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Structural variation in tense usage in Nigerian and British English: A corpus-based comparative study

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Abstract

This study investigated structural variation in tense usage between Nigerian English (ICE-Nigeria) and Standard British English (BNC) through a corpus-based comparative approach. Using data drawn from both spoken and written genres in the two corpora, the analysis combined quantitative frequency counts with qualitative examination of concordance lines to identify patterns in the present, past, and future tenses. The present tense emerged as the most frequent in both varieties, but Nigerian English demonstrated an extended functional range for the progressive aspect, including its use with stative verbs and for habitual actions. In the past tense, both varieties exhibited similar proportions of regular and irregular forms, but Nigerian English showed higher use of the past continuous and past perfect, suggesting a preference for explicit temporal sequencing. For the future tense, both corpora favoured *will*, though Nigerian English retained more frequent use of *shall*, reflecting formal register tendencies. These findings were interpreted within Kachru's World Englishes framework, highlighting Nigerian English as a nativised variety shaped by indigenous language influence, sociocultural norms, and historical contact with British English. The study argued that these patterns were systematic rather than erroneous, underscoring the legitimacy of Nigerian English as a distinct variety. The results had implications for English language teaching in Nigeria, advocating for pedagogical approaches that recognised local usage patterns while maintaining international intelligibility. The research demonstrated the value of corpus-based methods in capturing grammatical variation and called for further comparative studies across African Englishes to deepen understanding of tense usage in World Englishes.

Keywords: Corpus Linguistics; Nigerian English; Standard British English; Tense; World Englishes

1. Introduction

The global spread of English has resulted in the emergence of multiple varieties shaped by unique sociocultural, historical, and linguistic contexts. These varieties, collectively referred to as *World Englishes*, reflect the dynamic adaptability of the language to the needs and identities of diverse speech communities [1]. Nigerian English (NigE), one of the most widely spoken African Englishes, has evolved as a distinctive variety influenced by British colonial legacy, indigenous Nigerian languages, and the country's multilingual environment [2].

Within the study of World Englishes, grammatical variation—particularly in tense usage—has attracted scholarly interest because tense plays a central role in expressing time relations, sequencing events, and shaping discourse meaning [3]. The structural patterns of tense in Nigerian English, when compared with Standard British English (SBE), can reveal not only linguistic divergence but also sociolinguistic motivations behind such variation [4]. Previous studies have examined individual aspects of tense and aspect in Nigerian English, often focusing on specific genres or speech contexts [5]. However, few have undertaken a systematic, corpus-based comparative analysis that provides both quantitative and qualitative insights across multiple genres.

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Corpus linguistics offers a reliable framework for studying linguistic variation by enabling large-scale analysis of authentic language data [6]. Through tools such as concordance, collocation, and frequency analysis, corpus-based research allows for the objective identification of structural tendencies and deviations in tense usage [7]. This approach is particularly suitable for comparing Nigerian English and SBE because it provides measurable evidence of variation rather than relying solely on introspection or anecdotal observation.

The present study investigates the structural patterns of tense in Nigerian English and SBE using data drawn from the International Corpus of English – Nigeria (ICE-Nigeria) and the British National Corpus (BNC). It focuses on the present, past, and future tense forms, examining their distribution, genre-specific tendencies, and structural differences. By integrating both statistical and qualitative analyses, the study seeks to contribute to the grammatical description of Nigerian English while situating its findings within broader theoretical frameworks such as Traditional Grammar, Structural Grammar, and Kachru's World Englishes model [8].

Objectives

- Identify the dominant tense patterns in Nigerian English and SBE.
- Compare their structural forms and usage contexts.
- Examine how Nigerian tense usage reflects indigenous language influence and sociocultural context.

Research Questions

- What are the dominant present, past, and future tense patterns in Nigerian English (ICE-Nigeria) compared with Standard British English (BNC)?
- How do the structural realisations of tense (e.g., inflectional forms, auxiliary selection, and periphrastic future constructions) differ across genres in Nigerian English and SBE?
- To what extent do the observed tense patterns in Nigerian English reflect the influence of indigenous Nigerian languages and local discourse norms?
- What are the practical implications of these differences for grammar description, English language teaching, and curriculum design in the Nigerian context?

In addressing these questions, the study aims to advance the understanding of grammatical variation in Nigerian English and to provide corpus-based evidence that may inform language teaching, curriculum design, and the codification of Nigerian English in formal settings [9].

2. Materials and Methods

2.1. Research Design

This study adopted a comparative, corpus-based research design to examine the structural variation in tense usage between Nigerian English and Standard British English. The corpus-based approach was chosen because it provided an empirical framework for analysing authentic language data across large datasets, enabling both quantitative and qualitative insights [10]. This method was particularly effective in identifying frequency patterns, structural tendencies, and contextual variations in grammatical usage [11].

2.2. Data Sources

Two corpora were employed: the International Corpus of English – Nigeria (ICE-Nigeria) and the British National Corpus (BNC). ICE-Nigeria represented educated Nigerian English across spoken and written genres, while the BNC offered a balanced representation of Standard British English [12]. Both corpora had been widely used in World Englishes research and were considered reliable linguistic datasets for comparative analysis [13].

The ICE-Nigeria data was drawn from a variety of formal and informal contexts, including broadcast news, legal proceedings, academic writing, and conversational discourse. The BNC data was selected from comparable genres to ensure valid cross-variety comparisons [14].

2.3. Sampling Procedure

To ensure balanced representation, data samples were proportionally selected from both corpora, covering equivalent spoken and written categories. Only standard Nigerian English forms were considered, while Nigerian Pidgin and code-

switching instances were excluded [15]. The selection process was guided by genre parity so that comparisons between Nigerian and British English were based on similar communicative contexts [16].

2.4. Analytical Tools and Procedures

The analysis was conducted using *AntConc*, a corpus analysis toolkit that generated concordance lines, frequency counts, and collocation patterns [17]. Tense forms were identified according to their grammatical structures:

- **Present Tense:** base form and third person singular -s forms.
- **Past Tense:** regular and irregular past forms.
- **Future Tense:** modal auxiliary constructions such as *will* and *shall*, as well as periphrastic future expressions.

Concordance lines were examined qualitatively to observe contextual usage and identify structural differences between the two varieties [18]. Collocational behaviour was also analysed, especially where tense forms demonstrated preference for particular lexical or semantic environments [19].

2.5. Analytical Framework

The study combined quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative structural analysis. Quantitative data was used to determine the prevalence of specific tense forms in each variety, while qualitative analysis provided deeper insights into the discourse functions and contextual motivations for their use [20]. The interpretation of results was informed by three theoretical perspectives: Traditional Grammar, Structural Grammar, and Kachru's World Englishes model [21].

3. Results and Discussion

3.1. Present Tense Patterns

Table 1 Frequency of Present Tense Forms in ICE-Nigeria and BNC

Present Tense Form	ICE-Nigeria (Freq.)	ICE-Nigeria (%)	BNC (Freq.)	BNC (%)
Base form (non-3rd person)	472	45.6	510	43.8
3rd person singular (-s)	214	20.7	290	24.9
Present continuous (<i>be + V-ing</i>)	253	24.4	260	22.3
Present perfect (<i>have + V-ed</i>)	96	9.3	105	9.0
Total	1,035	100	1,165	100

Data extracted from ICE-Nigeria and BNC corpora; percentages rounded to one decimal place.

3.1.1. Quantitative Analysis

Table 2 Structural Patterns of Present Tense in ICE-Nigeria and BNC

Present Tense Type	ICE-Nigeria Example	BNC Example
Base form	They work in the ministry.	We play football on Sundays.
3rd person singular (-s)	Martha plays guitar every Wednesday.	He drives to work every day.
Present continuous	He is going to church every Sunday.	She is working on her dissertation this term.
Present continuous (stative)	I am knowing the answer to that question.	(rare; mostly avoided)
Present perfect	I have finished my project.	I have completed the task.

Examples drawn from concordance lines in ICE-Nigeria and BNC datasets.

The data indicate that the base form is the most frequent present tense form in both varieties (45.6% in ICE-Nigeria, 43.8% in BNC). The 3rd person singular (-s) occurs more frequently in BNC (24.9%) than in ICE-Nigeria (20.7%), suggesting a slightly lower rate of subject-verb agreement marking in Nigerian English [22].

The present continuous is used more in ICE-Nigeria (24.4%) than in BNC (22.3%). This supports earlier observations that Nigerian English tends to extend progressive aspect usage in contexts where SBE prefers the simple present [23]. The present perfect remains comparable in frequency across both varieties (9.3% vs. 9.0%), indicating no significant difference in this tense-aspect combination.

3.1.2. Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative analysis reveals two distinctive structural features in the use of the present tense within ICE-Nigeria. The first is the progressive extension to stative verbs. This occurs when speakers use the progressive aspect with verbs that typically describe states, conditions, or mental processes rather than actions, such as in *I am knowing the answer to that question*. In Standard British English (BNC), this construction is rare and often perceived as non-standard because stative verbs are conventionally used in their simple forms. However, in Nigerian English, this usage appears to be a consistent feature rather than an occasional error, suggesting an expanded functional role for the progressive aspect. Such a pattern may reflect influence from Nigerian indigenous languages, many of which do not follow the same aspectual restrictions as English, allowing verbs of perception, cognition, and possession to occur in continuous forms for emphasis or immediacy [24].

The second feature is the progressive use for habitual actions, where the progressive aspect is employed to describe repeated or regular activities, as in *He is going to church every Sunday*. This construction adds a sense of immediacy, dynamism, and personal involvement to the description of habitual behaviour. In contrast, Standard British English typically favours the simple present for such contexts, as in *Martha plays guitar every Wednesday*. While the BNC examples frame habitual actions as timeless facts, ICE-Nigeria examples present them as ongoing, actively engaged processes [25].

Taken together, these features demonstrate that Nigerian English is not simply a learner's version of British English but a nativised variety with its own grammatical norms. The patterns are internally consistent within the variety and reflect both local communicative preferences and pragmatic strategies. This reinforces the position that Nigerian English is shaped by a combination of inherited English structures and local linguistic and cultural influences, resulting in a distinct and legitimate form of English [26].

3.2. Past Tense Patterns

The past tense is the second most frequently occurring tense in both Nigerian English (ICE-Nigeria) and Standard British English (BNC). While both varieties follow the same core grammatical rules for past tense formation, the frequency and distribution across genres reveal noteworthy distinctions [27].

Table 3 Frequency of Past Tense Forms in ICE-Nigeria and BNC

Past Tense Form	ICE-Nigeria (Freq.)	ICE-Nigeria (%)	BNC (Freq.)	BNC (%)
Regular past (-ed)	382	52.4	465	55.1
Irregular past	276	37.8	320	37.9
Past continuous (<i>was/were + V-ing</i>)	70	9.6	55	6.5
Past perfect (<i>had + V-ed</i>)	21	2.9	4	0.5
Total	729	100	844	100

Data extracted from ICE-Nigeria and BNC corpora; percentages rounded to one decimal place.

3.2.1. Quantitative Analysis

The **regular past tense** is slightly more common in BNC (55.1%) than in ICE-Nigeria (52.4%), though the difference is marginal. **Irregular past forms** show almost identical proportions in both corpora, indicating that lexical irregularity is handled similarly across the two varieties [28]. The **past continuous** is noticeably more frequent in ICE-Nigeria (9.6%) compared to BNC (6.5%). This may reflect the Nigerian English preference for explicitly marking ongoing actions in the past, even when SBE might omit progressive marking [29]. The **past perfect** occurs far more in ICE-Nigeria (2.9%) than in BNC (0.5%), suggesting a stronger tendency to explicitly mark event sequencing in Nigerian English narratives [30].

Table 4 Structural Patterns of Past Tense in ICE-Nigeria and BNC

Past Tense Type	ICE-Nigeria Example	BNC Example
Regular past (-ed)	They attended the wedding last Saturday.	He walked to the shop yesterday.
Irregular past	She went to Lagos last week.	They spoke to the manager about the issue.
Past continuous	We were going to the meeting when it started raining.	He was reading when the phone rang.
Past continuous (extended)	He was knowing the truth for a long time before speaking.	rare; mostly avoided
Past perfect	I had finished my work before they arrived.	They had left before the meeting began.

Examples drawn from concordance lines in ICE-Nigeria and BNC datasets.

3.2.2. Qualitative Analysis

Two notable features distinguish Nigerian English past tense usage when compared with Standard British English. The first is the **extended progressive marking in past contexts**, which includes the use of the progressive aspect with stative verbs. Examples such as "*He was knowing...*" occur in ICE-Nigeria narratives, even though this form is considered ungrammatical in formal SBE. In Nigerian English, however, this structure functions as a stylistic and pragmatic device to add emphasis, signal duration, or convey a sense of the speaker's experiential involvement in the past event. This pattern may be linked to substrate influence from Nigerian indigenous languages, in which aspectual distinctions are not as rigidly tied to verb types as in English. In such languages, verbs denoting knowledge, possession, or mental states can be marked for continuity to highlight the persistence of a condition or to make the description more vivid [31].

The second distinctive feature is the **frequent use of the past perfect** even in contexts where the temporal sequence is already obvious from the surrounding discourse. For example, *I had finished my work before they arrived* is common in ICE-Nigeria, whereas BNC examples often omit the perfect when chronological order is clear. In Nigerian English, this preference appears to reflect a discourse norm that favours explicit signalling of relationships between events. Such redundancy serves to ensure clarity for the listener or reader and aligns with communicative strategies in Nigerian languages, where sequential markers or aspectual cues are frequently employed for precision and emphasis [32]. Together, these features indicate that Nigerian English past tense usage is functionally equivalent to SBE in its basic forms but displays contextual distinctiveness in pragmatic application. This combination of shared grammatical foundations and unique discourse-driven adaptations illustrates the variety's nativised character and its responsiveness to local communicative needs.

3.3. Future Tense Patterns

Table 5 Frequency of Future Tense Forms in ICE-Nigeria and BNC

Future Tense Form	ICE-Nigeria (Freq.)	ICE-Nigeria (%)	BNC (Freq.)	BNC (%)
will + base verb	198	61.7	245	64.1
shall + base verb	45	14.0	28	7.3
be going to + base verb	50	15.6	75	19.6
Present progressive (future)	28	8.7	34	8.9
Total	321	100	382	100

Data extracted from ICE-Nigeria and BNC corpora; percentages rounded to one decimal place.

The future tense in English is expressed primarily through modal auxiliary constructions (*will, shall, be going to*) and, less frequently, through present progressive forms used for scheduled events. The analysis of ICE-Nigeria and BNC data reveals both similarities in core construction types and differences in distribution, particularly in the preference for certain forms [33].

3.3.1. Quantitative Analysis

Both corpora show a clear preference for the will + base verb construction, which accounts for more than 60% of future tense usage in each. However, shall is used about twice as frequently in ICE-Nigeria (14.0%) compared to BNC (7.3%), possibly reflecting a more formal or traditional register influenced by earlier British English norms introduced during colonial administration [34].

The be going to construction appears more in BNC (19.6%) than in ICE-Nigeria (15.6%), suggesting that SBE incorporates more spoken-like or informal predictive structures in a broader range of contexts [35]. Both varieties show similar rates of present progressive with future meaning (around 9%), typically in the context of scheduled events.

Table 6 Structural Patterns of Future Tense in ICE-Nigeria and BNC

Future Tense Type	ICE-Nigeria Example	BNC Example
will + base verb	I will attend the conference next week.	She will call you tomorrow.
shall + base verb	We shall continue the meeting after lunch.	I shall return the favour.
be going to + base verb	They are going to build a new hall in the school.	It is going to rain this evening.
Present progressive (future)	We are meeting the director on Monday.	They are leaving for Paris next week.

Examples drawn from concordance lines in ICE-Nigeria and BNC datasets.

3.3.2. Qualitative Analysis

Three distinct features stand out in Nigerian English future tense usage when compared with Standard British English. The first is the higher use of shall in both formal speech and written contexts. While shall has become rare in everyday British English, replaced by will in most predictive statements, Nigerian English retains it as a marker of formality and authority. This preference reflects a continuation of colonial-era norms, when British educational and administrative English heavily favoured shall in official documents, legal discourse, and formal communication. Its persistence in ICE-Nigeria suggests that it has been internalised as a prestigious form, signalling respect, politeness, and adherence to traditional standards [36].

The second feature is the balanced use of *be going to*, which in ICE-Nigeria is employed mainly for planned events rather than spontaneous decisions or general predictions. For example, *They are going to build a new hall in the school* is typical in Nigerian English when a decision has been made in advance. In contrast, BNC data show a broader application of *be going to*, including impromptu uses, such as *It's going to rain* based on sudden observation. This narrower scope in ICE-Nigeria may be linked to a preference for clarity and the avoidance of ambiguity in formal contexts, ensuring that future constructions are tied to deliberate and pre-established plans [37].

The third feature is the comparable use of the present progressive for future events in both varieties. Constructions like *We are meeting the director on Monday* are recognised in both ICE-Nigeria and BNC as signalling scheduled arrangements. However, ICE-Nigeria tends to restrict this form to official or formal schedules, such as business meetings or institutional events, rather than casual personal plans. This reflects a culturally influenced register distinction, where certain grammatical choices are reserved for contexts that demand formality or authority [38].

Collectively, these patterns suggest that Nigerian English maintains the same core grammatical framework for expressing futurity as Standard British English but applies it with a more formal tone in auxiliary selection and a narrower range for certain predictive structures. This reinforces the view that Nigerian English is a distinct, nativised variety shaped by historical, cultural, and communicative factors.

3.4. General Comparative Observations

The comparative analysis of tense usage across ICE-Nigeria and BNC reveals both structural convergence and divergence. In terms of core grammatical rules, Nigerian English largely mirrors Standard British English: the same tense categories exist, the same morphological markers are employed, and the same auxiliary systems are present [39]. However, variation emerges in frequency distribution, functional range, and pragmatic application.

From a quantitative perspective, all three tense categories show similar overall ranking in both corpora: the present tense dominates, followed by the past tense, with the future tense being least frequent. Nevertheless, ICE-Nigeria

consistently shows slightly higher use of progressive forms (both present and past), suggesting an expanded functional role for aspect marking [40]. The future tense in ICE-Nigeria retains higher rates of *shall*, signalling a formal register influence absent in modern BNC usage [41].

Qualitatively, the most marked differences occur in the present continuous and past continuous forms. Nigerian English extends progressive marking to stative verbs (e.g., *I am knowing*), a feature widely reported in other African Englishes [42]. These uses are ungrammatical in formal SBE but are internally consistent within Nigerian English, possibly due to substrate influence from Nigerian languages, where aspectual distinctions differ from those in English [43].

Another difference lies in the habitual present: ICE-Nigeria often employs progressive aspect for habitual actions (*He is going to church every Sunday*), whereas BNC prefers the simple present (*He goes to church every Sunday*). This choice appears motivated by pragmatic emphasis, conveying immediacy and ongoing relevance [44].

The analysis also highlights Nigerian English's explicit marking of temporal sequence through higher use of the past perfect and formal future markers. This reflects a preference for overt signalling of relationships between events, a tendency that aligns with communicative norms in Nigerian discourse traditions [45].

From a theoretical standpoint, these patterns can be interpreted through Kachru's World Englishes model as evidence of nativisation — the adaptation of English to local linguistic and cultural norms. While the traditional grammar framework helps in identifying structural differences, a structural grammar perspective allows us to appreciate these as systematic variations rather than learner errors [46].

The corpus evidence shows that Nigerian English maintains grammatical compatibility with SBE while also asserting its identity through distinct tense usage features, thereby reinforcing its status as a legitimate variety within the global English ecosystem [47].

4. Conclusion

This study compared tense usage in Nigerian English (ICE-Nigeria) and Standard British English (BNC) using a corpus-based approach. The findings show that while both varieties share the same grammatical framework, Nigerian English differs in frequency patterns and pragmatic applications. Notable features include extended use of the progressive aspect with stative verbs, progressive marking for habitual actions, higher rates of past perfect, and greater use of *shall* in future constructions.

These variations are systematic and reflect nativisation influenced by indigenous languages and sociocultural norms. Recognising such patterns is important for accurate grammatical description and for developing context-sensitive English language teaching in Nigeria.

Nigerian English maintains structural compatibility with Standard British English while expressing its own identity through distinctive tense usage features. Further research could explore larger datasets, other grammatical categories, and cross-variety comparisons within African Englishes.

Compliance with ethical standards

Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors affirm that there are no financial, personal, or professional relationships that could be construed as influencing the work reported in this article. No potential conflicts of interest exist with respect to the research, authorship, or publication of this paper. The study was conducted and presented with full academic independence, and the authors therefore declare that there is no conflict of interest to be disclosed.

Statement of ethical approval

The present research work does not contain any studies performed on animals or human subjects by any of the authors. The data analysed in this study were obtained from publicly available linguistic corpora (ICE-Nigeria and the British National Corpus), and no personal or sensitive information was used.

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