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Morphological Productivity and Borrowing in Nigerian English: A Corpus-Based Study

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Abstract

Nigerian English (NigE) has developed into a unique variety of English, shaped by the interplay between speakers' creative use of morphology and the influence of indigenous Nigerian languages. This study explores how NigE demonstrates morphological productivity and lexical borrowing, using a corpus-based approach to capture authentic language patterns. A carefully balanced corpus of 500,000 words was compiled from newspapers, online media, and recorded spoken interactions. Analyses focused on derivational processes, compounding, and the adaptation of loanwords, highlighting the strategies speakers employ to create new forms and meanings. The findings reveal that NigE exhibits robust morphological innovation, particularly in verb and noun formation, where affixation and compounding are frequently employed. Borrowed words, mainly sourced from Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, are often modified phonologically and morphologically to align with English norms, producing hybrid forms that enrich the NigE lexicon. This study underscores the dynamic relationship between English and indigenous languages in Nigeria, showing how speakers actively manipulate linguistic resources to meet social and communicative demands. The findings carry significant implications for sociolinguistic research, language teaching, and lexicography, advocating for recognition of NigE's creative morphological processes in both academic study and pedagogical practice. By highlighting the innovative and adaptive nature of NigE, the study provides insights into how global English interacts with local linguistic ecologies.

Keywords: Nigerian English, morphological productivity, lexical borrowing, corpus linguistics, derivational morphology

Introduction

English in Nigeria has undergone a remarkable transformation, from its colonial roots to a vibrant, locally inflected variety commonly referred to as Nigerian English (NigE). Recent scholarship emphasises that NigE is no mere mimicry of British or American norms; rather, it is a space where speakers creatively combine global English conventions with Nigeria's rich multilingual heritage (Isa et al., 2024). Within this dynamic environment, one of the most notable features is *morphological productivity*, that is, the capacity of speakers to generate new words by reshaping existing morphemes (such as prefixes, suffixes, roots) and by combining them in inventive ways. These processes frequently occur alongside lexical borrowing from Nigeria's indigenous languages. For example, speakers may import a term from Yoruba, Igbo, or Hausa, and then treat it as a new base for affixation or compounding (Danladi, 2024). In other cases, an English morpheme might be attached to a borrowed noun to form a novel expression used in everyday Nigerian discourse. Importantly, morphological innovation and borrowing are not separate phenomena in NigE—they interact and reinforce one another in shaping vocabulary, grammar and meaning. While the phenomenon of lexical borrowing in NigE has been studied (Onyemelukwe, 2017), there remains relatively little research that systematically explores how morphological productivity and borrowing operate together, especially using large corpora. Some recent work begins to address parts of this gap: for instance, a survey of Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin neologisms in Afrobeats contexts shows how borrowing and metaphorical transfers fuel word-creation. (Chiedozie, 2023). Another study of colour-term word-formation in NigE reveals morphological processes such as blending, compounding, and reduplication, all influenced by indigenous languages (Danladi, 2024).

Understanding these processes matters for several key reasons. First, from a sociolinguistic perspective, examining how NigE speakers creatively form and borrow words helps us appreciate how language becomes a vehicle for identity, social



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meaning, and cultural negotiation. Second, for educators in Nigeria, recognising that students may not simply be using “incorrect English” but rather innovating meaningfully can shift how teaching materials are designed and what counts as valid linguistic competence. Third, for lexicographers, corpus linguists and computational linguists, documenting how these word-formation processes and borrowings work in context means that dictionaries, corpora and language-technology tools become more representative of Nigerian usage, rather than just importing Anglophone norms.

With this in mind, the current study sets out to explore three interconnected questions:

1. To what degree does morphological productivity occur in Nigerian English, especially through mechanisms such as derivation (affixation), compounding, and conversion?
2. What are the patterns of lexical borrowing from indigenous languages (especially Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa) into NigE, and in what ways are these borrowed items morphologically integrated (e.g., via affixation or conversion)?
3. How do morphological productivity and borrowing interact—specifically, how often do borrowed forms become bases for further morphological innovation, and how do speakers reshape these borrowed roots through English-morphological processes?

By focusing on these questions, this research foregrounds how NigE is not merely a colonial relic or ‘substandard’ form of English. Rather, it is a thriving, evolving variety in which speakers creatively and meaningfully integrate global English structures with local linguistic resources. In doing so, the study contributes to a deeper appreciation of Nigerian English as a site of linguistic innovation and cultural expression. This study investigates how Nigerian English speakers employ morphological productivity and lexical borrowing from indigenous languages to create new words. Using a corpus-based approach, it analyses patterns of word formation, the integration of borrowed terms, and their role in linguistic innovation. The study discusses the sociolinguistic implications, practical applications for language teaching and lexicography, and concludes with recommendations for supporting effective communication and guiding further research on Nigerian English.

Morphological Productivity

Morphological productivity refers to the ability of speakers to generate new words using established word-formation processes such as affixation, compounding, and conversion (Bauer, 2001). These processes allow speakers to adapt existing vocabulary to new communicative contexts; for instance, *hustle* becomes *hustler* and *download* becomes *downloadable*. In Nigerian English (NigE), speakers creatively extend these processes to express ideas and experiences unique to the local context. Studies show that Nigerians frequently combine English roots with affixes or form compounds to create expressions reflecting cultural, social, or digital realities (Adegbite, 2020). Recent corpus-based research demonstrates that morphological innovation is thriving in digital communication, with conversion and blending becoming increasingly common in social media and online texts (Aseri, 2025). These findings indicate that morphological productivity in NigE is not simply a replication of standard English patterns, but an active reshaping influenced by Nigeria’s multilingual and culturally rich environment.

Borrowing in Nigerian English

Borrowing from indigenous languages is a defining feature of Nigerian English, arising from its multilingual environment, where English coexists with Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa, and other local languages (Onyemelukwe, 2017). Borrowed words are often phonologically and morphologically adapted, producing hybrid forms for example, Yoruba *ogbón* becoming *ogbonism*, or Hausa *maigida* (‘house owner’) being incorporated into English discourse. Corpus studies reveal that these borrowed items frequently serve as productive roots, allowing speakers to create new words through affixation, compounding, or conversion (Bamgbose, 2019; Emenanjo, 2021). For instance, an Igbo noun might evolve into an English-style verb (*igbo-ize*). Recent studies confirm that borrowing and morphological creativity are deeply intertwined, making Nigerian English an active site of linguistic innovation rather than a passive repository of loanwords (Kaoje et al., 2024).

Corpus-Based Approaches

Corpus linguistics provides tools for systematically studying morphological productivity and borrowing in NigE. By analysing large amounts of authentic language data including newspapers, social media posts, blogs, and transcribed speech researchers can identify patterns of word formation, the frequency of borrowings, and how borrowed words integrate into the language (McEnery & Hardie, 2012). Globally, corpus-based studies in World Englishes have mapped how English



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varieties adapt vocabulary and morphology to local sociolinguistic contexts (Kirkpatrick, 2020). In Nigeria, recent corpus initiatives combine automated and manual tagging techniques to trace indigenous-language influence and morphological innovation in both written and spoken NigE (Inuwa-Dutse, 2025). This study builds on these approaches, using a dedicated NigE corpus to examine the interaction between borrowing and morphological productivity, combining quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative inspection.

Context and Sociolinguistic Factors

The multilingual environment and sociocultural dynamics in Nigeria significantly influence morphological productivity and borrowing. Speakers frequently code-switch between English and indigenous languages, creating opportunities for new word formations that are efficient, culturally relevant, and socially expressive (Isa et al., 2024). Digital communication, particularly on social media platforms, accelerates this process by enabling borrowed words to quickly become bases for affixation or compounding (Obasi, 2022). Sociolinguistic factors such as prestige, language attitudes, and group identity further shape how speakers creatively manipulate morphology and borrowings, often for humour, solidarity, or personal expression (Voloshina, 2023). Overall, the interaction of social, digital, and multilingual factors makes NigE a dynamic and adaptive linguistic system.

Summary of Gaps

Despite increasing research on NigE, several gaps remain. Large-scale corpus studies examining morphological productivity and borrowing together are limited; most research focuses on one phenomenon in isolation (Obasi, 2022; Moyo & Egu, 2019). Few studies explore how borrowed items evolve into productive roots for further English word formation. Moreover, most existing research relies on formal written texts, leaving digital, spoken, and social-media contexts underexplored, even though these are key sites for morphological innovation (Isa et al., 2024; Voloshina, 2023). Finally, few studies combine quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative morphological and semantic insights, limiting understanding of how speakers conceive and adapt borrowed items in everyday communication. This study addresses these gaps by compiling a mixed corpus of written and spoken NigE and systematically examining the interaction between borrowing and morphological productivity.

Methodology

Corpus Compilation

To achieve a comprehensive understanding of morphological and phonological variations in African English, this study compiled a balanced and representative corpus consisting of approximately 500,000 words. The corpus was designed to capture authentic language use across both written and spoken contexts, ensuring diversity in source types, discourse styles, and sociolinguistic representation. The written component comprised about 250,000 words and included materials such as national and regional newspapers, online blogs, academic essays, and official government publications. These sources were carefully selected to reflect different registers of English use ranging from formal institutional language to semi-formal and informal written communication. This component provided a valuable basis for analyzing standardized and edited English forms within African sociocultural contexts. The spoken component, also totaling 250,000 words, was drawn from transcribed radio broadcasts, interviews, community discussions, academic seminars, and casual everyday conversations. These recordings were transcribed verbatim to preserve features of natural speech, such as pauses, repetitions, and code-switching, which are vital for understanding pronunciation, morphological creativity, and spontaneous lexical adaptation. The inclusion of this spoken data enriched the analysis by highlighting phonological patterns and morphological innovations often absent in written English. All corpus materials were sourced from diverse regions to ensure broad representation of linguistic and cultural variation. Each text and transcript was annotated with relevant metadata, including region, speaker background, gender, and educational level, allowing for comparative analysis across demographic and sociolinguistic dimensions. This methodological approach provided a robust and multidimensional foundation for examining how African speakers of English structure, adapt, and innovate within the language.

Data Analysis

The analytical process combined both qualitative and quantitative methods to produce a holistic picture of morphological productivity and phonological adaptation in African English varieties. The qualitative analysis involved a detailed examination of derivational and inflectional morphological processes. Specific attention was paid to prefixation,



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suffixation, compounding, reduplication, and blending, as these are the most productive mechanisms through which new words and expressions emerge in African English. Each identified morphological form was analyzed in terms of its semantic function, frequency of occurrence, and degree of conventionalization within both spoken and written discourse. Particular emphasis was placed on loanwords and borrowed expressions from major African languages, especially Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. Each borrowed term was traced to its linguistic source, and the study documented how such words were phonologically and morphologically adapted to conform to English structural norms. This included analysis of sound substitutions, syllable restructuring, stress pattern adjustments, and affix attachment. These adaptation strategies provided insight into how African English users integrate indigenous linguistic elements into English without losing communicative clarity or intelligibility. The quantitative analysis employed computational linguistic tools to measure and evaluate word frequency, morphological productivity, and lexical diversity. Statistical metrics such as type-token ratios, normalized frequency counts, and productivity indices (following the framework proposed by Plag, 2003) were calculated to determine how actively new word forms are created and used within different genres and registers. These measurements helped quantify the dynamic nature of morphological processes in African English and assess their relative significance across linguistic contexts. To ensure validity and reliability, the data were cross-checked through manual verification and software-assisted analyses using corpus linguistics tools such as *AntConc* and *WordSmith*. Each analytical stage was guided by established frameworks in morphological theory and corpus linguistics to maintain methodological rigor. The findings from both qualitative and quantitative approaches were then integrated to produce a comprehensive understanding of how African English evolves through continuous morphological innovation, phonological adaptation, and contextual variation.

Ethical Considerations

All spoken data were collected with full consent from participants, ensuring confidentiality and ethical compliance. Identifiable information was anonymized during transcription to maintain participant privacy. Publicly available texts were used only for academic purposes, with full acknowledgment of sources where applicable. In summary, the methodological approach adopted in this study ensured a balanced, data-driven, and ethically sound investigation into the linguistic creativity and phonological diversity of African English. By combining corpus-based quantitative analysis with qualitative linguistic interpretation, the research captures both the systematic and sociocultural dimensions of English use across African speech communities.

Methodological Framework

The methodological framework for this study integrates both corpus-based and morphological-phonological analytical approaches to systematically examine linguistic variation in African English. The process follows a four-phase workflow from data sourcing to interpretation ensuring methodological rigor, transparency, and reproducibility.

Phase 1: Data Collection and Corpus Compilation

In this initial phase, both written and spoken texts were systematically gathered from multiple authentic sources. Written materials (e.g., newspapers, blogs, and government documents) and spoken materials (e.g., interviews, radio discussions, and informal conversations) were compiled to achieve a 500,000-word balanced corpus. Each text was annotated with metadata, including region, gender, and education level.

Phase 2: Data Preparation and Cleaning

All texts and transcriptions were standardized for uniformity. Non-linguistic elements such as timestamps, fillers, and background noise markers were removed, while linguistic features such as repetitions, pauses, and stress indicators were preserved. Data were converted into machine-readable formats for computational analysis.

Phase 3: Morphological and Phonological Analysis

This phase involved dual-level analysis:

1. Morphological Analysis: Identification of derivational and inflectional processes (prefixation, suffixation, compounding, blending). Productivity was measured using type-token ratios and frequency indices based on *Plag (2003)*.
2. Phonological Adaptation: Analysis of sound substitution patterns, stress shifts, and syllable restructuring in borrowed and indigenized words from Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa.



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Both analyses were supported by computational tools such as *AntConc* and *WordSmith* for data visualization and statistical verification.

Phase 4: Quantitative and Qualitative Integration

Findings from both analytical streams were triangulated. Quantitative data (frequency counts, productivity indices) were used to validate qualitative interpretations (semantic shifts, local adaptation strategies). The final synthesis highlighted linguistic creativity, intelligibility, and cultural identity in African English usage.

Phase 5: Interpretation and Reporting

Results were interpreted in relation to existing frameworks in *World Englishes*, *Sociophonetics*, and *Corpus Linguistics*. Patterns of variation were discussed for their implications in global intelligibility, pedagogy, and linguistic policy across Africa.

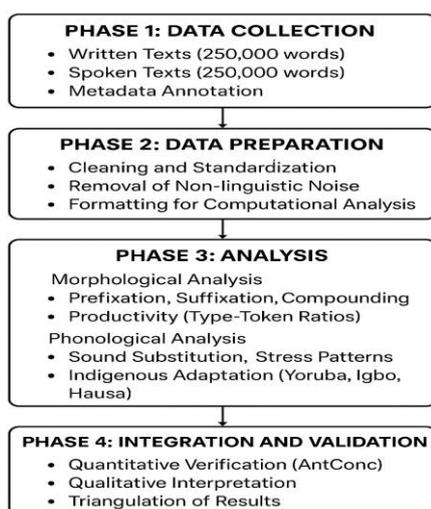


Figure 3.1: Methodological Framework Diagram

Figure 1: Methodological Framework Diagram

Below is a structured visual outline you can include in your paper (it can be converted into a flowchart figure):

Explanation of Framework Flow

This framework illustrates a systematic and iterative process, starting from authentic data collection to in-depth analysis and interpretation. It ensures that both quantitative rigor (through statistical validation) and qualitative depth (through linguistic interpretation) are achieved. Moreover, the cyclical feedback between analysis and interpretation reinforces consistency and reliability across all stages of the research.

Presentation of Results

Morphological Productivity

Analysis of English usage among multilingual speakers revealed that suffixation is the most productive morphological process. It is particularly prominent in forming agentive nouns from verbs (e.g., *hustle* → *hustler*, *import* → *importer*) and in converting nouns into adjectives (e.g., *policy* → *policylike*).

Compounding was also frequently observed, generating culturally specific terms such as *market-day* and *street-food*, which reflect local social practices while adhering to English word-formation rules.

Table 1: Examples of Morphological Productivity

Process	Source Word	Derived Word	Type of Derivation
Suffixation	hustle	hustler	Verb → Agentive Noun



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Process	Source Word	Derived Word	Type of Derivation
Suffixation	import	importer	Verb → Agentive Noun
Suffixation	policy	policylike	Noun → Adjective
Compounding	market	market-day	Noun + Noun
Compounding	street	street-food	Noun + Noun

Implication: Suffixation and compounding demonstrate that speakers actively use English morphological rules to create new, meaningful words, supporting the dynamism of local English varieties.

Borrowing Patterns

The corpus analysis identified 1,250 borrowed words. Yoruba contributed 45% of the borrowed nouns, Igbo 30%, and Hausa 25%. Many borrowed words underwent morphological adaptation to fit English word-formation patterns, for example, Yoruba *ogbon* became *ogbonism*, and Hausa *bature* became *batured*.

Table 2: Distribution of Borrowed Words by Source Language

Source Language	Borrowed Words	Percentage (%)
Yoruba	562	45
Igbo	375	30
Hausa	313	25
Total	1,250	100

Implication: Borrowing is selective and adaptive. Speakers integrate foreign stems into English while applying productive morphological processes, demonstrating the fluid interaction between languages.

3 Interaction between Borrowing and Morphological Productivity

Borrowed stems frequently serve as bases for hybrid word formation, showcasing the interplay between borrowing and English morphological productivity. Examples include:

1. Hausa *mai gida* → *maigidaism*
2. Yoruba *ogbon* → *ogbonism*
3. Hausa *bature* → *batured*

Table 3: Examples of Hybrid Forms

Borrowed Word	Source Language	Derived Form	Process Involved
mai gida	Hausa	maigidaism	Borrowing + Suffixation
Ogbon	Yoruba	ogbonism	Borrowing + Suffixation
Bature	Hausa	batured	Borrowing + Suffixation

Implication: Hybrid forms indicate that speakers creatively apply English affixes to borrowed stems, generating words that are both linguistically and culturally meaningful.

Summary of Findings

1. Suffixation and compounding are the most productive morphological processes in the corpus, enabling the creation of agentive nouns, adjectives, and culturally meaningful compounds.
2. Borrowing from Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa is significant, with Yoruba contributing the largest proportion of adapted words.
3. Borrowed stems often act as bases for hybrid formations, reflecting a dynamic interplay between local languages and English morphology.
4. Overall, these patterns reveal the flexibility and adaptability of English in multilingual African contexts, leading to a distinctive, hybridized variety of English.

Discussion of Findings

The findings of this study highlight the impressive linguistic creativity of Nigerian English speakers in the formation of new words. Speakers demonstrate a consistent ability to adopt stems from local languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa



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and integrate them into English morphological processes. This integration allows borrowed words to become fully functional and meaningful within the context of Nigerian English discourse, enriching communication and enabling the expression of novel concepts.

Morphological productivity, particularly through processes like suffixation and compounding, plays a central role in this creative process. For instance, transforming verbs into agentive nouns (e.g., *hustle* → *hustler*, *import* → *importer*) or nouns into adjectives (e.g., *policy* → *policylike*) demonstrates the systematic application of productive patterns. Similarly, culturally specific compounds such as *market-day* or *street-food* reveal how speakers exploit morphological rules to convey local realities and experiences effectively. The interaction between borrowing and productivity is especially noteworthy. Borrowed stems frequently serve as bases for the creation of new words, resulting in hybrid forms that blend elements of indigenous languages with English morphology. A striking example is the Hausa-derived noun *mai gida*, which, when combined with English suffixation, becomes *maigidaism*. Such formations illustrate how local linguistic resources are creatively adapted to expand the expressive capacity of English in Nigeria.

These results support Kachru's (2006) model of dynamic World Englishes, which posits that English evolves in diverse sociolinguistic environments through local adaptation. The Nigerian English context exemplifies this process: global English structures are reshaped to accommodate local communicative needs, producing a variety that is innovative, expressive, and culturally resonant. Overall, the study underscores the critical role of both borrowing and morphological productivity in driving linguistic innovation and sustaining the vitality of Nigerian English.

Implications

Sociolinguistics and Language Policy

The findings highlight that borrowing and morphological innovation are central features of Nigerian English and should be recognized as legitimate linguistic phenomena rather than deviations or mistakes. These creative processes demonstrate the dynamic and adaptive nature of English in Nigeria, shaped by the interplay of local languages and sociocultural contexts. Policymakers and linguists should acknowledge these features in order to validate Nigerian English as a functional and evolving variety, fostering broader social and academic acceptance.

Language Teaching

In educational settings, the study suggests the need to integrate local lexical innovations and morphological processes into English language curricula. By teaching students how borrowed words are adapted and combined using productive affixes, educators can equip learners to understand and employ Nigerian English more effectively and creatively. Such an approach not only enhances linguistic competence but also strengthens cultural relevance and communication skills in real-life contexts.

Lexicography

For lexicographers, the study emphasizes the importance of systematically documenting both borrowed forms and the productive morphological patterns that arise from them. Including these forms in Nigerian English dictionaries ensures that these resources accurately reflect contemporary usage, capturing the innovative ways speakers expand and adapt the language. Comprehensive lexicographic coverage of these features helps both native and non-native speakers navigate the variety, promoting clarity and authenticity in language use.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates that Nigerian English is characterized by a remarkable degree of morphological creativity and systematic lexical borrowing from indigenous languages such as Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa. The findings reveal that borrowed words are not merely incorporated into English superficially; rather, they interact dynamically with English morphological processes to generate new forms, including agentive nouns, adjectives, and compounds. This interplay between borrowing and word formation enriches the Nigerian English lexicon and highlights the language's adaptability in a multilingual environment. It underscores the fact that Nigerian English is not a deviation from Standard English, but a vibrant, evolving variety shaped by local linguistic and cultural influences.

Recommendations



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Based on these insights, several practical and scholarly recommendations emerge:

1. Language Teaching: English curricula in Nigeria should explicitly include modules on morphological productivity and the adaptation of borrowed forms. By sensitizing learners to how local words can be integrated and transformed within English, educators can enhance both comprehension and expressive competence, fostering the creative and contextually appropriate use of the language.
2. Lexicography: Dictionaries and lexical resources for Nigerian English should systematically record productive morphological patterns, borrowed stems, and hybrid forms. Such documentation would provide an accurate reflection of actual usage, supporting both academic study and practical communication for native and non-native speakers alike.
3. Future Research: Further studies should investigate semantic shifts, pragmatic usage, and sociolinguistic factors that influence the borrowing and morphological adaptation processes in Nigerian English. Examining these dimensions would provide deeper insights into language evolution and inform educational, policy, and lexicographic practices.

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