A Stylistic Analysis Of Naturally- Occurring Conversation In Nigerian English

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Abstract: *The study, entitled: "A stylistic analysis of naturally- occurring conversation in Nigerian English", was a linguistic- stylistic examination of educated Nigerian English conversation. The study, following the example of Davy & Crystal (1969), was aimed at identifying the common features of conversation in educated Nigerian English in relation to the marked linguistic features of informal conversations in English. The data were sourced from a surreptiously recorded spontaneous conversation between two graduating students of Ebonyi State University, after their final examination. The recording was later transcribed following Jefferson (1979) transcription model. Our findings showed that Nigerian English conversation has the features of inexplicitness of expressions,randomness of subject – matter,and general lack of planning. Other features include: normal non-fluency or gap-fillers, the use of in-group slang and abbreviations only known to the participants due to shared background knowledge and extreme informality of expressions. In specific terms, Nigerian English conversation closely approximates the Standard British English conversation in terms of its style and interactive qualities as a language in use in social contexts. The study discovered that, Nigerian English conversation, apart from the common-core features which it shares with the general conversational English, has some indexical markers that locate it in its socio-cultural and sociolinguistic context as English as Second language.*
Keywords: Stylistics, Nigerian English, Conversation.

I.   INTRODUCTION

A verbal event can either be spoken or written. For many years, the focus of grammarians andlanguage scholars was on the written text with little or no attention to the spoken text. But withthe advent of modern linguistics, attention of scholars shifted from the written text to the spokentext and primacy was given to the spoken word. It is therefore odd to note that despite thegeneral agreement in linguistic circles on the primacy of speech in language study, and the factthat much of our everyday lives are conducted through the medium of conversation, very littlelinguistics research has been carried out into this variety of English. However, the last fewdecades have witnessed an increasing and emerging interest, especially by sociolinguists, anthropologists and sociologists, in conversational discourse analysis.Conversation occurs when at least two people are talking. For it to be a conversation, eachperson must talk one after the other. There must be a string of at least two turns. Even if thesecond party keeps quiet, he must show evidence of having heard the utterance by nodding,starring, or other paralinguistic cues that accompany speech. Conversation analysis byextension, is the study of recorded naturally occurring talk-in-interaction whose principal aimis to discover how participants understand and respond to one another in their turns at talk witha central focus on how sequences of actions are generated. [1]. Theterm conversation, in the framework of conversational Analysis (CA) can be varied and openendedas scholars vary in their definitions and delimitation of the scope of the term. [2] for example opts for a narrow definition.

Conversation may be taken to be that familiar predominant kind of talk in which two or more participants freely alternate in speaking;
which generally occurs outside specific institutional settings like:
religious services, law courts, classrooms and the likes. (p. 234).

The above definition restricts the term to the trivial chit- chat. Members of this school areconcerned with the use of language to negotiate interpersonal and role- relationships, peersolidarity, the exchange of turns in a conversation, the saving of face of both speaker andlistener [3], [4], [5], [6]. To some other scholars, the term conversation is best regarded as a technical term covering avariety of forms of spontaneous social interaction in a speech community which includesinstitutional settings like: courtrooms, classrooms and boardrooms [7]. For our purpose in this study, preference is given to a less inclusive and relatively informal andnatural conversation between educated people. Following the reasoning of [8], this is without doubt, the most commonly used kind of English and consequently, themost familiar variety to the vast majority of English speaking people. This is because we findourselves making use of this variety on daily basis as we concretize our

realities as socialbeings. In addition to the above view is the pedagogical reason. The variety of English used ininformal spontaneous and natural conversation would seem to be the most logical and the leastartificial variety to expose students, in English as a second Language situations to, as part of theiroverall communicative competence in the use of English as a means of everydaycommunication. The present study finds justification in these practical reasons that are quiteimportant especially as Nigerian students and of course, Nigerians at large are said to speakbookish English. This is due to the prevailing situation in Nigeria where the English languageis taught and learned through the written medium of text books and not through naturalcontexts. In addition to the above, it has been observed that not much has also been done in theanalysis of Nigerian English conversation and this constitutes the gap which this study hascome to fill.The aim of the present study flows from that of stylistics in general which is the explication ofthe linguistic features which characterize a text and how writers use them to convey theirmessage. In specific terms, the study, following the example of [9], aimsat studying, in as much details as possible, the English language as it is used by Nigerians innatural conversation and by so doing, identify the formal linguistic features whichcharacterize it and where possible, explain why such features have been used as opposed toother alternatives.

II.   STYLISTIC FEATURES OF NATURAL CONVERSATION

The linguistic distinctiveness of conversation manifests on all the levels of linguistic andstylistic analysis: phonological, syntactic, graphological, lexical and semantic levels. Butfor our purpose and because of space and scope constraints, it suffices to elucidate a few of a more general features. Harvey sacks in his 1971 lecture series, posits that conversation hasmuch of the marked phonological, grammatical and thematic patterning that usuallycharacterize works of literature. He argues that such features occur too frequently to be rejectedas chance occurrences. He observes that participants in a conversation interactively strive toachieve effects of similar sophistication and complexity to that of literary texts. According tohim:These phonological echoes are evidence of how closely attentive,speakers are to each other. A speaker's choice of one formulationrather than another is partly determined by the phonologicalpatterning of the previous text and alternative formulations.In his discussion of an extended version of skip connecting, he also observes that texts alsodisplay marked lexical patterning such as contrasts and that conversation also displays markedlexical patterning such as contrasts:"These and those", "go to and come from", "in and out", "you and they" "men and ladies""new and old", "ever and never" "depressing and fun", (p. 122).He suggests that the use of such contrasting forms is usually appropriate at points of "topicconflict". [10] give a more elaborate and incisive account of features ofconversational English and they identify the following:

1. General features: Inexplicitness of expressions due to extreme reliance on extra-linguisticcontext by participants. This manifests through frequent use of apparent ambiguousness ofexpressions which will be readily ambiguous once removed from context, incompletenessof utterances; the use of a great deal of abbreviated forms, slangs, subtle references, familyjokes, etc.

2**.** Randomness of subject- matter and general lack of planning which usually manifeststhrough lack of an overall theme and the unpredictability of the direction or end; theunpredictability of a change of topic etc.

3. Extreme informality which usually manifests in the following ways; change of accents,dialects, code for humorous effects; juxtaposition of very separate linguistic features suchas formal and informal forms.

4. Normal non- fluency: this occurs in forms of gap fillers, recapitulation, re- starting, word

searching features, random errors, and hesitation features.At the phonological level, they identify such features as; the use of wider range of sounds,artificial clearing of the throat or coughing; snorts and sniffs to communicate attitudes; thepermissiveness of onomatopoeic words such as ghoosh! Whoosh! e t c; lack of end-ofutterancepauses due to rapid taking of cues; the prevalence of the use of significantparalinguistic features such as: nodding, coughing, etc.At the syntactic level, they identify the following features: the use of a large number of looselyco-ordinated clauses and short sentences; the frequent use of minor sentences especially asresponse utterances, and even non- response utterances in the form of summarizing statements;the frequent use of interrogative sentence types and the paucity of imperative ones; the use ofvocatives for attention getting or for identifying function; the use of contracted forms and tensejumbling etc. At the lexical level, some prominent features have also been identified: they include; theavoidance of specialized words and formal phraseology; the permissibility of inexplicity ofreference and imprecision; the permissibility of clichés, colloquial idioms, in-group slang, andlexical hyperbole.The above list of features could be extended to accommodate Nigerian English usage as toinclude; the tolerance of Nigerianisms and other disputed usages as well as the use of theNigerian pidgin.

THE NOTION OF STYLE AND STYLISTICS

The name stylistics, according to [11] is given to studies of different kinds, andabout the only thing they have in common is that they involve in one form or another, an analysis of the linguistic structure of texts. In fact, the word stylistics has been interpreted indiverse ways by different linguists. This is probably because

the word 'style' from whichstylistics emanates, itself has several connotations that make it difficult to be definedaccurately. Style and stylistics are two related and interwoven terms. In fact ,the simplestdefinition of stylistics is as "the study of style". Style as a concept is vast, multi- faceted andelusive.This complex phenomenon is not only related to literature but also to other fields likearchitecture, painting and the arts.

[12] identify four main characteristics of style.

(a.) Style may refer to some or all of the language habits of one person, e.g. Shakespear style.

(b). Style may refer to occasional linguistic idiosyncrasies which characterise anindividual's uniqueness

(c). It may refer to effectiveness of a mode of expression- saying the right thing in a mosteffective way.

(d). It may refer to the language habits shared by a group of people at one time, over aperiod, e.g. the style of American poets.

The concept of style can be studied from different perspectives: style as choice; as deviation, as personality, individuality, as situation, etc. but it is well beyond the scope of this study to expatiate all these perspectives.

Stylistics, for [13] could be defined in terms of theoretical and non- theoretical usages. He explains thus;

…in non- theoretical usage the word 'stylistics' makes sense and is useful in referring to an enormous range of literary contexts. Such as John Milton's grand style, the prose style of Henry James, the epic and

the ballad style of classical literature etc.

… stylistics, in theoretical usage, is a distinctive term that may be used to determine the connections between the form and effects with a particular variety of language, (p.76)

Stylistics from the theoretical usage above looks at what linguistic associations are, that the style of language reveals. For decades, the discipline of stylistics suffered the misconception of belonging exclusively to the domain of literature. In corollary to this, literary tropes such asmetaphor, metonymy, irony and so forth in an ordinary language use are regarded asexclusively literary phenomena. Exponents of linguistics are quick to point out however thatstylistics techniques can be applied to texts other than those included in the established literarycannon. Indeed, a central axiom of much modern stylistic analysis is that there is no such thingas an exclusively literary language 'that the elements of literariness' inhere in all constructedtexts: newspaper editorial/headlines, political speeches, spontaneous conversation and so on.[14] captures the arguments when he says"… there is no any reason to confineto literature alone the type of studies crystallized in poetics: we must read as much not only ofliterary texts but all, not only verbal production but symbolism".The present study aligns itself with the central axioms in modern stylistics which studiesvarieties of language whose properties position that language in context. For example, thelanguage of advertising, politics, religion, and, in our own case, natural conversation, all ofwhich are used distinctively and belong in a particular situation.

III.   FEATURES OF CONVERSATION:

Turn- Taking

One of the most noticeable features of conversations is that speakers change. In fact in mostcases, in a face- face conversation, only one person talks at a time and speakers take their turnsinterchangeably with few gaps or little overlap. Overlaps, where they occur, are always seen tobe interactively significant. Gaps and overlaps are in fact often interpreted by participants asindicating that something additional is happening. Generally speaking, a system of turn-taking is an organizational requirement of any coordinated joint activity or action as people require some way of organizing and managing the contributions of the various persons who are engaged in it. Turns and turn-taking provide the underlying framework of conversation because turns and the specific ways in which they are distributed among participants shape, influence and determine vast phenomena in conversation. [5] points out that "speakerchange is a normative process which must be achieved by participants in the conversation. That is to say, turn- taking behaviour is socially constructed, not the result of an inevitable process".What the above observation means is that, the fact that one person speaks at a time most ofthe time is not as a result of any physical or psycholinguistic constraint on human beings.There are a variety of strategies or devices used in turn- taking. [11] lists thefollowing: using interjections to signal a request for a turn , (e.g. Mn- hmm, Yeah!); and risingintonation; accepting a turn offered by another speaker by responding to a question or byproviding the second pair part of an adjacency pair, completing or adding to something saidby the previous speaker, and so on. In order to hold the turn, speakers use devices indicatingthat they are making a series of remarks: first of all or to begin with, followed by then; afterthat, next, and expressions such as: another thing, after that, next, etc, andconnectors like: so, because, however, etc, which promote continuity.

Topic Selection/ Management

The way speakers in a conversation select the topics for discussion and the strategies they useinnominating, developing and changing them, constitute an important dimension ofconversational organization [7]. For example, for a conversation to be coherent, speakers must handle topics delicately by respecting the norms concerning thechoice of topics. [8] terms this, topicalizing behaviour by which he means

bringing up topics, responding to other people's topics; mentioning something, avoiding themention of something, carrying the discussion one step further, and so forth. [9] also observes:

we experience, see, hear about events all the time; some are tellable,some aren't and of those that are tellable, some are tellable toeveryone, some have restricted audience; some can wait and stillretain their interest (p.79).

In the same vein, [10] points out that participants select topics as first topics
though a process of negotiation.

Adjacency Pairs.

Adjacency pairs are the basic structural units of a conversation. They are automatic sequencesthat consist of two parts produced by different speakers [1]. The concept ofadjacency pair was developed by [3] who describe it as a sequence oftwo utterances that follow each other or are adjacent, and has two parts- a first pair part and asecond pair part. The kind of first pair part that is used by a speaker determines the kind orrange of second pair part the other participant in the conversation can give, as only specificsecond pair parts can correlate to each first pair part. A question, for example, requires somekind of answer; an invitation requires an acceptance or rejection, a greeting requires a greeting;a complaint requires an apology or a justification and so forth.

The norm in the production of adjacency pairs is for the current speaker, having produced the first part, to stop speaking, and the next speaker mush produce, at that point, a second part to the same pair. If an initial request or greeting does not receive a second part, or if there is a delay, that will be understood to be interactively significant. For instance a silence may indicatedisagreement while a delay can signify hesitation, both showing a lack of connection betweenpeople in conversation.Adjacency parings can yield conversational patterns of varying degrees of complexity. Presequencescan be used as initial enquiries, to obtain information that will help a person decidehow the next pair part will be answered, and insertion sequences can be included in the middleof the pair parts to clarify what has already been said.

THE DATA FOR THE PRESENT STUDY

The data for this study was sourced from a recorded naturally –occuring and spontaneous conversation between two undergraduate students of Ebonyi State University. The students: Eze and Uche, were friends and the conversation occurred in one of the off- campus hostels near the the university, after their final examination. The recording was made in such a way that the participants were not aware that they were being recorded. Following [6] transcription model, the recording was transcribed in a way that, we believe, will reflect the spontaneity and informality of the talk.

ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The conversation started with an opening conversational move by Eze in exchange 1: *Nwanne,I greet Oh!* This functions as phatic communion which usually constitutes the beginnings andendings of conversation. According to [12], it normally takes the form of theroutine formulae of greeting and parting (Hi! Good morning, greetings! Good- bye etc). It alsoincludes stereotype remarks on issues such as the weather. Eze's use of Phatic communion inthis text functions to secure attention, agreement and solidarity with the listener- Uche.The question in exchange 5: *Guy! Have you heard*? interactively functions not as aninterrogative, but as a summon used by Eze to secure a conversational common- ground andto introduce a topic for the conversation.The text, as it is characteristic of conversational English, displays a significant preponderanceof in- group markers/slang.In exchanges 1-4, we can see:

1. Eze : Nwanne! (My brother) I greet O !
2. Uche: How far guy?
3. Uche: Udo! (Igbo- peace).
4. Eze: Guy, have you heard?
5. Eze: Oh boy! You mean you were not there
6. If you enter the church eh!

According to [4] in- group marker or in- slang are used to close down the socialdistance between speakers and to proclaim common identity. The more the participants knoweach other, the more they rely on in- group markers, or in-group slang, abbreviated forms,family or group jokes and so on, to communicate. [12] identifies such termsas: pal, guys, dear, mate, etc. as popular in- group markers.Another feature, which is also diagnostic of conversation is the phenomenon of inexplicitnessof expression. The is abundantly in evidence in this text. Inexplicitness in language use isusually attributed to shared background knowledge between the interlocutors and the extremereliance on the extra-linguistic context in which the conversation is taking place. The ability ofparticipants in a conversation to arrive automatically at interpretations of the unsaid orunwritten is

usually used due to pre-existing knowledge structures. According to [3], these structures function like familiar patterns from previous experience that we use tointerpret new experiences.

Features of inexplicitness found in the text include: the use of words and remote referenceswhich, when removed from their contexts, become apparently ambiguous. In line 7, Eze asksUche*: Oh boy, You mean you were not there*. The use of the spatial (place) deixis: *there* hereis hazy or unclear and would not have been understood if Uche, the Co-conversationalist hadnot been present. There is the use of other reference features of language such as the use of theproper nouns in sentences like:

When *Dave* was declared… (line7)

People say that *Chinedu* will be the first victim (line 13) etc. all of which, need to be furtherexplained or expatiated for them to be intelligible.In the same vein, the anaphoric use of pronominals and demonstratives in line 11 - Eze: *Healso delivered a speech and said…* and in line 16-Uche: Hmm, Hmm! *That guy deserveswhatever he gets*; and line 17-Eze*: He has dealt \ with people of this state*; is only permissiblein spontaneous face-face conversation and rarely present in writing.There are also instances of in-completeness of many utterances that the co- participant has torely only on the context or shared - background knowledge to interpret. For instance, in line8- Eze told Uche: *when Dave was declared*. This utterance, when removed from the context ofthe speech event, will elicit the question. declared as what? This incompleteness of utterancesand indeed, other features of inexplicitness of conversation derives from the fact that the possibilityof the hearer asking for recapitulation in the course of the discourse, is ever present. In conversation the fact that the participants know each other well meant that they were often ableto take a great deal of what they were trying to say for granted.The data also exhibit another marked feature of conversational English which is randomnessof topic or subject- matter and a general lack of planning. We notice the movement, in thisconversation, from the topic of Dave's celebration of election victory to the beauty and theserenity of the premises of The Christ Embassy Church; to the request of financial assistanceby Uche and finally to Eze counseling Uche to quit some of his bad habits. Spontaneousconversations, as opposed to such genres as discussion, debates etc, characteristically lack anoverall theme. It is however possible for a participant to interactively guide the course of theconversation towards a given theme. In the text, Uche tactfully guides the conversation to apoint that enables him to modestly make his request for financial assistance from Eze withoutlosing face, and Eze, on his own part, strategically steered the conversation to a point where heis able to reprimand Uche for his bad habits without hurting his negative face. Generally, it isobserved that a participant can at will, change the topic of a conversation at any point of in theconversation without this being felt to be linguistically or communicatively inappropriate.

In a conversation, it is rarely possible for one to predict when and how it, will end or how itwould develop within a period.Another significant stylistic feature of natural conversation displayed in this conversation, onethat has clearly located it in its socio- cultural and sociolinguistic context, is the flexibility oflanguage use. This conversation displays significant incidence of code mixing of standardEnglish, the Igbo language and the Nigerian Pidgin. This mixing of different languages andcodes as well as the use of in- group slangy expressions are used partially for humorous effect and to indicate familiarity or intimacy. There is a marked inter-sentential and intra-sententialmixing of the *Igbo* language, the Nigerian Pidgin and the Standard English in line: 1- *Nwanne*(brother); 2-*how far guy*, 4- *udo*, (peace);28- *Nna* (father), etc. There is also a preponderant useof the Nigerian pidgin in lines: 3- *I dey . How your end*? Line 6 - *Gist me*; Line 7 - *Ol boy, youmean you were not there…*, line 23 - *Ol boy eh! If you enter the church Eh!* and line 32 –*Nowahala*. There is also a preponderant use of popular Nigerian English usage (Nigerianisms).

Instances of this occur in such utterances as:

Eze: *He also delivered a speech and said that those who ate government money…*(misappropriated or embezzled government fund) should be ready to account for it (line: 11)

Uche: *Nnaa! I am in dire need of money can you borrow (lend) me some money*? (line 28).This unguided mixture of languages and codes derives from the nature of extreme informality of conversation. It is significant to note that in informal conversation, any kind of language canoccur without its being considered inappropriate or out of place. In fact this feature of Codeswitching and code-mixing and the permissibility of distinctive Nigerian English idioms canbe considered as one of the major characteristics of Nigerian English conversation.Another general feature of natural conversation, which is not much in evidence in this study,is the feature of normal non-fluency. This occurs when Uche used it to hedge his opinion on acomment made by Eze :

Hmm! Hmm! That guy deserves whatever he gets (line,16). [5] suggest that hesitancy in language use is strongly influenced by periods of creative thinking, themore one is thinking what to say, the more likely hesitation features are to appear. They further suggest that hesitation phenomena are of primary significance in determining the acceptability or otherwise of conversation as a participant who displays perfect fluency in the spoken variety may be frowned upon and more often than not, may be labeled 'a smooth talker"Therefore the occurrence of these feature in conversation is normal and should not bepejoratively regarded as an error.At the phonological level, not much is revealed in the data. What is readily noticeable in thisrespect is the use of

vocatives in the form of exclamatory expressions of emotions of surpriseand excitement. This is evident in line 1-*I greet O*! line 6- *Heard what*! line 7- *O1 boy*! Line10- *Is that so*! line 23- *O1 boy eh*!

[14] observe that the depth of emotion that is expressed by participants ina conversation depends on the personal relationship between the participants and that thelinguistic means of expressing such expressions is a function of the non- segmental features.Another noticeable feature on display in this conversation is the absence of end-of-utterancepauses which is due to rapid taking up of cues by the participants. This contributes to the featureof extreme informality of this conversation.At the syntactic level, there is a marked use of short and simple sentences not separated by anykind of pause, especially at the beginning of the conversation. We also observe that thesentences become longer and more complex as topics are introduced and developed and shortenagain at the resolution of the topics and arguments at the end of the conversation.Related to this is the frequency of minor sentences especially as response utterances as used byUche, (line-4) *Udo;* Eze (Line- 9) *yes now*.It is this high proportion of short and simple sentences and minor sentences, along with theloosely coordinated structures that has bestowed on conversation its purported characteristicsof disjointedness.Another notable feature at the syntactic level, is the high proportion of interrogative sentenceswhich rhetorically, do not always function as questions as in Eze's use of : *Have you heard*? –line 5; *where else*, line 9, etc.At the lexical level, this conversation displays a preponderance of simple words and a generalavoidance of specialized vocabulary. There is also a high-proportion of colloquialism, clitches,and in- group markers in the conversation .Uche's use of *guy* in line 2 and Eze's use of *nowahala* in line 33 are just a few illustrations of this. Uche's use of *OON* in line 14 illustratesthe use of abbreviations familiar to both participants. The use vocabulary in this conversationgenerally, reflects the common background of the participants.

IV.   CONCLUSION

In this study, it has been argued that informal conversation has its own linguistic, stylistic anddiscourse features different from institutional, formal and written discourse and that it deservesthe attention of language scholars. The study is concerned specifically with features of NigerianEnglish conversation in relation to general features of conversational English. Our analyseshave dearly shown that such features as: the use of phatic communion to open conversations,the use in- group markers/ Shang; inexplicitness of expressions; randomness of subject matter,code.- Switching, or language interlarding, the use of simple words and phraseology, clichés,etc, cohere in high proportion in this conversation. The occurrence of these features whichhave all been identified as general characteristic features of conversational English, in thisconversation, has clearly shown that Nigerian English conversation closely approximate thestandard English conversation in terms of its interactive, rhetorical, and linguistic qualities of language in conversation. In specific terms, Nigerian English conversation, apartfrom the common core- features which it shares with conversation English generally, also hasthe features of the use of Nigerian English idioms.

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