

‘SPEAKING WITH TWO MOUTHS’: CREATIVITY IN IDIOM USAGE IN NE

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Abstract

Prior to this time, both language teachers and learners assumed that to know a language, an individual needs only to learn its vocabulary and grammar. But contrary to this view, linguists acknowledge that the users of a language exhibit creativity in language usage that goes beyond a mere knowledge of the vocabulary and grammar of the language. Rather, language users enjoy the products of their creativity; for their incisiveness, wit, polish, and savour in the case of idioms. However, existing studies on NE have paid limited attention to the creative processes underlying idiom formation. This study is hinged on cognitive semantics but draws on theories of conceptual metaphor and semantic redeployment. The NE idioms were selected, examined and analyzed to determine their level of creativity and the strategies employed in their formation process. These idiom usages display instances of creativity via the interplay of English and the numerous indigenous languages and cultures that come into constant contact in Nigeria. The patterns and dimensions reflect the cultures of the Nigerian people and their indigenous languages, Nigerians' perception of the world, as well as help to transmit their culture. Creativity in idiom usage in this study is seen in the forms, structure, and meaning of these idioms. Some of the strategies observed include creative variants of SBE idioms, compounding of existing words which acquire idiomatic status, intensification, and translation of idioms and ideas from Nigerian indigenous languages into English using SBE structure.

Keywords: NE, idioms, creativity, cognitive semantics, conceptual metaphor.

Introduction

After almost one century of British socio-political dominance in Nigeria, English acquired the status of a second language (L2). But this status, though backed by government policies, is being challenged in the private lives of present-day Nigerians. Some children acquire English first before

learning an indigenous language to communicate with uneducated members of the extended family. To such children, English is an L1 while their local language is the L2.

English was proclaimed the official language of the nation in the 1979 Constitution alongside Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. The statutes of the Nigerian polity are written in English, and the business of politics itself is carried on in English. However, political discourse in Nigeria is interspersed with idioms and other expressions from indigenous languages in order to identify with the people. Such idioms gain acceptability as a result of usage and eventually Nigerians recognize and use them without second thought, in both formal and informal situations.

English is the major medium of teaching and learning in most Nigerian schools, backed by the National Policy on Education as revised in 1981. Even where the policy states that local languages be used for early childhood education, this is not usually implemented in metropolitan cities like Lagos and Port Harcourt because children come from many different linguistic backgrounds. Teachers in these schools are non-native speakers of English who hardly use English outside the classroom. These teachers mostly avoid teaching idioms even at the secondary school level. When idioms are taught, they are mostly isolated from the context of usage and the culture of the users. Children read texts, learn to understand both SBE idioms and those from indigenous languages, and grow into adult learners who use the language in creative ways.

Early missionaries brought English as a tool to Christianize Nigerians. Today, English is a major language of religion in Nigeria. Despite this, one would not expect that while preaching in English, clergymen would completely disregard the fact that their congregation are Nigerians with traditional cultures they identify with. It is therefore expected that idioms from indigenous languages would find their way into the English of such ministers and subsequently rub off on members of their congregation. The emergence of NE is a veritable consequence of the contact between English and indigenous languages, responding to the linguistic needs of Nigerians.

Most everyday business transactions in Nigeria are done in English unless participants discover they share a local language. In urban centers, the variety used may not be Standard English. Sometimes buyers and sellers use Nigerian Pidgin English. In such discourse, the chances are slim that people will use SBE. The idioms in use are likely to reflect the influence of local languages.

English also has social functions tied to the multi-ethnic nature of Nigerian society, which has close to 500 ethnic communities. People from these groups meet to socialize at marriages, burials, and club meetings. On such occasions, they use English, which is neutral and belongs to no ethnic group. The level of inter-ethnic marriages also promotes the use of English, accounting for many young children from such unions whose first language is English. The idioms being acquired are most likely a hybrid of SBE and local languages. This may be connected to the fact that the cultural contexts of SBE idioms are different from the contexts in which Nigerian children are learning them

Objectives

The objectives of this study are:

1. to identify and describe the strategies employed in the formation of NE idioms;
2. to examine and identify the creativity and source(s) in the formation of NE idioms.

Background to the Research

Among notable Nigerian linguists like Adetugbo, Akere and Olagoke, there is a consensus that it is difficult to recognize registers appropriate to different situations in the language use of Nigerian speakers for several reasons: the learner is exposed to very few registers, the principal source of English acquisition is the formal school system via non-native speaker teachers, the learner speaks English the way it is written, and in an L2 situation many expressions are culture bound.

Speakers of English in a non-native environment transfer meanings from L1 to L2 to express cultural patterns, values, ideas, concepts and situations that are different or non-existent in the English native environment. NE therefore exhibits features of the cultural life and patterns of social behaviour of the people who use it—features which Adetugbo (1977) emphasizes are not mere deviations from the norm but characterize standard NE. He strongly emphasizes that language is culture-bound and that users of English as a second language are likely to fit the language into their own cultural mould rather than mould themselves through English into any of the native English cultures.

One significant example of cultural influence on NE is the use of kinship terms. In Nigerian languages, factors such as blood relationship, age, status and degree of intimacy are considered before a person can be addressed. This does not tally with the socio-cultural practice in Nigeria. Therefore, the NE speaker extends the reference of equivalent markers from his local language into English. He refers to his siblings as 'brother' or 'sister', but also refers to acquaintances, somebody from his village, or someone who speaks his dialect as a brother or sister. In which case, the kinship terms have acquired idiomatic status in Nigerian usage. Another piece of evidence is the use of titles transferred from cultural practice. Nigerians' love for titles is perhaps legendary. Professionals like engineers, surveyors, and architects use these names as titles, and Nigerians are also fond of combining titles as in "Prof. Chief Mrs Deola Bright" or "Chief Dr. Smart Williams."

In NE, the expression "I got down from the bus" is acceptable and widely used, whereas SBE prefers "I got off the bus." This is a type of phraseological idiom or idiom of encoding. On the other hand, when an NE speaker says "My wife is in state," where "in state" gives no clue as to the meaning, this is an idiom of decoding. According to Makkai (1972), idioms of decoding include lexical clusters like "hot dog," "red herring," and tornures like "to fly off the handle."

The standpoint of sociolinguistics is that language is an open living system that depends on its external environment. Chomsky (1965) opines that for a speaker-learner to claim knowledge of a

linguistic system, he must know how and when to perform, otherwise he would be a 'cultural monster' (Hymes, 1972). In the case of idioms, the speaker-learner's experience of the language within a community gives him the idiomatic skills needed, coupled with his cognitive skills.

Hymes (1962) views communicative competence as the ability of a speaker to produce and understand utterances which are appropriate in the context in which they are used. Hymes (1972) suggests that communicative competence depends on tacit knowledge and ability for use: the knowledge of language in actual use and the actual use of language in concrete situations. This means that social and cultural knowledge play a part in the use and interpretation of linguistic forms. In using idioms in NE, the speaker relies on his knowledge of his culture and that of English and tries to find a common ground that best expresses his meaning.

This corroborates Adetugbo's (1977) view that the socio-cultural milieu in which a speech act takes place gives it its total meaning. He argues that communicative competence permits the user of any language to create and understand utterances within the contexts in which they are used. Communicative competence in the use of idioms is how the speaker-hearer manipulates factors effectively to produce idioms appropriate to the speech events he finds himself involved in.

There are world-acclaimed Nigerian writers whose texts are studied at different educational levels in Nigeria and whose texts are replete with idioms from NE. These writers include Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, Ola Rotimi, Zainab Alkali and Hope Eghagha. These writers successfully use language in ways that display the importance of context of usage, the culture of the users, and the linguistic antecedents of the speakers in determining the acceptability and appropriateness of idioms. Therefore, the observations of such writers are vital resource in any attempt to study idioms in NE. Speakers of English in Nigeria read these texts and regard expressions encountered in them as standard reference points of usage.

Methodology

Research Design

This study adopts a qualitative, corpus-based research design. Qualitative because idioms carry figurative and culturally specific meanings that cannot be adequately captured through quantitative measures alone, while the corpus-based dimension allows for systematic collection, categorization, and analysis of naturally occurring idiomatic expressions. The study is also descriptive and analytical, as it seeks to identify the strategies employed in the formation of NE idioms and examine the creativity and sources underlying such formations.

Theoretical Underpinnings

This study is primarily grounded in Cognitive Semantics (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980; Gibbs, 1984), which provides tools for analyzing how figurative meanings emerge from metaphorical and

metonymic processes. It draws on theories of conceptual metaphor and semantic redeployment (Cacciari, 1993) and Lexical Semantics (Makkai, 1972), which inform the classification of idiom formation strategies. The study also incorporates insights from Pragmatics (Hymes, 1972; Glucksberg, 1993) and the Sociolinguistics of World Englishes (Kachru, 1992; Bamgbose, 1995) to situate NE as a distinct variety shaped by language contact and nativization.

Data Sources

The primary source of data is taken from a larger research project on the identification of NE idioms. Idioms were collected from both spoken and written media, drawing from literary texts and social activities.

Literary Texts: Ten literary texts were selected based on the author's level of education, profession (teachers of English or Literature), language skills, Nigerian nationality, and genre (prose and drama only; poetry excluded due to poetic licence).

Social Activities: Idioms were collected from observed social events, including gatherings, ceremonies, and everyday conversations where NE is naturally used.

Secondary Sources: Candidate idioms were verified against selected texts on English idioms. Expressions not verified in SBE idiom dictionaries were assumed to have their source in Nigerian languages and were subsequently verified against selected texts on NE, regular usage at social events, electronic and print media, and the selected literary texts.

Sampling and Selection Procedure

Purposive sampling was employed. Authors were selected based on demonstrated competence in English, professional background as teachers, and Nigerian nationality. Poetry was excluded because poetic licence makes it unrepresentative of ordinary language use. The gender ratio of 2:1 (male to female) reflects the demographic reality of Nigerian literary authorship.

Analytical Framework

The analytical framework involved a two-stage process: determination of idiomatic status and classification of formation strategies.

Determining Idiomatic Status: Each candidate expression was subjected to four tests: compositionality (can meaning be deduced from constituent parts?), literal/figurative (do words have both meanings?), relational (what is the relationship between words and figurative meaning?), and lexicographic verification (is it listed in dictionaries?). Expressions satisfying at least three tests were retained.

Source Identification: Expressions verified in SBE idiom dictionaries were assigned SBE origin. Those not verified but found in NE texts, media, or social events were assigned NE origin (presumed transfer from Nigerian languages).

Classification of Formation Strategies: NE idioms were classified into six strategies emerging from the data: semantic shift, metaphorical extension, creative adaptation of SBE idioms, compounding, loanword integration, and direct transfer from Nigerian languages.

Data Analysis Procedure

The analysis proceeded in six steps: (1) collection of candidate expressions, (2) application of four tests to determine idiomatic status, (3) verification of source through lexicographic checks, (4) classification into one of six formation strategies, (5) identification of creativity patterns across categories, and (6) interpretation of findings in light of the theoretical framework.

Validity and Reliability

Multiple verification methods were employed. Idiomatic status was confirmed using four distinct tests. Source attribution was cross-checked against multiple reference works. Expressions from literary texts were triangulated against observed usage in social activities and media to confirm they represent living, current usage.

Ethical Considerations

All idiomatic expressions collected from social activities were recorded anonymously, with no identifying information about speakers included. Literary texts are published works and are cited appropriately. No sensitive or personally identifiable information is reported.

Results

The data analysis revealed six distinct categories of idiomatic expressions in NE. Each category reflects a different linguistic process through which expressions acquire figurative or culturally specific meanings. Representative examples drawn from the primary data are presented. All examples are presented as recorded from field data collected between 2004 and 2011.

Category 1: Lexical Items That Acquire Idiomatic Meanings

This comprises standard NE lexical items that, when placed in specific sentential contexts, acquire idiomatic meanings not predictable from their individual components. Table 2 presents representative examples.

Table 2

Lexical Items from NE That Acquire Idiomatic Meanings in Sentential Context

Expression in sentential context	Idiomatic meaning
You need to use long-legs to secure a job in a bank.	To use undue influence or connections
Shade has taken in .	She is pregnant
PHCN has taken the light .	There is a power outage
After all we are in the same soup .	Sharing the same challenge or difficulty
Her life is in flood .	She is menstruating
...another ploughs my field for me.	Someone else is having sexual relations with my wife

Note: “PHCN” refers to the former Power Holding Company of Nigeria.

Category 2: Expressions That Acquire Extended Meanings through Metaphor and Cultural Reference

This consists of words and phrases that extend their conventional meanings through metaphor or cultural association. Unlike the first category, where meanings are entirely new, these expressions retain a transparent connection to their literal origins. Table 3 presents representative examples.

Table 3

NE Expressions That Acquire Extended Meanings through Metaphor and Cultural Reference

Expression in sentential context	Extended meaning
You have to shake body before you leave this place.	To give money as a gift or token to people present

Expression in sentential context

Extended meaning

Although he was only a little boy, he had the **mind of an adult**; he could tell when someone is looking at him with a **good eye** or a **bad one**.

To possess mature judgment; to perceive approval or disapproval from another person's gaze

Naira power is important when you want to woo a woman.

The influence or attractiveness conferred by Nigerian currency (money)

That is a **million-naira question** if you ask me.

A serious or difficult question that resists easy answer (analogous to the English idiom "million-dollar question")

An elder does not speak with **all his mouth**.

To speak carefully or with restraint, without being fully direct or uncircumspect

Is there no **yellow-fever** at the junction?

A traffic warden (so named because of the yellow color of the uniform)

Note. "Naira" is the Nigerian currency. "Yellow-fever" refers to the orange (Nigerians call it 'yellow') uniforms worn by traffic control officers in some Nigerian cities.

Category 3: Creative Variants of SBE Idioms

This comprises expressions that appear to be creative adaptations of existing SBE idioms. In each case, the NE version modifies the standard form through addition, substitution, or elaboration while retaining a recognizable connection to the original meaning. Table 4 presents representative examples.

Table 4

Creative Variants of SBE Idioms in NE

Expression in a sentential context	Meaning
"And I think I should remind you again to hold your tongues in your hand when we get there and leave the talking to me."	To refrain from speaking with great determination or self-control
Six days passed before Oduche found a favourable moment, and during this time his heart lost some of its strength .	To become weakened or discouraged, though not completely defeated
The plot had been hatched and the goose thoroughly cooked .	To devise a plan secretly; to conspire against someone; to frustrate another's schemes or ruin their chances
It seemed obvious at the time that fate had once more dealt him a blinding blow .	To cause a plan or hope to fail; to affect someone or something badly

Note. For comparison, the SBE equivalents would be: "hold your tongue" (without "in your hand"), "lost heart" (rather than "lost some of its strength"), "the goose is cooked" (past participle "cooked" is standard, but the full construction varies), and "dealt a blow" (without "blinding").

Category 4: Compound Formations Functioning as Idiomatic Expressions

This involves the compounding of existing English words (sometimes alongside indigenous loanwords) to create new idiomatic expressions that are unique to NE. These compounds often combine a familiar English word with another noun to produce a meaning which is idiomatic. Table 5 presents representative examples.

Table 5

Compound Formations in NE That Function as Idiomatic Expressions

Note. "Agbero" (from Yoruba) refers to transport touts or street hustlers commonly found

Expression in sentential context	Meaning
The agbero boys are always hiking the transport fare.	Men and boys who are miscreants, spending most of their time idling and extorting money from others
We have a number of khaki boys standing guard outside.	Military officers, especially soldiers
At this point I need to step aside for the couple to dance.	To give others an opportunity to do something one was previously doing
The use of bottom power is highly prohibited.	Undue influence exerted through sexual wiles or seduction

at bus stops and motor parks. "Khaki boys" derives from the khaki-colored uniforms worn by Nigerian military and police personnel. "Bottom power" is a distinctly NE compound referring to the use of sexual relationships to gain undue advantage.

Category 5: Idioms and Loanwords From Nigerian Cultural Experience

The idioms emerge from distinctly Nigerian cultural experiences, including local modes of dressing, food names, indigenous medical practices, kinship structures, and cosmological understandings expressed through local languages. Table 6 presents representative examples.

Table 6
Idioms and Loanwords from Nigerian Cultural Experience

Note. "Kabukabu" is a loanword in NE which refers to unpainted commercial taxis commonly used for public transport. "Juju" refers to traditional African spiritual or medicinal practices; its

Expression in sentential context	Meaning
The children of my mother go to school here.	Siblings (brothers and sisters)
We had to drag the matter for a while.	To argue or debate a point persistently
We could hear the smell of her food from the gate. / You could hear the smell of the town ten miles away.	To perceive a smell (using the verb "hear" rather than "smell" or "detect")
An herbalist cannot find any cure for what ails my friend. / One of her forefathers was a renowned juju man . / All this juju : where did it come from?	An indigenous medical practitioner; a man skilled in the use of herbs and other materials for healing and influencing others (sometimes referred to as "juju man")
We had to take a kabukabu to get to the house.	An unpainted taxi (a commercial vehicle, often used for shared transport)
meaning in context can range from healing to influence-seeking, depending on usage..	

Category 6: Metaphorical and Allusional Idioms Transferred From Nigerian Languages
 Metaphorical and allusional idioms are transferred directly from indigenous Nigerian languages into NE. These idioms carry peculiar meaning potentials that are tied to the socio-cultural environment of Nigerian users. Table 7 presents representative examples.

Table 7

Metaphorical and Allusional Idioms Transferred From Nigerian Languages into NE

Note. The expressions presented here are transferred from indigenous Nigerian languages into NE usage. These idioms carry meaning potentials tied to the socio-cultural environment of Nigerian users.

Expression in sentential context	Meaning
If alligator comes out of the water one morning and tells you that crocodile is sick, can you doubt his story?	One cannot question a person who appears to have direct understanding of a situation when one is not in a position to verify the information independently
For me, the proverb that "what a mother eats, she gives to her child" was a truism.	Children acquire or inherit what they are exposed to from their mothers (whether physically, socially, or behaviorally)

Discussion

Category 1: Lexical Items That Acquire Idiomatic Meanings

The findings in Table 2 demonstrate that everyday NE words such as "long-legs," "take in," and "in flood" carry figurative meanings that diverge substantially from their literal interpretations. This phenomenon aligns with what Adegbija (2004) described as the domestication of English in Nigeria, whereby English lexical items are repurposed to express locally relevant concepts. The expression "long-legs" is particularly revealing. Rather than referring to physical anatomy, it denotes the use of personal connections or undue influence—a concept of significant social importance in Nigerian contexts where patronage and networking often determine access to employment and other opportunities. This finding supports Akere's (2004) observation that NE develops lexical items to name culturally specific social practices that lack direct equivalents in SBE.

Similarly, "take in" shifting from its literal sense of receiving or absorbing to the specific biological meaning of pregnancy, and "in flood" metaphorically extending the imagery of overflowing water to menstruation, illustrate what Cacciari (1993) termed semantic redeployment—the process by which existing words acquire new figurative meanings within a speech community.

Category 2: Expressions That Acquire Extended Meanings through Metaphor and Cultural Reference

The expressions in Table 3 demonstrate how NE speakers creatively extend existing words to name culturally specific concepts. "Shake body," for example, extends from the physical act of dancing or moving the body to the social obligation of giving money to well-wishers (a practice common at celebrations and gatherings in Nigeria). This finding aligns with Gibbs's (1984) observation that metaphorical extensions are grounded in embodied experience and cultural practices. The adaptation of "million-dollar question" to "million-naira question" exemplifies what Kachru (1992) called the nativization of English in non-native contexts. By substituting the local currency (naira) for the American dollar, Nigerian speakers simultaneously demonstrate their competence in the English idiom system and their allegiance to local cultural frames of reference. The expression regarding an elder not speaking with "all his mouth" encodes a cultural value about circumspection and wisdom, suggesting that directness is not always appropriate, particularly for those in positions of social authority. This finding resonates with Hymes's (1972) concept of communicative competence, which recognizes that knowing a language involves not only grammatical knowledge but also sociocultural knowledge about appropriate speech.

Category 3: Creative Variants of SBE Idioms

Table 4 indicates that NE speakers sometimes elaborate conventional idioms by adding words or intensifying imagery. The expression "hold your tongues in your hand" intensifies the standard "hold your tongue" by adding "in your hand," thereby emphasizing the effort and determination required to remain silent. This pattern of elaboration suggests a productive engagement with the idiom system of English rather than simple deviation or error, as earlier scholars such as Bamgbose (1995) argued.

Similarly, "his heart lost some of its strength" modifies the standard "lost heart" by quantifying the loss ("some of"), suggesting partial rather than complete discouragement—a more nuanced emotional state than the standard idiom typically conveys. This finding challenges the view, prevalent in earlier studies such as Olagoke (1984), that such modifications represent learner errors. Instead, it supports the position advanced by Adekunle (1974) and later by Muhammad (2016) that NE exhibits systematic and creative linguistic processes rather than random deviations from standard norms.

The expression "dealt him a blinding blow" adds the adjective "blinding" to the standard "dealt a blow," intensifying the severity of the setback. This pattern of adjectival elaboration appears to be a productive strategy in NE idiom formation, warranting further investigation.

Category 4: Compound Formations Functioning as Idiomatic Expressions

Table 5 illustrates compounding as a productive mechanism for idiom formation in NE. Expressions such as "agbero boys," "khaki boys," and "bottom power" demonstrate how Nigerian speakers creatively combine lexical items—sometimes alongside indigenous loanwords—to name culturally specific social roles and practices.

"Agbero boys" refers to transport touts who extort money from passengers and drivers, a recognizable figure in Nigerian motor parks. The inclusion of the Yoruba loanword "agbero" alongside the English "boys" exemplifies what Igboanusi (2001) documented as the incorporation of indigenous lexical items into NE. "Khaki boys" uses the distinctive colour of military and police uniforms as a metonym for armed forces personnel, a pattern of metonymic compounding that Makkai (1972) identified as a universal feature of idiom formation across languages.

"Bottom power" encodes a culturally recognized phenomenon whereby individuals, particularly women, are perceived to gain undue advantage through sexual relationships with powerful figures. This compound has no direct equivalent in SBE and represents a genuinely innovative NE idiom. Its existence supports Okoro's (2004) argument that NE has developed lexical resources for discussing locally salient social phenomena that would otherwise require lengthy paraphrases in SBE.

Category 5: Idioms and Loanwords From Nigerian Cultural Experience

Table 6 reveals that NE idioms frequently incorporate perceptual metaphors that differ from SBE usage. The expression "hear the smell" (rather than "detect" or "smell") represents a cross-modal transfer that may reflect patterns in indigenous Nigerian languages. Levorato (1993) noted that such cross-modal perceptual metaphors are characteristic of languages where sensory boundaries are conceptualized differently than in SBE. This suggests that substrate influence from Nigerian languages may operate at the level of conceptual metaphor, not merely at the level of lexical borrowing.

Terms such as "juju man" and "kabukabu" demonstrate how NE lexicalizes culturally specific roles and artefacts that have no direct equivalent in standard varieties of English. As Dadzie (2004) observed, such lexicalizations are evidence of the indigenization process whereby English is adapted to serve the communicative needs of Nigerian speakers.

The kinship expression "children of my mother" (rather than the SBE "siblings" or "brothers and sisters") reflects the importance of maternal lineage tracking in some Nigerian cultures, where tracing kinship through the mother carries specific social and legal implications. This aligns with Joseph-Odu's (2024) observation that idioms reveal the occupational, economic, historical, and socio-cultural practices of speech communities.

Category 6: Metaphorical and Allusional Idioms Transferred From Nigerian Languages

The expressions in Table 6 represent the most direct form of transfer from indigenous Nigerian languages into NE. The alligator-and-crocodile idiom draws on the shared ecological understanding that both creatures do not inhabit the same environment and therefore do not have privileged knowledge of each other's affairs. A hearer who does not recognize this cultural framing would miss the pragmatic force of the expression. As Glucksberg (1993) argued, idiom comprehension often requires access to the allusional context that gave rise to the idiom originally. The proverb about maternal consumption and child transmission reflects indigenous understandings of prenatal influence and behavioural modelling. The expression operates on multiple levels: literally about biological transmission, metaphorically about socialization and learning, and allusively about the deep and often invisible ways mothers shape their children's lives. This multivalent quality is characteristic of what Gibbs (1984) called literary meaning (meaning that exceeds literal paraphrase and requires cultural knowledge for full comprehension). These support the argument advanced by Callies and Oyebola (2024) that language contact between indigenous Nigerian languages and English generates innovative phraseological patterns. Unlike the creative variants in Category 3, which modify existing English idioms, the expressions in Category 6 represent a wholesale transfer of indigenous figurative frames into English. This distinction is important for understanding the different sources of innovation in NE.

Findings

This study was guided by two objectives: (1) to identify and describe the strategies employed in the formation of NE (NE) idioms; and (2) to examine and identify the creativity and source(s) in the formation of NE idioms. The analysis of the data yielded six categories of idiomatic expressions, which collectively reveal the specific strategies, creative processes, and source domains that characterize NE idiom formation. The findings are presented below according to each objective.

Objective 1: Strategies Employed in the Formation of NE Idioms

The data analysis revealed six distinct strategies, each operating at a different level of linguistic structure. These strategies are summarized in Table 8

Table 8

Strategies Employed in the Formation of NE Idioms

Strategy	Description	Example
Semantic shift	Existing English words acquire entirely new idiomatic meanings	"long-legs" (undue influence)
Metaphorical extension	Literal meanings extend to related concepts through metaphor	"shake body" (to give money)
Creative adaptation	SBE idioms are modified through addition, substitution, or elaboration	"hold your tongues in your hand"
Compounding	Two or more words combine to form a new idiomatic expression	"bottom power"
Loanword integration	Indigenous Nigerian words are incorporated into English idiom structures.	"kabukabu," "agbero boys"
Direct transfer	Complete idiomatic frames are transferred from Nigerian languages into English.	Alligator/crocodile proverb

Objective 2: Creativity and Sources in the Formation of NE Idioms

Analysis revealed that NE idiom formation draws from three primary sources and exhibits four distinct patterns of creativity.

i. Sources of NE Idiom Formation

The three principal sources from which NE idioms are derived are:

Source 1: Internal Semantic Redeployment

There is a creative redeployment of existing English lexical resources without external input from Nigerian languages. This source is evident in Semantic shift, metaphorical extension, and compounding of English words only (e.g., "bottom power"). These idioms demonstrate that NE speakers creatively manipulate the internal resources of English to express locally relevant meanings.

Source 2: Indigenous Nigerian Languages

This involves a transfer from indigenous Nigerian languages. This source operates at two levels:

Lexical transfer: Direct borrowing of words such as “agbero,” “juju,” and “kabukabu” (Strategies 4 and 5);

Conceptual transfer: Transfer of perceptual and cognitive frameworks, such as “hear the smell” (Strategy 5), which reflects Nigerian language patterns of sensory description.

Source 3: SBE Idioms

This involves a creative modification of existing SBE idioms by Nigerian speakers. In Strategy 3 (creative adaptation), Nigerian speakers take recognizable English idioms and elaborate, intensify, or nuance them through addition, substitution, or quantification. This demonstrates that NE idiom formation is not merely a process of deviation from a standard but an active, creative engagement with the English idiom system.

ii. Patterns of Creativity in NE Idiom Formation

Four distinct patterns of creativity operate across the six strategies.

a. Elaboration/Intensification

Elements are added to SBE idioms to intensify or specify meaning. A striking example is “hold your tongue in your hand,” where “in your hand” is added to the standard “hold your tongue.” This elaboration emphasizes the effort and determination required for silence. Similarly, “dealt him a blinding blow” adds “blinding” to “dealt a blow,” intensifying the severity of the setback.

b. Quantification and Gradation

Quantification or gradation absent from SBE idioms is introduced into NE idioms. “His heart lost some of its strength” quantifies the loss (“some of”), suggesting partial rather than complete discouragement. This allows Nigerian speakers to express nuanced emotional states that SBE idioms may not capture.

c. Cross-Modal Metaphor

Cross-modal metaphor, exemplified by “hear the smell,” differs lexically and conceptually from SBE’s sensory modalities (hearing, smelling, seeing). NE is influenced by indigenous language patterns, which allow cross-modal transfer whereby a verb associated with one sense (hearing) is used for another (smelling). This creative pattern suggests that NE has its own figurative logic.

d. Cultural Analogy and Localization

English idioms are adapted to Nigerian cultural and economic realities. “million-naira question” substitutes the local currency (naira) for the American dollar in the standard “million-dollar

question”; “Naira power” adapts the concept of purchasing power to the Nigerian monetary context. These localizations demonstrate creativity that is simultaneously linguistic and cultural as speakers demonstrate mastery of the English idiom while asserting a Nigerian frame of reference.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study and the theoretical framework adopted, the following are our recommendations.

1. For Researchers and Linguists

Further research on NE idioms should expand the data sources to include more diverse spoken corpora, including natural conversations, radio talk shows, and social media interactions. While the present study drew primarily from literary texts and observed social activities, a larger, digitally curated corpus of NE would allow for more robust quantitative and frequency-based analyses. Additionally, comparative studies across Nigeria's six geopolitical zones could reveal regional variations in idiom usage that were beyond the scope of this investigation.

2. For Lexicographers and Dictionary Makers

The six categories of idiom formation identified in this study—semantic shift, metaphorical extension, creative adaptation, compounding, loanword integration, and direct transfer—provide a practical framework for the compilation of a comprehensive dictionary of NE idioms. Current dictionaries of NE (e.g., Igboanusi, 2001) are valuable but do not systematically categorize idioms by their formation strategies. A dedicated idiom dictionary organized along these lines would serve as an important reference for researchers, educators, and language learners.

3. For Educators and Curriculum Developers

The findings of this study have significant implications for English language teaching in Nigeria. Rather than treating NE idioms as deviations from SBE to be corrected, educators should recognize them as systematic and creative linguistic innovations. English language curricula at both secondary and tertiary levels should include modules on NE as a legitimate variety, helping students develop metalinguistic awareness of the differences between SBE and NE idioms without stigmatizing the latter.

4. For Textbook Authors and Materials Writers

Textbooks on English language and literature in Nigeria should incorporate authentic examples of NE idioms alongside SBE idioms. The expressions documented in this study (e.g., "long-legs," "bottom power," "hear the smell") can serve as teaching materials for lessons on figurative language, semantics, and language variation. Such inclusion would validate students' linguistic experiences while still preparing them for formal writing contexts where SBE is expected.

5. For Future Studies

Future research should investigate the psycholinguistic processing of NE idioms among native speakers of Nigerian languages. Questions for further investigation include: Do bilingual speakers process idioms transferred from their mother tongue faster than those formed through internal English strategies? How does proficiency in English affect comprehension of the six idiom categories identified here? Longitudinal studies could also examine how new idioms emerge in response to contemporary social, political, and technological changes in Nigeria.

6. For Journal Editors and Publishers

Given the volume of original data and analysis presented in this study, the researcher recommends that academic journals and publishers consider the value of publishing appendices containing full idiom corpora. Access to raw data would facilitate replication studies, comparative analyses across varieties of English, and the continued development of NE lexicography.

Conclusion

The NE idiom usage displays instances of creativity via the interplay of English and the numerous indigenous languages/cultures that come into constant contact in Nigeria. The patterns and dimensions of these idioms in NE reflect the cultures of the Nigerian people and their indigenous languages on the one hand. These idioms in turn reflect the Nigerian's perception of the world as well as help to transmit their culture. On the other hand, the idioms have patterns of SBE used in a variety of ways. These result in creativity in idiom formation in NE in the forms, structure and meaning of these idioms through the use of a variety of strategies. Some of which are creative variants of SBE idioms, compounding of existing words which thus acquire idiomatic status, intensification and translation of idioms/ideas from the Nigerian indigenous languages into English using SBE structure. This is the act of 'speaking with two mouths': 'mouth' being a symbol of the two-dimensional sources of idiom formation in NE. NE speakers fit the idiom formation into their own cultural mould as well as mould some of them through their linguistic creativity into aspects of the native English cultures which suit the purpose of usage.

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