

## FOCUS MARKING IN EDUCATED NIGERIANS' SPOKEN ENGLISH

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### **Abstract**

A significant quantum of research has been done on how focus is realised in English and other European languages. Within this ambit are studies on the intonational realisation of narrow focus or the placement of relative prominence and lengthening of the focus domain (Baker, 2010; Klassen, 2013). However, research on focus realisation in the new Englishes or the emerging varieties of English, such as Nigerian English is still scarce. The current study, therefore, examines the marking of focus in the speeches of forty Nigerian postgraduate students of English in a Nigerian university. Respondents were assumed to have been familiar with the rudiments of pronunciation and prosodic rules. The respondents read aloud twelve sets of question and answer test items designed to elicit rendition on broad and narrow focus structures. The respondents were also observed while having naturally occurring discussion for validation. The basic data collected were subjected to instrumental analysis using Praat speech analyser. The results of the study revealed the integral relevance of focus realisation to meaning-making in Nigerian English, attesting cross-linguistic diversity with regard to focus realisation. The paper particularly revealed the patterns of focus realisation in Nigerian English through pitch accent and durational marking.

Key words: Focus, prosody, Nigerian English, pitch, duration, prominence

## 1.0 Introduction

It has been established that each non-native variety of English has unique intonation systems which make it different from other varieties of English, whether native or non-native (Ouafeu, 2010). Several studies have been conducted and have shown that prosodic variation exists in both native varieties of English (e.g. Fletcher & Harrington, 2001; Pellowe & Jones, 1978) and non-native ones (e.g. Gut, 2003; Udofot, 2000, 2003). These works in some ways corroborate the existence of specific differences between the native British English (henceforth BrE) and the non-native variant known as Nigerian English (henceforth NigE). Walsh (1967) has noted that, the varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter what their language is, have enough features in common to mark off a general type, which may be called Nigerian English. This fact has also been attested in Adegbija (2004), Bamgbose (1982); Banjo (1995); Jowitt (1991); Ufomata (1996); and many others. It would, therefore, be fascinating to discover specific features that mark Nigerian English as Nigerian, with regard to focus marking as this study intends.

Nigerian English differs significantly from other varieties of English, especially in the area of Sphonology (Akindele, 2011; Akinjobi, 2013; Akinjobi & Oladipupo, 2005; Eka, 1985; Gut, 2002; Udofot, 1997) and of all the aspects of phonology, the non-segmental features has been shown to be the most complicated areas for Nigerian speakers (Udofot, 2002). These areas include stress, rhythm and intonation. The variant forms of these often persist in the spoken English of Nigerian speakers as well as other non-native speakers despite long exposure to standard forms such as the British and American varieties.

Fuchs (2011) points out that there is not yet a standard form of the Nigerian variety of English as New Englishes are already emerging and for there to be standardisation, there is need to know what kind of language the educated speakers of the variety use. This work is, therefore, descriptive in approach. Its purpose is to provide a description of the prosodic marking of information focus in the read speeches of select postgraduate students. The spoken English of the selected sample has a tendency to be described as Educated Nigerian English (ENE). Describing the prosodic marking of information focus in the read

speeches of postgraduate students of English will contribute to the process of identifying Nigerian English at least in a modest way.

## 2.0 Marking of Information Focus

According to Jackendoff (1972), focus stands for that information component that is new or important in the sense that the speaker assumes it is not shared by him and the hearer. Focus involves the concentration of attention on a particular part of the message.

There are different focus meanings which are distinguished based on whether or not the information represents new information or concerns a correction of existing information. When the whole of a stretch of speech or an Intonational Phrase (IP) is brought into focus, it is known as **broad focus**. If, however, it is only a selective part of the message that is brought into focus, it is called **narrow focus**. The part of the IP that is placed in focus, whether broad or narrow, is called the **focus domain**. Broad focus means that the focus domain is the whole IP. This means that everything in the IP is brought into focus. Broad focus would be used, for example, in answering the question *what happened next?*

***What happened next?***

***She started crying.***

However, in narrow focus, only part of what is said is brought into focus, for example,

Who beat the girl?

**Sola.**

**Sola** did.

**Sola** beat the girl.

I think it was **Sola**.

I think it was **Sola** that beat the girl.

All the five versions of the answer have narrow focus. The **focus domain** is just the item **Sola**.

Different languages rely on different linguistic means in expressing focus. These linguistic means could be prosodic, syntactic or morphological. Prosody is known to be used in many languages to mark focus, though there may be other means of marking focus. According to Chen (2012), in languages that use prosody to mark information structure, focus tends to be encoded with a wider pitch range, a longer duration, and a higher intensity.

English is one of the languages that use prosody to mark focus information, which could either be tonal, e.g. higher pitch peaks or register levels, and/ or durational, e.g. longer durations of syllable nuclei (Cooper, Eady & Mueller, 1985; Eady & Cooper, 1986; Eady, Cooper,

Kloouda, Mueller & Lotts, 1986). Since focus marking has been found not to be just language-specific but also variety-specific, it is pertinent to identify the specific ways focus is marked in the varieties of English. The current study, therefore, is significant as it examines the pitch and durational marking of focus in the English spoken by educated Nigerians as a variety of English language. The following are the questions to which the study intends to empirically proffer answers:

- a) What is the duration of the word and the stressed syllable in each focused constituent in their speech?
- b) What is the pitch minimum, pitch maximum and pitch span of each focused word?
- c) What are the possible effects of focus marking on the read speech of the Nigerian postgraduate students?

### **3.0 Methodology**

The data comprised audio recorded speeches of forty purposively selected postgraduate students in a university in Nigeria. A set of questionnaires was administered to the respondents to elicit personal information for equitable meta-data relating to age, sex, and languages spoken in order of acquisition, proficiency and degree of use, as well as their socio-cultural backgrounds. Second, respondents were required to read aloud 12 sets of question and answer test items designed to elicit rendition on broad and narrow focus structures. The test items comprise a reading passage of just three simple declarative sentences. The subjects read-aloud the passage and answered the questions following it. This was designed to elicit spontaneous speech from the subjects in order to determine how they mark focus. Following this is a number of question and answer pair sets which was designed to elicit broad and narrow focus structures. Sentence length for each answer was kept constant with the same syntactic structure which was SVO (Subject-Verb-Object).

Two variables were manipulated for each utterance: a) the length of the target words in each utterance for both narrow and broad conditions and b) the location of focus for utterances in the narrow focus condition. The structure of the target words varied from monosyllabic to trisyllabic. Each target utterance consisted of a subject (a proper noun), followed by a verb, and then an object. This is consistent with previous research (Frota, 2002; Maxwell, 2010; Xu & Xu, 2005). Target words consisted mostly of sonorants such as /m/, /n/, /l/, /r/, /eɪ/, and /ɪ/ (with minimal variation) since these are more suitable for both pitch and duration

measurements (Chen, 2012; Turk, Nakai & Sugahara, 2006) which are in consonance with the purpose of this study. “Question-and-answer-pair-set” technique is chosen in order to elicit a particular focus condition for each utterance. This method has also been used successfully in previous studies (Baumann, Becker, Grice & Mucke, 2007; Maxwell, 2010; Xu & Xu, 2005).

Each set consisted of four prompt questions and four answers where the target word would vary depending on the focus structure. An example of a question and answer set is given below.

### **Prompt questions**

1. Who reared a lamb?
2. What did Mary rear?
3. What did Mary do to a lamb?
4. What did you say?

### **Answers**

1. **Mary** reared a lamb. NF (Narrow Focus)
2. Mary reared a **lamb**. NF
3. Mary **reared** a lamb. NF
4. Mary reared a lamb. BF (Broad Focus)

After recording, any sentences containing any type of reading error such as unexpected phrasing break, disfluencies, etc, were eliminated. For the purpose of this study, only the utterances with broad focus and narrow focus have been analysed, in total 240 utterances. With a laptop computer, the productions of the subjects were recorded using Praat version 6.0.43, a software programme for speech analysis by Boersma and Weenink (2018). The target utterances were thereafter annotated and analysed using the Praat software.

## **4.0 Data Analysis and Discussions**

The following analyses were performed in order to find answers to the three research questions. A number of paired t-tests analyses were performed on the two focus conditions across all speakers using SPSS. The basic analysis strategy is to make comparisons between broad focus and narrow focus constituents in three separate locations: subject, verb and object positions. The length of each target word ranges between one to three syllables. All the words have the primary stress on the first syllable. The sentences are:

1. Mary reared a lamb.
2. Joe drove the lorry.
3. Solomon worshipped God.

**Table 1: Duration of Focused Words**

WORD	DOMAIN	POSITION	MEAN DURATION
Mary	Narrow	Subject	377.45
Mary	Broad	Subject	374.4
Joe	Narrow	Subject	298.6
Joe	Broad	Subject	275.4
Solomon	Narrow	Subject	522.75
Solomon	Broad	Subject	546.5
Reared	Narrow	Verb	383.4
Reared	Broad	Verb	403.3
Drove	Narrow	Verb	352.85
Drove	Broad	Verb	360.35
Worshipped	Narrow	Verb	540.65
Worshipped	Broad	Verb	573.2
Lamb	Narrow	Object	301.5
Lamb	Broad	Object	268.6
Lorry	Narrow	Object	347.15
Lorry	Broad	Object	335.35
God	Narrow	Object	329.05
God	Broad	Object	281.2

Table 1 presents the mean duration of each word in the two focus structures averaged across all speakers. The analysis shows differences in the mean duration values of the focused words between the narrow and broad focus structures. The monosyllabic target word, *Joe*, and the bisyllabic target word, *Mary*, have longer duration under narrow focus than broad. However, the trisyllabic target word, *Solomon*, has a shorter duration under narrow focus than broad. The monosyllabic target word *Joe* has a greater durational increase under narrow focus (with a mean duration of 23.2ms) as compared to the bisyllabic target word, *Mary* where the durational difference is relatively small (with a mean duration of 3.05ms). In line with previous research (Cooper et al., 1985), the

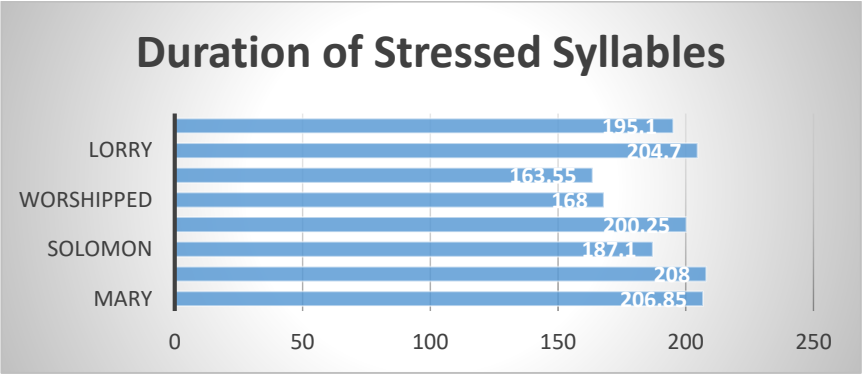
amount of durational increase on the accented syllable of the focused word correlates with the overall length of the word. In this regard, the longer word *solomon* show a proportionally smaller increase in duration than the monosyllabic target word *Joe*. This invariably means that the shorter the focused word, the longer the duration.

At the verb position, the analysis shows differences in the mean duration values of the focused word between the narrow and broad focus structures but with broad focus having insignificant longer duration than the narrow focus in all the target words. This shows that there is shortening of focused word at the verb position which means duration may not be significant for focus marking at the verb position.

At the object position, the analysis shows differences in the mean duration values of the focused word between the narrow and broad focus structures. The monosyllabic target words *lamb* and *God* both have greater durational increase under narrow focus (with a mean duration of 32.9ms and with a mean duration of 47.85ms, respectively) as compared to the other bisyllabic target word, *lorry*, where there is a lesser durational increase under narrow focus (with a mean duration of 11.8ms). *Lamb* and *God* are both significantly longer under narrow focus as compared to broad focus with a t-value greater than 1.96 (p-value being lesser than 0.05 and equal to 0.05 respectively). However, all the words have longer duration under narrow focus than broad. This implies that the subjects used duration to emphasize the focused items.

**Table 2: Duration of Stressed Syllables**

SYLLABLE	DOMAIN	POSITION	MEAN DURATION
Mary	Narrow	Subject	206.85
Mary	Broad	Subject	208
Solomon	Narrow	Subject	187.1
Solomon	Broad	Subject	200.25
Worshipped	Narrow	Verb	168
Worshipped	Broad	Verb	163.55
Lorry	Narrow	Object	204.7
Lorry	Broad	Object	195.1



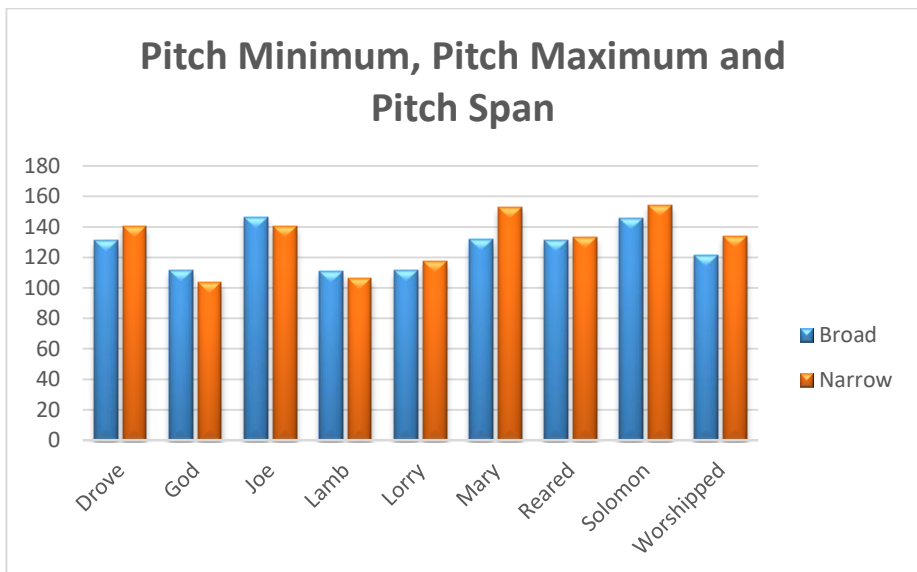
The analysis of the stressed syllable in each focused constituent shows insignificant difference in the mean duration values of the focused word between the narrow and broad focus structures. The stressed syllable in each of the bisyllabic and trisyllabic words both at the subject position have a little shorter duration in narrow focus while the bisyllabic words at the verb and object positions have a little longer duration in narrow focus. The paired t-test analyses show that these differences are far from being significant. We can therefore say that the significance of duration to focus does not affect the syllable but the word at large. The subjects marked off the focused words with longer duration for emphasis.

**Table 3: An Indication of Pitch Variations of the Words**

WORD	DOMAI N	POSITIO N	PITCH MINIM UM	PITCH MAXIM UM	PITCH SPAN
Mary	Narrow	Subject	152.63	192.31	39.68
Mary	Broad	Subject	132.03	175.87	43.84
Joe	Narrow	Subject	140.31	190.10	49.79
Joe	Broad	Subject	146.57	183.44	36.87
Solomo n	Narrow	Subject	154.2	194.8	40.68
Solomo n	Broad	Subject	145.9	178.6	32.65
Reared	Narrow	Verb	133.5	178.3	44.76



Reared	Broad	Verb	131.5	170.6	39.12
Drove	Narrow	Verb	140.3	174.2	34.37
Drove	Broad	Verb	131.1	165.0	33.85
Worshi pped	Narrow	Verb	134.1	211.2	77.06
Worshi pped	Broad	Verb	121.6	193.7	73.56
Lamb	Narrow	Object	105.9	140.4	34.49
Lamb	Broad	Object	110.9	136.7	25.76
Lorry	Narrow	Object	117.4	152.4	34.95
Lorry	Broad	Object	111.6	141.9	30.29
God	Narrow	Object	103.5	163.1	59.21
God	Broad	Object	111.6	155	43.33



From the mean values of the measurements presented in Table 3, the pitch maximum of each focused word is significantly higher under narrow focus than in the broad condition regardless of the size and location of the focus constituent (though the rate of the height is dependent on the size and location of the focus constituent). This means that for the purpose of focus marking, the subjects raised the pitch of their voice on the focused items.

## 5.0 The Effect of Focus Marking on the Read Speech of the Subjects

To sum up, the results reveal that the selected Postgraduate Nigerian students characteristically mark focus in utterances. The subjects in this study realised focus using peak height and duration. Despite observed individual differences in the use of pitch range, all speakers manipulate  $f_0$  height in the two focus structures and produce higher peaks on the narrow focused words. In addition, all the sentence-final target words were spoken with longer duration in narrow focus. The sentence-initial target words also have duration as correlate of narrow focus structure, but this is relative to the size of the target word. This means that there is a longer duration in narrow focus when the target word is between one or two syllables.

It is also observed that where there is word lengthening all syllables in the target word, and not just the stressed syllable in the word, are lengthened. Similar patterns are observed in other varieties of English. For example, in English all syllables within the focused word are lengthened (Cambier-Langeveld & Turk, 1999), whereas in Swedish only the stressed syllable and the immediately following syllable within the focused word are lengthened (Heldner & Strangert, 2001). Also, Eady and Cooper (1986) found that in American English, sentence-final nouns (e.g. *Jef gave the ball to the cat*) were spoken with both a longer duration and a higher pitch peak in narrow focus (e.g. *What did Jef give the ball to? Jef gave the ball to the cat.*) than in the broad focus (e.g. *What did Jef do? Jef gave the ball to the cat.*).

From the analysis of the data, focus marking had important effect on the read speeches of the select subjects. The speakers put prominence or importance on the focused constituents by prolonging the duration or raising the pitch to emphasise that it was Mary, for instance, who reared the lamb (not Joe or Paul or Solomon or Joseph). Therefore, focus marking is important and is expressed in the utterances of the educated Nigerian speakers of English. This shows that Nigerian speakers of English cannot be generally assumed not to have prosodic markers of information focus in English.

However, focus is not marked by the selected speakers as it is in Standard British English. English realises focus consistently in the sense that the focus constituent must always contain the final pitch accent, or nuclear pitch accent, in a series of accents (Zimmerman & Onea, 2011). This is not always the case with the tested sample in this study. Also, the pitch range of the focused item in British English is expanded (Xu & Xu,

2005) but pitch range (or pitch span) is not found to be significant in this study. Lastly, in British English, word duration is used to distinguish broad focus, narrow focus and contrastive focus (Sityaev & House, 2003) whereas, the selected postgraduate students tested do not rely on word duration for this purpose. Nonetheless, the selected postgraduate students still marked focus prosodically using peak height and sentence final lengthening.

In conclusion, pitch and duration were found to play a significant role in the marking of information focus by the selected Nigerian postgraduate students. The speakers use lengthening of the sentence-final words and greater pitch maximum in narrow focus structures. Having accomplished the research objectives highlighted in Introduction, this research therefore concludes that focus marking has important effect on the read speeches of the educated Nigerians' spoken English.

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