

# TOWARDS A STANDARD WEST AFRICAN ENGLISH

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In this section we will move on to Africa with a closer look to West African countries where English was first brought by missionaries and traders and later by colonisers. In these countries it is only after the post-colonial period that English has acquired the status of dominant language of politics, communication, education, and of social advancement in general. Before this last development, English had played an insignificant role among non-elitist social groups and a prominent as well as widespread use among leading social classes in some regions. It is worth noting that English developed across African regions in a quite different way as first, second and pidgin variety and under different circumstances that have determined its true nature. In particular, English came very early to West African countries through trade routes and the slave trade; in fact it became stronger with the repatriation of former slaves in Sierra Leone and Liberia from where they started mission work along West Africa's coastline (Leitner 2012). It developed into West African Pidgin English as means of communication to facilitate interactions with local peoples. It was only in the nineteenth and in the twentieth century that English acquired an important status in Sierra Leone, Nigeria, Ghana along with the English Pidgin becoming a symbol of prestige and power (Schneider 2011, 135f.)<sup>1</sup>. Today in most of Britain's former colonies English is spoken as either a second or official language with different degrees of penetration. To mention one example, in Nigeria, which is the most anglicized country, the local Pidgin is perceived as an informal variety of English (ib.139) and in Ghana English is the official language along with its stigmatised Pidgin.

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<sup>1</sup> To understand the complex language context in Africa, it is worth recalling the classification Samarin (1962, 56) proposed for classifying a lingua franca as natural, pidginized, creole or artificial. By natural language is meant a language acquired by normal processes of enculturation. When a natural language is acquired as a second language it may lose some of its linguistic features and become a simplified / pidginized variety.

In particular, the English language in Nigeria is the major means of communication in every aspect of society, including education, commerce and governance, but most importantly, it is the lingua franca among the over 200 ethnic nationalities that make up the Nigerian state (Ogoanah 2011, 201). The forms and functions of this variety have been well documented in the literature, mostly focusing on phonology, syntax, and lexicosemantic analyses. As a result, it is generally agreed that a distinct variety called Standard Nigerian English now exists and is used by educated groups of speakers also at university level of education.

In Africa, it is possible to identify a general trend in the development of English

which is rapidly growing, spreading further and getting indigenised [in which] two trends are most noteworthy: a process of grassroots diffusion and nativization, and young people's love of mixing it with local languages (ib.140).

In Nigeria, for instance, the distinction is getting blurred with linguistic structures continuously borrowed from English to pidgin and vice-versa.

There is no one African English. English is best seen as the aggregate of different traditions and a highly heterogeneous entity. It has become a literary language that reflects important aspects of African identities [...] West African experts suggest that West African features are quite regular and could become features of Standard West African English. Endonormativity seems to be on the horizon (Leitner 2012, 221ff).

From this perspective along with the theoretical framework of the book presented in the general introduction, the findings reported in the following chapters can be interpreted from a cross-linguistic perspective as well as generalisations in the domain of linguistic typology. As a matter of fact, the two papers in this section give a significant contribution to the understanding of the process of standardization Nigerian English and Ghanaian English are currently undergoing towards the identification of Standard West African English.

Brato presents recent auditory findings suggesting that specific affricated realisations in Ghanaian speakers of English are on the rise in various positions and that these may become a supra-ethnic Ghanaian marker. Also Mazzoli presents the results of a research on the tonal analysis of the item DE in Nigerian Pidgin aiming to isolate specific verbal property items in order to attest their fluctuating semantic content (stative/non-stative) and labile syntactic behaviour (intransitive/transitive).

From a different standpoint, Mazzaferro addresses the issue of the status and functions of postcolonial Englishes beyond the boundaries of their speech communities dealing with the spread of English-speaking communities from former British and American colonies in countries (e.g. Italy) where English is historically a foreign language (EFL).

