

## The "Invisible" Aspects of Variation in Second-Language Varieties of English: The Case of Prepositions in Kenyan English

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### Abstract

This paper looks at some aspects of prepositional usage in Kenyan English which are less "visible" than features of vocabulary or pronunciation, and which distinguish this variety of English from the standard British Variety. It shows that variation in the usage of a grammatical category manifests itself largely in the frequency with which it is used in one variety compared to the other, in the functions for which it is used and in the way such functions are distributed within different registers. It argues that grammatical variation plays a more important role in distinguishing second language varieties from and standard native varieties of English than has hitherto been recognised.

### Introduction

Research on second language varieties of English has for a long time concentrated on the more salient aspects of linguistic variation, particularly pronunciation, loan words and idiomatic expressions. As a result, and as Schmied (1990: 259) acknowledges, "grammatical analysis is still underdeveloped." Since grammatical variation is not as "visible" as other forms of variation, there appears to be a general assumption that the grammar of second language varieties of English is not very different from that of Standard English. In their analysis of the grammar of EAfrE, Todd and Hancock (1986: 172), for instance, allege that the syntax of EAfrE "is derived from and very similar to Standard BrE in the UK." Hancock and Angogo (1982: 316) also state that "most forms of East African English do not differ grammatically very much from varieties of English spoken elsewhere in the world." Such general assumptions seem to have affected research into the grammar of most second language varieties of English in general. While it is logical to expect these varieties of English to show close resemblance to their parent variety, the fact that few comprehensive empirical studies of grammatical aspects have been carried out to determine how they vary from BrE deny such claims full credibility.

The arguments raised in this paper are based on the usage of prepositions in the International Corpus of English- Kenya (ICE-K hereafter). This is a section of the East African component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-EA), a collection of written and spoken texts from Kenya and Tanzania. The ICE-EA is part of the International Corpus of English (ICE), a project aimed at a survey of the use of the English language in the different varieties in which it exists to enable the comparison between or among varieties (cf. Greenbaum 1996). The usage of prepositions in ICE-K is compared to that in the British component of the International Corpus of English (ICE-GB) in order to determine the extent of variation of KenE from BrE. ICE-GB is a collection of one million written and spoken texts of educated BrE, collected along the same principles of informant and text selection as the ICE-EA. A comparison of prepositional usage between the two corpora provides a good basis to determine variation between a native and a non-native variety of English, an area that has received little attention in corpus-based research.

### Variation in frequencies

As mentioned above, one of the ways in which grammatical variation manifests itself is in the frequency with which a grammatical item occurs in different varieties. Greenbaum (1988: 100) indicates that "differences between regional and social dialects may also be manifested in the relative frequencies with which certain linguistic features are used." This implies that frequency is an important marker of a language variety. This is echoed by Algeo (1989: 156), who defines a nationalism as "a linguistic feature that is unique to, occurs with greater frequency in, or is associated for whatever reason with a particular nation".

An important difference between KenE and BrE as far as prepositions are concerned is in the frequency with which certain prepositions are used in each variety of English. To begin with, we find that there are more prepositions in ICE-K than in ICE-GB, although the difference of occurrence is not significant. At the same time, there are more prepositions in the spoken section of ICE-K compared to the spoken section of ICE-GB. These differences imply that prepositions are used more often in KenE and that they are used more in spoken than in written communication. The implication of this finding is that there are more superfluous prepositions used by speakers of Kenyan English in spontaneous speech than are used by native speakers of English.

In terms of individual prepositions, we find that there are far more occurrences of *in* in ICE-K than in ICE-GB, the difference being very significant ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). The preposition *to*, on the other hand, occurs significantly more in ICE-GB than in ICE-K ( $p \leq 0.001$ ). This means that *in* is used more often than *to* in KenE while the reverse is true for BrE. Other prepositions that show important frequency differences in their occurrence in the two corpora are given in Table 1 below

Table 1: Frequency differences in the occurrence of prepositions

Preposition	ICE-GB	ICE-K
<i>Into</i>	1540	1123
<i>Out</i>	473	290
<i>Across</i>	205	72
<i>Down</i>	158	36
<i>Off</i>	176	48
<i>Among</i>	155	426
<i>Round</i>	100	19
<i>Below</i>	68	34
<i>Past</i>	72	9
<i>Beneath</i>	28	4
<i>Underneath</i>	22	0
<i>Notwithstanding</i>	4	15

The frequency differences in the occurrence of these prepositions in the corpora suggest that there are differences in the way these prepositions are used in each of the varieties represented by these corpora. In order to explain some of these differences it is important to consider the semantic functions of individual prepositions. As observed above, the preposition *in* occurs significantly more in ICE-K than in ICE-GB, implying that it is more commonly used in KenE than in BrE. One of the explanations for this scenario is the observation that in KenE, certain semantic distinctions are not made in the usage of prepositions. For

instance, the distinction between prepositions of position and those of direction are not always made in KenE. The following example taken from ICE-K illustrates this kind of overlap:

Let us take the length and the width of Zanzibar island and the people who are there. What do you think if there are so many people *coming into* the country? (S1A018T). Whereas in BrE these prepositions are often distinguished, KenE tends to level out these semantic distinctions using prepositions of position to perform both semantic functions. As a result, prepositions of direction are rarely used while those of position occur with a comparatively high frequency. This explains the high frequency of prepositions of position such as *in* and *on* in ICE-K and the resultant lower frequency of those of direction, for instance, *into* and *onto*. The failure to make distinctions between prepositions of location and those of direction may be attributed to substrate influence from two of the major local languages spoken in Kenya, namely Swahili and Kikuyu. This is because in these languages the same preposition is often used to express both semantic functions. Schmied (1991a: 68) gives an example of the use of the postposition *-ni* in the word *mwituni*, which can be translated as *at, to, in/inside, by/near/next to* and *from the forest* in Swahili. The semantic distinctions made by prepositions in StdEng are therefore not made in Swahili, which explains the lack of semantic distinctions in the use of English prepositions in KenE. By looking at the distribution of the semantic functions of other prepositions in table 1 in each corpus, we observe that some prepositions do not perform the whole range of semantic functions in KenE as in BrE. Consequently, they occur with lower frequency in ICE-K than in ICE-GB.

### Semantic Variation

As a result of semantic restrictions in the usage of certain prepositions in KenE, a number of them have a smaller semantic range in comparison to their counterparts in BrE. Some of the prepositions in this category are *off*, *past* and *down*. From table 1, we observe that *off* occurs only 48 times in ICE-K and 176 times in ICE-GB, *past* occurs only 9 times in ICE-K and 72 times in ICE-GB, while *down* occurs 36 times in ICE-K and 158 times in ICE-GB. These frequency differences might be accounted for by a consideration of the way different functions of these prepositions are distributed in each corpus.

In looking at the semantic functions of *off*, we find that it is rarely used as a source preposition in KenE. There are only 16 instances where this preposition has this function in ICE-K (33%), while ICE-GB contains 81 instances of *off* as a source preposition (46%). These frequency differences may be attributed to an overlap of function with the preposition *from*. In KenE *from* is often used where *off* would be expected in BrE to express source. For instance, instead of saying that an item has fallen *off* a table, a wall or a shelf, a Kenyan speaker of English is likely to say that it fell *from* the table, wall or shelf. Unfortunately, no such usage is attested in the corpus. But a few examples from ICE-K also suggest that there is an overlap of usage between *off* and *from* in KenE:

- [1] And then before he waits for the bus to stop or the matatu stop she jumps *off from* this bus This is the kind of thing we don't want So we're asking even in this case to be taking care you should not until you arrive. (S1BINT2K)
- [2] We are there to educate members of public including the drivers themselves If we find a vehicle to be overcrowded it is our duty to ask these members of public politely to *get off from* this vehicle to wait for another vehicle. (S1B046K)

In these two examples the use of both *off* and *from* where only *off* would be used in BrE seems to suggest that the speakers feel that *from* in addition to *off* is also necessary. It is as if the use of the latter alone would not convey the intended meaning. The use of both prepositions, however, results in a kind of complex preposition that does not exist in BrE.

*Past* also has a smaller semantic range in KenE than in BrE. The fact that this preposition occurs only 9 times in ICE-K shows that it is very rare in KenE. A look at the distribution of its semantic functions shows that *past* has lost its spatial senses and is now only used as a temporal preposition in KenE. Out of the nine occurrences of this preposition in ICE-K, six are in reference to time, e.g. *They arrived at ten past four in the afternoon*. This implies that this is the only function which this preposition now performs in KenE.

The preposition *down* also shows important differences in the distribution of its semantic functions between the ICE-K and ICE-GB. The most important difference in the usage of *down* between KenE and BrE seems to be its function as a preposition of movement along a directional path. For example, *down* in ICE-K is used 17 times to express literal movement, (47.2%), and only once to express non-literal movement, (2.8%). Thus literal movement accounts for nearly half of all the occurrences of *down* in ICE-K. In ICE-GB, on the other hand, there are 62 cases where *down* expresses literal movement, accounting for 39.2% of its occurrences in the corpus and 19 cases where it is used to express implied motion, accounting for 12% of its occurrences. These results suggest that the usage of *down* is restricted to the expression of literal movement in KenE while in BrE it expresses both literal and non-literal movement.

Semantic restrictions in the usage of a linguistic item often lead to an extension of the meaning of other closely related items. This applies to the prepositions mentioned above. Some of the semantic functions not performed by the prepositions with smaller range in KenE are usually taken over by other prepositions, which consequently, have a wider semantic range or an expanded functional load (cf. Shields 1989). These prepositions occur with higher frequency in ICE-K than in ICE-GB because their meanings have been expanded or generalised to the extent that in KenE they perform semantic functions which are normally performed by different prepositions in BrE. For instance as mentioned above, prepositions of location such as *in* and *on* have their meanings generalised to express direction as well as location, hence taking over the functions of prepositions of direction such as *into* and *onto*. As a result, prepositions of location have a wider semantic range in KenE than in BrE. In expressing the dimensional properties of different locations, there is also a tendency in KenE to use the preposition *in* regardless of the dimensional properties of a particular location as in the two examples below, taken from ICE-K.

- [1] I hope that your brief stay in Zanzibar has been both fruitful and enjoyable and especially because you are *in an island* of perfume. (S2B053T)
- [2] There was drought all over. It was so dry he says he says uh even the palm tree could not produce liquor. I believe this should have been somewhere *in the coast*. (S1B001K)

The prepositional complements in the above examples are two-dimensional areas and not three-dimensional. The use of the preposition *in* with these locations, however, seems to suggest that they are enclosed spaces, hence three-dimensional. This usage seems to result from the application of analogy in KenE, which justifies the use of the preposition *in*. *The island* in [1], for instance, is used to refer to a country, Zanzibar, which is usually considered to be three-dimensional hence require the preposition *in*. When talking about the coast, one could refer to the entire area that is along the coast. Thus the use of *in the coast* in [2] could be seen to mean *in the coastal area*, which is a three-dimensional location and therefore the use of *in* would obtain. These generalisations give the preposition *in* a wider range of meaning in KenE than in BrE.

Another preposition with a wider semantic range in KenE is *from*, which as was mentioned above, is sometimes used as a source preposition instead of the preposition *off*. We find that expressions such as the *pen fell off the table* in BrE would be realised as *the pen fell from the table* in KenE. At the same time, while somebody gets *off* a bus or train in BrE, they are likely to get *off from* the bus or train in KenE.

### Variation in collocation

Another aspect of variation in the usage of prepositions between KenE and BrE is in terms of collocation. There are some considerable differences in the way prepositions collocate with different lexical items in these two varieties. Such tendencies have also been reported in studies of national varieties of English. Algeo (1988: 13), for instance, argues that the most significant differences between BrE and AmE, in terms of prepositional usage, are the idiomatic use and collocability of prepositions in particular contexts. In this connection, we observe that certain prepositions such as *over*, *during*, *among* and *down* collocate differently in KenE compared to BrE. For instance, the collocations *during the weekend* and *during Christmas* are found in KenE where BrE uses *at the weekend* and *at Christmas*. While *at the weekend* and *at Christmas* occur 13 times and 24 times in ICE-GB, respectively, the former does not occur even once in ICE-K and the latter occurs only once. The collocation *down the road*, in both its literal and metaphorical senses, is also more common in BrE than in KenE, where *along the road* is used instead. It occurs 17 times in ICE-GB and only three times in ICE-K, while *along the road* occurs 26 times in the latter and only 7 times in the former corpus. These frequency differences are partly accounted for by the fact that the metaphorical meaning of *down the road* does not exist in KenE.

Despite the fact that *among* serves similar semantic functions in KenE as in BrE and their distribution is relatively similar, there are certain patterns which appear to be used more in KenE than in BrE. One such pattern is the collocational framework *among* + (*many*) + *other* + *things*, which occurs 24 times in ICE-K and only five times in ICE-GB. Closely related to this, and equally striking, is the occurrence of the collocation *among* + *others*. This occurs 26 times in ICE-K and only 2 times in the entire ICE-GB. This large frequency difference in the occurrence of these patterns, confirms what Schmied (1991a: 89) says about African varieties of English: "word collocations are used with different frequency". But there are also other factors that lead to the frequent use of such expressions, especially in a second language context.

*Among other things* and *among others* are fixed phrases which come in very handy when one has several items or situations all of which he can not mention, but which can all be included "among others" or "among other things". The interesting question is why they should appear more useful to speakers of KenE than to speakers of BrE. According to Kennedy (1998: 108), "second or foreign language learners have often made efforts to learn the 'idiomatic' use of a language, or to learn set phrases appropriate for different contexts" and they are encouraged to do so. In contrast, "teachers of native speakers of English have often discouraged them from any tendency to use set phrases". However, some of the set phrases learnt by second language learners are not always used in the "appropriate context" that Kennedy implies. Schmied (1991a: 52), for instance argues that "language learners in general use simplification strategies at an early stage and try to reproduce memorised phrases from the target language later, irrespective of the linguistic and pragmatic context". That the phrases *among others* and *among (many) other things* are simply memorised by some speakers of KenE can be seen in the examples below taken from the ICE-K:

- [1] And that is the time that the Legal Notice of 1986 was uh made by the government and the board was set and KISI that's when it started at that time to train *among other things* uh children uh teachers for various disabilities and also to train uh people who are going to man these technical skills and many other skills and also to train assessors who are going to go into the field to assess ~~people with various disabilities~~ thereafter refer them to where they ought to be. (S1B042K)
- [2] The vice-chancellors added a revolving fund would be set up with funds recovered from the loanees. The loan recovery has not been easy due to lack of adequate staff

*among others*. The ministry of education has also failed to trace most of the defaulters, (W2C021K)

- [3] In the artist's endeavour to communicate with the audience, the issue of language comes in. Language must be seen as it affects the artist as well as the audience. The two must share a linguistic medium *among others*. (W2A006K)

The placement of *among other things* after the verb *train* in example [1] somehow interferes with the interpretation of the sentence, especially because children and teachers cannot be counted "among other things" as the interpretation of the sentence allows them to be. Indeed the speaker shows that this was not the intended meaning because he mentions other people who might also have been included "among other things" as those going to be trained, later in the sentence. It therefore appears that the speaker meant to say that training was "among other things" which the board was supposed to do, in which case the phrase should have come before the verb and not after it. Thus the expression is used without regard to its linguistic interpretation. The other two examples, [2] and [3], suggest that these two phrases *among other things* and *among others* are sometimes even used interchangeably. This is because one would expect *among other things* in both sentences. In fact, the use of *among others* instead of *among other things* introduces some ambiguity in the sentences. In sentence [2], for instance, it can be interpreted to mean other educated staff or to mean that there is a lack of adequate staff among other things also lacking. Example [3] also has a double interpretation in a similar fashion. These examples are evidence of the fact that, these phrases are indeed used without much consideration of their linguistic contexts or implications, thus implying that they have simply been memorised by their users.

One more collocational difference worth mentioning is in the use of prepositions to express pervasive meaning. For instance, there are notable differences in the way *over* is used in expressing this semantic function in ICE-GB and ICE-K. For instance, the framework *all over* +NP makes up 12.6% of the occurrences of *over* in ICE-K and only 5.5% of its occurrences in ICE-GB. This clearly indicates that this collocation is a very common way of expressing pervasiveness in KenE but not in BrE. Other prepositions that can be used to express pervasive meaning in English are *throughout* and *across*. It appears that *throughout* is also used for this function more in KenE than in BrE. For instance, there are 24 instances of the collocation *throughout the country* in ICE-K and only 2 in ICE-GB. *Across*, on the other hand, is used to express pervasive meaning almost three times more in ICE-GB than in ICE-K. The collocations *across the world* and *across the country*, for instance, occur 4 times each in ICE-GB but not at all in ICE-K. This shows that different prepositions are preferred to express pervasiveness in BrE compared to KenE. It is also clear that in BrE there is a wider range of expressions used for this function than in KenE, where a more limited range of collocational patterns occurs with high frequency

### Generalization across co-occurring categories

The generalization of prepositions across co-occurring grammatical categories is also an observable characteristic of KenE that distinguishes it from BrE. For instance, the complex preposition *according to* is restricted to usage with the third person in StdEng. In KenE, however, in addition to usage with the third person, it is also used with the first and second persons. There are seven tokens of *according to me* and one instance of *according to you* in ICE-K. Some examples illustrating the use of these different complements with the preposition *according to* are given below:

- [1] How would you like one to look at the linguistic competence putting aside the theory by Noam Chomsky and Dell Hymes' idea of communicative competence *according to you* what's the idea of competence. (S1B001K)

- [2] But *according to me* or rather in my view from the research I have done the stock rooms should not be neglected. (S1B010K)
- [3] Cultural identity *according to me* can always be manifested through other ways like naming typical to the society heritage, tattoo decorations with minimum pain, dressing habits, language, ethnic and geographical location. (W1A010K)

These examples imply that *according to* is generalised across the category of personal pronouns. Other prepositions generalised in this way are *with a view to*, *in case of* and *in view of*. The preposition *with a view to* is complemented by both the infinitive and the *-ing* form of a verb in KenE whereas in BrE it is only followed by the *-ing* form. The other two prepositions, *in case of* and *in view of*, are normally followed by nouns in StdEng, but in KenE they are sometimes followed by the *-ing* as well. These generalisations are either due to semantic change or the application of analogy. For instance, *according to* has undergone semantic change in KenE such that it is used to mean 'in my/your view' or 'in my/your opinion', which makes it possible to use the first as well as second person pronouns as complements. The complementation of *with a view to* with the infinitive instead of the *-ing* form of the verb in KenE is due to analogy with the subordinating conjunction *in order to*, which is closely related in meaning to the complex preposition and is normally followed by the infinitive in English.

### Complex Prepositions

Leitner (1991: 224) acknowledges that "the use of complex prepositions is often associated with the level of formality or regarded as bad style" and argues that "since non-native Englishes are often claimed to use a more formal register than native Englishes, complex prepositions provide a little studied testing ground." A comparison of the occurrence of complex prepositions in ICE-GB and ICE-K shows that they are more commonly used in KenE than in BrE. This implies that the former uses a more formal register than the latter. This is particularly confirmed by looking the occurrence of prepositions of respect in each corpus. The most common prepositions of respect are *with reference to*, *with regard to* and *with respect to* (and their variant forms with the preposition *in*). According to Quirk et al. (1985: 706), some of these prepositions are formal and they are therefore used more in formal contexts such as business letters than in informal registers.

A comparison of prepositions of respect between ICE-K and ICE-GB reveals that there are more such prepositions in the former than in the latter corpus. This means that these prepositions are more commonly used in KenE than in BrE, a confirmation that the former variety has a more formal character than the latter. This may be attributed to the importance attached to politeness strategies in African forms of English (cf. Schmied 1991a: 51) and the use of "respectful" prepositions enables speakers to achieve this social goal.

Another aspect of variation in the use of complex prepositions has to do with two-word versus three word sequences. In ICE-K, two-word sequences make up 66.2% of all the complex prepositions analysed in the study, while in the British corpus they make up 55.3%. In contrast, three-word complex prepositions are more common in ICE-GB (44.7%) than in ICE-K (33.8%). This means that two-word sequences are more commonly used in KenE than in BrE and the reverse is true for three-word sequences. The fact that three-word sequences are more common in BrE suggests that the more complex a preposition is, the less likely it is to be used by a second language speaker of English. This could account for the more frequent use of two-word prepositions in KenE, while three-word sequences seem to be avoided. That two-word complex prepositions occur twice as frequently (66.2%) as three-word sequences in ICE-K (33.8%) seems to confirm this. In ICE-GB, on the other hand, the difference in the occurrence

of these two groups of prepositions is very small which suggests that no form is preferred to the other.

### Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion of different aspects of variation in the usage of prepositions in KenE, it has become evident that variation of a grammatical category manifests itself in less salient ways than variation in vocabulary and pronunciation. An item may be used with higher frequency in one variety in comparison to the other and it may also be used to perform different semantic functions in different varieties. Even when it is used to perform similar functions, there may be differences in the way these functions are distributed in different varieties, with some semantic functions playing a more important role in one variety than in the other. It is therefore clear that grammatical variation plays a more important role in distinguishing second language varieties from standard varieties of English than has hitherto been recognised. More data-based research on grammatical aspects of these varieties of English is therefore required to determine the full extent of variation.

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