

# AN ANALYSIS OF PRONUNCIATION AND TRANSCRIPTION CHALLENGES AMONG SELECTED IBIBIO (NIGERIAN) ENGLISH SPEAKERS

Ubong Josiah

&

Mercy Okon David

## Abstract

This paper examines the pronunciation and transcription challenges among Ibibio (Nigerian) speakers of English, especially as it relates to the Nigerian situation. Specifically, the research studies the written expressions of sophisticated Nigerian English speakers to determine the **effective** use of weak and strong forms. The research is necessitated by the observed challenges in the realisation and representation of strong and weak forms among speakers and writers of English in the Nigerian linguistic environment. Data for the research were collected from Educated Nigerian English speakers through measured tests in which each participant was asked to transcribe and read aloud selected sentences. The participants' recorded voices were collated and analysed perceptually. It was discovered that all the subjects had challenges in the realisation of weak forms in most of the tests, though they did well in some aspects. It is hoped a more concerted effort in teaching and practising weak forms in educational settings would go a long way to inculcating the needed consciousness in the pronunciation of weak forms in their speeches.

**Key words:** Pronunciation, Transcription, Challenges, Ibibio

## Introduction

Observations have shown that the weak forms are hardly deployed in the speeches of most Nigerian users of English. This study, therefore, attempts to examine the issues that account for this

phenomenon among Nigerian speakers of English and to also advocate linguistic consciousness in Nigerian speakers of English as it concerns the use of weak forms especially in consideration of the invaluable roles of weak forms in smooth and meaningful speech production.

Weak form is a term used to describe the state of most function words in the category of auxiliary verbs, articles, prepositions, conjunctions and even pronouns, when they are not emphasised in speech production. It is a fact in speech act that most function words when used in association with other words in a stretch of utterances undergo a process of weakening or elision so that they lose their initial pronunciation often ascribed to them in isolation. Each of these words when realised in isolation bears its original pronunciation identity, which can be called strong form. Of course, there are instances where the strong forms can also be maintained even when those words are associated with other words, as seen in this study's analysis. However, it should be noted that such instances are quite few compared to situations where weak forms should be used.

It is sad to observe that most Nigerian speakers of English in their speeches appear to be ignorant of the weak forms even as they completely abandon them, apparently not minding the defects their utterances are subjected to as a result. This is so because the importance of the weak forms in speech production cannot be over-accentuated. For one, the weak forms when deployed properly regulate the rhythm of utterances. Thus, speech is done with smooth simplicity and, with less effort and energy. Consequently, speech is not only less laborious but, above all, meaningful and pleasant to the senses.

However, in the Nigerian situation, it is observed that most function words continue to be used in their strong forms even when the situation demands the use of weak forms. Several reasons have been advanced to account for this phenomenon. One is attributed to the nature of Nigerian languages. According to Eka (1996), most African languages and indeed Nigerian languages are said to be tonal. Thus, speech variation tends to rely on the individual words rather than the stretch of utterance. This characteristic affects the speech of most

Nigerian users of English. Perhaps, this explains why most Nigerian 1 speakers of English have been noted to place emphasis on every word in a stretch of utterance. This challenge is considered to be at the root of weak form casualty among Nigerian speakers of English. Adenike's (2009) study aims to determine if Yoruba speakers of English could recognise or use weak forms found in functional words in sentences and finds that in most cases, the participants use weak forms. This paper aims at studying the expressions of educated Ibibio speakers of English to determine if they recognise weak forms.

Other factors are sheer carelessness and ignorance. These also account for the omission of weak forms in the speeches of Nigerian speakers of English. It is the aim of this paper, therefore, to bring awareness and enlightenment to the use of weak forms among Nigerian users of English.

### **The Use of Weak Forms among Non-Native Speakers of English**

Perhaps, it would be appropriate to state why the use of weak forms becomes necessary for Nigerian speakers of English and indeed other non-native speakers of English. Although the use of strong forms throughout an utterance may not distort the speaker-hearer meaning relationship in many instances, two reasons account for why non-native speakers should be aware of the weak forms and their usages. For one, peculiar to the Nigerian environment, it is also used for communication purposes with the speakers outside Nigerian environment. Thus, because most native speakers of English find an all-strong form pronunciation unnatural provides the first reason for Nigerian speakers of English to familiarise themselves with the weak forms (Roach, 1983). Again, poor knowledge of the weak forms impairs communication between the native and non-native speakers of English, since it is likely that the native speaker will employ weak forms to the ignorance of the non-native speaker.

With these, this paper devotes the remaining paragraphs to the explication of weak form usages.

Weak forms are often signalled in most functional words by the presence of schwa /ə/ among the phonemes that comprise the words. For our study, we shall make a list of some strong and weak forms which will serve as a guide to subsequent analysis.

Words	Strong Forms	Weak Forms
From	/frɒm/	/frəm/
Was	/wɒz/	/wəz/
Of	/ɒv/	/əv/
An	/æn/	/ən/
For	/fɔ:/	/fə/
Than	/ðæn/	/ðən, ðn/
Us	/ʌs/	/əs, s/
At	/æt/	/ət/
Some	/sʌm/	/səm/
Are	/ɑ:/	/ə/
Were	/wɜ:/	/wə/
That	/ðæt/	/ðət/
But	/bʌt/	/bət/
Have	/hæv/	/həv/
Has	/hæz/	/həz/
Would	/wʊd/	/wəd/
Had	/hæd/	/həd/
Can	/kæn/	/kən, kn/
The	/ði:/	/ðə, ði/
My	/maɪ/	/mə, mi/

What is noticed from the above list is the presence of the sound /ə/(schwa) in each of the weak forms. Of course, it is a common fact that the schwa represents a weak syllable in English Language syllables. (Roach, 2009)

The next task is to examine the contexts where only strong forms could be used.

### Contexts of Strong Forms Usages

As earlier asserted, there are a few instances where most functional words could be deployed in their strong forms. These are:

1. When the words occur at the end of an utterance. For example,
  - (i) That's the man he was looking *for*.
  - (ii) What is she thinking *of*?
- (b) Where a weak form contrasts with another word. Example:  
The pen is for him not from him
- (c) For purpose of emphasis.  
Example: You must give me more money.
- (d) When it is quoted or cited.

Example: You can use 'But' to begin a sentence

### Contexts for Weak Forms Usages

This paper takes a look at the most common weak forms and how they are used in utterances. (Other function words in sentences transcribed will also take their weak forms where necessary.)

1. 'THE' which strong form is /ði:/ has /ðə/ and /ði/ as weak forms.

/ðə/ is used before consonants. Example:

- (i) Forget the man. /fə'get ðə mæn/

/ði/ is used before vowels. Example:

- (i) Peel the orange. /pi:l ði 'ɒrɪndʒ/

Whereas in a statement like: "I did not mean the boy but his classmate", the strong form of "the" /ði:/ is used.

2. 'A' /eɪ/: Its weak form is /ə/. Examples:

- (i) He earns a pound /hi ɜ: nɜ ə paʊnd/

- (ii) A big goat has been slaughtered. /

ə big gəʊt hæz bin 'slɔ: təd/

But it takes a different form in a statement like; He scored an 'A' in the course. /hi skɔ: d ən eɪ m ðə kɔ: s/

3. 'AND'/ænd/: Its weak forms function in different contexts.  
 Examples: /ænd/ is used before a consonant sound – My husband and children /mə'hʌsbænd ənd 'tʃɪldrən/,  
 /ən/ is used before a vowel sound. Example: David and I /'deɪvɪd ən aɪ/  
 /n/ is sometimes used after /t, d, s, z, ʃ/  
 Example: Cut and dried /kʌt n 'draɪd/

4. BUT /bʌt/: Its weak form is /bət/  
 Example:  
 (i) Tall but slim /tɔ: l bət slɪm/

5. THAN /ðæn/: Weak forms -/ ðən, ðn/  
 Example:  
 (i) More than ever /mɔ: ðən 'evə/

6. Her /hɜ:/: /has/hə / before consonants and /hər/ before vowels.  
 Examples:

(i) Take her phone /teɪk hə fəʊn/

(ii) Take her eggs /teɪk hər eɡz/

Note that “her” here only applies when used with the sense of possession, when it precedes a noun or as an object pronoun.

7. Us /ʌs/: Weak forms -/əs, s/  
 Example:  
 (i) Give us a pen /ɡɪv əs ə pen/

8. AT /æt/: Its weak form is /ət/  
 Example:  
 (i) Look at that. /lʊk ət ðæt/

9. For /fɔ: r/: /fə/ is used before consonant sounds and /fər/ is before vowel sounds.  
 Examples:

- (i) Look for them. /lʊk fə ðem/
- (ii) Look for us /lʊk fər ʌs/

10. Of/ɒv/: Weak form: /əv/

Example:

- 1. All of them /ɔ: l əv ðem/

11. From /frɒm/: Weak form -/frəm/

Example:

- 1. Away from home /ə'wei frəm həʊm/

It should be recalled that most of these words when used at the final position, emphasised, contrasted or quoted, are realised in their strong forms.

For words with relatively long sounds, their weak forms are realised with relatively short sounds. Examples: She /ʃi: / has its weak form as /ʃi/

We /wi:/: Weak form - /wi/

He /hi:/: Weak form - /hi/

Weak forms of some auxiliary verbs:

12a. Can/kæn/: Weak form -/kən/

Example:

- a. We can pray / wi kən preɪ/
- 12b. Could /kʊd/: Weak form -/kəd/
- (ii) He could not do it / hi kəd nɒt du ɪt/

13. HAVE, HAS, HAD /hæv/:/həv/

- 1. Which have you seen? /hwɪtʃ hæv jə si: n/
- HAS/hæz/: Weak form -/həz/
- 2. Who has been consistent? / hu hæz bɪn kən'sɪstənt /
- HAD/hæd/: Its weak form is /həd/
- 3. Many had gone. /'meni həd ɡʌn/

Weak forms, it does appear, account for a greater percentage of the use of function words. This is because apart from the final position,

function words are realised in weak forms in normal utterances. (Marks, 2007)

To see how conscious the educated Nigerian Speakers of English are of the weak forms, this work carried out a study of weak forms usage by selecting five sophisticated varieties of speakers.

The sophisticated speakers of English belong to variety three, according to Udofot (2007) re-classification. These include University lecturers in English and Linguistics, graduates of English and Humanities, broadcasters and those who live in mother tongue areas.

Five respondents who were used for the study include: Graduates of English who teach the English Language in Secondary Schools and Broadcasters, both in Radio and Television, who have been exposed to the phonetic rules of the English Language. In this study they are called TU, BE, TM, BB and BU.

Three sentences were used as instruments in testing the subjects' level of consciousness in the use of weak forms. The subjects were requested to transcribe and read aloud the sentences and record on their phones. The recordings were collated and analysed perceptually. The sentences are:

1. The boy with the apple is the winner.
2. I have your pen with me.
3. You are my best friend.

In sentence one, the definite article “the” was the focus.

Sentence two had “have” as the words in consideration while sentence three looked at “are”.

## Presentation of Data

Table 1: “The”

	The	Boy	With	The	apple	is	the	winner
Dictionary	/ ðə/			/ ði/			/ ðə/	
TU	/ ði/			/ ði/			/ ði/	
BE	/ ðə/			/ ði/			/ ðə/	
TM	/ ðə/			/ ði/			/ ðə/	



BB	/ ðə/			/ ði/			/ ðə/	
BU	/ ðə/			/ ði/			/ ðə/	

From Table 1, it is observed that four respondents were conscious of where to use / ðə/ and/ ði/ while one of them used / ði/ all through.

Table 2: “Have”

I	Have	Your	Pen	With	Me
Dictionary	/həv/				
TU	/həv/				
BE	/həv/				
TM	/həv/				
BB	/həv/				
BU	/həv/				

A look at Table 2 shows that all the subjects used the strong form in a position that should have taken the weak form of the function word.

Table 3: “Are”

	You	are	my	Best	Friend
Dictionary		/ə/			
TU		/æ/			
BE		/ɑ:/(with emphasis)			
TM		/ɑ:/			
BB		/ɑ:/			
BU		/æ/			

In table 3, three subjects articulated with the strong form of the word while two used neither the strong form nor the weak form. The two used a shorter sound of the strong form.

However, it was observed that one of those who read with the strong form placed emphasis on the word. An act which is allowed if the speaker had an intention to emphasis a point. Based on Nigerian

speakers of English used for the experiment, it is seen that there is need to be conscious of the weak forms of function words in English and the positions and contexts to apply them.

Table 1 shows that it is possible to achieve that level of consciousness. Therefore, there should be constant exposure of the weak forms of the function words in classrooms, professional courses, training, conferences and seminars to the sophisticated (educated) Nigerian speakers of English and others who may be interested.

As it relates to the purpose of this study, it has been observed from our analysis, that the weak forms are not natural in Nigerian English. In each of the cases where we have weak forms, an average Nigerian English speaker would substitute strong forms.

## **Conclusion**

This paper set out to examine the use of weak forms among non-native speakers of English. The analysis revealed that the average Nigerian English users ignore the weak forms, thereby making most versions of Nigerian speeches not follow the natural pattern of English rhythm. We have also encouraged the deployment of the weak forms of the function words and how they are used. It is a fact that the nature of Nigerian languages contributes to the weak form deficiency but this can be overcome with conscious effort just like other interference problems. Thus, this paper advocates the use of weak forms especially among the educated Nigerian speakers of English, even as some of these find themselves presenting papers at international conferences. Observations show that there are some constraints faced by the various categories of Nigerian speakers of English Language in the process of performance. As such, while it is expedient for educated speakers of the English Language to make a conscious effort to deploy weak forms in their language use, they should exhibit some degree of tolerance for their not much-educated counterparts because of such constraints at the level of English language performance.

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