

Article

A Socio-Literary Meaning in Sam Ukala's *Skeletons: A Collection of Stories*

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Abstract

The study focused on enhancing women's empowerment through distance education in Nsukka Local Government Area, Enugu State. The study was guided by three research questions. The descriptive survey research design was used for the study. The population for the study was 640 members of the registered women's organizations in Nsukka Local Government. The sample size was 320 women. Multi-staged sampling technique was used. The instrument for data collection was a questionnaire titled 'Enhancing Women Empowerment through Distance Education' (EWEDE). A reliability coefficient of 0.77 was obtained using Cronbach's Alpha. Data were analyzed using the weighted mean. Findings revealed that to a very high extent, distance education can contribute to the enhancement of political, economic, and social empowerment of women in Nsukka LGA of Enugu State. This is because women acquire sound political, economic, and social education, which results in active participation in more profitable businesses and life endeavors. A recommendation was made that the government should fund distance education.

Keywords: Distance Education, Empowerment, Women, Mental Health

Introduction

The English language plays a vital role in Nigeria, serving as the language of education, media, politics, administration, judiciary, science and technology, business, and commerce. Most historians and analysts agree that it is not an easy task to date the beginning of the use of English in Nigeria. Banjo (1996) states that although Nigeria, as a political entity, dates back to 1914 when Lord Lugard amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates, English had been taught institutionally in the area now known as Nigeria since the nineteenth century in towns such as Calabar, Lagos, and Oyo. He adds that there are records attesting to the presence of English in Nigeria since the nineteenth century. Jowitt (1991) reinforces this claim by stating that English did not begin to play a significant role in Nigerian society until the nineteenth century. According to him, this was the period during which the British made inroads into the country as missionaries and traders, and later as administrators and government officials. With the establishment of British rule in 1900, more Britons flocked to the country to serve as government officials. English became the language of administration and instruction. Before the arrival of the British colonialists, what is today known as Nigeria comprised diverse groups of people with distinct cultures, languages, and religions. With the attainment of independence in 1960, English was retained as the nation's official language for conducting legislative, executive, and judicial functions. English in Nigeria has since become the language of international and intra-national communication. It is also the language of religion, politics, education, administration, and integration. According to Akindele and Adegbite (1999),

Babajide (2001), and Bamgbose (1971), it holds a prominent place in Nigerian society and is well-received among the Nigerian people.

Scholars such as Brosnahan (1958), Banjo (1971), Adekunle (1979), Bamgbose (1982, 1995), and Akindele and Adegbite (2005) have classified Nigerian English into various varieties using different parameters, including the speaker's educational qualification and ethno-linguistic background. The first parameter revealed variations in the standard and non-standard usage of English. In contrast, the second produced a regional variety characterised by phonological variations primarily due to interference from indigenous languages. Uwen and Nta (2021,p.56) report that the interface between English Language and Nigerian languages is noticeable in the area of phonology, syntax, lexis, and semantics as represented in its spoken and written forms. These sociolinguistic factors have led to the emergence of Nigerian English, a variety unique to Nigeria. Eneremadu et al (2023) observe that ever since its introduction in Nigeria, the hundreds of indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, the different cultural backgrounds, the need to express unique Nigerian socio-cultural experiences as well as the various lengths of exposure to English in the educational system of Nigerians have caused significant structural variation that can be observed in the English currently used in Nigeria. Ngor (2024, p. 400) notes that the English language usage in Nigeria has evolved and has taken on new forms to suit the Nigerian cultural context and environment. What has happened to the English language in Nigeria is not an anomaly, but a normal and natural linguistic process that occurs in an atmosphere of mobility, language, and cultural contact. Nwokoji (2024, p. 324) states that this Nigerian variety is a unique one that has been influenced by Nigeria's rich linguistic and cultural diversity, historical context, and other sociopolitical factors. Aor (2023, p. 1) notes that the Nigerian variety of English is laced with Nigerian nuances, such as translations, transliterations, proverbs, cultural allusions, bastardised English, and indigenous metaphors, which foreground them as products of Nigerian culture.

The distinctiveness that characterises Nigerian English has been captured in literary works by Nigerian writers. One of such examples is Sam Ukala's *Skeletons: a collection of stories* published in 2000. Ukala was a Nigerian playwright, poet, short-story writer, actor, theatre director, and academic. His published plays include *The Slave Wife*, *The Log in Your Eye*, *The Placenta of Death*, *The Last Heroes*, and *Break a Boil*. His book *Skeletons: A Collection of Stories* is a collection of six short stories that focus on themes of immorality, injustice, corruption, betrayal, and the inequality between the rich and the poor. From the linguistic viewpoint, very little critical attention has been devoted to his works. The extant literature on Ukala's works is predominantly focused on the literary and theatrical aspects of his work. Tugbokorowei and Anyanwu (2018) is a collection of forty-seven essays in honour of Ukala. Out of these forty-seven essays, none is from a linguistic viewpoint. In yet another collection of essays edited by Ogude and Egede (1999) to honour Ukala, no single essay is from a linguistic standpoint. Agho (1999) investigates the power conflict in Ukala's *Placenta of Death*. He regards the play as one that has evolved from a folktale into a parable, addressing the ills of society. Examining Ukala's *The Slave Wife* and *The Log in Your Eye* through the lens of gender studies, Opara (1999) views Ukala as one who opposes the sexist thought patterns of writers such as Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, and Wole Soyinka, instead choosing to depict

women confronted with different socio-cultural challenges. Bello (2018) examines conflict and power dynamics in Akpakaland and the *Placenta of Death*. He identifies the first wife's desire to safeguard her position from her co-wives through unorthodox means as the primary cause of conflict in the play. Affiah et al (2022) examine ideological underpinnings in the use of proverbs in the works of Femi Osofisan and Sam Ukala. They observe that the proverbs used by the playwrights are stylistically embedded in symbols and colourful imagery, serving to aid characterisation and advance the African belief system. Ekwueme and Nwafor (2022) interrogate radical theatre and social injustice in Ukala's *Break a Boil*. They report that Ukala's text is a response to some of the realities of contemporary Nigerian society. Glikpoe (2023) analyses directorial elements in Ukala's *Placenta of Death*, focusing on aspects such as title, plot structure, character, and themes. He observes that the play's complex plot structure may pose challenges for stage directors.

From a linguistic perspective, apart from Edokpayi (2023a, 2023b) and Maledo (2020), there is a dearth of research on Ukala's works. Edokpayi (2023a) is a lexico-semantic analysis of Ukala's *Skeletons: a collection of stories*. The study's findings reveal that Ukala is a master of his craft and a creative expert who has succeeded in nativising the English Language through the use of devices like proverbs, Nigerian Pidgin, loan creation, and semantic extension. Edokpayi(2023b) investigates Ukala's use of graphological devices and their stylistic functions in *Skeletons: a collection of stories*. The findings reveal deviations from standard norms, especially in the writer's use of italicisation, punctuation, and capitalisation. Maledo (2020) conducts an ethno-pragmatic study of Ukala's *Slave Wife* and *Placenta of Death* using Brown and Levinson's (1987) politeness theory and Dell Hymes' ethnography of communication to show how politeness strategies are applied in the use of proverbs by the characters in the play, as well as their ethnographic features. The results reveal that most of the proverbs are used as face-enhancing devices.

The intersection of sociolinguistics and literary analysis offers a valuable framework for examining how language reflects and constructs social realities in literature. This interdisciplinary approach enables scholars to explore how authors use language not merely as a means of communication but also as a tool for social commentary, identity negotiation, and cultural affirmation. Sociolinguistics, the study of the relationship between language and society, examines how factors such as ethnicity, class, gender, age, and region influence language use. When applied to literary analysis, this perspective reveals how literary texts mirror and critique the sociolinguistic dynamics of their contexts. For instance, Fishman (1972) emphasises that "the study of who speaks what language to whom and when" (p. 15) is central to understanding linguistic behaviour in a social context. This principle is vividly illustrated in literature, where characters' linguistic choices often signify their social status, education, cultural identity, or ideological stance. In African literature, for example, the strategic use of code-switching between English, Pidgin, and indigenous languages reflects the multilingual realities of postcolonial societies, highlighting issues of belonging, power, and resistance. In Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, the translation of Igbo proverbs into English is a classic example of the use of sociolinguistic elements to convey cultural specificity. This reinforces Achebe's (1965) argument, "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of

my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (p. 62), further illustrating the author's conscious adaptation of English to reflect African thought patterns and worldviews.

Similarly, Nigerian playwright Sam Ukala's works, particularly *Skeletons*, embody this linguistic hybridity. By integrating Nigerian Pidgin, proverbs, and localised expressions into English, Ukala constructs characters and dialogues that resonate with Nigerian socio-cultural realities. This resounds with Halliday's (1978) assertion that "language is the central semiotic process of social life; it is both a product of society and a means of creating it" (p. 2). Edokpayi (2023a) further notes that "Ukala demonstrates a keen awareness of the sociolinguistic environment by deploying linguistic codes that reflect the ethnicity, occupation, and social class of his characters" (p. 144). This enhances character development, making the narrative a site of cultural preservation and social critique. Thus, by analysing Ukala's *Skeletons* through a sociolinguistic lens, this study seeks to uncover how linguistic choices encode social hierarchies, cultural values, and ideological tensions. Literature becomes a fertile ground for examining the interplay between language and society, offering insights into how language is used to construct identities, challenge norms, and envision new possibilities.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study is based on Labov's Variability Theory, a key concept in sociolinguistics that examines the patterned differences in language use across various social contexts. Labov (1966) studied the speech habits of workers in a New York department store, demonstrating that pronunciation, particularly of post-vocalic /r/, varies with social class and that language behaviour is influenced by socio-economic stratification. His research challenged traditional dialectology by illustrating that language variation is not random but systematically connected to social factors. Sociolinguistic variables, such as gender, age, education, income, occupation, ethnicity, and location, serve as tools for analysing how language functions within society. These variables shape phonological, lexical, and syntactic choices, offering insights into the speaker's social identity and group affiliation. This framework enables researchers to understand how languages vary across contexts and how they reflect and reinforce societal structures and beliefs.

In literary studies, this sociolinguistic approach offers a valuable perspective for analysing how language is portrayed in fiction, drama, and poetry. Literature acts as a mirror of the society it depicts, capturing linguistic diversity and providing a stage for dramatising social realities. As Carter and Simpson (1989) state, "literature is one of the most important areas in which language is used to portray and interrogate human relationships and power structures" (p. 4). Writers incorporate sociolinguistic variables into their texts through character dialogue, narrative voice, and stylistic devices to reflect the complexities of human communication within specific cultural and social contexts.

In Sam Ukala's *Skeletons*, the distinct speech patterns of characters reflect sociolinguistic variables like ethnic background, education, social status, and age. Ukala's use of Nigerian Pidgin, code-switching, and local idioms is a conscious linguistic choice to highlight social class differences and cultural identities. This portrayal of language variation supports Labov's idea that "linguistic variation is a means through which speakers negotiate social meanings" (Labov, 1972, p. 203). Examining *Skeletons* through sociolinguistic theory helps reveal how language in literature can depict, reinforce, or question social hierarchies and cultural values.

Furthermore, incorporating non-linguistic variables, such as education level, ethnicity, social class, and generational status, is especially significant in Nigeria, where English has been localised and diversified. These factors influence the characteristics of Nigerian English, a form enriched with local proverbs, idioms, and cultural references. Bamgbose (1995) describes Nigerian English as "a vehicle for the expression of a Nigerian identity" (p. 26), with literature serving as one of its strongest expressions.

Variability Theory and Language Use

Variability Theory, as developed by William Labov, views language as a flexible and socially rooted system that is constantly influenced by contextual and demographic factors. Instead of seeing language as a uniform and fixed structure, this theory highlights the patterned and systematic nature of linguistic variation across diverse social groups and communication contexts. This perspective is especially useful for understanding Nigerian English, a vibrant and evolving variety shaped by contact between local Nigerian languages and Standard British English. In Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural environment, English does not function in isolation but is continually negotiated through local linguistic practices and social realities. Variability Theory illuminates how different social groups in Nigeria, defined by region, class, education, ethnicity, and urban-rural differences, adopt, modify, and personalise English to meet their expressive needs.

Labov's (1972) assertion that linguistic variation is not simply deviation but a structured reflection of social differentiation reflects the emergence of Nigerian English as a socially constructed variety that mirrors and reinforces the identities of its speakers. The influence of indigenous languages is apparent in phonological shifts, lexical innovations, semantic extensions, syntactic reconfigurations, and stylistic peculiarities, which are often explored and dramatized in Nigerian literary texts.

Within literature, especially in works like Sam Ukala's *Skeletons*, these linguistic variations are not accidental but essential to character development, thematic building, and social commentary. Authors often embed social realities through their characters' speech patterns, reflecting Nigeria's sociolinguistic diversity. Therefore, Variability Theory provides a robust framework for analysing how language functions in literary settings, not merely as a means of communication, but as a symbolic tool for negotiating power, identity, and cultural connection.

The Role of Sociolinguistics in Literature

Sociolinguistics offers valuable tools for analysing how language functions as a medium through which literature reflects and constructs social realities. In literary texts, language is not merely a stylistic element but a vehicle for expressing cultural norms, social identities, and ideological positions. Researchers can uncover deeper layers of meaning that illuminate the socio-political contexts underpinning a narrative by attending to linguistic variation, such as code-switching, dialectal usage, and culturally embedded expressions.

In *Skeletons*, Sam Ukala strategically employs features of Nigerian English, including lexical innovations, transliterations, proverbs, and elements of Nigerian Pidgin, to portray characters and dramatise lived realities. These linguistic choices do more than reflect the speech patterns of Nigerian society; they actively engage with issues of corruption, inequality, and moral disintegration. Ukala's stylised use of language enhances the authenticity of his characters while also functioning as a subtle yet powerful critique of societal dysfunctions.

This study, therefore, situates Ukala's *Skeletons* within a sociolinguistic framework to explore how language varieties function as communicative devices and as narrative strategies that reveal, resist, and reshape the socio-cultural dynamics of Nigerian life. The research bridges the gap between language and literature by integrating sociolinguistic analysis into literary interpretation, emphasising how linguistic form and social content are inextricably linked.

Methodology

Skeletons: A Collection of Stories by Sam Ukala was selected for this study due to the paucity of linguistic analyses on his literary corpus, notwithstanding its rich socio-cultural and stylistic significance. As a playwright and storyteller, Ukala's deliberate manipulation of language provides fertile ground for examining the intersection of sociolinguistics and literary expression. This study adopts a qualitative, text-based approach that bridges literary analysis and sociolinguistic inquiry. The primary text was carefully read and annotated, with a focus on how language use reveals cultural identity, social stratification, and communicative intent. Linguistic features were examined alongside literary elements such as characterisation, setting, and themes to understand how Ukala's stylistic choices strengthen the narrative and its social critique. Secondary data was collected through thorough library research, referencing scholarly articles, journal publications, and books about Nigerian English, sociolinguistics, and African literature to establish theoretical and contextual foundations.

Data Collection

The data collection process employed a purposive sampling method. Specific excerpts from *Skeletons* were selected based on their literary and linguistic density, particularly dialogues, narrative voice, and culturally rooted expressions. These excerpts were chosen for their potential to illuminate how Ukala employs language to represent characters' identities, convey sociopolitical commentary, and build

thematic resonance. This selection was also informed by the need to explore how the setting intersects with language to reflect Nigeria's multilingual and multicultural society.

Analytical Framework

The analysis was guided by Labov's Variability Theory, which explains how language use varies according to social factors such as class, education, ethnicity, and age. This theoretical model was used alongside literary analysis, allowing for a detailed understanding of how Ukala's linguistic choices shape narrative voice, character portrayal, and thematic development. Each excerpt was analysed across five linguistic levels: phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic. These features were then interpreted within their literary context to understand how they reflect or challenge the socio-cultural norms depicted in the stories. By emphasising both sociolinguistic patterns and literary functions, this framework reveals how Ukala's narratives reflect and reconstruct the lived experiences of Nigerians through language.

Results

The analysis shows that the language used by the characters reflects Nigerian society and culture, as well as the influence of indigenous languages on English. The findings are organised into two main sections: Varieties of Nigerian English and Features of Nigerian English.

Varieties of English in Ukala's *Skeletons*: A Collection of Stories

Ukala's text highlights three main types of English: The Standard variety, the Pidgin variety, and the incipient bilingual variety, as described by Adegunle (1979).

The Standard Variety

Educated individuals typically speak the standard variety of Nigerian English, which closely resembles standard British English in terms of syntax, semantics, and phonology. However, it displays certain phonetic deviations and lexical peculiarities unique to the Nigerian context (Akujobi & Umoh, 2022, p. 90). This variety remains intelligible across Nigeria's diverse linguistic landscape and is recognised in formal, academic, and international discourse.

In *Skeletons*, Ukala intentionally assigns the Standard variety to characters whose education or social status matches the typical expectations for formal language. This linguistic choice emphasises the character's identity and social role, supporting the author's themes related to societal structures, including access and social mobility.

Example 1:

"Good luck. Don't hesitate to come to us after you've obtained the certificate. As you probably know, we have a well-staffed training department. We run a basic course for all those with only the Primary School Leaving Certificate, who wish to make reasonable progress as operatives."

(p. 42, "The Certificate")

In this excerpt, the Personnel Manager speaks to Nnenna using polished, interference-free Standard English. The language is formal, clear, and free of local idioms or code-switching, demonstrating his corporate status and the authority of the institution. Employing Standard English here highlights his education and aligns with Ukala's strategic portrayal of the professional class in postcolonial Nigeria, where linguistic mastery often symbolises social capital.

Example 2:

"Soon after breakfast that Monday morning, I began to track Mrs. Udume. I drove one of Alhaji's commercial mini-buses, with Jackijoko and Jili as my only passengers. We went from one popular orphanage to another and found no sign of Mrs. Udume."

(p. 130, "Murder at Wilmer")

Bullet, a Mass Communication graduate and skilled assassin, describes his mission in clear, well-structured English. His fluent and coherent speech reflects his education and self-control, creating an irony with his morally ambiguous work. Ukala's choice of Standard English for this character adds depth: the language serves not only as a sign of sophistication but also as a means to conceal moral corruption, offering a critique of a society where education and professionalism do not necessarily equate to ethical conduct.

In both cases, Ukala's use of the Standard variety goes beyond mere education; it enriches character development and highlights the social hierarchies within Nigerian society. Here, language serves as both a storytelling device and a sociolinguistic marker, illustrating the relationship between linguistic choices and their representation in literature.

The Pidgin Variety

Nigerian Pidgin, often regarded as a common language among diverse socio-ethnic groups, is primarily used by less-educated and working-class populations. Its structure shows influences from indigenous Nigerian languages and English, particularly through phonological simplification, lexical borrowing, and interference from the mother tongue. Brosnahan (1958) relates it to Level 1 English, Banjo (1975) labels it as Variety 1, and Bamgbose (1995) classifies it as a subtype of Contact English. Elugbe and Omamor (1991) link its origins to interactions between European traders and coastal Nigerian communities, highlighting its development into a second or even first language for many urban Nigerians.

In *Skeletons*, Ukala uses Pidgin not just for realism but as a stylistic tool that reflects Nigeria's complex linguistic fabric, power, identity, and class struggles. Pidgin English acts as a cultural marker, providing insight into character backgrounds and social positioning while serving as a means of solidarity, resistance, and humour.

Example 3:

*'Where you de come from?' the man asked me.
'From our village,' I replied.
'You reach Lagos here dis morning?' the man asked again.
'Yes... No. In the night. I slept in the lorry till this morning.'
'Okay,' said the man. 'Sit down make I go call Oga.'
(p. 18, "Embrace of a Mirage")*

This interaction between Ushie and a gatekeeper highlights the layered nature of linguistic interaction. While Ushie responds in Standard English, the gatekeeper speaks in Pidgin, marked by phonological simplifications, such as "dis" for "this" and "make I go call Oga" instead of "let me call the boss," illustrating the linguistic divide often linked to educational background and occupation. Ukala uses this contrast to reflect real-world inequalities in power and access, as well as the complex modes of communication in Nigerian urban life.

Example 4:

*'You know se I fit burst your throat like dat?'
'Yes, yes, I know... But... what have I done?'
'Notin yet. Just to show you how I go burst your life if you taffia this tin wey I tell you now to anybody.'
'You didn't need to go that far to get my promise,' Oluwatosin admonished.
(p. 71, "Money, Guns and Justice")*

This excerpt showcases the expressive and often confrontational use of Pidgin in emotionally intense or threatening contexts. Gobo, a prison inmate, employs Pidgin to subtly threaten someone, with language that includes phrases like "burst your throat" and "taffia," emphasising street-level immediacy and cultural nuance. Notably, Oluwatosin, a civil servant, understands and responds, demonstrating how Nigerian Pidgin bridges class divides. Ukala highlights Pidgin's versatility: it can convey roughness and raw emotion as well as facilitate communication among diverse speakers.

In both examples, Ukala showcases the aesthetic and communicative versatility of Nigerian Pidgin. Far from just a "low" variety, it serves as a compelling narrative device for realism, character development, and social critique. This Pidgin form not only authenticates the characters' socio-economic backgrounds but also places the stories within a wider Nigerian sociolinguistic context.

The Incipient Bilingual Variety

The Incipient Bilingual Variety of Nigerian English is characterised by notable interference from indigenous Nigerian languages, especially in syntax, phonology, and lexical choices. Uwen and Nta (2021, p. 59) describe it as typical of Nigerians in the early stages of learning English as a second language. This stage often involves mother-tongue transfer, grammatical simplification, and transliteration, where native language structures are directly transferred onto English expressions. The outcome is a hybrid linguistic form that diverges from Standard British English norms but remains understandable within the local sociolinguistic context.

In *Skeletons*, Ukala effectively uses this variety to depict characters who navigate the linguistic divide between indigenous language skills and emerging English fluency. His portrayal is not just imitative but serves a thematic purpose, emphasising issues of social mobility, marginality, and cultural hybridity.

Example 5:

"Regosna tough prace but hunger no de kill person for dea. Yohea me?"

(p. 33, *"Embrace of a Mirage"*)

This line, spoken by a street-level character, exhibits phonological substitutions ('Regosna' for 'Lagos is', 'prace' for 'place', 'dea' for 'there', and 'Yohea' for 'You hear'), mother-tongue influenced elisions, and Pidgin-influenced syntax. It exposes linguistic limitations and the character's social and economic position, surviving in a tough cityscape with a gritty resilience.

Example 6:

"He was training my daughter in the way of the Lord, but your devilish son spoilt her and made her pregnant."

(p. 105, *"Masquerade Music"*)

Although this example leans towards Standard English in structure, its moral tone, emotional charge, and lexical choices ("spoilt") evoke overtones of local discourse patterns often found in emerging bilingual speech, where the emotional impact takes precedence over grammatical accuracy.

Example 7:

"C.M.A na big man-o; big man no de lie."

(p. 61, *"Money, Guns and Justice"*)

This sentence combines transliteration and localised honorifics, such as "big man," emphasising hierarchical social structures through colloquial idioms. The phrase "no de lie" simplifies the syntax while conveying trust within the community, portraying authority figures as morally impeccable- a prominent theme in Nigerian socio-political discourse.

Example 8:

"'Una no go go?' Nebuchadnezzar's attendant asked. 'The dog de come chop una-o.'"

(p. 21, *"Embrace of a Mirage"*)

Ukala vividly depicts linguistic anxiety and urgency through Pidginised English. The phrase "de come chop una" demonstrates verb serialisation and a reduction in prepositional accuracy, highlighting speech patterns influenced by native syntax.

Example 9:

"*'Look this man!' he exclaimed. 'Do you want to be a witness?'*"

(p. 65, *"Money, Guns and Justice"*)

This excerpt showcases syntactic simplification and direct transliteration from common Nigerian speech patterns. "*Look this man!*" mimics the Igbo or Yoruba direct address style, where *look at this man* becomes *look this man*, a structure understood within Nigerian English but ungrammatical in Standard English.

Ukala's strategic use of this variety enhances the realism of his narratives, anchoring his characters in specific social and linguistic identities. It also highlights broader themes such as education, urban survival, morality, and the conflicts between tradition and modernity. By incorporating the Incipient Bilingual Variety, Ukala reflects Nigeria's diverse linguistic landscape and challenges colonial linguistic hierarchies by giving voice to subaltern characters in literature.

Phonological Features of Nigerian English in Ukala's *Skeletons*

Ukala's storytelling technique skillfully uses phonological deviations from Standard English to depict authentic Nigerian speech patterns. These deviations serve two main purposes: they mirror the linguistic reality of his characters, often influenced by their ethnic background, education, and social class, and they reinforce the text's themes of marginality, survival, and identity. The phonological features highlighted in the chosen excerpts reveal the distinctive qualities of Nigerian English (NigE), which is shaped by the speakers' native languages, particularly in sound substitution, consonant cluster simplification, and the insertion of epenthetic vowels.

Example 10:

"*Dis one go fit push truck?*"

"*The fierce man replied, 'Take yea ugry face away flomdea and ret di boy eat in peace.'*"

(p. 33, *Embrace of a Mirage*)

In this passage, Ukala depicts the speech of a fierce man using intentional orthographic spellings that highlight common phonological features of Nigerian English. Examples like "ugry" for "ugly", "flomdea" for "from there", and "ret" for "let" demonstrate interference from local Nigerian languages, where /r/ and /l/ are not distinct sounds. These pronunciation choices also serve to characterise the speaker, possibly as semi-literate or working-class, thereby emphasising sociolectal divisions within Nigerian society.

Example 11:

"*E bi like motor wey get accident for highway and 'im owner no come tow am before night come. When 'e come di next morning, 'e go meet di body, do chasis and di plate number.'*"

(p. 63, *Money, Guns and Justice*)

This example highlights several important features of NigE phonology: the glottalisation and omission of the /h/ sound in "him" (represented as "'im") and

"he" (as "'e"), the replacement of "chassis" with "chasis, " and the passage's rhythmic, prosodic patterns. The contraction of syllables and morpho-phonemic shortcuts reflect an oral storytelling style, connecting the narrative to Nigerian folk traditions. This emphasises the literary role of oral tradition, a defining trait of postcolonial African literature.

Example 12:

"...But some people wey first am reach there, if natyredem like, dem go don take am; if na rear lamp, dem go don take am; tificator-o, mirror-o, bumber-o, even di chairs kpkkpa, people go fit take dem as more and more nights dey fall."
(p. 63, *Money, Guns and Justice*)

This excerpt demonstrates how phonology intersects with creativity in literary form. The inserted epenthetic "-o" (as in "tificator-o", "mirror-o", "bumber-o") is typical of Nigerian English and originates from the syllable-based rhythm of Indigenous languages such as Yoruba and Igbo. The epenthetic "-o" often emphasises or softens imperatives or object references in conversation. Ukala's repetition and rhythmic structure ("kpkkpa") enhance the musicality of the prose, reinforcing the performative nature of the narrative voice and establishing a cultural identity rooted in local speech practices.

These phonological stylisations are more than just linguistic deviations; they significantly enhance the aesthetic quality of Ukala's fiction. They enable Ukala to reframe English as a means of African expression, making the language feel unfamiliar and tailored to local contexts. This approach places Ukala alongside writers such as Chinua Achebe and Ken Saro-Wiwa, who acknowledge and incorporate the speech forms of everyday Nigerians into the broader scope of African literature.

Lexical Features of Nigerian English in Ukala's *Skeletons*

Ukala's stylistic strength is in his intentional use of the Nigerian English lexicon to mirror Indigenous awareness and reinforce cultural identity. By incorporating coinages, loanwords, and hybrid forms, Ukala not only records linguistic diversity but also engages in a literary protest against linguistic imperialism, highlighting the inventive flexibility of Nigerian English.

Coinages

Coinages in *Skeletons* demonstrate the ingenuity of Nigerian speakers in naming social realities and experiences absent in Standard English. These neologisms emerge from practical needs and reflect local semantic environments.

Examples:

1. Chewing stick (p. 15): This replaces "toothbrush" but is culturally and materially different, originating from traditional oral care practices.
2. Black-book (p. 30): A powerful metaphor representing stigmatisation or negative labelling within culture.

3. Apprentice peasant (p. 9): A socially nuanced term for the unemployed that suggests both aspiration and economic marginality.
4. Native Sunday (p. 11): Culturally reinterprets Saturday as a day for traditional dress, highlighting clothing as a form of identity.
5. Last card (p. 22): A metaphor for economic vulnerability; one's final financial refuge.
6. Money bag (p. 130): A colloquial term for a wealthy person, expressing both envy and respect.
7. Hot-headed (p. 101): While used in British English, it takes on a deeper significance in Nigerian contexts of stubbornness linked to masculinity and pride.

Ukala's coinages are intentionally based on experiential realism, enhancing both the narrative's tone and its social commentary.

Loanwords

Loanwords from Nigerian languages highlight cultural particularity and authenticity. They help establish the story's connection to specific places and identities, emphasising culinary, material, and symbolic cultural elements.

Examples:

1. Eba, Amala, Ewedu, Agidi, Suya, Ogi: These culinary items evoke taste, identity, and communal values. They resist translation to preserve cultural essence.
2. Buba (p. 112): A garment representing gender, class, and ethnic identity.
3. Iroko (p. 18): More than a tree, it symbolises ancestral permanence and spiritual authority.
4. Molue (p. 26): A cultural icon of Lagosian public transport, symbolising chaos and resilience.

These lexical items enrich *Skeletons* with symbolic resonance, offering texture to the setting and social realism while evoking cultural intimacy for Nigerian readers.

Hybridisation

Hybridisation reflects Nigeria's postcolonial linguistic landscape, where English engages in a dialogic relationship with indigenous languages.

Examples:

1. Ankra cloth (p. 32): The fabric signifies not just a dress but also African aesthetics and identity.
2. Danfo bus (p. 131): A term loaded with urban subtext: crowding, hustle, and survival.
3. The raffia bag (p. 15) and Bonga fish (p. 124) highlight rural and coastal lifestyles, anchoring the story in specific locations.

Ukala's hybrid lexicon functions as a linguistic palimpsest, layering meanings that reflect linguistic coexistence and cultural continuity.

Semantic Features of Nigerian English in Ukala's *Skeletons*

Ukala's semantic strategies involve shifting and extending, allowing familiar English words to reflect Nigerian realities, spiritualities, and relational dynamics.

Semantic Shift and Extension

Words in *Skeletons* often take on new meanings due to indigenous conceptual frameworks.

Examples:

1. Masquerade (p. 20): Instead of the playful deception typical of masked parties, it signifies a sacred ancestral spirit, thereby transforming English secularism into African spirituality.
2. Gateman (p. 17): A respectful redefinition of "guard," implying loyalty and authority.
3. Truck (p. 31): Refers to a hand-pushed cart rather than a motorised vehicle, highlighting local labour practices.
4. Godfather (p. 29): The term has broadened from solely mafia-related connotations to include political patronage or mentorship within Nigerian sociopolitical culture.
5. Priest (p. 10): Not a Christian clergy member, but a traditional diviner, redefining the term in the context of African cosmology.
6. Bush (p. 11) indicates not just wilderness, but social primitiveness or backwardness, highlighting postcolonial hierarchies.
7. Reception (p. 16), escort (p. 18), park (p. 14), load (p. 25): All demonstrate context-specific adaptations within Nigerian everyday life.

These shifts are ideologically powerful, demonstrating how colonial language is transformed to reflect indigenous meanings. Ukala's characters reframe their lived experiences in English, turning it into a medium of cultural self-expression rather than colonial imitation.

Kinship Terms and Politeness Forms

Ukala also uses semantic extension in kinship terms to reflect social cohesion and communal values.

Examples:

1. "W'oma brother" (p. 26): conveys solidarity or endearment.
2. "Sleep here with us, my son" (p. 14). conveys warmth, care, and intergenerational respect.
3. "We want to see our brother" (p. 27). This phrase reflects a sense of communal belonging rather than biological kinship.

These terms embody African relational ethics, showing that identity in Ukala's world is relational rather than individualistic. They also function pragmatically as politeness strategies, enhancing the novel's emotional and cultural depth.

Syntactic Features in Ukala's *Skeletons*

Ukala's syntactic choices in *Skeletons* deliberately engage with the structures of Nigerian English, diverging from Standard British English to reflect the rhythms, thought patterns, and communicative economy of Nigerian speech. These syntactic features are not merely errors or informalities; they embody cultural identity and oral aesthetics rooted in the linguistic traditions of Nigerian languages.

Subjectless Sentences

Subjectless constructions are characteristic of Nigerian English, often indicating speech economy, shared context, and inference. These elliptical structures depend on pragmatics to infer the implied subject.

Examples:

1. "Hope no problem at home?" (p. 18)
2. "Just keep the plates in the kitchen." (p. 89)

In the first example, the omission of "I" (I hope...) indicates a communal mode of address where self-reference is downplayed. In the second, the imperative leaves out "you," presuming familiarity between speaker and listener. These structures prioritise message content over grammatical accuracy, which is common in oral-focused communication styles in many Nigerian communities. As Uwen and Nta (2021, p. 66) observe, such omissions are part of a culturally acceptable strategy of syntactic economy, where brevity enhances fluency and immediacy.

Double Subjects

In Nigerian English, repeating subjects is often used for emphasis or clarification. This redundancy isn't a mistake but a rhetorical strategy rooted in Nigerian oral tradition and language influence.

Example:

"You Mbiri people are too bold." (p. 29)

The repeated use of "you" and "Mbiri people" emphasises clarity and specificity, effectively distinguishing the addressee from the group identity. This mirrors common syntactic patterns in many Nigerian languages, where such duplication enhances understanding and assertiveness in speech.

Omission of Preposition

In Nigerian English, prepositions are sometimes omitted, especially when the meaning is clear from context or when L1 transfer leads to simplified syntax.

Example:

"Look this man." (p. 65)

The absence of the preposition (at) does not hinder understanding; rather, it exemplifies a syntactic style of directness. This mirrors structures found in languages such as Yoruba or Igbo, where such relational words are frequently implied rather than explicitly expressed.

Omission of Articles

In spoken Nigerian English, articles like "a," "an," and "the" are often left out. This tendency is influenced by indigenous languages that lack articles and the speaker's aim to communicate ideas quickly and efficiently.

Examples:

1. *"I have gone to Lagos to look for white man's job."* (p. 13)
2. *"Night is falling."* (p. 89)

In these cases, the omission indicates a pragmatic choice rather than misunderstanding. The characters prioritise narrative urgency and thematic elements over strict grammar. The initial sentence subtly hints at postcolonial economic ambitions, while the second conveys a transitional mood through poetic brevity.

Incorrect Tense Usage

Deviations from standard tense usage are common in Nigerian English due to the influence of native languages. In Ukala's dialogue, this type of usage frequently emphasises urgency, confusion, or emotion.

Examples:

1. *"That girl have jump into lagoon."* (p. 53)
2. *"She have been saved."* (p. 54)
3. *"Plenty things have happen."* (p. 54)

Although these utterances may appear ungrammatical, they reflect the natural rhythm of Nigerian speech. They convey the emotional immediacy of the moment, especially during crises or revelations. The use of "have" instead of "has" acts as a non-standard auxiliary, grounded in spoken language rather than formal writing.

Collocational and Pragmatic Features in Ukala's *Skeletons*

Ukala's *Skeletons* showcases extensive syntactic and lexical creativity, vividly illustrating the unique collocational and pragmatic features of Nigerian English. The author creates a nuanced linguistic landscape that reflects Nigerian socio-cultural realities through carefully chosen word pairings and culturally rooted speech acts.

Collocational Features

Collocations, or frequently co-occurring words, reveal the worldview and cognitive connections within a speech community. Edem (2023, p. 32) states that collocations are not random but are shaped by cultural thought patterns. In *Skeletons*, Ukala

creates collocations that might seem unusual to Standard British English speakers, but are entirely understandable and meaningful to Nigerian English users.

Examples:

1. "Full-time apprentice peasant" (p. 9)
2. "Devil's high priest" (p. 10)
3. "My father's face squeezed immediately" (p. 11)
4. "Native Sunday" (p. 11)
5. "Bush meat" (p. 61)
6. "Evil forest" (p. 77)
7. "Bad death" (p. 79)
8. "Active sleeping men" (p. 25)

These collocational patterns reflect cultural specificity and contextual embeddedness:

1. "Apprentice peasant" connotes a young person burdened by socio-economic hardship, reflecting layered deprivation.
2. "Devil's high priest" is a metaphorical label for a particularly wicked or diabolic figure, drawing on religious and traditional beliefs.
3. "Face squeezed" is a vivid visual metaphor that expresses displeasure and is a common phrase in Nigerian language.
4. "Native Sunday" refers to the traditional Igbo day of rest, representing cultural continuity and indigenous calendar systems.
5. "Bush meat" and "evil forest" are culturally meaningful terms that refer, respectively, to meat from the wild and to mystical burial sites.
6. "Bad death" reflects the societal stigma surrounding deaths by suicide or illness, reinforcing shared attitudes toward mortality.
7. "Active sleeping men" depicts cart pushers who pretend to rest but stay alert and watchful, symbolising street-smart survival in urban Nigeria.

These collocations underscore Ukala's ability to encode Nigerian experiences in English without diluting their semantic richness.

Pragmatic Features

The pragmatic aspect of Skeletons illustrates how language serves to enact culturally rooted social roles, such as showing respect, establishing hierarchy, and confirming identity. Ukala accurately reflects the pragmatic approaches of Nigerian English, particularly in kinship terms and honorifics.

Kinship Terms as Politeness Strategies

In Nigerian sociolinguistic culture, kinship terms extend beyond biological ties to embody respect, familiarity, and community belonging. Employing words like brother, sister, uncle, and auntie for non-relatives fosters warmth and strengthens social connections.

Examples:

1. "I am looking for my brother." (p. 16)
2. "Bola said he merely escorted master's brother to master's house." (p. 18)
3. "This is our master's junior brother." (p. 17)

Here, "brother" and "junior brother" are not confined to biological kinship but represent cultural relationships and social hierarchy. This practice is especially common in Yoruba and Igbo speech cultures, where respect for age and status is of great importance.

Use of Honorifics and Titles

The use of sir and other titles in Nigerian English is widespread and context-dependent, expressing respect, recognition of authority, and humility.

Examples:

1. "E'karo Sir." (p. 18)
2. "Uw'oma Sir, I greeted." (p. 19)
3. "Our language sir, I translated my earlier answer." (p. 19)
4. "Ika Sir, I had begun to shiver." (p. 19)
5. "Yes, sir." (p. 19)

These utterances blend local greetings, such as 'E'karo'—Yoruba for good morning— with English honorifics, creating a mixed system of politeness. These titles are often repeated throughout interactions to emphasise respect and reinforce politeness. Ukala's employment of these pragmatic strategies reflects character traits and ingrained cultural norms. In *Skeletons*, language serves both descriptive and performative purposes, shaping relationships and conveying cultural values.

Discussion

This study confirms that Sam Ukala's *Skeletons* is a linguistically rich text ideal for examining the sociolinguistic intricacies of postcolonial Nigeria. By creatively utilising different forms of English— such as Standard Nigerian English, Nigerian Pidgin, and localised collocations— Ukala creates a vibrant linguistic environment that both mirrors and critiques Nigerian society's realities.

Language and Identity Formation

Hall (1997) argued that language plays a key role in shaping identity. In *Skeletons*, Ukala skillfully employs linguistic differences to highlight characters' identities and social ranks. Educated characters usually speak Standard Nigerian English, representing formal education, institutional authority, and alignment with Western knowledge systems. In contrast, characters from lower socio-economic backgrounds frequently use Nigerian Pidgin, emphasising community unity and challenging elite linguistic dominance. This diglossic interaction supports Bourdieu's (1991) concept of linguistic capital, viewing language as a form of symbolic power. Ukala's characters switch between different language forms based on context, audience, and purpose, allowing them to embody multiple identities within the same story.

Linguistic Hybridity as Cultural Expression

Ukala's writing exemplifies linguistic hybridity, a central concept in postcolonial language studies. Based on theories by Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (1989), hybridity goes beyond simple language mixing; it acts as a form of cultural expression and resistance. In *Skeletons*, Ukala uses localised collocations like "face squeezed," "bad death," "evil forest," and coinages such as "active sleeping," blending indigenous perspectives with English language forms. This novel approach to Nigerian English highlights cultural particularities and questions the dominant power of Standard British English. It supports Achebe's (1965) belief that African writers should create a language that genuinely expresses the African experience.

Thematic Resonance and Linguistic Strategy

Ukala's focus on themes like corruption, exploitation, and moral decay is closely connected to his use of language. His characters' speech reflects their social and political positions, as well as their perspectives. The deliberate use of kinship terms such as "junior brother" and "master's brother," honorifics like "Sir" and "Uw'oma," and interjections like "E'karo" roots the story in local communication customs. These choices highlight the importance of oral tradition and communal respect within Nigerian cultures.

Furthermore, the syntactic deviations and collocational creativity reflect a society grappling with postcolonial tension, where indigenous knowledge systems contend with imposed colonial frameworks. Ukala's deliberate "errors" serve as rhetorical devices for criticising institutional shortcomings and class inequalities, highlighting language's function in conveying sociopolitical critique.

Implications for Future Research

This research advances the discussion on Nigerian English's stylistics in African literature and broadens avenues for sociolinguistic exploration. It affirms Nigerian English's validity not just as a linguistic variation but as a creative, functional, and expressive form of postcolonial identity.

Future research can expand this analysis by examining how Nigerian English has developed across different generations in literature. This could include pioneering authors like Achebe and Soyinka, as well as contemporary writers such as Chimamanda Adichie, Elnathan John, and Ukala. The study might explore how gender, class, and regional factors influence the practical use of Nigerian English in drama, prose, and poetry. Alternatively, corpus-based methods could be employed to quantify and visualise recurring patterns of syntactic and lexical innovations in Nigerian literary texts.

Conclusion

This study analyses '*Skeletons: A Collection of Stories*' by Sam Ukala, emphasising the importance of Nigerian English in expressing literary ideas and shaping socio-cultural identity. It confirms that Ukala's storytelling highlights the linguistic hybridity of Nigerian English, which results from ongoing contact between English and local

Nigerian languages. Ukala uses phonological distortions, lexical creativity, syntactic changes, and pragmatic nuances to create a language space that reflects Nigerian societal realities. His use of Nigerian Pidgin, culturally meaningful metaphors, and localised collocations adds authenticity to dialogues, making them relatable and vivid for local readers. These linguistic choices also serve as stylistic markers that signal class, education, ethnicity, and culture. The findings support Labov's Variability Theory, showing how social factors like class, education, and cultural ties influence language use in the text. Ukala challenges traditional ideas of linguistic correctness by presenting Nigerian English as a systematic, rule-based variety capable of expressing complex experiences and ideas. By placing Nigerian English at the core of his narrative, Ukala affirms its place in literature and challenges the dominance of British English. His work advocates for linguistic independence and cultural authenticity, contributing to decolonial efforts in African literature. Overall, the study demonstrates that language is dynamic and shaped by social and cultural histories. In Nigeria, English continues to evolve into a vibrant language that maintains local identity while gaining global recognition. Ukala's *Skeletons* is a powerful example of Nigerian English's creative and critical role in modern African literature.

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