Beyond Syllable-Timing: Re-assessing Rhythm in Nigerian English

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Abstract

This study is a re-examination of the rhythm of Nigerian English, using speech data drawn from Nollywood films. Unlike earlier descriptions of Nigerian English rhythm which relied largely on elicited speech, the study investigates Nollywood speech with a view to ascertaining if methodological differences affect rhythmic characterisation. Using acoustic evidence from Pratt, Rhythm Ratio analysis, and perceptual examination of a hundred and forty (140) utterances, the study finds consistent evidence for full-vowel timing across the data, lending support to Udofot's (2003) account. The findings suggest that Nigerian English rhythm is neither conventionally stress-timed nor syllable-timed but reflects an emergent phonological pattern associated with the nativisation of English in Nigeria.

Key Words: Rhythm; Nollywood; Full Vowel, Stress-Timing; Syllable-Timing

Introduction

Since the 1970s, there have been sustained interests in the study and description of the Nigerian variety of English from several linguists. Considering that language is primarily spoken, the phonological level has received its fair share of attention in the scholarly outputs that emanated from these efforts (Simo Bobda, 2007; Ugorji, 2010; Gut, 2001). On the suprasegmentals, there appears to be a consensus that Nigerian English (NE hereafter) departs from native English norms in its choice of stressed syllables in polysyllabic words (Atoye, 1991), in its rhythmic structure (Essien, 2018; Oyebola & Ilekura, 2026), and in realising the pitch variations that convey either linguistic or pragmatic information – intonation – (Jowitt, 2000; Gut, 2003).

Earlier studies on NE rhythm (Bamgbose, 1982; Udofot, 1997, 2003) reveal a tendency towards syllable-timing. Convinced that this position may have been influenced by their method of data elicitation – having the respondents read a passage into a tape recorder – these authors, using data from purposively-selected Nollywood scenes, revisit the description of NE rhythm. They seek to establish the extent to which NE challenges traditional rhythm classifications derived from Inner Circle Englishes (Pike, 1945; Abercrombie, 1967).

The central aim of this study is to revisit the question of Nigerian English rhythm from a totally different methodological perspective. Empirical evidence abounds on the preference for data elicited from read passages in previous studies on Nigerian English rhythm (Udofot, 1997, 2003; Eka, 1993; Akinjobi, 2004; Josiah and Akpan, 2015; Oyebola and Ilekura, 2026). As impactful as the findings of these studies have been, one cannot rule out the possibility of the observer's paradox (Labov, 1972). It is unarguable that the most reliable of spoken data can only be sourced from naturally occurring speech, either during real-time conversations or from scenes in high-profile movies.

Beyond data elicitation, another pertinent question is that of the rhythm metrics employed in the analysis of NE rhythm. Earlier studies have explored different models of speech rhythm analysis but this study specifically seeks to ascertain the implication of the persistence of full-vowel timing on the phonological evolution of NE using Low et al.'s (2000) Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) and Gibbons & Gut's (2001) Rhythm Ratio (RR).

Literature Review

Speech rhythm refers to the systematic patterning of sounds in terms of duration, stress and even their groupings. It can also be described as a periodic recurrence of speech events (Gut & Milde 2002). All speech sounds that are delivered without pause are said to have rhythm (Giegerich 1992) and, in a language like English, sequences of prominent and non-prominent syllables form the framework for connected speech (Cruttenden 1986), which accounts for the rhythmic pattern of the language.

The study of rhythm has largely been influenced by Pike's (1945) isochrony hypothesis which proposes the classification of languages into two rhythmic categories: stress-timed and syllable-timed languages, depending on the linguistic unit perceived to recur at regular temporal intervals. Describing English, for instance, as a stress-timed language suggests that 'we take an equal amount of time from one stressed syllable to the next' (Cruttenden 1986: 20). Correspondingly, when such languages as Spanish, Yoruba, and Izon are described as syllable-timed, it simply suggests that the rhythmic beats in them can be accounted for in terms of the succession of tone-bearing units or syllables (Ugorji 2010). Pike's position on the above binary typology is upheld by Abercrombie (1967) who considers the two rhythm types as mutually exclusive and universal. Although their concept of isochrony may be considered foundational to rhythm typology, its authenticity has not been

supported by subsequent research. Laver (1994: 156), for instance, avers that the isochrony theory is 'a controversial view' of rhythm. Roach's (1982) experimental research questions the acoustic isochrony of the classification; while Dauer (1983) also strongly rejects it while proposing that rhythm be viewed as a continuum influenced by phonological properties such as vowel reduction and syllable structure complexity, rather than a binary typology.

Adopting a combination of acoustic and computational approaches, Ling et al. (2000) propose the Pairwise Variability Index (PVI) for measuring the durational variability of successive vowel intervals. They argue that rhythm should be characterized through acoustic variability metrics applied to the speech signal. Using a normalised version of the model (nPVI), they found that successive vowel durations were significantly more variable in British English than in Singapore English. Gibbon and Gut (2001) propose the Rhythm Ratio, an improvement on PVI, which focuses on using the timing and duration of adjacent syllables to capture the rhythmic characteristics of languages. The RR formula is given as:

$$RR = 100 \times \frac{1}{m-1} \sum_{i=1}^{m-1} \left(\frac{min(d_i, d_{i+1})}{max(d_i, d_{i+1})} \right)$$

Figure 1: Rhythm Ratio (RR) as Propounded by Gibbon and Gut (2001)

where:

- m is the number of syllables; and
- d_i and d_{i+1} are the durations of the i-th and $(i + 1)$-th syllables, respectively.

The formula calculates the ratio of the shorter duration to the longer duration for each pair of adjacent syllables, averages these ratios, and multiplies the result by 100. An RR value of 100 indicates perfect syllable-timing, whereas lower values indicate a deviation from syllable-timing towards stress-timing. Considering that this model acoustically supports rhythmic differences, it is explored in our analysis of the study data.

Rhythm in New Englishes

The emergence of New Englishes has further advanced studies on speech rhythm, giving room for engagement with the recommended typologies. Low (1998) found that Singapore English is syllable-timed, stemming from a fundamentally different prosodic system rather than equal syllable duration. This includes the tendency for phrase-final lengthening, and a reduction in the long, short and reduced vowel distinctions. Writing on Educated Indian English, Fuchs (2013) found that its rhythm simply represents a gradient, rather than categorical, departure from stress timing, foregrounding reduced variability in vowel duration, and frequent glottal stop insertion at word boundaries.

African Englishes have also been the subject of research on rhythm. Udofot (1997) demonstrates that Nigerian English rhythm cannot be neatly categorized as either stress-timed or syllable-timed. She notes that Nigerian English rhythm is marked by a proliferation of prominent syllables… sounding 'like the pulsations of an African drum, heard as rhythmic but hardly varying its tempo'. Appartaim's (2009) study on Ghanaian English a unique rhythmic pattern marked by a preponderance of prominent syllables, a tendency towards more even syllable duration, and a failure to reduce function words to weak forms. Clearly, even these non-native English-based studies do not align with the binary typology of isochrony; instead, there appears to be a consistent reference to vowel length and distinctions.

Rhythm in Nigerian English

Jibril (1982), one of the earliest comprehensive studies on the phonology of Nigerian English, explains the deviation in NE rhythm as a function of the absence of the accent redistribution tendency of English in NE. Eka (1993) describes it as 'inelastic-timed' rhythm, considering the inability of the Nigerian speaker of English to 'squeeze-in' or 'stretch-out' certain syllables in a given rhythm unit, thus resulting in more prominent syllables than the rhythm of native-speaker speech. Udofot (2003) prefers the label "full-vowel-timed", considering the absence of any clear distinction between full and reduced vowels in NE. Akinjobi (2004) empirically demonstrates the absence of vowel reduction as the principal indicator of non-stress-timing in Educated Yoruba English (a geographical variant of the Nigerian English Accent). She acknowledges the near-total lack of the schwa /ə/ even in contexts where reduced vowels would have been preferred in British English.

Confirming this, Oladipupo (2004) observes the inability of Nigerian English speakers to weaken vowels in unstressed syllables that typically undergo reduction and shorter duration in native Englishes. In another regional study, Josiah and Akpan (2015) found that the rhythm of NE spoken by Akwa-Ibom English bilinguals reveals a tendency towards syllable-timing characterised by syllable-based prominence, absence of weak forms, and reduced durational contrast between stressed and unstressed syllables. They conclude that the perceived rhythm aligns more closely with the syllable-timing of the subjects' native language.

Gut and Milde (2002) found significant differences in NE speech rhythm, where NE is found to be intermediate between three other West African languages and SBE. Dismissing the claim that NE rhythm is syllable-timed, Ugorji (2010: 61) notes that both pitch and duration combine in the assignment of prominence; however, 'while high pitch marks prominence in British English, duration (subtle time extension) complements pitch extrusions in NE'. However, Ugwuanyi and Aboh (2025), writing on acrolectal Nigerian English, submit:

> Given that most indigenous Nigerian languages are tonal languages and, therefore, syllable-timed compared to English, which is intonational and stress-timed, Nigerians tend to stress virtually all syllables in their speech or place the stress differently. The substitution of schwa with stressed vowels in Nigerian English also contributes to stressing the often-unstressed schwa. For instance, [sək' ses] is realised as [' sə.ses] 'success'.

The above review reveals a lack of agreement on the part of scholars on rhythm typologies, particularly in relation to the description of the rhythm of non-native varieties, in general, and NE, in particular. This study is, therefore, designed to investigate the phonological nativisation of NE in relation to rhythm, with a view to promoting the status of NE as an autonomous variety. It also seeks to investigate the relationship between NE and traditional rhythm typologies, and its implications for the theory of world Englishes.

Methodology

The study employs quantitative research design, adopting media monitoring as the primary research instruments. The quota sampling criterion was adopted in the selection of samples. Quota sampling is a non-probability sampling technique where the researcher divides the population into exclusive subgroups (quotas), and then selects participants from each subgroup to reflect those proportions in the population. Nollywood, the film industry in Nigeria, a portmanteau of 'Nigeria' and 'Hollywood', constitutes the main source of data for the study. Nollywood movies are often defined by their Nigerianness, part of which is the use of NE in the form of peculiar idioms, neologisms, fixed Nigerian expressions, and peculiar NE pronunciation. Thus, Nollywood movies rendered in (Nigerian) English are considered suitable for this study. Two Nollywood movies were purposively-selected. They are:

(i) *The Set Up* (2019) written by Onuzo, C. and directed by Akinmolayan, N., and
(ii) *Up North* (2018) written by Ajakaiye, B. and Onuzo, C., and directed by Oshin, T.

Fifty (50) audio files – corresponding to standalone and isolatable utterances – were extracted from each of the selected movies (making a total of one hundred audio files) and analysed. The storage, processing, organisation and analysis of the data were facilitated by a Windows 10 computer with 456GB SDD and 16GB RAM. The MP4 or MKV files were converted to MP3 format using the VLC Media Player which was also used to close-watch the movies to get the timestamps. The timestamps of eligible utterances were recorded in a CSV file. Using the Python IDE (Independent Development Environment) software – Anaconda – the audio and text files were segmented. The analysis was done using Praat, a software tool for speech analysis developed by Paul Boersma and David Weenink at the University of Amsterdam. Perceptual analysis was also employed to complement Praat. Thus, guided by the waveforms and perceptual analysis, the organised data were classified as phones, syllables, feet, words, and tone groups. The classified data were subsequently subjected to rhythm ratio analysis using the Rhythm Ratio formula.

Data Analysis

In the tables that follow, we present the processed data extracted from the two movies for the analysis of the phenomenon of rhythm in this study. Here, the rhythm ratio, calculated using syllable intervals and foot intervals, are presented in tables, one table per movie. The proposition is that a 100% rhythm ratio score for syllables means that the utterances are perfectly syllable-timed. On the other hand, a 100% rhythm ratio score for feet means that

the utterances are perfectly stress-timed. The stress-timing and syllable-timing phenomena are thus determined through a high ratio score. Although fifty (50) utterances were extracted from each movie, only ten each will be presented here while the analysis will be based on the fifty.

The Set UP (2019)

The average syllable ratio for the fifty extracts analysed from *The Set Up* was 0.584234035, giving a 58.42% rhythm ratio, while the average feet ratio was 0.65164775, a 65.16% feet ratio. The ten selected utterances are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Rhythm Ratios for Selected Data from *The Set Up* (2019)

***The Set Up* (2019)**			
SN	**Utterances**	**Syllable Ratios**	**Feet Ratios**
1	Is that how I'm raising you upə	0.72004628	0.565185932
2	You will accept the one million naira from Chike.	0.580751306	0.680926478
3	Chike, what would you have to doə	0.52018137	0.52018137
4	All they need to do is catch you after one trip	0.572621277	0.700201858
5	He said you're going to Hong Kong and the ticket is in the hotel room.	0.638382767	0.526236182
6	Can you help usə	0.734285435	0.734285435
7	All right, let me just quickly use the bathroom,	0.573719089	0.737406139
8	How many people did your father kill, before the police caught up with himə	0.641011516	0.62220907
9	I gave you my word. Anything you want, it's yours.	0.531508506	0.746247563
10	Huhə And as for her, a better life.	0.686077935	0.620326679

From Table 1, utterance 6 and is further subjected to acoustic analysis on Praat, highlighting the syllable, feet, word and tone group tiers as presented below:

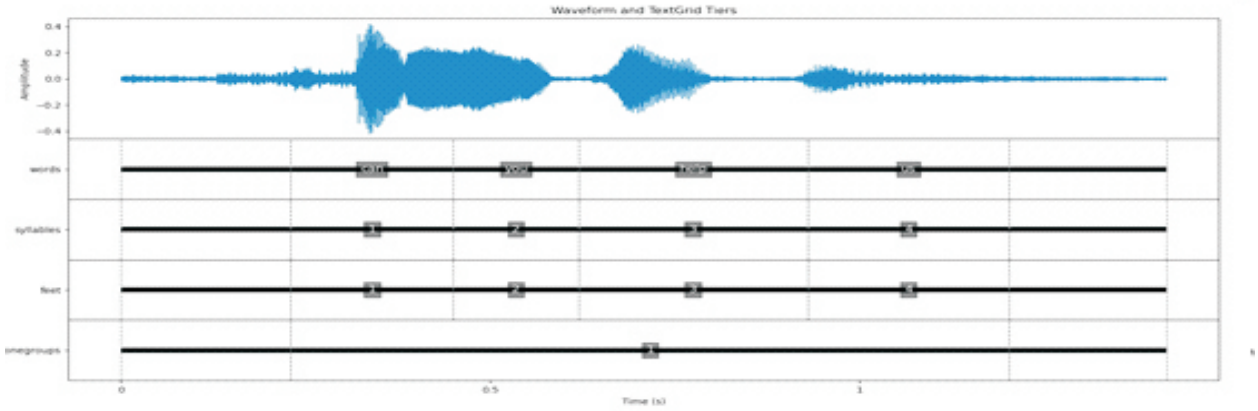


Figure 2. Analysis of Utterance 6 'Can you help usə' in *The Set Up* Data

Up North (2018)

The average syllable ratio for the fifty extracts analysed from *Up North* was 0.599669507, giving a 59.97% rhythm ratio, while the average feet ratio was 0.66045108, a 66.05% feet ratio. The selected ten utterances are presented in Table 2:

Table 2. Rhythm Ratios for Selected Data from *Up North* (2018)

***Up North* (2018)**			
SN	**Utterances**	**Syllable Ratios**	**Feet Ratios**
1	You still can't get through to himə	0.68278951	0.55689103
2	A car was sent for you to bring you here for lunch with my friends.	0.494891089	0.71320461
3	A man who understands his responsibilities to himself and to his family.	0.572261291	0.67937533
4	I've changed my mind.	0.549111133	0.88898185
5	Why does he need to see meə	0.659076743	0.68039676
6	Um, I need to update you on your NYSC plans.	0.521971537	0.54503059
7	Do you know what you have doneə	0.544890698	0.5448907
8	Idara would do a much better job running your company than I ever could.	0.519020048	0.66961013
9	Well, just remember, no trust fund baby could ever do this for you.	0.563331592	0.55747598
10	Where have you beenə	0.734506872	0.85294118

From Table 2, utterance 3 is further subjected to acoustic analysis on Praat, highlighting the word, syllable, feet and tone group tiers as presented below:

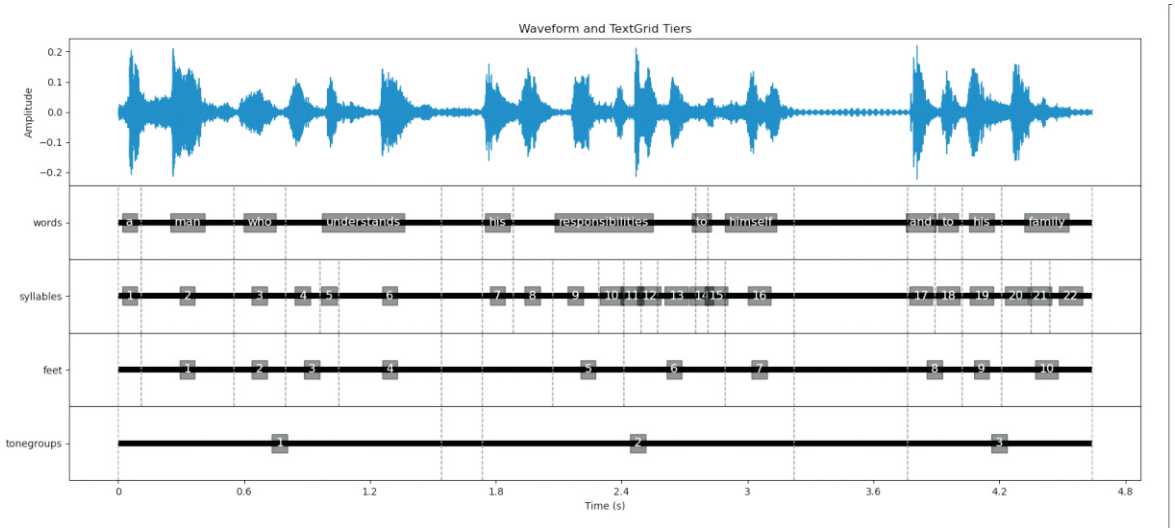


Figure 3. Utterance 3 'A man who understands his responsibilities to himself and to his family' i n *Up North* Data

A perceptual analysis of the utterances from the two movies shows that the speakers place the stresses per word. The implication of this is that rather than aligning with the traditional English foot structure in which a foot is associated with one stressed syllable and optional unstressed syllables, the grammatical unit – word – is assigned the status of a phonological unit. Apart from that, the grammatical words in the utterances have full vowels even though, in RP, they are reduced, shortened or weakened. '*Can you help us?*' in *The Set Up*, for instance, has all three grammatical words stressed. This points to the

occurrence of full-vowel-timing, and also the tendency for multiple stresses in a word if there are multiple full vowels in it. This occurrence also accounts for why there is an increase in the number of feet compared to syllables, in the analysed data. The syllable ratio of *The Set Up* (2019) data was 58.42%, while that of *Up North* (2018) data was 59.97%, none of which suggests that NE rhythm is syllable-timed.

The foot ratios were also examined. The proposition is that the higher the ratio, the stronger the proof of stress-timing – since connected speech stress determines the foot. The foot ratio for *The Set Up* (2018) data was 65.16%, while that of *Up North* (2019) was 66.05%. This, again, cannot be interpreted as NE rhythm being stress-timed. However, comparing these ratios to the syllable ratios, it may be concluded that NE rhythm, as rendered in the selected Nollywood movies, is more stress-timed than syllable-timed. This is because the division of the utterances into feet did not follow the default pattern of native-speaker models.

Discussion of Findings

The study has empirically demonstrated, using Nollywood speech, that neither syllables nor stresses constitute the recurrent phenomenon in NE rhythm, thus challenging traditional rhythm typologies. In other words, NE rhythm is not stress-timed as it does not strictly adhere to vowel weakening and other phonological processes occurring in rapid speech which characterise stress-timed languages and/or accents. It is also not syllable-timed as the number of syllables does not equal the number of feet in each utterance. Instead, full vowels, in line with Udofot (2003)'s postulations, recur in NE rhythm as the head of each foot. This observed persistence of full-vowel timing across these scripted speeches suggests that the phenomenon may constitute a stabilised phonological characteristic of educated NE.

It can also be argued that there is more to the timing of NE rhythm than syllables. Ideally, a hybrid linguistic system such as NE adopts features from both the English language and the indigenous languages. Therefore, the assumption that NE rhythm copies the syllable-timing of Nigerian languages is unfounded. The revelation from this study so far is that NE rhythm actually borrows from the stress-timing feature of native Englishes and the syllable-timing feature of Nigerian languages. This, the researchers interpret as an indication of the phonological Nativisation (the third phase of Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model) of Nigerian English. This could also be an indication of the attainment of the fourth phase in the aforementioned Model – the phase of Endonormative Stabilisation – as confirmed in Ugorji (2015) and Ugwuanyi (2022).

To a large extent, NE is, today, regarded as a legitimate variety of English by its speakers; therefore, the emergence of the observed rhythm pattern, which can be termed a new local norm in relation to native varieties, and its acceptance in formal usage, even in educated NE speech, should not be a surprise. The mere fact that we are talking about Nigerian English Rhythm and not the Rhythm of English in Nigeria is already enough evidence of Endonormative Stabilisation.

One may be tempted to ask, 'What is the implication of all this for the world Englishes theoryə' The concept of world Englishes acknowledges and explains the transformation of the English language. NE as one of the world Englishes is, by this study, further explicated thereby expanding its intelligibility beyond the many cross-cultural boundaries in the country to the international space. Documenting the phonological norms of this variety, in general, and its rhythm, in particular, is a viable tool for local identity construction. Thus, by clarifying the nature of Nigerian English Rhythm, we have set the stage, not only for the intelligibility of the Nigerian English Accent (Jowitt 2019) but also, the acceptance of the status of Nigerian English as an autonomous variety;

Methodologically, the engagement with Nollywood data in this study revisits a long-standing debate in Nigerian English phonology using a less controlled dataset. Having demonstrated that the rhythm of NE in the utterance of Nollywood actors mirrors the rhythm of normal NE conversations, the study goes to prove that the speech of Nigerian actors in movies is a verisimilar representation of real-life speech. This simply suggests that the method of data gathering plays no role in the results of speech rhythm analysis. The implication of this finding is that speakers are hardly able to alter their speech rhythm. If any speaker is able to change the rhythm of their speech, it is then the case that the speaker has successfully been able to model another accent. This lends credence to Banjo's (1976) position on the difficulty of mastering English suprasegmentals, as the segments, vowels and consonants, are more susceptible to alteration by learners than the suprasegmentals – stress, rhythm and intonation.

Succintly put, the present findings provide limited support for strict interpretations of isochronous timing in Nigerian English.

Conclusion

The study attempted a re-description of NE

rhythm using speech data collected from two Nollywood movies. The aim was to establish the real nature of Nigerian English rhythm using naturally-occurring speech, as against elicited speech. The findings demonstrate that Nigerian English has evolved a peculiar rhythmic structure which mirrors both the rhythm of native English and the rhythm of the indigenous languages of its speakers. Going by the findings which provide limited support for strict interpretations of isochronous timing in Nigerian English, we strongly recommend that isochrony only be taught to beginner students of phonetics and phonology to illustrate how the focus of native Englishes is on stress, while that of NE is most likely the syllable. It should not be taken as an acoustically supported description of speech rhythm in any language.

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