Stressed and Unstressed Syllable Alteration in Educated Edo (Nigerian) English

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Standard British English (SBE) rhythm is characterised by stressed and unstressed syllable alternation. Phonological investigations from non-native English such as Nigerian English (NE) have claimed that NE differs remarkably from SBE, especially in the area of rhythm. Existing phonological studies on Educated Edo English (EEE) – a sub-variety of NE – have been on word and variable stress while studies on stressed and unstressed syllable alternation have been rare. This study, therefore, investigated the extent to which Educated Edo English Speakers (EEES) stressed and unstressed syllable alternation conforms to SBE rhythm. Prince and Liberman’s (1977) metrical theory, which explains the alternation of strong and weak constituents in SBE rhythm units, served as a theoretical framework. A purposive sampling technique was used to select 150 (75 males and 75 females) EEES while 2 SBE speakers served as Native Baselines (NB). Speech Filing System (SFS) version 1.41 was used to record the production of a validated instrument of 40 rhythm units, with stressed and unstressed syllable alternation. The recordings were transcribed and subjected to a perceptual analysis (frequency and percentages). Out of 6000 expected instances of stressed and unstressed syllable alternation, the participants had 694 (11.6%), while inappropriate use was higher, with 5,306 (88.4%). The performance of EEES males showed 5.7% and the females 5.9%. The grids of EEES showed proliferation of Strong/Strong (S/S) juxtaposition of stressed and unstressed syllables in rhythm units, compared to the NB alternation of Weak/Strong (W/S) or Strong/Weak (S/W). Results confirmed that EEES alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in rhythm units differ ‘markedly’ from those of the SBE form.

Keywords: educated Edo English, stressed and unstressed syllable alternation, rhythm units, Standard British English, NE

Every human language has its own characteristic rhythm. One of the most difficult areas to master in the spoken form of a foreign language is its rhythm. Rhythm in English is not just something extra, it is not something that is added to the basic sequence of consonants and vowels, it is the guide to the structure of information in the spoken message (Odujiebe, 2015). In Nigerian English (NE), rhythm is a major area where Nigerian spoken English has been observed to deviate from Received Pronunciation (RP). Various nomenclatures have been used to describe NE rhythm. Some linguists say NE is syllable timing (Akinjobi, 2004; Iloko, 2013; Akindele, 2015; Akinjobi & Akindele, 2016) while others are of the opinion that it is full-vowel timing (Udofot, 1997, 2003) or in-elastic-timing (Eka, 1993).

Eka (1993) argues that NE rhythm is in-elastic-timed due to NE speakers’ use of prominent syllables and inability to ‘squeeze-in’ or ‘stretch-out’ the syllables in a rhythm unit as RP speakers do. However, NE has been observed to have many sub-varieties, with over 250 ethnic groups and 522 languages attested for Nigeria (Lewis et al., 2013).

The periodic recurrence of movement between stressed and unstressed syllables in connected speech constitutes the stress-timing rhythm of SBE (Abercrombie, 1967; Roach, 2010). Stress-timing rhythm implies that the time to produce each foot in a sentence is expected to be equal, regardless of the numbers of unstressed syllables in the foot. In other
words, in stress-timing rhythm, time is based on each foot while in syllable-timing rhythm; time is based on each syllable. For example, in the following sentence “father has bought a ‘car’. The sentence has three feet. The first foot has three syllables, the second has two syllables and the last foot has one syllable; despite the fact that the number of syllables in each foot is unequal (Roach, 2000; Osisanwo, 2012). This means that stressed syllables tend to occur at relatively regular intervals of time whether or not they are separated by unstressed syllables. It takes roughly the same amount of time to produce one stressed syllable to another. There is a tendency to rush over the stressed syllables because of the need to maintain a kind of time regularity. As a rule, English stress avoids having stresses close together (Osisanwo, 2012; Odujebe, 2015).

Lubega (1989) and Katsiavriades (2002, p. 1) note that the English language is accepted and used in all the corners of the globe in a linguistically and culturally diverse communities where it serves a wide range of functions. It is estimated that there are over 300 million native speakers, and 300 million use English as a second language (L2) while about 100 million use it as a foreign language. It is listed as the official and co-official language of over forty-five countries and it is spoken in other countries where it has no official status. Davidson (2007) remarks that 90% of the world’s 6,000 languages are currently threatened by the domination of English. Below is a brief analysis of the status of the English language in the world:

Table 1.1

| ENL | ESL | EFL | TOTAL |
|-----|-----|-----|-------|
| BC: E 2000 | 350 | 350 | 100 | 800m |
| Crystal | 320-380 | 150-300 | 100-1000 | 570-160m |
| Graddol | 375 | 375 | 750 | 1,500m |

Sources: (McArthur, 2006 and Akindele, 2015)

Table 1 overleaf, apparently shows that different roles have been assigned to English in the different nations in which it is used. Some nations use the English language as their mother tongue, that is, the native speakers while the non-native speakers use it either as a second language or as a foreign language. In Nigeria for instance, it is assigned the role of an official language and second language (McArthur, 1999; Katsiavriades, 2002, p. 2; Oyeniyi, 2006; Davidson, 2007). The term “non-native English”, therefore, reflects the existence of observable variation in the use of the language by its non-native users as a result of its contact with various indigenous languages. The origin of the term “non-native English” can be traced to two conferences on English as a world language which took place in 1978 in Haiti, and the second which took place in June-July at the University of Illinois, Urbana Champaign, where Kachru and Larry played a major role in the conferences (Smith, 1981; Kachru, 1982, 2008; Bolton, 2004). Kachru’s model of ‘non-native Englishes’ identified three concentric circles: The Inner Circle, the Outer (or Extended) Circle and the Expanding Circle. These circles represent the types of spread, the patterns of acquisition, the range of functional domains, and the social penetration of the language. Hence, the term ‘non-native English(es)’ is presently seen as a reality, as varieties of Englishes have been noticed in the various fields of language study - grammar, morphology, lexis, semantics, discourse, syntax and phonology. Therefore, we can talk of Indian English, Ghanaian English, Nigerian English, of which Educated Edo English is a sub-variety, and lots of other non-native Englishes (Kachru, 2008).

Earlier studies investigated Nigerian English rhythm from the perspective of reduction in the quality of English vowels but this research intends to find out whether Educated Edo English Speakers alternate stressed and unstressed syllables in a rhythm unit from the practical sense. Moreover, the study considers Edo spoken English from a ‘geo-ethnic approach’ - an ethnic minority group of South West Nigeria, out of the multifarious linguistic groups in Nigeria - since there could be areas of convergence and divergence within a language variety.

This paper aims to address the following research questions:

- Do Educated Edo English Speakers appropriately alternate stressed and unstressed syllables in rhythm units?
- Is there any significant difference in the conformity of Edo males and females to Standard British English in stressed and unstressed syllable alternation of English rhythm units?
- To what extent does Educated Edo English Speakers’ rhythm pattern conform to earlier description of other Nigerian English sub-varieties rhythm description as syllable or inelastic timed?

**Method**

University undergraduates who are assumed to have relative proficiency in spoken English, due to years of training and exposure to spoken English in ESL environment were purposively sampled for this research. A short English passage segmented into forty rhythm units of 150 stressed and unstressed syllables in alternation as typically used in SBE constituted
the instrument, while Prince and Liberman’s (1977) metrical grid which explains strong and weak alternation in rhythm unit in a hierarchical order was adopted as the theoretical framework. Segmentation of passage was made into phrases of 40 rhythm units in order to provide a solid scientific platform for studying rhythm, stress and the peculiar patterns of Educated Edo English speakers, as remarkably different from SBE form. The informants comprised one hundred and fifty (75 males and 75 females) were asked to produce each English rhythm unit into a computerized speech laboratory (SFS), version 1.41. Speech production of each of the informants was later played back and transcribed. Frequency count of the appropriate alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables of each rhythm group of each of the informants was tracked; with each rhythm unit allotted 1 mark and converted to simple percentages. To determine the extent to which Educated Edo English Speakers alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables of English rhythm unit conform to Standard British English form, the number of correctly alternated stressed and unstressed syllables of the rhythm group was reckoned as a percentage of the total frequency of the occurrence of correctly alternated forms. That is, the number of correctly alternated stressed and unstressed syllables in each rhythm unit is divided by the total items in instrument, and multiplied by 100.

**Results**

Table 1 represents the performance of EEES in the appropriate alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in English rhythm units. Out of 6,000 expected instances of occurrence, the participants alternated stressed and unstressed syllables of the English rhythm units appropriately in 694 (11.6%) instances, while inappropriate use was higher, with 5,306 (88.4%).

Table 2 depicts the performance of EEES in the appropriate alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables by sex. The male participants alternated stressed and unstressed syllables appropriately in 344 (5.7%) instances, with inappropriate use of 2,576 (44.3%) while EEES females’ appropriate use was higher, with 351 (5.9%) instances, and inappropriate use of 2,649 (44.1%). Figure 2 below further gives this illustration:

**Table 1**

| S/N | English Rhythm units | Participants | Appropriate Alternation | % of Appropriate Alternation | Inappropriate Alternation | % of Inappropriate Alternation |
|-----|----------------------|--------------|------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------|-------------------------------|
| Native Baselines 1 | | | 100 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| Native Baselines 2 | | | 100 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| 1. | it has been said that several // it has been said that several | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 2. | educated //‘edjəkəntdi// | 150 | 79 | 52.7% | 71 | 47.3% |
| 3. | as well as parents and employers //‘æsweləs pεərəntsəndɪmpərnəns // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 4. | players of //‘pλæςəv // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 0% |
| 5. | labour are be //‘leibrəbrə // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 6. | ginning to //‘gɪnɪŋtə // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 7. | get //‘gɛt // | 150 | 150 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| 8. | worried a //‘wərdə // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 9. | bout the //‘bautə // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 10. | quality of //‘kwɔlɪteɪv // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 11. | graduates from these //‘ɡrædʒʊeɪtsfrəmðiːz // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 12. | universities, the //‘juːniˈvɜːrsətɪsθə // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 13. | fact re //‘fæktr // | 150 | 150 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
| 14. | means that the //‘miːnzθət // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 15. | issue of //‘ɪʃuː // | 150 | 0 | 0% | 150 | 100% |
| 16. | quality //‘kwɔlɪteɪv // | 150 | 150 | 100% | 0 | 0% |
|   | Sentence                                                                 | Value | Length | %   | Value | Length |
|---|--------------------------------------------------------------------------|-------|--------|-----|-------|--------|
| 17.| cannot be de/kəmənθbɪd//                                               | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 18.| terminated by the //tɪ:mdbæθ//                                          | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 62%    |
| 19.| universities a //ju:nɪvɜːsɪtiə//                                        | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 20.| lone. it //lɒnʊt                                                            | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 21.| also de //səldədi//                                                        | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 22.| pends on a //pendzənə//                                                    | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 23.| /number of //ˈnʌmbərəv//                                                    | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 24.| factors which in //ˈfæktəzwiðntʃi:n//                                    | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 25.| include the a //ˈkluːdəθə//                                                | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 26.| bility of the //ˈbɪlətiəvθə//                                             | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 27.| student, the //ˈstjuːdntðə//                                               | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 28.| level of //ˈlevl̩əvkə//                                                     | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 29.| nmitment to //ˈmɪtmənttə//                                                | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 30.| reading, as well as the //ˈrɪ.dʒɪzəlzələθə//                              | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 31.| physical, //ˈfɪzɪkl̩//                                                     | 150   | 15     | 10%| 135   | 90%    |
| 32.| psychological and e //ˈsəukə „lɒdʒikəndi //                                | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 33.| motional//ˈməʊʃn̩əl//                                                      | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 34.| factors. //ˈfæktərz//                                                     | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 35.| all these help to de //ˈə.hə.zhelptədə//                                 | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 36.| termine, fa //tɜː mɪnəf//                                                  | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 37.| silitate and en //ˈsɪlɪteɪtəndɪn//                                       | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 38.| hance the//ˈhænsðə//                                                      | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 39.| quality of a //ˈkwɒlɪtiəvə//                                              | 150   | 0      | 0% | 150   | 100%   |
| 40.| graduate. //ˈɡrædʒʊeɪt//                                                 | 150   | 150    | 100%| 0     | 0%     |

**Total** 6,000 694 11.6% 5,306 88.4%

**Figure 1.** Educated Edo English Speakers alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in Rhythm Units.
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Table 2
Male and Female Educated Edo English Speakers’ alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in Rhythm Units

| S/N | English Rhythm units                                                                 | Participants | Appropriate Alternation | Inappropriate Alternation |
|-----|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|--------------|-------------------------|----------------------------|
|     |                                                                                       | M | F | M | % | F | % | M | % | F | % | M | % | F | % |
| 1.  | it has been said that several // it has been said that several                       | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 2.  | educated // edyokentid//                                                               | 75 | 75 | 35 | 23.3 | 44 | 29.3 | 36 | 24 | 35 | 23.3 |
| 3.  | as well as parents and em // as well as parents and em                              | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 4.  | plovers of // plaisnaz//                                                               | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 5.  | labour are be // leborobi//                                                            | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 6.  | ginning to // gingga//                                                                | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 7.  | get // get//                                                                            | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 8.  | worried a // wanda//                                                                   | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 9.  | about the // baonti//                                                                  | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 10. | quality of // kwolitiav//                                                              | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 11. | graduates from these // graduates from these                                          | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 12. | universities. the // universities. the                                                | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 13. | fact re// fakti//                                                                        | 75 | 75 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| 14. | mains that the // menzdoni//                                                           | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 15. | issue of // ifu:av//                                                                    | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 16. | quality// kwoliti//                                                                     | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 17. | cannot be de// kenatbidi//                                                             | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 18. | terminated by the // terminated by the                                                | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 19. | universities a // universities a                                                      | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 20. | lone. it // lsonit                                                                    | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 21. | also de // also de                                                                     | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 22. | pends on a // penda//                                                                   | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 23. | /number of // number of                                                                | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 24. | factors which in // factors which in                                                  | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 25. | include the // klu:obia//                                                               | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 26. | bility of the // bilitiavdosa/                                                          | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 27. | student, the // stju:dntoba/                                                            | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 28. | level of // levja:vas//                                                                 | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 29. | mriment to// mriment to/                                                                | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 30. | reading, as well as the // reading, as well as the                                    | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 31. | physical, // fizikl//                                                                    | 75 | 75 | 8 | 5.5 | 7 | 4.7 | 71 | 47.3 | 64 | 42.7 |
| 32. | psychological and e // psychological and e                                            | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 33. | motional// maufi:nl//                                                                   | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 34. | factors. // fakti//                                                                      | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 35. | all these help to de // all these help to de                                           | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 36. | termine, fa // termine, fa                                                              | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 37. | silitate and en // silitate and en                                                     | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 38. | hance the// ha:nso//                                                                     | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 39. | quality of a // kwolitiavva//                                                           | 75 | 75 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 |
| 40. | graduate. // graduate.                                                                  | 75 | 75 | 75 | 50 | 75 | 50 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |

Total: 3000 3000 344 5.7 351 5.9 2657 44.3 2649 44.1
Table 2 depicts the performance of EEES in the appropriate alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables by sex. The male participants alternated stressed and unstressed syllables appropriately in 344 (5.7%) instances, with inappropriate use of 2,576 (44.3%) while EEES females’ appropriate use was higher, with 351 (5.9%) instances, and inappropriate use of 2,649 (44.1%). Figure 2 below further gives this illustration:

Figure 2. Male and Female Educated Edo English Speakers’ alternation of stressed and unstressed syllables in English rhythm groups.

7 Metrical Grid Analysis of Native baselines and EEES stressed and unstressed syllable alternation

From the native baselines’ grids above, the first syllable of the English rhythm group //ˈe dʒʊkeɪtɪd// is more prominent than the other syllables. This is because in SBE, a polysyllabic English word such as the one above is expected to have one of the syllables carrying the primary stress.

The grids of Educated Edo English Speakers differ completely from that of the Native Baselines. All the syllables of the English rhythm group //ˈe dʒʊkeɪtɪd// were made prominent with indication of x* clashes. This account for why earlier scholars (Eka, 1993; Akinjobi, 2004; Ilolo, 2013) claim NE rhythm should be best described as syllable-timed.

The Native Baselines’ grids //ˈpeərəntsəndɪm// recognised the Lexical Category Prominence Rule (LCRP), where prominent nodes are allowed to swap in a bi-direction manner, once the branching does not lead to a strong node. Only the first syllable //ˈpeə/ of the rhythm group receives more prominence as shown through the height in the grid above, which is in accordance with Standard British English rhythm.

Electronic copy available at: https://ssrn.com/abstract=3209437
Educated Edo English stressed and unstressed syllable alternation statistical and metrical findings established inability to appropriately alternate stressed and unstressed syllables in English rhythm units; thereby making it different from SBE forms. Like other L2 speakers of English, stressed and unstressed syllable alternation is not a phonological feature of Educated Edo English Speakers. The “marked” difference in stressed and unstressed syllable alternation of the informants, compared to SBE form could be as a result of the linguistic background of the participants. Most of the participants’ came in contact with English in the formal setting as confirmed through oral interview. Therefore, the fact that the informants were already exposed to their mother tongue - Edo language, could clearly account for the reason why variation exists in Edo English stressed and unstressed syllable alternation as compared to the Standard British English form. It is therefore important to note that proficiency in English rhythm in L2 context may depend greatly not only on educational attainment but early exposure to good and Standard English. Since, the English language is used as a medium of instruction in Nigerian schools (i.e. upper primary to tertiary), L2 users should be made to understand that if stressed and unstressed syllables are not applied appropriately, the rhythm of English utterance would be distorted and comprehension becomes difficult. Therefore, it is very crucial for language teachers to pay special attention to learners from tone language backgrounds, especially Edo English speakers.

This study sampled one hundred and fifty Educated Edo English Speakers, a sub-variety of Nigerian English speakers. This purposive sampling method was carried on university undergraduates who are assumed to have relative proficiency in spoken English, due to years of training and exposure to English in the second language (L2) context. It is, however, assumed that there could be some variations for Educated Edo English Speakers who are professionals (language teachers, broadcasters, lawyers, academics). Hence, other aspects of English suprasegmentals especially intonation, could be investigated in the light of their usage in Edo English. Furthermore, investigations on Edo English rhythm can be extended to other Educated Edo English speakers who are professionals like English language teachers, academics and broadcasters.

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