

Nigerian English. Similarities and Dissimilarities with Other West African Englishes

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Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to identify some phonological similarities and dissimilarities across West African New Englishes, namely to contrast Nigerian English² to Ghanaian English (GhE), Sierra Leone English (SLE), and Cameroon English (CamE). The analysis is intended to be a bottom-up approach, starting from particular cases (see Annex) which will eventually lead to generalizations regarding the way in which the vocalic system of British English has been restructured in the varieties discussed (with a special focus on the vocalic elements chosen for illustration), or the strategies employed in dealing with different types of consonant clusters from one variety to another. I am aware that important phonological phenomena are missing from the analysis but, unfortunately, I have failed to find exact corresponding transcriptions of words to be included for illustration in some cases.

Key words

phonological differences, similarity, uniqueness, map

1. Introduction

Platt et al. (1984: 37) identify some general tendencies which are shared by some or all of the New Englishes, which prove that the vowels of these new varieties exhibit a very high degree of restructuring: a tendency to shorten vocalic sounds, a lack of distinction between long and short vowels, a tendency to replace central vowels by either front or back vowels, and also a tendency to shorten diphthongs and to leave out the second element in a diphthong. Conversely, the consonants undergo some changes, according to the consonantal system of the

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² It has been split here into two subvarieties: Nigerian Southern English (NigSE) and Nigerian Hausa English (NigHE), the latter being spoken mainly in the northern part.

speakers' L1, but the most striking phenomenon in most of the new varieties of English is the restructuring of consonant clusters.

Schmied (1991: 58) captures five main aspects which characterize the behaviour of English phonemes in the African context, but I have selected only four of them which are relevant for the purpose of this study and which roughly correspond to the four points identified by Platt et al. (1984), as follows: the difference between long and short vowels is levelled, so that this phonemic feature is not used any longer in differentiating between meanings systematically, leading to widespread homophony; the central vowels /ə/, /ʌ/, /ɜ:/, as in *writer*, *but* and *bird*, are avoided and glide towards half-open or open positions such as [ɔ, a, ɛ]; diphthongs tend to have only marginal status and to be monophthongized; consonant clusters are resolved by consonant deletion or by the addition of vowels (either via epenthesis, or paragoge).

The phonological standard used for reference and ease of comparison, to which I will refer hereinafter as RP, is Received Pronunciation.

2. The analysis of some restructuring patterns from RP to African New Englishes

The identification of similar as well as different patterns of restructuring focuses on the words presented in the pronunciation chart which constitutes the Annex, and I have summarized them in the restructuring chart below for clarification.

Table 1: The restructuring chart of some phonological elements from RP in various African New Englishes

RP		GhE	SLE	NigSE	NigHE	CamE
/ɜ:/		[ɛ]	[a]	[a]	[a]	[ɛ]
			[ɔ]	[ɔ]		[ɔ]
/ʌ/		[a]	[ɔ]	[ɔ]	[a]	[ɔ]
/εə/		[ea]	[ea/ia]	[ea/ia]	[ea]	[ɛ]
/ɪə/		[ia]	[ia]	[ia]	[ia]	[iɛ/ɪə]
Final syllable /ə/		[a]	[a]	[a]	[a]	[a]
			[ɔ]	[ɔ]		[ɔ]
The treatment of <i>muta-cum-liquida</i>	Obstruent + lateral liquid (O + L)	maintained	maintained	maintained	epenthetic V – vocalic copy	maintained
	Obstruent + rhotic	maintained	O + uvular [R]	maintained	default epenthetic V	maintained

clusters	liquid (O + R)				[ə]	
The treatment of consonant clusters ³		± plosive deletion	plosive deletion	plosive deletion	plosive deletion	plosive deletion
Final		yes	spelling pronunciation	spelling pronunciation	spelling pronunciation	yes
NG - coalescence						

2.1 The restructuring of some vocalic elements

2.1.1 The RP vowels /i:/ and /ɪ/ are almost invariantly rendered as [i]⁴ in all the African varieties presented in the pronunciation chart, exhibiting a tendency to level down vowel length differences. The examples included in the chart display the following possibilities of restructuring:

- (1) RP /ɪ/ → [i], either alone or as an element of a diphthong: *thirty* – [θɜ:tɪ], *beer* – [bɪə], *try* – [traɪ], *bring* – [brɪŋ], *quickly* – [kwɪklɪ], *single* – [sɪŋg(ə)l].
- (2) RP /Vɪ/ → [V#], when it is the second, unstressed gliding element of a diphthong: *labour* – [leɪbə]
- (3) RP /ɪ/: [+nas] _# → [e], in *journey* – [dʒɜ:nɪ].
- (4) RP /i:/ → [i], in *teacher* – [ti:tʃə]

2.1.2 In what concerns the behaviour of the *bird* vowel, only GhE is unique in rendering it unanimously as [ɛ]. If we take a look at Map 1 below, all the others display it at least as [a]⁵.

Besides GhE, which has a single restructuring pattern, CamE stands out as it has the widest range of possibilities in restructuring this mid vowel. It patterns with GhE in rendering it as [ɛ], but also together with SLE and NigSE in rendering it as [ɔ]. It is noteworthy to mention that SLE and NigSE speakers have a unique pattern in rendering the /ɜ:/ vowel which comes from <ir> and <er> sequences,

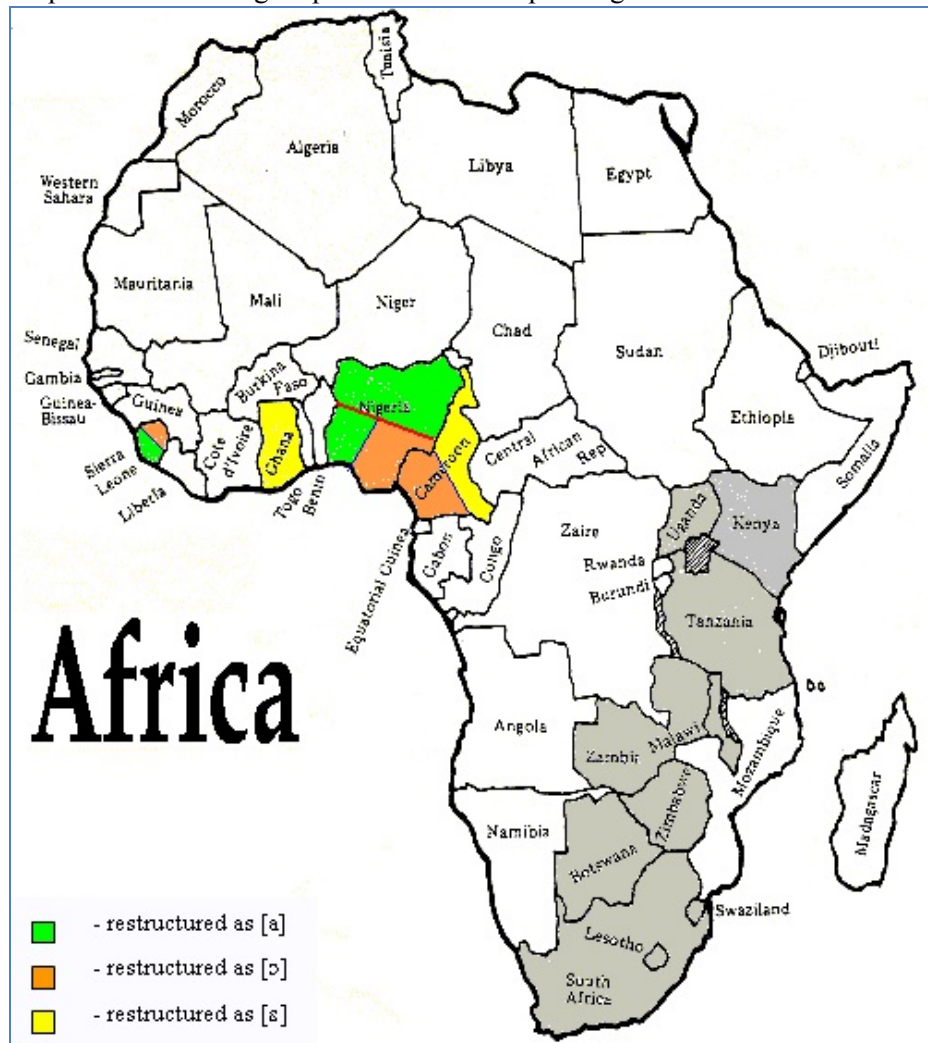
³ Word-final /-st/ and /-ld/ here.

⁴ This /i/ is short but it also has the feature [+advanced tongue root], i.e. [+tense], which characterizes long vowels in RP (Brozba 2010: 380).

⁵ Simo Bobda (2000) does not include one in his chart but I have run across the example *maternity* in (Atechi 2004), who argues that Cameroonians pronounce it [mɛtaniti] instead of the RP [mætɜ:niti].

which goes to [ɔ] in the words *first* and *person*, when the expected variants would be [a] or [ɛ] if we take into consideration the word *thirty*.

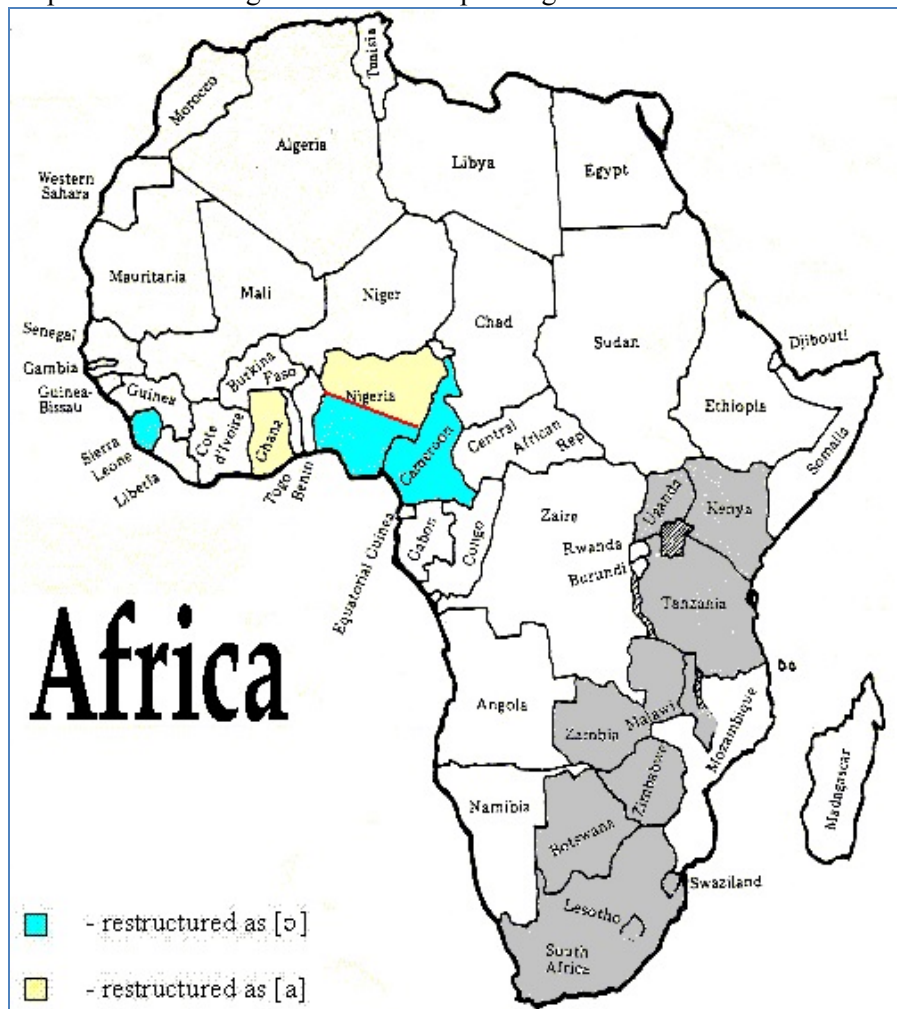
Map 1 - Restructuring map⁶ of the RP monophthong /ɜ:/



2.1.3 The mid vowel /ʌ/ displays two patterns of restructuring, as Map 2 shows, in which SLE, NigSE and CamE pattern together again in rendering it as [ɔ], while GhE and NigHE speakers pronounce it as [a].

⁶ All the lines have been conventionally drawn in order to enable the viewer to trace more easily the restructuring patterns. The gray areas represent the other former British colonies in Africa which are not included in this study. These comments apply to all the subsequent maps.

Map 2- Restructuring of the RP monophthong /ʌ/

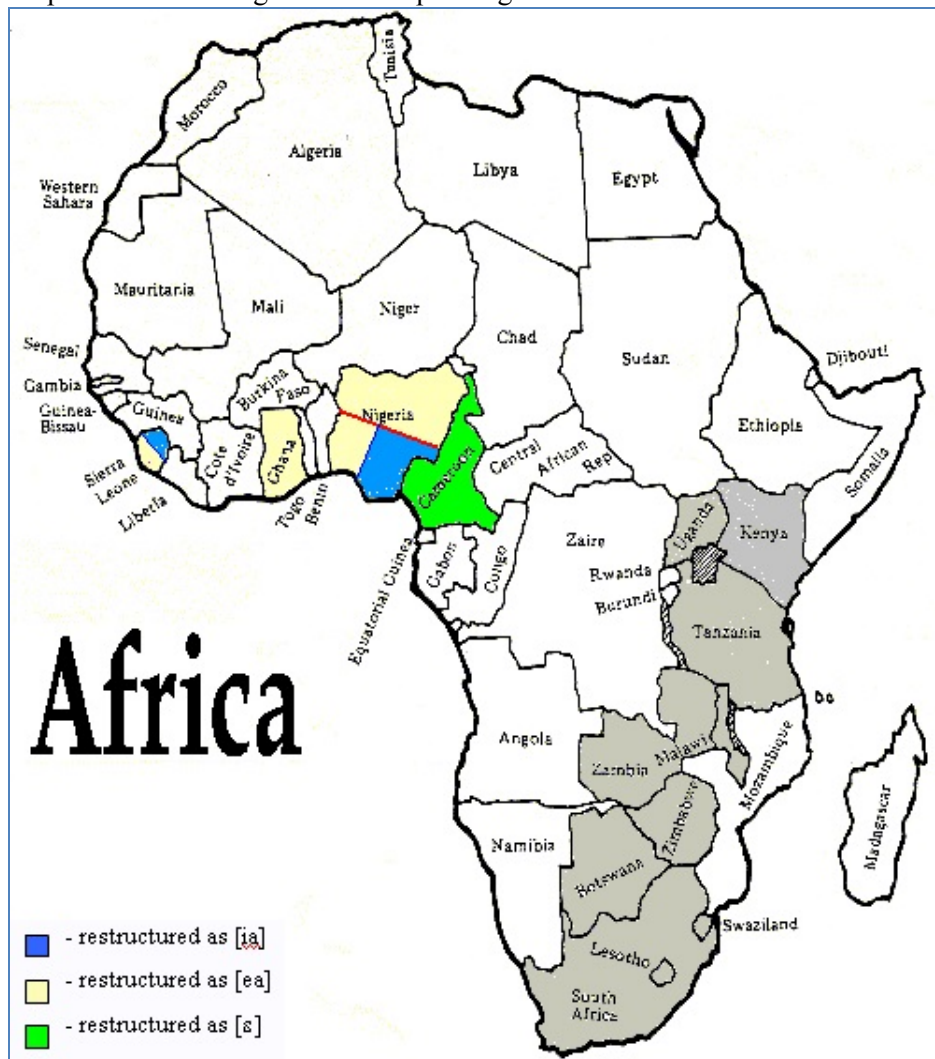


2.1.4 This diphthong is pronounced in four out of the five varieties discussed as [ea], as we can observe both in the restructuring chart (Table 1) and Map 3.

Parallel to this pronunciation we have another phonological pattern for this diphthong, i.e. [ia], in the southern part of Nigeria and in Sierra Leone, which is rendered in blue on the map⁷. Cameroon dissociates from the group altogether by monophthongizing the diphthong to its first vocalic element [ɛ].

⁷ Again, the feature is not to be found exclusively in the area delimited by the blue colour on the map, but all over of Sierra Leone and in Southern Nigeria, in competition with the alternative pattern of pronunciation [ea].

Map 3 - Restructuring of the RP diphthong /ɛə/

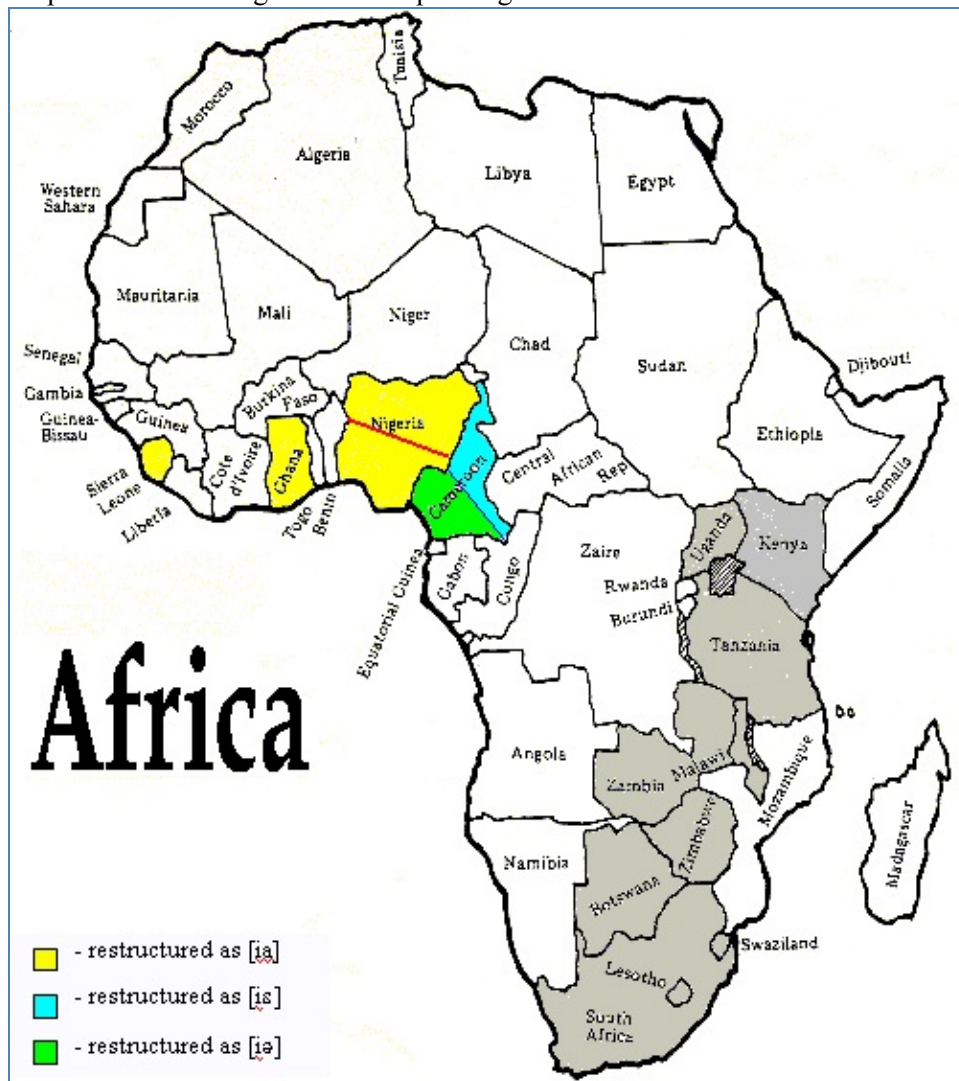


2.1.5 The two elements of the vocalic segment are preserved in this case but either one or both are restructured, as follows:

- (5) RP /ɪə/ → [ia] in four of the studied varieties: both vocalic elements have undergone changes (in length, height/aperture);
- (6) RP /ɪə/ → [iɛ/iə] in CamE: either both vowels display differences (the first is shortened and the second has been replaced by a front counterpart), or only the first vowel of the diphthong is affected.

The distribution of the two patterns is presented in Map 4 and in the Annex, under the pronunciations for the word *beer*.

Map 4 - Restructuring of the RP diphthong /ɪə/

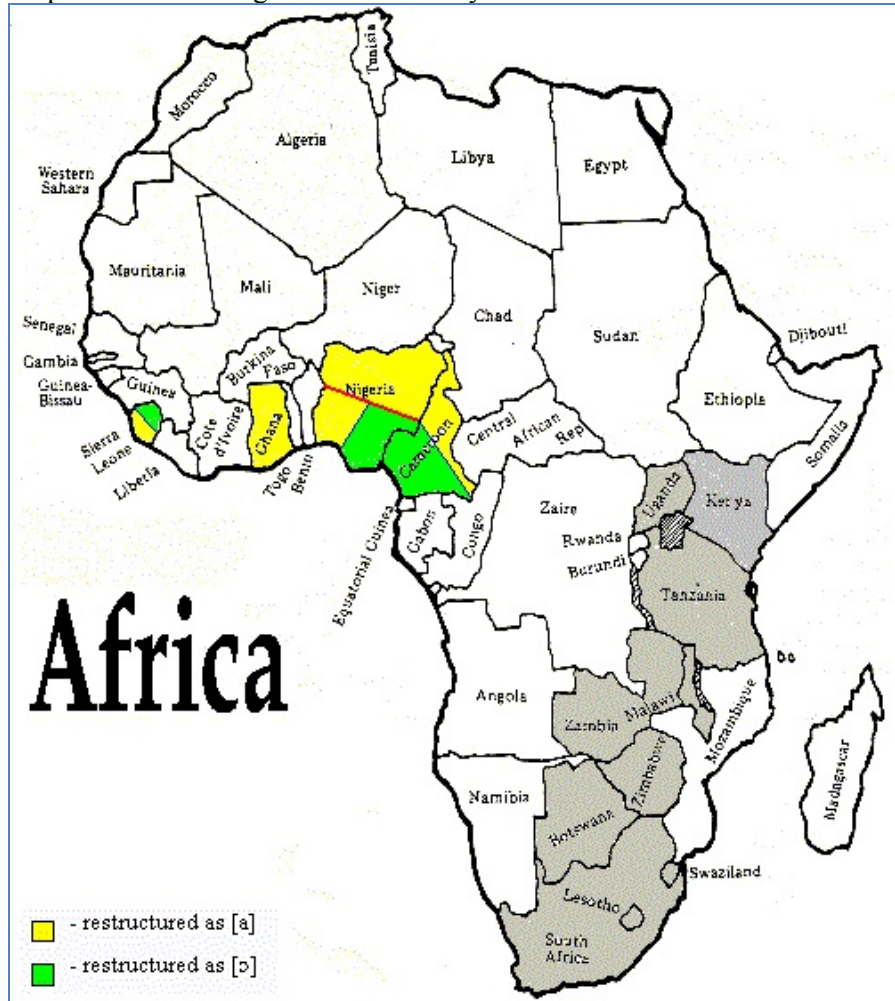


2.1.6 All the African New Englishes at issue replace [ə] in word-final position with [a], which is also visible on Map 5 and in the pronunciation chart (Annex), for a word like *teacher* or *murder*.

However, in Southern Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Cameroon, speakers pronounce it as [ɔ] in words like *structure*, *labour*, *sector*, *pompous* or *forum* (see Annex). I was first inclined to believe that in a word like *structure* – [strʊktʃɔ] or *forum* – [fɔrɔm] this transformation must be an instance of vowel copy, but if we look at *labour* – [leɔ] one could say that this is a clear example of labial attraction. Moreover, a case like *pompous* – [pɔmpɔs] is undecidable, i.e. either

vowel copying or labial attraction can account for the nature of the vowel. The example of *sector* – [sektɔ] comes to clear things up: there is neither a neighbouring consonantal sound to assimilate it partially, nor a total assimilation at a distance with another vocalic sound. This is simply the default option of the speakers in the respective geographical areas in rendering the schwa in final-syllable position.

Map 5 - Restructuring of the RP final-syllable /ə/



2.2 The restructuring of some consonantal elements

2.2.1 If we take a quick look at the pronunciation chart in the Annex we can see that in most of the varieties⁸ the speakers do not have a problem with pronouncing consonant onset clusters as they are in RP, including the ‘s + obstruent’ ones (see *structure*, *square*). The *muta-cum-liquida* clusters in the onset are preserved most of the times with a minor alteration for SLE which uses a uvular /R/. However, NigHE splits the ‘obstruent + liquid’ group by inserting an epenthetic vowel. For the ‘obstruent + rhotic liquid’ clusters, the speakers use the default vowel schwa, while in the case of ‘obstruent + lateral liquid’ clusters, we have a clear instance of vowel copy, as in the word *quickly*.

On the other hand, speakers across all these West African New Englishes simplify systematically the coda clusters. Irrespectively of the cause for which they do it (either these kind of clusters are dismissed as an effect of a transfer phenomenon if they are not attested in the L1 of the speakers, or as a connected speech effect), we can easily identify some ‘repair’ strategies of such coda clusters in all of the varieties at issue. In five of these, word-final consonant clusters are reduced to one element by deleting the oral stop. Simo Bobda (2000) claims that in some cases Ghanaian English speakers retain the oral stop in a word like *first*. This could be accounted for by the need to dissociate between words like *first* and *face* which would sound homophonous otherwise, since only the first gliding element of the RP diphthong /eɪ/ would be retained according to the restructuring pattern (see *labour*). However, I can only assume that in an expression like ‘first man’ the deletion is guaranteed.

2.2.2 Only two of the five varieties, namely GhE and CamE, maintain the original pronunciation, i.e. they coalesce the nasal and the voiced velar stop in word-final, with a minor difference affecting the length of the vowel. All the other varieties seem to illustrate spelling pronunciation.

3. Conclusions

I have underlined in all the above subsection points in which some or all of the African New Englishes studied are similar or differ strikingly in the way they render one or other of the selected phonological segments. If we are to look again at the pronunciation chart (Table 2) and at the patterns in the restructuring chart (Table 1), first horizontally and then vertically, we will see other striking similarities between some accents in restructuring some vocalic elements and a few unique features for some of the varieties.

On the one hand, a horizontal scanning shows that three out of the five varieties (i.e. SLE, NigHE and CamE) render as [ɔ] three RP vocalic elements: /ɜ:/, /ʌ/ and /ə/, as predicted in the introduction of this investigation. Also, we can notice that, in one way or another, all the varieties discussed alter the coda consonant clusters so as to fit their speech needs.

⁸ There are some exceptions to which I will refer when discussing ‘obstruent + liquid’ clusters.

On the other hand, if we look vertically, we can identify one variety which has a unique behaviour in some respects, namely CamE. First of all, CamE has three distinctive features which separates it completely from the others: it is the only one to have three patterns of realization corresponding to the RP monophthong /ɜ:/ (as shown in 7); it is again the only one to reduce the diphthong /ɛə/ to its first vocalic element and to have two distinct pronunciations for the diphthong /ɪə/ (see 8).

(7) RP /ɜ:/ → CamE [ɛ]; [ɔ] or [a]⁹

(8) RP /ɪə/ → CamE [i ɛ] or [iə]

Nigerian subvarieties of English resemble in our analysis one or more other West-African varieties, which is an indication that the structural nativization process is still under way.

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NOTE:

The source for the template of a blank map of Africa is <http://abbott-infotech.co.za/africa-map-blank.gif>. I have operated the other changes myself

⁹ See footnote 7.

ANNEX

Table 2: Pronunciation Chart across West African English Accents¹⁰

Word	RP	GhanE	SLE	NigE		CamE
				NigSE	NigHE	
<i>term</i>	[tɜ:m]	[tɛm]	[tam]	[tam]	[tam]	[tɛm]
<i>thirty</i>	[θɜ:tɪ]	[tɛti]	[tati]	[tati]	[tati]	[tɛti]
<i>first</i>	[fɜ:st]	[fɛs(t)]	[fɔs]	[fɔs]	[fas]	[fɛs]
<i>person</i>	[pɜ:sn]	[pɛsən]	[pɔsɪn, pɛ-]	[pɔsɪn]	[pasən]	[pɛsɪn]
<i>work</i>	[wɜ:k]	[wɛk]	[wɔk]	[wɔk]	[wak]	[wɔk]
<i>journey</i>	[dʒɜ:nɪ]	[dʒɛne]	[dʒɔne]	[dʒɔne]	[dʒane]	[dʒɔne]
<i>murder</i>	[mɜ:də]	[mɛda]	[mɔda]	[mɔda]	[mada]	[mɔda]
<i>cut</i>	[kʌt]	[kat]	[kɔt]	[kɔt]	[kat]	[kɔt]
<i>square</i>	[skwɛə]	[skwea]	[skwea, -ia]	[skwea, -ia]	[skwea]	[skwɛ]
<i>beer</i>	[bɪə]	[bia]	[bia]	[bia]	[bia]	[biɛ, biə]
<i>teacher</i>	[ti:fə]	[tɪfa]	[tɪfa]	[tɪfa]	[tɪfa]	[tɪfa]
<i>sector</i>	[sɛktə]	[sɛkta]	[sɛktɔ]	[sɛktɔ]	[sɛkta]	[sɛktɔ]
<i>labour</i>	[leɪbə]	[leba]	[leɔ]	[leɔ]	[leba]	[leɔ]
<i>structure</i>	[strʌkfə]	[strakf'a]	[strɔkfɔ]	[strɔkfɔ]	[strakf'a]	[strɔkfɔ]
<i>pompous</i>	[pʌmpəs]	[pɔmpas]	[pɔmpɔs]	[pɔmpɔs]	[pɔmpas]	[pɔmpɔs]
<i>forum</i>	[fɔrəm]	[fɔram]	[fɔrɔm, -um]	[fɔrɔm, -um]	[fɔram]	[fɔrɔm]
<i>try</i>	[traɪ]	[traɪ]	[tRai]	[traɪ]	[tərai]	[traɪ]
<i>quickly</i>	[kwɪklɪ]	[kwikli]	[kwikli]	[kwikli]	[kwikli]	[kwikli]
<i>told us</i>	[tɔldəs]	[tol as]	[tol ɔs]	[tol ɔs]	[tol as]	[tolɔs]
<i>bring</i>	[brɪŋ]	[brɪŋ]	[brɪŋ]	[brɪŋ]	[brɪŋ]	[brɪŋ]

¹⁰ Source: Slightly adapted from Simo Bobda (2000: 263)