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Attitudes towards Nigerian Englishes: Ethnic categorisation and underlying reasons for categorisation

Abstract

There has been a dearth of studies in language attitude research focusing on the association between ethnic categorisation and underlying reasons for the categorisation of accents of Nigerian Englishes. This paper examines the ethnic categorisation of speakers of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba Englishes and the reasons for categorising their accents into ethnic groups by 406 participants from three Nigerian universities. The findings reveal that participants found it challenging to distinguish between speakers of Igbo and Yoruba Englishes, which points to a possibility of language change in progress in the speech of Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria. The results show a significant association between good educational background (GEB) and de-ethnicised speech, demonstrating that GEB helps to minimise common L1 interference features. This study offers a new perspective for the study of language attitudes: it demonstrates participants' levels of exposure to Nigerian Englishes; and it reveals the sociopsychological processes that underlie accent recognition and ethnic categorisation of accents.

Keywords: Nigerian English, Language attitude, Accent recognition, Ethnicity, New Englishes

1. Introduction

Although attitudes towards languages and their speakers have received considerable attention in the literature (Kircher and Zipp, 2022), quite a few studies have focused on ethnic categorisation of language users (Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan, 2022a). There has been a dearth of studies focusing particularly on ethnic categorisation and underlying reasons for the categorisation of speakers of Nigerian Englishes. Except for a few studies (such as McKenzie, 2010) that asked participants to provide reasons for ethnic or social categorisation, many language attitude studies exclude this item. As a result, little is known about the association between ethnic categorisation and underlying reasons for the categorisation of accents into ethnic groups. To address this gap in the literature, this study examines the ethnic categorisation of six speakers from a verbal guise study and the reasons for categorising their accents into ethnic groups. The paper also explores the association between ethnic categorisation and underlying reasons for ethnic categorisation of speakers of three major Nigerian Englishes: Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba Englishes. Exploring this association provides insights into the factors influencing language attitudes and the sociopsychological processes underlying linguistic discrimination.

Nigeria is a multilingual and multicultural country with an estimated population above 210 million (World Bank, 2022), about 520 living languages, and over 250 ethnic groups (Eberhard et al., 2022). With this number of languages, Nigeria is the world's

third most linguistically diverse nation behind Indonesia (with 707 languages) and Papua New Guinea (839 languages) (Eberhard et al., 2022). Due to its British colonial legacy/history, English is the official language of Nigeria. Because different indigenous languages serve as the L1 of many Nigerians, this L1 influences their English usage, resulting in different Nigerian Englishes, such as Hausa English (HE), Igbo English (IE) and Yoruba English (YE). Research has shown how speakers of these varieties are evaluated (Aboh, 2023; Ugwuanyi and Oyebola, 2022; Williams, 1983). For instance, Aboh (2023) found that YE is rated more favourably on status and quality of language than IE and HE varieties. The study showed that HE was rated as the least attractive. With respect to the linguistic features of these localised English varieties at the acrolectal level, features that mark HE include the mappings of [p] onto [f] as in [pipti] for 'fifty', [b] onto [v] as in [beri] for 'very', [z] onto [ð] as in [ɔza] for 'other' and [ɛ] onto [eɪ] as in [trɛnd] for 'trained'. IE is characterised by realising [nj] as [ɲ] as in [ɲu] for 'new', [eɪ] as [e] as in [trend] for 'trained', and dentalisation of [t] as in [to̪t̪al] for 'total'. YE is characterised by [h] insertion and deletion as in [hɔl] for 'all' and [ɔl] for 'hall'. Its features also include the realisations of [ʒ] as [ʃ] as in [iʒu] for 'issue', and [ɜː] as [a] as in [tam] for 'term' (see Igboanusi, 2006; Jowitt, 2019 for a more comprehensive description of these features). Sometimes, HE is classified as Northern Nigerian English while IE and YE are rendered as Southern Nigerian English because of the geographical locations where these varieties are mainly spoken (Ugwuanyi, 2021). These varieties are often used in the media especially in videos on social media and pop culture. Although not empirically confirmed, it can be argued that IE and YE varieties are more represented in the media than HE because of the speakers' dominance in Nigeria's afro-music, Nollywood movies, and comedies.

Thus, this article uses responses from a verbal guise study to show the ideological resources Nigerians draw upon to categorise speakers of Nigerian Englishes into ethnolinguistic groups. This study contributes to a cross-cultural understanding of how speakers from different ethnolinguistic groups are evaluated. The study extends the study of language attitudes to include exploring the association between ethnic categorisation and its underlying reasons, which helps in understanding the complex nature of accent recognition. The article provides insights into how sociopsychological processes impact attitudes towards different language varieties. Before I turn to the methods, presentation and discussion of the results, the discussion below provides an overview of ethnic categorisation and evaluations of language varieties.

2. Ethnic categorisation and evaluations

Following the call to include a recognition item in matched- and verbal-guise studies (Preston, 1989), several language attitude studies have asked participants to indicate the nationality or ethnicity of the speakers they heard. According to Garrett et al. (2003: 208),

> Recognition can be construed as the cognitive mapping of audible speech-features (or stylistic configurations of features in combination) onto individuals' records of the usage norms of particular communities. By this account, 'recognizing a dialect' involves identifying values of variable features and then succeeding or failing to make the appropriate mapping.

This position suggests that there are linguistic features that characterise the language use of a particular ethnic or social group, which may or not be accurately identified by participants. The above excerpt also indicates that recognition precedes

ethnic categorisation. Therefore, it can be argued that ethnic categorisation is a three-stage process involving the perception of the voice stimuli, (mis)recognition of the speech features and categorisation of the speaker into an ethnic or social group. Research incorporating speaker recognition and ethnic categorisation revealed no perfectly accurate identification and categorisation of speakers' accents. For example, in Garrett et al.'s (2003) study of language attitudes in Wales, the highest accurate identification was an RP speaker (85%), whereas the lowest was Valleys and North-west accents (26%). They argued that age and level of geographical mobility are crucial in accurately recognising varieties. In their study of Americans' attitudes towards ten English varieties, Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan (2022a) found that the Standard American English speaker received the highest recognition rate (94.3%), whereas the Farsi-accented speaker received the lowest recognition rate (6.1%). Similarly, Oyebola (2020) asked 209 Nigerian participants to identify the nationality of two Nigerian English speakers and one speaker each of American English, British English, Ghanaian English and Jamaican English varieties. He found that the highest recognition rate was the first Nigerian English speaker (64.8%), while the lowest was the Jamaican English speaker (20.2%). Other studies have also identified the absence of a 100% identification and categorisation rate of speakers (see Chien, 2018; Lindemann, 2003; McKenzie, 2010; Zhang, 2010).

A range of factors may affect participants' 'imperfect' recognition of speakers' ethnicity or nationality. The first factor is perhaps due to the complex nature of speech recognition and ethnic categorisation (Delia, 1974; Garrett et al., 2003: 198). Second, the misrecognition of varieties may result from participants' insufficient experience and awareness of the varieties or outgroup norms (Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan, 2022a; Garrett et al., 2003). Third is possibly due to participants' attempt to categorise foreign-accented speakers into specific foreign groups or countries (Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan, 2022a).

Despite this lack of 'perfect' recognition, studies have shown that participants recognise speakers of their own variety more than outgroup varieties (McKenzie, 2010; Zhang, 2010). In situations whereby participants misrecognise their own variety, such misrecognitions might be because of "inadequate cognitive representation (or awareness) of ingroup speech norms" (Garrett et al., 2003:201). It has also been observed that (mis)identification of accents does not significantly impact or invalidate respondents' evaluations (Lindemann, 2003; Milroy and McClenaghan, 1977; Oyebola, 2020). Delia (1974) found that if the speakers' accent differs from those of the participants', it reduces cognitive differentiation and increases stereotypes among the participants, regardless of their level of cognitive complexity. This position implies that participants have an idea of the linguistic features of (non)prestigious varieties, and although they did not accurately categorise them into the exact (non)prestigious accents, they were able to evaluate them based on popular stereotypes. For instance, Oyebola (2020) found no significant difference in the ratings of participants who correctly identified speakers' ethnic nationality and those who did not. On the other hand, studies have found a significant effect of accurate recognition of speaker origin on evaluation (Chien, 2018; Yook and Lindemann, 2013; Zhang, 2010). For example, Chien (2018) found that the Spanish-English bilingual speaker in his study received a higher solidarity rating from those who correctly identified his origin than those who did not. The reason for this inconsistency in variety recognition research remains an important direction for further research.

In addition to the discussion on (mis)recognition of language varieties, ethnic categorisation is a social cognitive process involving membership categorisations and intergroup identity formation. Accent variation is closely connected to social differences, meaning that accents can indicate a speaker's social identity, such as their ethnicity or nationality (Lippi-Green, 2012). In other words, stereotypes and ingroup identity mediate language evaluations (Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan, 2022a; Ryan, 1983). As Garrett et al. (2003: 208) conclude, "The apparently simple task of giving a community label to a particular speaker may well have tapped into these group-level cognitions, and influenced the frequencies with which particular speakers were 'recognized' as members of ingroup and outgroup communities." Within the inner circle, participants tend to rate their own variety more favourably on both status and solidarity dimensions than the outgroup, whereas in several outer and expanding circle contexts such as Nigeria and Taiwan, participants often rate the exonormative varieties more favourably than their own variety according to status dimensions (Chien, 2018; Ugwuanyi and Oyebola, 2022). However, from a raciolinguistic perspective, studies have shown that speakers of inner circle varieties tend to negatively evaluate an inner circle variety when that variety is presented with faces of speakers of racialised and stigmatised varieties. For instance, in their study involving listeners' (whose dominant language was American English) perception of American, British and Indian English, Kutlu et al. (2022) found that speakers of American English were given lower intelligibility ratings and judged to have heavier accents when presented with South Asian faces. On the other hand, they were given higher intelligibility scores and judged to have less accented speech when paired with White faces. This finding indicates how ideologies about language and race can impact evaluation of language varieties and sustain the racialisation of speakers of 'nonstandard' varieties (Rosa, 2016).

3. Method

3.1 Speakers

The verbal-guise experiment or test (VGE or VGT) is a variant of the matched-guise test (MGT), which is an indirect approach to measuring language attitudes (Garrett, 2010). The text the speakers read was obtained using an elicitation paragraph centred on explaining what research is. The reason for using research as the subject matter was because it is believed to be a topic that will resonate with the respondents since they are students in tertiary institutions. It is also thought to be relatively neutral in terms of emotion, religion, and race. Two speakers each (one male and one female) from Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba backgrounds were selected as speakers. To address potential issues that may arise by including voices of different genders, I analysed the categorisation and reasons for categorisation at the level of variety not on individual speakers. In other words, I aggregated the categorisations of both male and female speakers for each variety. Since each variety has male and female speakers, it is expected that the potential issues caused by gender will not affect the results.

The elicitation paragraph was printed and given to the speakers to read and familiarise themselves with it to avoid stuttering or hesitant delivery. While looking at the paper, the speakers were then asked to read the paragraph as naturally as possible in the voice they would use if they were to speak in a lecture setting. Read speech, as opposed to spontaneous speech, helps to prevent probable variances (lexical, syntactic, and morphological) of various English speakers (Oyebola, 2020)

and ensures that the semantic content is constant across the guises (Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan, 2022b).

Each speaker was recorded at least five times. There are two main reasons for multiple recordings. First, speakers tended to read more naturally in later recordings than in earlier ones, and there were also little or no slips of the tongue in subsequent recordings (Loureiro-Rodríguez and Acar, 2022). Second, multiple versions provide options for selecting recordings that are comparatively similar in speech rate and quality. As Soukop (2007: 174) maintains, "comparability of the speech samples can be sufficiently established if the speakers do not diverge greatly in voice quality". For each speaker, it took between 15 and 20 minutes to record and obtain their demographic data, such as age, educational background, where they grew up, and the languages they speak. The range of the recordings was 34–42 seconds, with a mean of 37 seconds. Despite the fact that the speakers had lived in Hong Kong for a maximum of three years at the time the recordings were made, participants in the pilot study confirmed that the voices were authentic representations of the speakers' Nigerian English varieties and were relatively similar in voice quality.

The speakers were selected based on their educational status. Apart from the HE male speaker who has a PhD and the HE female speaker who has a BSc, the highest qualification of other speakers is a master's degree. Following Loureiro-Rodríguez and Acar's (2022) suggestion that the speakers should be within a close age range, the speakers' age range is between 25 and 35 (mean age=29.5, *SD*=3.56). The three males and three females constituting the study's six speakers possessed the phonological features listed in Table 1 (below). These features are based on their rendering of the prompt given to them.

Table 1

Phonological features of speakers

Phonemes	**HE Male, 31, from Kano**	**HE Female, 25, from Kano**	**IE Male, 35, from Enugu**	**IE Female, 28, from Imo**	**YE Male, 31, from Ibadan**	**YE Female, 27, from Osun**
[f] to [p]	[p] in *afraid*, *frontiers*	[p] in *afraid*				
[v] to [b]	[b] in *discover*					
[ð] to [z]	[z] in *other*					
[h] insertion or dropping					[h] dropping in *hallmarks* and [h] insertion in *also*	[h] dropping in *hallmarks*
[θ] to [t]				[t] in *through*	[t] in *three*, *through*	[t] in *three, through*
[ʃ] to [ʒ]						[ʒ] in *issue*

STRUT [ʌ] to [ɔ]	[ɔ] in *frontiers, one*	[ɔ] in *discover, culminates*	[ɔ] in *discover, submitting*	[ɔ] in *some*, *one*	[ɔ] in *some*, *but*	[ɔ] in *culminates, study*
NURSE [ɜ] to [ɑ:]	[ɑ:] in *research, tertiary*	[ɑ:] in *tertiary, research, service*		[ɑ:] in *service*		[ɑ:] in *research, tertiary*
GOAT [əʊ] to [o:]			[o:] in *also*	[o:] in *also*		
[j] omission	Omitted [j] in *institutions*, *duties*	Omitted [j] in *particular, community*			Omitted [j] in *community*, *student*	
[nj] to [ɲ]			[ɲ] in *new*	[ɲ] in *new*		
FACE [eɪ]	[ɛ] in trained	[ɛ] in papers	[e] in interrogating, afraid	[e] in *culminates*, *papers*	[e] in *trained*, *papers*	
[aɪ] to [ɑ:]					[ɑ:] in *primary*,	[ɑ:] in primary
commA [ə] to [ɔ]					[ɔ] in *institutions*, *community*	[ɔ] in *community, development*
LettER		[ɑ:] in *researcher* [ɔ] in *lecturer*		[ɔ] in *lecturer* [ɑ:] in *researcher*		
[z] devoicing	[s] in *duties*, *institutions*	[s] in *papers, courses*		[s] in *institutions*, *courses*	[s] in *duties*, *courses*	[s] in *frontiers and courses*

Table 1 shows that the substitution of [f] with [p] and the realisation of [eɪ] as [ɛ] were the peculiar features of HE speakers. [h] dropping and insertion as well as the realisation of [ə] as [ɔ] characterised the YE speakers. The realisations [əʊ] as [o:] and [nj] as [ɲ] were the peculiar features of the IE speakers.

3.2 Participants

The participants for this study were four hundred and six (406) undergraduate students drawn from three universities in the Southeastern (*n* = 151), Southwestern (*n* = 144) and North Central (*n* = 111) parts of Nigeria. The reason for choosing students from

North-Central is because of the inability to access students from core Hausa-speaking states, such as Kano and Kaduna, due to the strike action of university lecturers during the time of data collection. However, due to the identity of North Central and North West as Northerners, it is assumed that they hold similar attitudes (Ali, 2021). Because of the cultural diversity in the selected universities, it is believed that the students were conversant with the Nigerian Englishesbeing studied.

The students were chosen as participants because they were more likely to volunteer for language attitudes research (McKenzie, 2010). In addition, they tended to be more exposed to different accents of Nigerian Englishes because of their active use of social media (e.g., Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and others.), where individuals from different accent groups can be found (McKenzie, 2010; Oyebola, 2020). The mean score for age was 20.4 years (*SD*=2.41), ranging from 16 to 32 years old. Due to the gender imbalance typical in Nigerian universities, 268 respondents were women, whereas 138 were men. 76.8% of the respondents reported that they learned English in school, while 23.2% learned English without formal instruction. This is not surprising because many Nigerian parents send their children to English Medium Instruction (EMI) schools where teaching and class participation in English are emphasised (Ndiribe and Aboh, 2022). 69.5% of respondents indicated acquiring their mother tongue as their first language, while 30.5% reported English to be their first language. All the participants were of Nigerian origin, had lived in Nigeria all their lives, and were currently enrolled as students during data collection.

As with any research that involves human subjects, ethical issues were considered. At each university, participants were recruited using snowball sampling involving existing participants helping to identify other potential participants. The participants had access to the consent form and information sheet that detailed the purpose of the study, the importance of their participation and the duration of their participation, and a statement assuring them that their responses would be kept confidential and that they were free to withdraw from the study if they did not wish to continue.

3.3 Instrument

The data analysed in this study were two open-ended questions included in an online verbal guise questionnaire which participants responded to after listening to the six speakers and rating them on thirteen personality traits. The results of the language ratings, which have been reported in a separate article (Aboh, 2023), showed that YE was rated as the most attractive on status and quality of language dimensions, while HE received the most negative ratings on status, solidarity and quality of language. The first open-ended question asked participants to state where they think each of the speakers was from, while the second question elicited information on participants' reason for categorising the speakers into the ethnic group they provided in the first question.

The second section of the questionnaire elicited participants' (i) demographic characteristics (sex, age, ethnicity, religion, among others), (ii) English learning history, (iii) linguistic background, and (iv) how many months they had stayed in the town where their university is situated. In addition, based on standard procedure (Starks and Paltridge, 1996; Stell, 2022), social variables that are relevant to the Nigerian sociolinguistic context, such as whether participants attended 'public' or 'private' primary and secondary schools and the location of these schools (rural, suburban, urban) were included. This background information was elicited from the

respondents because it has been found that positive or negative attitudes towards accents depend on their social demographic and linguistic characteristics (Chien, 2018; McKenzie, 2010).

3.4 Data preparation and coding

Responses to speakers' ethnicity were classified into eight categories: Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, De-ethnicised[1], Foreign, South-South, Middle Belt, and No idea. The percentage of responses falling within each category for each variety was calculated. Apart from explicitly mentioning 'Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba' among others, respondents used phrases suggesting that they were referring to these ethnic groups. Therefore, responses such as 'northern part', 'Fulani/Hausa' 'North', and specific mentions of states or cities such as 'Jos, Kastina, Kaduna' were coded as Hausa because the Hausa-speaking people occupy the northern part of Nigeria, and the mentioned states are where Hausa is mainly spoken. Responses like 'Eastern side', 'south east' (where Igbo people are predominantly located) and explicit mention of Igbo-speaking states and cities such as 'Enugu, Imo, Nsukka and Abakiliki' were coded as Igbo. The Yoruba category included responses such as 'southwestern part of Nigeria' and Yoruba-speaking states and regions as in 'Ondo, Oyo, Egun'.

Responses coded as de-ethnicised included statements such as 'The speaker did not mix dialect while speaking', 'Can't say, there is no trace of an actual accent', 'Sounds like a Nigerian whose mother's tongue occupies no space on her tongue', among others. 'Foreign' included cases where the respondents mentioned countries other than Nigeria, as in 'American', 'Sweden', Ghanaian, or 'Spanish' or expressions like 'Heaven, she is angelic'. Responses classified as South-South included mentions of states and ethnic groups belonging to the South-South geopolitical zone such as 'Delta, Akwa Ibom, Edo, Calabar, Urhobo and Ibibio'. Middle Belt category included states and ethnic groups that belong to the Middle Belt, like 'Ebira, Benue, Tiv' and explicitly mentioning the term 'Middle Belt'. Where participants indicated, 'I don't know', 'No idea', 'Can't really tell' or provided no answer, they were categorised as 'No idea'.

Coding the reasons for categorising a speaker into an ethnic group was done by generating an initial list of 11 codes. Here, 'Mother tongue interference', 'accent',

[1] De-ethnicised or de-ethnicisation is a term used by Stell (2022) as a variant of Mesthrie's (2010) notion of 'deracialisation' to represent a shift from ethnic speech to ethnically neutral speech. It is rooted in Trudgill's concept of 'koineisation,' which argues that dialects merge with one another wherever they are in intense contact (Trudgill, 2003). Since New Englishes behave at least partly like native varieties (Mesthrie and Bhatt, 2008), one may expect koineisation (a concept developed in relation to L1 varieties in the Outer Circle) to also apply to Nigerian English. The early exposure of Southern Nigerians to education and the popularity of American and British movies in Nigeria (Falola, 2001) may have contributed to a 'substrate erasure' (Mesthrie, 2017) of common features that characterise Igbo and Yoruba speakers. Belonging to the same language family and the close contact between Igbo and Yoruba speakers may have also contributed to the similarity of Igbo and Yoruba Englishes (Igboanusi, 2006). Koineisation (substrate erasure and de-ethnicisation) is a plausible scenario in multi-ethnic urban southern Nigeria among educated individuals who have devoted time to Nigerian English accent reduction. This de-ethnicisation explains why participants did not assign some speakers to any ethnic group in the VGE.

‘intonation’ and ‘ethnic speech matching’ were coded separately. However, after a closer look at the categories, these four codes were merged into one category, ‘Accent’, because speakers’ mother tongue interference and intonation can be said to characterise their accent. More so, accent and intonation appear as synonyms from the responses. The resultant recoding gave rise to eight categories: Accent, good educational background (GEB), poor educational background (PEB), verbal nonfluency, verbal fluency, behavioural tendencies, the respondents’ intuition, and don’t know. Finally, the percentage of each category was calculated. Table 2 provides the coding scheme of the ethnic categorisation and some examples.

Table 2

Categories of the reasons for ethnic categorisation

Categories	Examples for all speakers
Accent	*Accent, his way of speaking; the way his words sound; he is disturbed by mother tongue; he speaks like them*
GEB	*He went to a good school; Because most Yorubas are educated; She speaks like a learned person*
PEB	*They (Igbo) have a lot of poorly educated people; she is not (properly) educated; he sounds like a roughly educated Igbo man*
Verbal nonfluency	*His phonation are not fluent; he speaks as though he is still learning; some words are not pronounced correctly; bad intonation*
Verbal fluency	*He speaks very well; his accent sounds good; smooth voice; there are no sign of ethnicity from the speaker; she speaks flawlessly; nice English*
Behavioural tendencies	*Because of the way he behaves; because he has the zeal to know more; hardworking and vibrant*
Intuition	*I feel so; just guessing; my thinking; because I can feel it; my thoughts*
Don’t know	*Don’t know; I just can’t tell; and (no answers provided)*

4. Results

4.1 Ethnic categorisation

Participants were asked to provide the ethnicity of the speakers they listened to. This was to test if they could assign an ethnic group to the speakers based on their accents. It also showed the relationship between participants’ status, solidarity and quality of language ratings of the speakers and the ethnic group they perceive the speakers to belong to. Fig. 1 presents the results of the ethnic categorisation of speakers. The percentage of ethnic categorisations is across the two speakers of each variety.

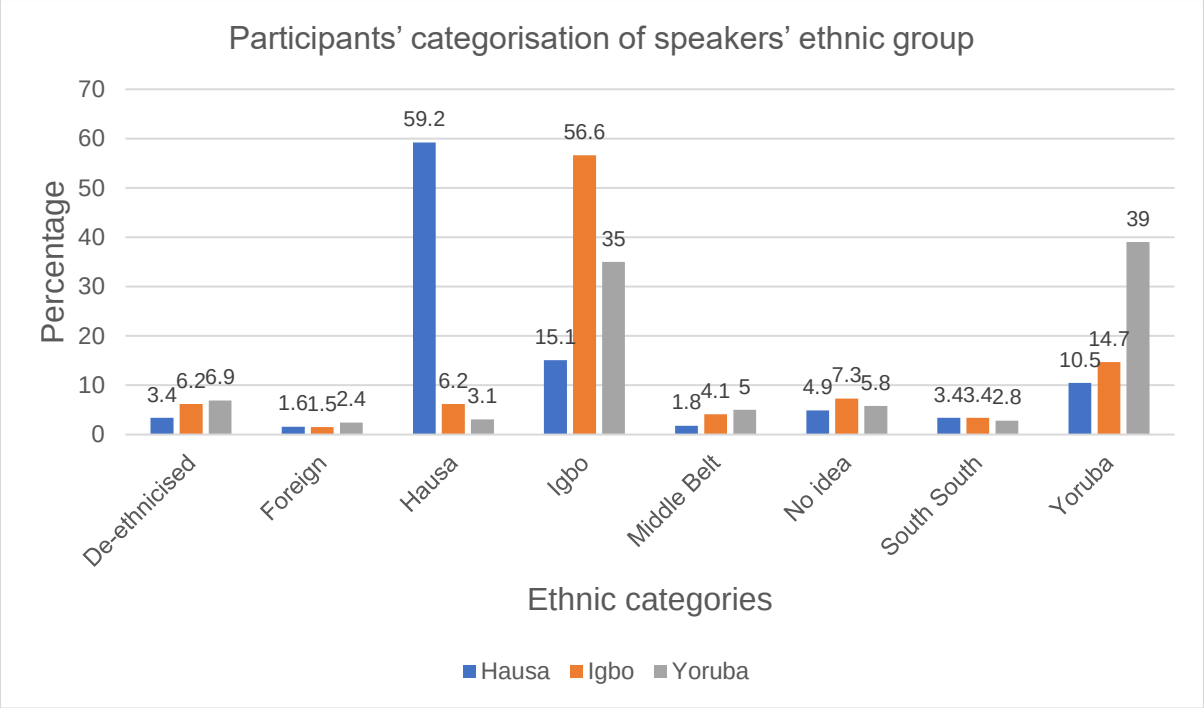

Fig. 1. Participants' categorisation of speakers' ethnic group

Fig. 1 is quite revealing in several ways. First, it shows that the ethnic categorisation of the HE speakers has the highest percentage (59.2%), followed by IE (56.6%) and YE (39%). This result suggests that participants found the HE accent the easiest to identify. A closer inspection of the table shows that some participants found it difficult to clearly distinguish between the IE and YE speakers. For example, 35% of the participants classified the IE speakers as Yoruba, while 14% categorised YE speakers as Igbo. From this table, it can be seen that only 6.2% and 3.1% classified the IE and YE speakers as HE.

Second, the results in Fig. 1 show that YE speakers were categorised as being de-ethnicised more often (6.9%) compared to HE speakers, which had the lowest percentage for this category (3.4%). Additionally, Yoruba speakers had the highest percentage (2.4%) categorised as foreign. The high percentage of YE's de-ethnicised category aligns with the findings from the VGE, where YE received the highest status, solidarity and quality of language ratings. This finding suggests that although specific linguistic features distinguish one ethnic group from another, very few participants in this study believed that there are features that mark one as Nigerian at a broader level. In general, the results suggest that the participants were moderately accurate at identifying speakers' ethnic groups based on speech alone.

4.2 Reasons for ethnic categorisation

Participants' responses to the reasons for categorising speakers' accents provided eight categories as presented in Fig. 2.

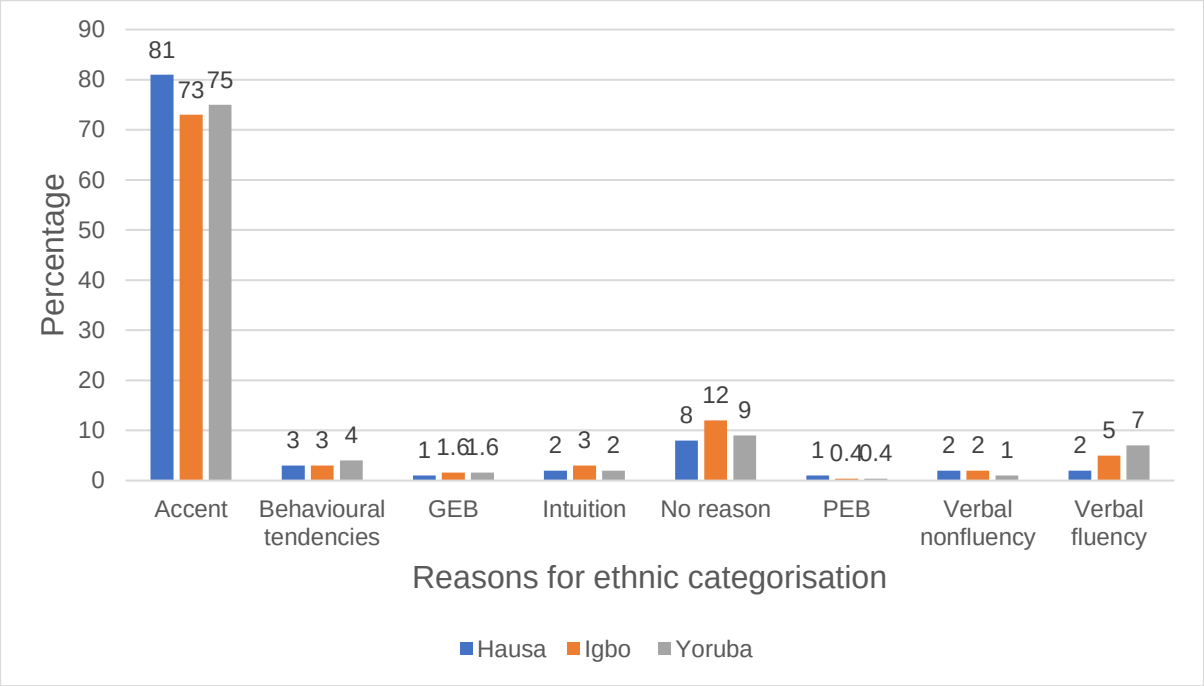

Fig. 2. Participants' reasons for categorising speakers' ethnic group; GEB (Good educational background), PEB (Poor educational background)

What stands out in Fig. 2 is that accent is the most reported reason for ethnic categorisation. In other words, participants who categorised speakers into different ethnic groups did so because of the speakers' accents. This reason features prominently in the categorisation of HE speakers (81%), followed by YE (75%) and then IE (73%). The next most reported reason is 'no reason', which may represent the inability of the respondents to provide an ethnic categorisation or find words to justify the reason for assigning the speakers to a particular ethnic group. Rather than providing any concrete justifications, some respondents reported that they felt that the speakers spoke like individuals from the ethnic group to which they assigned them. This reason (intuition) is comparatively similar across the HE, IE and YE speakers. Whereas YE (1.6%) and IE (1.6%) have the highest percentage for GEB, HE has the highest for PEB. In agreement with having a relatively high percentage of GEB, the YE speakers were seen as being more verbally fluent (7%) than other speakers, IE (5%) and HE (2%). Conversely, HE and IE speakers are relatively high in verbal nonfluency with 2% each. 10% of the participants in this study classified the speakers' ethnic groups based on behavioural tendencies with statements such as "Because of the way he behaves" and "because he has the zeal to know more". The next section reports the results of the association between ethnic categorisations and reasons provided by respondents.

4.3 Association between ethnic categorisations and reasons

4.3.1 Two-way contingency table analysis for HE speakers

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to ascertain the relationship between the ethnic categorisation of HE speakers and the reasons for classifying them as Hausa. The two variables were ethnicity with eight levels (de-ethnicised, foreign, Hausa, Igbo, Middle Belt, no idea, South South, and Yoruba) and reasons for ethnicity with eight levels (accent, behavioural tendencies, good educational background, intuition, no reason, poor educational background, verbal nonfluency, and verbal fluency). Ethnic categorisations and reasons for ethnicity were found to be significantly related, Pearson $\chi^2(49, N = 406) = 408.24$, $p = <.0007$, Cramér's $V = .26$. In addition, follow-up pairwise comparisons were conducted to ascertain the combination of categories that contributed to statistical significance. Table 3 shows the results of these analyses. Holm's sequential Bonferroni method was used to control for Type I error at the .05 level across all comparisons. The adjusted p value = .0007. The significant pairwise differences were between the following categories: GEB and de-ethnicised, accent and Hausa, Igbo and accent, accent and no idea, no reason and no idea, PEB and middle Belt, and Hausa and no reason.

Table 3

Results of the Pairwise Comparisons using the Holm's Sequential Bonferroni Method for HE speakers

Comparison	Pearson chi-square	*p* value	Cramér's *V*
GEB vs de-ethnicised	34.81	<.0007	.07
Accent vs Hausa	104.04	<.0007	.13
Accent vs Igbo	16.81	<.0007	.05
Accent vs no idea	114.49	<.0007	.14
No reason vs no idea	234.09	<.0007	.20
PEB vs Middle Belt	11.56	<.0007	.04
No reason vs Hausa	88.36	<.0007	.12

Table 3 shows that the relationship with the largest effect size is no reason and no idea, which shows that a greater percentage of the respondents could not categorise the speakers into an ethnic group or provide any reasons for ethnic categorisation. On the one hand, the table also reveals an association between Hausa and accent, indicating that participants who categorised the speakers as Hausa did so based on their accent. On the other hand, participants could identify the speakers as Hausa but could not find the words to justify their reason. Furthermore, the contingency analysis shows a significant relationship between PEB and Middle belt. This result indicates that the speakers were categorised as Middle Belt based on the perception that individuals from this area have limited exposure to good education (Adeyemi, 2001), which impacts their English language use. Some participants claimed that the speakers were Igbo based on their accents. Because some participants categorised the HE speakers as Igbo, it explains why there is an association between Igbo and accent in the two-way contingency table analyses of HE speakers. There was also an association between GEB and de-ethnicisation, which supports the claim that people with good education have a minimal influence of their mother tongue on their speech.

4.3.2 Two-way contingency table analysis for IE speakers

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to test for the association between ethnic categorisation and the reasons for ethnic categorisation for the IE speakers. The two variables have the same levels as those of HE speakers described above. Ethnic categorisations and reasons for ethnicity were significantly related, Pearson $\chi^2(49, N = 406) = 330.79$, $p = <.0007$, Cramér's $V = .24$. Follow-up pairwise comparisons were conducted to ascertain the significant relationship levels. Table 4 shows the result of these analyses. Holm's sequential Bonferroni method was used to control for Type I error at the .05 level across all comparisons. The adjusted *p* value = .0007. The significant pairwise differences were between GEB and de-ethnicised, verbal fluency and de-ethnicised, no reason and foreign, Igbo and accent, Igbo and no reason, accent and de-ethnicised, accent and no idea, and no reason and no idea.

Table 4

Results of the Pairwise Comparisons using the Holm's Sequential Bonferroni Method for IE speakers

Comparison	Pearson chi-square	*p* value	Cramér's *V*
GEB vs de-ethnicised	30.47	<.0007	.07
Verbal fluency vs de-ethnicised	49.46	<.0007	.09
No reason vs foreign	16.00	<.0007	.05
Accent vs Igbo	21.16	<.0007	.06
No reason vs Igbo	34.81	<.0007	.07
Accent vs de-ethnicised	18.49	<.0007	.05
Accent vs no idea	123.21	<.0007	.14
No reason vs no idea	248.04	<.0007	.20

As shown in Table 4, results indicate that GEB and verbal fluency are significantly associated with the de-ethnicised category. This result indicates that speakers who could not be associated with any particular group resulted from perceived GEB and verbal fluency. A closer inspection of the table shows that participants who categorised the IE speakers as foreign could not provide any reason for their choice. On the one hand, sometimes, respondents who correctly identified the ethnic group of the IE speakers were convinced that they were Igbo but could not find any reason. This finding suggests that one can identify an accent and lack words to justify their answers. On the other hand, participants could identify the IE speakers based on their accents. It is apparent from this table that participants who reported no idea for ethnic categorisation did not provide any reason. What is surprising about the data in this table is the relationship between accent and the de-ethnicised category. A possible preliminary interpretation for this relationship is that there tends to be a de-ethnicisation in progress, but it is not fully observable by a vast majority of the sample. As such, while some participants reported that IE speakers have 'accent neutral' speech, others could recognise they were Igbo based on their accent.

4.3.3 Two-way contingency table analysis for YE speakers

A two-way contingency table analysis was conducted to test for the association between ethnic categorisation and reasons for categorisation of YE speakers. The two variables have the same levels as HE and IE speakers described above. Ethnic categorisations and reasons for ethnicity were significantly related, Pearson $\chi^2(49, N$

= 406) = 235.19, p = <.0007, Cramér's V = .20. Follow-up pairwise comparisons were conducted to ascertain the points of significance. Holm's sequential Bonferroni method was used to control for Type I error at the .05 level across all comparisons. The adjusted p value = .0007. The significant pairwise differences were between GEB and de-ethnicised, accent and no idea, no reason and no idea, Yoruba and accent, and Yoruba and no reason.

Table 5

Results of the Pairwise Comparisons using the Holm's Sequential Bonferroni Method for YE speakers

Comparison	Pearson chi-square	*p* value	Cramér's *V*
GEB vs de-ethnicised	26.01	<.0007	.06
Accent vs no idea	68.89	<.0007	.10
No reason vs no idea	158.76	<.0007	.16
Accent vs Yoruba	32.49	<.0007	.07
Yoruba vs no reason	16.81	<.0007	.05

This result demonstrates that participants who did not categorise the speakers' accents based on ethnicity provided no reason for ethnic categorisation. It shows a relationship between having a GEB and the ability to speak well without being identified with any particular ethnic group in Nigeria. The 'Accent vs no idea' and 'Yoruba vs no reason' significant relationships demonstrate that participants could identify that the speakers are Yoruba but could not find any reason to justify their choice. There was a significant relationship between Yoruba and accent, which indicates that participants who identified the speakers as Yoruba did so based on their accent.

4.3.4 Comparing the two-way contingency table analyses for the three varieties

The most striking observation from the two-way contingency table analyses for the three varieties is the relationship between accent and ethnic categorisation. The classification of the speakers into the actual ethnic group they belong to was based on their accents. This result shows that a greater percentage of the participants were able to detect the ethnic group of the speakers based on their speech. Another consistent result from the contingency analyses is the association between GEB and de-ethnicisation, which suggests that when one is well-educated, it can be difficult to detect one's ethnic group. Another common association among the three varieties was accurately identifying the speakers' ethnic group but providing no justification. This association indicates that accent detection can be intuitive. Some of the participants in this study were convinced that the speaker was from a particular ethnic group but could not find words to justify their reason. Recurrent in categorisation of the three varieties is the relationship between 'no idea' and 'no reason', a finding that shows that participants who did not categorise the speakers into any ethnic group did not provide any reason. In all the contingency table analyses, there were no significant differences featuring any of the following categories: behavioural tendencies, intuition, verbal nonfluency, and South South.

Peculiar to IE speakers is the association between verbal fluency and de-ethnicisation as well as accent and de-ethnicisation. For the former, it shows that IE speakers could not be assigned to any specific ethnic group by some respondents,

perhaps, because of their fluency. This relationship found for the IE speakers is surprising because the YE speakers have the highest percentage for de-ethnicisation of speech (Fig. 1) and verbal fluency (Fig. 2). This finding may explain why there was also a relationship between accent and de-ethnicisation for IE speakers, which has been explained to mean a de-ethnicisation in progress, which many respondents have not fully recognised.

There was a unique relationship between PEB and Middle Belt for the HE speakers. This relationship may show that participants who perceived the HE speakers as belonging to the Middle Belt did so based on PEB. This result is not surprising as many of the states that belong to the Middle Belt, such as Benue, Kogi, Kwara, Nasarawa, Niger and Plateau, are classified as educationally disadvantaged states (Adeyemi, 2001).

5. Discussion

This study examined the association between ethnic categorisation and underlying reasons for categorisation. Four major findings from the association between ethnic categorisations and reasons are discussed in this section: (1) participants' difficulty distinguishing between IE and YE speakers as well as HE speakers being the easiest to identify; (2) accent being the dominant reason for ethnic categorisation; (3) the significant association between 'de-ethnicised speech' and 'good educational background'; and (4) the relationship between verbal fluency and de-ethnicised speech.

5.1 Accent identification

The first point to be discussed is participants' difficulty distinguishing between IE and YE speakers, which contrasted with the easy identification of the HE speakers. As shown in Fig. 1, 59.2%, 56.6%, and 39% of the respondents accurately categorised the HE, IE and YE speakers, respectively. However, 14.7% categorised the YE speakers as IE, while 35% categorised the IE speakers as YE. Two factors may explain this difficulty in distinguishing between the YE and IE speakers. First is the geographic proximity between Yoruba and Igbo lands. In pre-colonial Nigeria, the lands inhabited by the Yoruba and Igbo people belonged to the Southern protectorate, whereas Hausa belonged to the Northern protectorate. The amalgamation of the Northern and Southern protectorates in 1914 gave rise to the country known as Nigeria. The closeness of these ethnic groups may have given rise to similar linguistic characteristics between Igbo and Yoruba Englishes. The second factor is that the Igbo and Yoruba languages belong to the Kwa group of languages, a branch of the Niger-Congo language family (Heine and Nurse, 2000). In contrast, Hausa belongs to the West Chadic group of the Afroasiatic language family. The phonological features of the Afroasiatic language family, such as ejectives, implosives, bilabial fricatives, and the absence of regular phonemic distinction between p/f and b/v, make HE stand out from other Nigerian Englishes. These features are not present in the Igbo and Yoruba languages, which belong to the Kwa group of languages (see Hyman et al., 2019; Meyer and Wolff, 2019 for the linguistic description of Niger-Congo and Afroasiatic language families).

This challenge in clearly distinguishing between IE and YE is consistent with the observations in the literature. Igboanusi (2006) remarks that the high rate of migration, education, industrialisation and urbanisation has brought together people from different parts of Nigeria, and the effect is the narrowing of the differences between

Igbo and Yoruba Englishes. He adds that the differences between IE and YE are less observed at the acrolectal level but clearly evident at the basilectal and mesolectal levels. Similarly, Jowitt (1991) maintains that the differences between IE and YE pronunciations are narrower than those of HE. The ethnic boundary between Igbo and Yoruba could be described in terms of Giles' (1979) concept of soft linguistic boundary, which means slight accent differences between the two varieties. This difficulty in differentiating between IE and YE suggests that perceptions can help detect a potential change in progress through ethnolinguistic recognition patterns (Stell, 2022). It also indicates a koinéisation in progress where IE and YE are undergoing the process of levelling and simplification (Trudgill, 2003).

Despite this alternation in identifying the YE and IE speakers, the respondents still associated them with GEB and verbal fluency. This observation is in line with findings from similar studies which show that despite misidentifying the ethnic group of a speaker, the stereotypes associated with the speaker's ethnic speech are fairly accurately assigned by the participants (Oyebola, 2020; Zhang, 2010). For example, in their study, Milroy and McClenaghan (1977) observed that stereotypes of participants who misidentified English varieties such as Ulster English and Scottish English were the same as those who correctly identified them. According to Edwards and Jacobsen (1987: 377), "errors in placing speakers do not invalidate judges' assessments". The same situation was observed by Zhang (2010), who reported that although a few of the Hong Kong respondents accurately identified the General American accent speaker, the speaker received high ratings. The finding of this study and other studies reported here suggest that participants can still evaluate a variety based on the stereotype frequently associated with it, even though they are unable to correctly identify it.

5.2 Accent as the dominant reason for ethnic categorisation

The second finding to be discussed is the recognition of accents as the dominant reason for ethnic categorisation. Out of the eight categories relating to reasons participants gave for classifying the speakers' accents into a particular ethnic group, 81%, 73%, and 75% of the respondents reported accent (see Fig. 2) as the reason for classifying the speakers' accents into Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups, respectively. This finding is observed in the two-way contingency table analyses of the three English varieties. This result indicates that linguistic differences exist in all three varieties. This result supports the claim of Mgbo-Elue (1987) that a person can easily be identified by their speech, which can then influence societal stereotypes based on social class, race, or ethnicity. In his study within the Japanese context, McKenzie (2008) reported that Japanese learners evaluate varieties of English based on accents. In phonological terms, accent tends to be crucial for people in identifying varieties of speech (Ladegaard, 2001).

A possible explanation for recognising the speakers' accents is Nigerian respondents' familiarity with HE, IE and YE varieties. Although many have not been to indigenous cities or states of speakers of varieties other than their own, their exposure to these varieties through traditional media (radio and TVs), interpersonal relationships, and videos on social media enabled them to be familiar with other varieties. For instance, one of the participants in a side-talk with another participant in a focus group discussion said that the HE speaker spoke like the Nigerian President (at the time), who is also a Hausa/Fulani person. This result suggests that speakers' accent and ethnicity identification is based on awareness (Lindemann, 2003).

Additionally, the prevalence of IE and YE speakers in Nigerian afro-music, radio, television, Nollywood films, and comedy may have aided recognition of speakers based on accent. This recognition likely contributed to positive reasons for categorisations such as verbal fluency and de-ethnicisation being attributed to such speakers.

The association between accent as a means of ethnic categorisation suggests that when individuals rate speakers' accent, they do so based on their perception of the speakers' ethnic group and social status (Appel and Muysken, 1987; Dragojevic et al., 2021; Hill, 2015; Holmes and Wilson, 2022; Preston, 1996; Tajfel, 1978). This deviates from the position that there is an absence of a "simple isomorphism between attitude towards ethnic groups and towards the languages of those groups" (Ryan et al., 1984: 143). As Ladegaard (1998: 269) rightly puts it:

> Even though the judges are not native speakers of English, we may assume some degree of familiarity with the accents employed in this experiment since they sometimes appear in the media. It is, therefore, possible that the subjects have some sort of stored, *subconscious information*, based on previously acquired media-transmitted stereotypes (italics in original).

Even without having a personal encounter with the speakers of the voice stimuli, the participants rated them based on stored subconscious stereotypical information they have heard about people from the ethnic group, which the accents index.

5.3 Significant association between de-ethnicised speech and GEB

The next issue to be discussed is the significant association between de-ethnicised speech and GEB. It is surprising to see this association for HE speakers, who received the lowest rating in the VGE. This unexpected association may be because of the misidentification of the speakers as Igbo and Yoruba, as shown in Table 5, where there is an association between accent and Igbo. Typically, the ethnic classification of speakers' accents into the de-ethnicised category stems from participants' inability to assign them to a particular ethnicity because traces of their mother tongue do not emerge in their English usage. The association between de-ethnicised speech and GEB implies that the greater difficulty that participants have in identifying the ethnic group of the speakers, the higher GEB ratings the speakers have. It is like an "apprenticeship process" (Fillmore, 1979) where more education tends to improve English usage. This observation aligns with the claim that acrolectal speakers of "Educated Nigerian English" have little influence from their L1 (Bamgbose, 1982; Jowitt, 2019). Acrolectal speakers tend to exhibit the belief system of *accent mobility* (a variant of social mobility) whereby they express their dissatisfaction with the accent associated with their ethnic group by enrolling in schools that can help improve their accent (Tajfel and Turner, 1986), a process Hirschman (1970: 108) refers to as "evolutionary individualism". Enrolment into good schools does not imply that all educated Nigerians, like the speakers in this study, will have the de-ethnicised feature. Those who are educated but could not attain the level of de-ethnicisation would be "classified with speakers of the appropriate lower variety" (Bamgbose, 1982: 101).

There are some reasons why there is a relationship between de-ethnicised speech and GEB. First, to an average Nigerian, the ability to speak well correlates with how much education one has acquired. People may be disappointed when someone who claims to have acquired higher education does not speak in a way that matches their educational qualifications (Aboh, 2022). Therefore, when someone speaks without

mother tongue interference or with near-L1 speaker competence, the likely reason is GEB. Second, participants' idea of L1 interference is difficulty with vowels and consonants, which can be addressed through 'good' education, but "they do not realise that intonation can be *erroneous*" (Wells, 2006: 2, italics mine). This position suggests that participants' knowledge of L1 interference is limited to phonetic and phonological levels, as evident in their repetitive examples of speech sounds interchange as the identifying features of Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba Englishes. They have limited knowledge of the role of intonation and stress in indexing ethnic groups. In other words, they fail to understand the distinction between "phonological accent" (phoneme substitutions) and "phonetic accent" (a phonologically correct word that is mispronounced because of other factors like co-articulation or suprasegmental errors) (Gut, 2009). Nida (1949) concurs that individuals often judge the correctness of English usage based on their egocentric attitudes and limited knowledge.

The finding discussed here is consistent with previous findings in the literature that have found a relationship between education and 'good' English usage. One such study is Garrett et al. (2003), who found that educated speakers of south-west Wales English were described as sounding cultured and having the potential of finding top jobs. Stell (2022) also found that ethnically neutral English in Namibia results from education, socioeconomic class and women-inspired language change. Studies on the effect of education on verbal fluency have also found that individuals with good education performed better in the verbal fluency task than those with poor education (de Andrade and Martins, 2011; Kempler et al., 1998). This finding suggests that GEB helps to minimise or eliminate common L1 interference features, which results in "de-focusing away from 'ethnic-sounding' varieties towards an ethnically neutral variety" (Stell, 2022: 19).

5.4 Relationship between verbal fluency and de-ethnicised speech

The last finding to be discussed is the significant relationship between verbal fluency and de-ethnicised speech for IE speakers. This significant relationship between verbal fluency and de-ethnicised speech implies that speakers whose ethnic group could not be identified were verbally fluent. In other words, their verbal fluency was critical in participants' perception of their speech as ethnically neutral. This identified relationship between verbal fluency and de-ethnicised categorisation advances fluency research. As a concept related to communicative effectiveness (Bygate, 2009), much fluency-related research has linked fluency to the use of formulaic language, speech rate and rapidity, pause, idiomaticity, accuracy, coherence, and creativity in language use (see Fillmore, 1979; Götz, 2013 for an overview of fluency research). However, little or no research has linked de-ethnicisation to verbal fluency. In Outer Circle Englishes, like the varieties in Nigeria, it appears that the ethnicity of individuals with verbal fluency is difficult to ascertain, as the present study's findings show.

Similar to the relationship between GEB and de-ethnicised speech, it appears that speakers who are perceived to have GEB are also perceived to have little or no nonfluencies in their speech. Apart from good education, another factor that may contribute to verbal fluency is speakers' social status and relevant experiences, such as working in an organisation where verbal fluency is required (Segalowitz, 2010). Most Nigerians who grew up in urban areas may be said to possess 'native-like rapidity' (Lennon, 1990), making them speak 'better' than those in rural areas. In light of the linguistic and communicative competence speakers from non-Inner-Circle territories have in English, "native speakership should not be used as a criterion for

excluding certain categories of people from language teaching, dictionary editing, and similar functions" (Paikeday, 1985: 88).

6. Conclusion

The present study examined the association between ethnic categorisation of accents of Nigerian English and its underlying reasons. The study found that a vast majority of the participants accurately identified the ethnic group of the speakers based on their accents. The study revealed a significant relationship between GEB and de-ethnicised speech. The identified participants' difficulty distinguishing between IE and YE points to the possibility of language change in progress in the speech of Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups in Southern Nigeria. The numerical advantage of speakers from these ethnic groups and their dominance in the media and entertainment industries suggest a potential variety levelling and de-focusing away from ethnic speech, especially in Southern Nigeria (Igboanusi, 2006). One possible implication of this finding for World Englishes and language attitudes is that it may help to understand factors responsible for the preference for a local or international variety of English. Within the Nigerian context, despite 56% of the respondents preferring British English at the international level (spoken by the ex-colonial masters), it did not inhibit their preference for YE at the national level (Aboh, 2023). This situation implies that despite participants' aspiration for an international English variety, they are still concerned about the ownership of a Nigerian English variety (Ugwuanyi, 2021).

Studies (Chien, 2018; Dragojevic and Goatley-Soan, 2022a; Garrett et al., 2003) that included ethnic or social categorisation of speakers in the VGT do not often require participants to include the reasons for categorising the speakers' accents into a particular ethnic group or race. Therefore, the inclusion of the open-ended question eliciting reasons for ethnic categorisation offers new insights into understanding what factors help participants identify the ethnolinguistic affiliation of speakers and which factors are significantly associated with ethnic/social categorisation. It is believed that this study will offer fresh perspectives on how Nigerians perceive Nigerian Englishes and inspire further research on accent and social evaluation in the Nigerian sociolinguistic context and beyond.

Its contributions notwithstanding, the present study's limitation lies in the use of non-core Hausa participants. Admittedly, despite the presence of the Hausa-speaking population in North Central Nigeria, the evaluations of the Northern participants used in this study may not truly reflect those of L1 speakers of Hausa. It would be interesting to include L1 speakers of Hausa in further studies. Studies may also include other Nigerian Englishes as they are expected to further our understanding of the sociopsychological processes that underlie the ethnic categorisation of speakers' accents.

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