STANDARD ENGLISH IN THE WORLD: THE CASE OF ASPECT IN STANDARD NIGERIAN ENGLISH AND AMERICAN ENGLISH

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Abstract

This paper argues that Standard English (StdE) is relatively homogeneous across the globe. In order to find out the veracity of this claim, the study examines the use of aspect in Standard Nigerian English (SNE) and American English (AmE). The data consist of 38 political essays drawn from 24 volumes of Tell, (a Nigerian Magazine) and Time (an American magazine) within a period of three months; spanning January to March 2013. The two magazines are selected as representatives of magazines in which Standard English is used in their respective linguistic environment because of our belief that the editors as well as the writers of most articles in these magazines are either native speakers of English or well-versed in the language and, as such, could be considered as best exemplars of users of Standard English. The study reveals that the forms and the functions of aspect in the two varieties of English are identical. It is also revealed that, in respect of the frequency of the various types of aspect, there seems to be no overwhelming difference between the two varieties (i.e., SNE and AmE). The study then concludes that the two varieties of English are strikingly similar mainly because of their association with educated users of English, who are often the writers of most of the articles in them.

Keywords: Standard English, Nigerian English, American English, Aspect, Magazines, educated users of English

Introduction

This paper investigates aspect in Standard Nigerian English (SNE) and Standard American English (SAE) with a view to examining the extent of convergence or otherwise in the two varieties of English. The major argument of the paper is that Standard English (henceforth, StdE) is relatively homogeneous across the world. In order to support this argument, the paper has focused on aspect which is one of the four primary structural distinctions marked in the verb phrase; others being tense, mood and voice (see Biber, Johansson, Leech, Conrad, & Finegan, 1999:452). While there is no doubt that aspect can interact, and indeed can combine, with other properties of the verb phrase such as tense and modality; we have chosen to concentrate on *aspect* in this paper because of our belief that it can sometimes be much more complex than either the system of tense or that of modality. Although it is possible to examine other areas of the English grammar (e.g., pronominals, adjectives, adverbs, prepositions) to argue for the homogeneity of StdE, our focus on an aspect of the verb phrase (i.e., aspect) is intentional: the verb is at the centre of the English sentence and it determines to a large extent the arguments that surrounds it (see Allerton, 1982; Akande 2008; Akande & Okanlawon, 2011). Given this background, the objectives of the present study are:

   a) to identify and discuss the use of different types of aspect in American Time and Nigerian Tell magazines (henceforth, *Time* and *Tell* respectively), and;
   b) to find out whether or not there is variation in the aspectual usage in the two magazines.

It is hoped that if these objectives are addressed properly, the existing literature on StdE will not only be enriched, the study will further widen our horizon about the global dialect of English known as StdE.

What is Standard English?

Standard English, a variety of English which is highly prestigious across the globe, is socially but not linguistically superior to other varieties of English. The prestige accorded StdE is mainly due to the fact that it is associated with educated users. Scholars have remarked that StdE is fuzzy and difficult to define (Trudgill, 1999; Gupta, 2006) as there is no absolute agreement in certain areas of English language usage about what is and what is not correct (Gupta, 2001). Gupta (2001:367) says:

> Many practitioners of English pride themselves on their skill in doing
> Standard English but in English there is no centralised authority –

> Standard English is determined by loose consensus of good practice, which means that no individual can reasonably be expected to be completely knowledgeable about what is and what is not considered best practice, and especially that individuals cannot be aware of what is considered good practice in one of the English centres other than their own.

Trudgill's (1995) believes that StdE is not as fuzzy in written English as it is in spoken English. The fuzziness of StdE in speech is due mainly to the fact that while we can talk of standard pronunciation, there is nothing like standard accent (Gupta, 2006). All over the world where English is used, accents have high or low prestige not for any linguistic reasons but solely because 'hearers associated their speakers with particular social groups which have high or low prestige. These systems of prestige do not operate at international level' (Gupta, 2006:96). Akande (2008:11) notes that it is the social privilege that makes StdE socially (but not linguistically) superior to other varieties. Extraneous factors rather than linguistic criteria are often used in the description of StdE and this also contributes to the difficulty in defining StdE (Akande, 2008:12). Akande opines that the differences between StdE and non-StdE are therefore a matter of prestige than more of the linguistic features that make up each of the varieties. According to him, StdE enjoys the high social privilege of global acceptability among the educated speakers of English and this means that it cuts across regional boundaries (see also Kortmann & Schneider, 2004).

What is implied above is that accent cannot be used in defining StdE. Trudgill (1999) has already warned us that StdE can be spoken with any accent. He remarks that StdE is a variety of English which is 'the most important dialect in the English-speaking world from a social, intellectual and cultural points of view; and it does not have an associated accent' (Trudgill, 1999:123). There is no doubt that written Standard English is, to a large extent, uniform around the world today. The grammar and the vocabulary of StdE are relatively the same except for minor differences (see Wardhaugh, 1986).

Trudgill (1995) further claims that it is the variety that is normally taught to non-native speakers learning English. It must, however, be quickly added that a diglossic situation may exist in situations where educated users have both StdE and non-StdE in their repertoires: the tendency is for those educated users to use StdE in formal settings and non-StdE in informal ones. Farr and Ball's (2001:753) definition of StdE as 'the variety of English used by the formally-educated people who are socially, economically, and politically dominant in English-speaking countries' needs some re-examination in the context of some African countries. While we agree with Farr and Ball that StdE is associated with formal education, it is difficult to agree with the link that they make between StdE and social, economic and political dominance. For instance, in Nigeria (and we believe it is the case in some other African countries), there are many StdE users – graduates and elites - who are economically and politically irrelevant just as there are very rich people and successful politicians who cannot use StdE. Thus, the link between the ability to use StdE and socio-economic and political dominance may be misleading.

Aspect in English

Most scholars agree that the term aspect has to do with whether or not the action described in a sentence is deemed complete or incomplete (Biber et al, 1999; Börjars & Burridge, 2010; Comrie, 1976; Downing & Locke, 2006; Quirk et al, 1972; Thomson, 2006; Vidal & Garau, 2002). While Comrie (1976:3) defines aspect as 'ways of viewing the temporal constituency of a situation,' Brinton and Brinton (2010:127) say that aspect is 'the view taken of an event, or the 'aspect' under which it is considered, basically whether it is seen as complete or whole (perfective aspect) or as incomplete and on-going (imperfective aspect).' Kreidler (1998:198) seems to summarize the views of scholars about aspect by saying:

> We experience events and situations from various points of views and these points of views are often incorporated into our description of the events and situations.... we see some events just beginning and situations just coming into existence and other events and situations coming to an end. Some events are viewed as over and done with at some particular time, others are still continuing, and the continuity may be a matter of constant status or constant change. The expression of all these viewpoints is called aspect.

Huddleston and Pullum (2005:51) states that 'A grammatical form or construction qualifies as an **aspect** if its main use is to indicate how the speaker views the situation described in the clause with respect not to its location in time but to its temporal structure or properties' while Borjars and Burridge (2010: 134) remark that "aspect is concerned with the completion or non-completion of the process depicted by the verbal group."

There are two major types of aspect in English and these are progressive and perfect aspect (Lyons, 1986:315) and aspect, whether progressive or perfect, can combine freely with tense, mood and voice as noted earlier (see Biber et al, 1999). Other scholars have classified aspect in different ways. For instance, Vidal and Garau (2002) identify grammatical aspect and lexical aspect. Grammatical aspect refers to how 'the internal constituency of a situation is viewed, independent of its relation to any reference time. It is a distinction marked explicitly by linguistic devices usually auxiliaries and inflections' (Vidal & Garau, 2002:171). For them, lexical aspect is the aspect which is characteristic of a notion or a situation expressed by the verb but which does not depend on any inflectional marking or time frame. In this paper, our classification is based on that of Biber et al (1999) in which the inflectional morphology is used in the classification of aspect into progressive and perfect aspect. This is purely a formal classification of aspect. However, as Akande (2008) has argued, functional analysis is necessary in addition to the formal one so as to reduce some inconsistencies that may occur by sticking solely to formal analysis. This is because, as demonstrated by Akande (2008:56), two varieties of StdE 'may be identical in terms of their formal structures, they are not necessarily identical in terms of meanings and functions.'

Finally, the action depicted by aspect may be realis or irrealis. It is realis when the action actually occurred and irrealis when it did not occur. So, there is a distinction between 'The man *is dancing*' and 'The man *is dancing* tomorrow.' While the verb phrase in the two is the same and it depicts progressive aspect, functionally the two sentences are different in meaning in the sense that while the former is realis in that the action in it is occurring at the moment of speaking, the latter is irrealis because the action has not occurred and may never occur. Similarly, a verb phrase which is introduced by a modal auxiliary is irrealis.

Methodology, Data Analysis and Discussions

Methodology

The data for this study consist of 38 political essays drawn from a total of 24 volumes of two magazines (12 from Tell, a Nigerian Magazine and 12 from Time, an American magazine) within a period of three months; spanning January to March 2013. There are 22 political essays in *Time* while there are 19 political essays in *Tell*. In order to have an even number from the two magazines, we select 19 political essays from *Time* while we make use of all the 19 essays in *Tell*. The two magazines are weekly publications each of which has a very wide coverage in its locality. The two magazines are representatives of magazines in which StdE is used in their respective linguistic environment because of our belief that the editors as well as the writers of most articles in these magazines are either native speakers of English or are well-versed in the language and, as such, could be considered as best exemplars of users of StdE. The decision to concentrate on political essay is mainly due to the fact that politics often attracts the attention of most readers.

Data Analysis and Discussions

In this section, we present an overview of the occurrences of various types of aspect in our data. Apart from discussing the occurrences of the different types of aspect, we also provide a descriptive analysis of the aspectual usage in the two magazines.

Table 1: Overview of the use of aspect in *Tell* and *Time*

Type of aspect	Tell	%	Time	%
Progressive aspect	124	24.6	123	27.5
Perfect aspect	278	55.2	272	60.7
Perfect progressive aspect	15	3	5	1.1
Aspect and voice combined	59	11.7	43	9.6
Aspect and modality combined	28	5.5	5	1.1
Total	504	100	448	100

Table 1 is an overview of the occurrences of the various types of aspect used in our data. The table shows that the most frequently-used aspect type is perfect aspect which has 278 and 272 instances in both *Tell* and *Time* respectively. Next in the line in terms of occurrences is progressive aspect which has 124 instances in *Tell* and 123 instances in *Time*. While the least-used type of aspect in *Tell* is perfect progressive aspect which has a total number of 15 instances, the least-used types in *Time* are two: *perfect progressive aspect* and *aspect combined with modality*. As we can see above, there is no overwhelming difference in the occurrences of the various types of aspects in both magazines. Below is another table which shows an overview of the use of each aspect type in our data.

Table 2: Aspect by Types

Type of aspect	No of occurrence in both magazines	%
Perfect aspect	550	57.8
Progressive aspect	247	25.9
Aspect and voice combined	102	10.7
Aspect and modality combined	33	3.5
Perfect progressive aspect	20	2.1
Total	952	100

Table 2 shows that out of 952 instances of the aspectual usage in the data, perfect aspect alone accounts for 57.8% while progressive aspect accounts for 25.9%. This means that these two types (perfect and progressive aspect) account for 83.7% of the overall occurrences of the various aspects used. The table also shows that the frequency of a combination of aspect and voice is higher than that of the frequency of a combination of aspect and modality as these two are 10.7% and 3.5% respectively. The least-used type of aspect is perfect progressive aspect (i.e., a combination of perfect and progressive aspects) which amounts to only 2.1%.

Now, let us present an analysis of the occurrences of each progressive and perfect aspect in our data.

Table 3:   Progressive aspect in *Tell* and *Time*

Types of aspect	Frequency in Tell	%	Frequency in Time	%
Present progressive without adverb	74	54.4	84	62.7
Present progressive with adverb	23	17.0	9	6.7
Past progressive without adverb	25	18.4	30	22.4
Past progressive with adverb	2	1.5	-	-
Present progressive passive	5	3.7	6	4.5
Past progressive passive	3	2.0	2	1.5
Progressive aspect with modal	4	3.0	3	2.2
Total	136	100	134	100

From the table (i.e., Table 3), it is clear that a total of 136 instances of progressive aspect were identified in the *Tell* essays while 134 occurrences were recorded in the *Time* essays. The most frequently-used sub-type of progressive aspect is *present progressive without adverb*, which has 74 (54.4%) instances, and 84 (62.7%) instances, in *Tell* and *Time* respectively. Out of 136 instances of different sub-types of progressive aspect in *Tell*, 25 (18.4%) instances of *past progressive without adverb* were recorded while 30 (22.4%) instances, out of a total of 134 examples, were recorded in *Time*. There was no single occurrence of *past progressive with adverb* in *Time* while it appeared only twice in *Tell*. Like *past progressive with adverb* sub-type, the other sub-types (i.e., *Present progressive passive, past progressive passive* and *progressive aspect with modal*) are rarely used in both *Tell* and *Time* (see Table 3 above).

We now turn to the actual usage of the various sub-types of *progressive aspect* in our data. The progressive aspect can exhibit four main structures. The first, which is the most common type of progressive aspect, is *BE + -ing form of the lexical verb* that follows it. Examples of this are:

1) The man *is beating* the drum   (Present progressive aspect)
2) The man *was beating* the drum   (Past progressive aspect)

The second structural type of progressive aspect, which involves passive voice, is *BE + -ing auxiliary + -en form* of lexical verbs as in:

3) The man *is being beaten up* (Present progressive aspect with voice)
4) The man *was being beaten up.* (Past progressive aspect with voice)

While the third structure is *MODAL + BE + -ing form* as in example (5):

5) The man *will be driving* the car

The fourth structure is *MODAL + perfective + -ing + past participle form of the lexical verb* that follows it as in example (6) below:

6) The car *will have been being driven.*

While the first three structures are attested in varying degrees in our data, the fourth is not attested at all. We present here examples of progressive aspect in our data.

7) Mr President and his party as the counter force *is gathering* a critical.... *Tell* Magazine
8) ... Jonathan's strategists *are not doing* enough.... *Tell*
9) ... they *were hoarding* information .... *Tell*
10) Americans *are forming* their political identity ... (*Time* Magazine)
11) ... agents who *are challenging* Obama Administration authority ... *Time*
12) He *was attending* a meeting of the House Republican caucus. Time

As shown in examples (7) to (12) above, the verb phrases *is gathering, are not doing, were hoarding, are forming, are challenging,* and *was attending* exemplify *BE + -ing* structure. This is certainly the simplest progressive aspect in English (Biber et al, 1999). However, while examples (7, 8, 10 and 11) are instances of present progressive, examples 9 and 12 are past progressive. Sometimes, the whole verb phrase indicating the progressive aspect can be discontinued by an adverb as shown in example 13 to 15 below.

13) The governors' forum *is now acting* as an opposition party .... *Tell*
14) ... he *was only biding* his time .... *Tell*
15) ... he *is now contemplating* taking his scabrous ... *Time*

In terms of function, examples 13 to 15 are realis but incompletive. Whereas examples 13 and 15 indicate that the actions in them occur and are ongoing at the moment of speaking, example 14 shows that at some point in the past the action was ongoing but incomplete. As stated above, the second structural type of progressive is *BE + -ing auxiliary + -en form of the lexical verb* that follows. Below are some examples with this structure from our data:

16) ... our citizens who *are being subjected* to terror attacks .... *Tell*
17) ...the time Imoke *was being expected* back in Calabar .... *Tell*
18) ... these voices *are being heard. Time*
19) ... campaigns *were being prepared. Time*

The verb phrases in examples (16) to (19) exemplify *BE + -ing auxiliary + -en form* structure. As we can see in these examples, the progressive aspect is combined with passive voice. However, it is interesting to note that in both magazines, the majority of the examples in the data are short passives as there is no *by-agentive prepositional phrase* in most of them. This confirms Biber et al's (1999) claim that short passives often occur more frequently than long passives. While examples 16 and 18 are instances of *present progressive passive*, examples 17 and 19 are *past progressive passive.*

The last structure of the progressive aspect attested in our data is *MODAL + BE + -ing form.* The examples with this structure from our data are presented in examples 20 to 23 below.

20) ... the Presidency *may be considering* a way out of the .... *Tell*
21) ... when one individual *will be sucking* the system without .... *Tell*
22) Obama *might be doing* this because he wants .... *Time*
23) "... they *will be struggling*" says Pietro Ichino, a politician .... *Time*

In each of examples 20 to 23 above, there is a combination of a modal auxiliary and progressive aspect. It is clear that the verb phrases in the examples above are irrealis in meaning in the sense that the actions in them have never occurred. For instance, the action of considering a way

out by the Presidency in example 20 has not occurred and it may, in actual fact, never occur.

Table 4: Perfect aspect in *Tell* and *Time*

Types of aspect	Frequency in Tell	%	Frequency in Time	%
Present perfect without adverb	177	48.1	196	62.4
Present perfect with adverb	25	6.8	32	10.2
Past perfect without adverb	59	16.0	36	11.5
Past perfect with adverb	17	4.6	8	2.5
Present perfect passive	45	12.2	29	9.2
Past perfect passive	6	1.6	6	1.9
Perfect aspect with modal	24	6.5	2	0.6
Perfective progressive aspect	15	4.1	5	1.6
Total	368	100	314	100

As could be seen from the table above, there were 368 and 314 instances of the various types of perfect aspect in *Tell* and *Time* respectively. The *present perfect aspect without adverb* was the most favoured in both magazines with 177 (48.1%) and 196 (62.4%) instances in *Tell* and *Time* respectively. With respect to the frequency of occurrence, *past perfect without adverb* came next in both magazines. In *Tell*, 59 (16.0%) instances of this aspect sub-type were identified, while 36 instances which accounted for 11.5% of the occurrences of past perfect aspect without adverb were recorded in *Time*. While in *Tell*, the use of present perfect passive (i.e., a combination of present perfect aspect and passive voice) was more frequent than the use of present perfect aspect with adverb as indicated by 12.2% of the former to the 6.8% of the latter, in *Time* we recorded more of *present perfect aspect with adverb* (i.e., 10.2%) than *present perfect passive*, which accounted for 9.2%; although the difference was marginal. While there was no difference at all in both magazines in the use of past perfect passive, the use of *past perfect aspect with adverb, perfect aspect with modal auxiliaries* and *perfect progressive aspect* (i.e., with 17, 24 and 15 occurrences respectively) was higher in *Tell* than in *Time* in which the instances of these three sub-types amounted to eight, two and five occurrences respectively. The table shows examples of complex aspect. An aspect is complex if it combines with another type of aspect or with either modality of voice. The table clearly shows that *perfect aspect with modal* was used more frequently in *Tell* than in time as its occurrences in *Time* constituted just one-twelfth of its occurrences in *Tell*.

Let us now consider the real usage of the various sub-types of perfect aspect in our data. We would like to start with present perfect aspect as shown below:

24) These ministers *have contacted* the god fathers .... *Tell*
25) ... the Presidency hawks *have been* impatient with the President .... *Tell*
26) ... the zone *has **also** lost* the seat of the speaker of the House .... *Tell*
27) That is something Obama *has suggested* to Democrats .... *Time*
28) Obama *has **also** extended* the steady .... *Time*

As we can see from the examples above, there is no structural difference in the use of the present perfect aspect indicated by the verb phrases in examples 24 to 28. The examples exemplify the *HAVE + the past participle* structure. And just as we had a case of discontinuity occasioned by the insertion of the adverb *also* within the verb phrase in example 26, (a verb phrase used in *Tell*); so did we in example 28 where the same adverb was inserted within the verb phrase *has extended*. Also, examples 24 to 28 showed clearly that all the actions had actually occurred at some point in time in the recent past. This means that all the actions are realis and at the same time completive. The past perfect aspect was also used in exactly this manner except for the change in tense. Here are examples to illustrate this.

29) ... there *had been* speculations that Gabriel Igbinedion .... *Tell*
30) House of Assembly *had **officially** transmitted* a letter to the House .... *Tell.*
31) *... the president *had refused* a bribe, says Hassan .... *Time*
32) The newsmen *had **already** been* on the political radar. *Time*

Examples 30 and 32 show that the use of adverb within past perfect verb phrases is evident. The four examples showed that *past perfect aspect*, whether with or without adverb, had the same pattern in *Tell* and *Time*. These two types (i.e., *present perfect* and *past perfect aspect*) could be regarded as the simplest types of perfect aspect in that none of the two combined with either voice or

modality; or with each other.

Our data showed cases in which there was a combination of either perfect aspect and voice or perfect aspect and modality. Here are examples of the combination of perfect aspect and voice:

33) ... the president *has been made* not to let it go .... *Tell*
34) Jails *have been emptied* of thousands of political prisoners. *Time*
35) ... he *had not been pocketed* by PDP. *Tell*
36) ... if political power *had not been handed* over, a year later .... *Time*

While examples 33 and 34 illustrate the use of present perfect aspect combined with passive voice, examples 35 and 36 are examples of past perfect aspect combined with passive voice. Again, all the examples are short passives in that the doer of the action is not indicated in each case. Another complex combination can be exemplified by the use of modal auxiliary with perfect aspect as in:

37) The thinking of the governors is that Tukur *should have called* a NEC meeting .... *Tell*
38) ...Obama *could have saved* lives if he ... *Time*

In the two examples above (examples 37 and 38), the perfect aspect verb phrase *have called* and *have saved* are introduced by a modal auxiliary in each case. While the VPs in the two examples are irrealis, if the actions they depicted actually had occurred, those actions would have been complete at a particular point in time in the past. Thus, there is a sense in which we can regard these VPs as completive. The last complex combination in our data is that in which the perfect and the progressive aspects are combined as the following examples show:

39) ...we *have been doing* our job ... *Tell*
40) ...the state governor *has been sweeping* through the ... *Tell*
41) Wayne Lapierre *had been warning* American of a massive Obama conspiracy... *Time*
42) ...witless conversation they'*ve been having*. *Time*

The VPs in examples 39 to 42 are considered perfect progressive aspect in the sense that they are governed by HAVE. However, all the lexical verbs in them (i.e., *doing, sweeping, warning* and *having*) are in the progressive form. Functionally, all the VPs are realis as the actions they depicted actually occurred but when they did, they were ongoing. This means that though realis, the VPs are incomplete.

Findings and Conclusion

This study was aimed at examining the notion Standard English with a view to demonstrating that it is a global variety of English which can be found in any part of the world. In order to argue for the homogeneity of Standard English, the paper focused on aspect as it was used in *Tell* and *Time*. This study has revealed the following findings:

a) That the use of aspect in both magazines is similar in form and function,
b) That perfect aspect is the most preferred in the two magazines,
c) That in both magazines, the present perfect aspect is preferred to past perfect aspect.
d) That perfect progressive aspect is the least used of all the various types of aspect being used in both magazines.
e) That out of the possible and actual complex combinations in the data, aspect combined with passive voice is much more common than aspect combined with modality.

Given the fact that there is no remarkable difference in the form and function of aspect used in the two magazines (and by extension in SNE and in AmE), it can be concluded that StdE is, to a large extent, syntactically homogeneous especially in written English generally. From the analysis of the structure and functions of aspect in the two magazines, it can be concluded that there is no variation in the aspectual usage in SNE and AmE as reflected in the two magazines.

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