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"If You Listen to a Nigerian Speaking…You Need a Translator": A Critique of William Ruto's View on Nigerians' English

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Abstract
This study examines the stir President William Ruto caused with remarks made at a Kenya-Diaspora engagement in Italy in April 2026 about Nigerian English, while also challenging prevailing notions about the status and ownership of languages. Utilising Braj Kachru's framework of World Englishes, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of Linguistic Capital, and Ndhlovu, Ngue Um and Unamuno's Decolonial Approach to Multilingualism, which questions Eurocentric perspectives on language ownership, prestige, and legitimacy, the study undertakes a conceptual qualitative analysis of secondary sources, including peer-reviewed journal articles, books, book chapters, and select academic publications found in databases such as Google Scholar, Academia, and ResearchGate. The findings indicate that Nigerian English has a distinct vocabulary and syntax and is comprehensible to both speakers within its community and those outside it. Furthermore, the study shows that comparing English dialects to native-speaker norms reinforces inherited hierarchies and creates linguistic ambiguity. It implies that understandability, rather than adherence to American or British norms, should be the basis for evaluations of English competence. The study argues that categorising national variants is both logically impossible and unproductive to the global linguistic space.
Keywords: World Englishes, Linguistic Capital, African English Varieties, Sociolinguistics, Language

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Introduction

The remarks made by President William Ruto of Kenya during his visit to the diaspora in Italy in April 2026 have sparked renewed debate on the status and reputation of African English speakers. He said:

> *"Yes…We [Kenyans] speak some of the best English in the World...If you listen to a Nigerian speaking, you don't know what…you need a translator…even when they are speaking English…"*[1]

In reference to the speech patterns of Nigerians, Ruto claimed that Kenyan speakers have "some of the best English in the world" and that comprehending Nigerian English (even when it is spoken) necessitates a translator. Although he later clarified that his statements were misunderstood, the incident highlights enduring ideological beliefs about language, identity, and power within postcolonial contexts.

Such beliefs have attracted growing scholarly attention (Sabao & Mavengano, 2025). Assertions that one African country uses English "better" than another stem from colonial legacies rather than current sociolinguistic circumstances. This draws on Kachru's (1985) World Englishes framework and its further elaboration by Schneider (2007), in addition to recent views on the decolonisation of language (Ndhlovu et al, 2024). Given that English is typically a second language in many African nations, the emergence of local varieties through processes of nativisation and indigenisation has produced valid forms of English shaped by regional histories and communicative requirements.

Nigerian English is the variant of English formally taught and used by educated Nigerians, featuring distinct phonological, lexical, syntactic, and pragmatic traits (Banjo, 1996; Bamgbose, 1995; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2018). In contrast, Nigerian Pidgin is not the same as other contact languages, as it has its own grammar, vocabulary, and sociolinguistic roles (Faraclas, 1996; Deuber, 2005). Although both forms coexist and may influence each other, they should not be considered a single group because they serve different functions within Nigeria's multilingual landscape (Deuber, 2005; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2018).

According to Smith & Nelson (1985) and Jenkins (2015), conformity to native-speaker norms is considered more important in international communication than adherence to indigenous practices. This study underscores the importance of assessing the degree of mutual comprehension among speakers from diverse linguistic backgrounds. The social value assigned to particular languages or dialects is known as linguistic prestige, and it often reflects societal and historical power dynamics rather than innate linguistic superiority (Bourdieu, 1991; McKenzie, 2015). Language legitimacy and social identity are also shaped by linguistic ideology, which is the assessment and categorisation of languages and their speakers by various social groups (Woolard & Schieffelin, 1994; Kroskrity, 2004; Ndhlovu et al., 2024).

Based on a recent study, Nigerian English exhibits systematic linguistic characteristics rather than haphazard departures from British or American norms (Ugwuanyi & Aboh, 2025). Studies

[1] DailyNewsKE, (Posted on April 20, 2026). Ruto Roast Nigerians Speak Poor English https://www.youtube.com/shorts/6eEfW9rM_5M)

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have shown that Nigerian English is highly intelligible both locally and globally (Idowu, 2020), suggesting that communicative efficiency is a better criterion for assessing English usage than adherence to native-speaker norms. Language ideologies that support some forms while opposing others are also reflected in attempts to rank national English variants in public. Despite evidence of admiration for African Englishes in many academic endeavours, hierarchical notions about linguistic legitimacy and ability continue to dominate public discourse. Linguistic ambiguity and the devaluation of regional identities result from the gap between sociolinguistic theory and societal attitudes. These perspectives point to the necessity of reevaluating the standards by which English dialects in multilingual African populations are evaluated.

Given this background, the study seeks to:

i. Investigate the sociolinguistic and ideological implications of William Ruto's observations on Nigerian English;
ii. Evaluate the impact of intelligibility and linguistic prestige on perceptions of Nigerian English within the World Englishes context.
iii. Assess the extent to which public discourses on English proficiency reinforce stereotypes and linguistic disparities among African speech communities.

Consequently, the study investigates the following questions:

i. What is the meaning of William Ruto's comments on Nigerian English in terms of sociolinguistic and ideological factors?
ii. How does the level of linguistic prestige and intelligibility shape the perception of Nigerian English in relation to other aspects of English distribution?
iii. How is it possible that discussions about English proficiency in Africa perpetuate stereotypes and linguistic biases?

The study is significant in several ways. The scholarship in sociolinguistics and World Englishes is strengthened by its support of African English variants. By encouraging instructional techniques that prioritise intelligibility and communicative efficacy over strictly following native-speaker standards, it provides insights for teaching English. This is beneficial. Additionally, it promotes broader cultural engagement and linguistic tolerance, as well as improved public understanding of African English.

This study's design is based on a qualitative analytical review, with a focus on discourse analysis and critical sociolinguistics. Instead of being merely methodical, this study adopts a conceptual approach to the ideological assumptions underpinning current discussions on English competency and linguistic status in Africa. This is primarily the focus of Bourdieu's Linguistic Capital and Kachru's World Englishes framework. The data of the study came from secondary sources, including books, book chapters, peer-reviewed journal articles, and specific academic publications that were found utilising databases such as Google Scholar, Academia and ResearchGate. The purposeful selection of materials was focused on the preservation of linguistic prestige and decolonisation, as well as its applicability to African Englishes, World Englishes, language ideology, and intelligibility. Materials of ambiguous scholarly significance or methodological legitimacy were excluded from the review.

Additionally, YouTube videos, online responses, and media coverage of President William Ruto's remarks in April 2026 were examples of public discourse. The materials were utilised to demonstrate the dominant linguistic attitudes and ideological stances rather than being regarded

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as primary evidence. Qualitative investigation of data was carried out using thematic discourse analysis. Critical sociolinguistics research revealed recurring issues with linguistic status, stereotypes, native-speaker ideology, intelligibility, and the legitimacy of African Englishes. The study investigates how much public discourse about English-speaking Africans reproduces historical linguistic hierarchy by weakening the acceptance of indigenised varieties like Nigerian English through the synthesis and critical examination of these sources.
With Nigerian English serving as an example, the study is limited to a theoretical examination of language ideology and African Englishes; it does not attempt to compare all of the English dialects that are spoken in Africa.

Conceptual Foundations of the Study

The study is based on two correspondingly complementary theoretical frameworks: Bourdieu, who proposed that social capital is an essential component of language formation, and Kachru's World Englishes theory. The World Englishes paradigm was developed by Kachru (1985), and furthered by Schneider (2007), Jenkins (2015), and other scholars. It views English as a pluricentric language with several acceptable norms rather than being exclusively controlled by native-speaker standards. According to Kachru's Three Circles Model, the English language is divided into three categories: the Inner Circle, which comprises nations where it is taught as a first language; the Outer Circle, which includes (postcolonial) societies where English is an institutionalised second language; and the Expanding Circle, where English is almost exclusively learnt as a foreign language.

English has been nativised and indigenised in a number of Outer Circle nations, including Kenya and Nigeria. Nigerian English and other African English dialects are therefore regarded as institutionalised variations with distinct norms, communicative roles, and sociocultural identities rather than as inferior forms of British or American English. This method places more emphasis on communication skills and comprehension as the main criteria for assessing language use than it does on using a single standard English language. This view is further supported by empirical research. The idea that native-speaker norms are universally accepted is challenged by scholars such as Bello and Abdullahi (2022), who contend that familiarity with accents can greatly enhance understanding of various forms of English.

The World Englishes model is supplemented by Bourdieu's (1991) notion of linguistic capital. According to Bourdieu, language is primarily a medium of communication that is used as metaphorical capital to disseminate social position and power. Rather than being superior in language, some varieties are more valuable in society when they are connected to institutions and powerful groups. In many African nations, the prestige of British and American English has been preserved due to colonial legacies and current global power dynamics. Linguistic confusion and the perception that certain speakers are more proficient in English emanate from the frequent comparison of localised varieties, such as Nigerian English, to foreign norms. Bourdieu's theory sheds light on why language attitudes have grown so hierarchical, despite substantial linguistic evidence supporting the legitimacy of African Englishes. World Englishes emphasises the social and ideological mechanisms that favour some kinds over others while simultaneously demonstrating the existence and legitimacy of numerous variants.

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Decolonial and Critical Sociolinguistic Outlooks

Modern research on African multilingualism emphasises the need to challenge the colonial ideologies that underpin linguistic hierarchies, even though Kachru and Bourdieu's theories were significant intellectual underpinnings. This study interprets public discourses about English competency in Africa using a critical sociolinguistic and decolonial analytical approach. According to Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986), colonialism included the creation of linguistic and cultural systems that prioritised European languages and epistemologies in addition to political dominance. In postcolonial societies, these hierarchies continue to influence the evaluation of English dialects and notions of linguistic validity. Beyond identifying African Englishes, current study increasingly looks at the epistemological presumptions that underlie inherited language patterns. Fundamentalist ideas are contested by Makoni and Pennycook (2007), who suggest the "disinvention" and reconstructing of languages. They contend that traditional linguistic categories frequently mimic colonialism perceptions of multilingual circumstances and that languages are social and historical creations rather than naturally determined phenomena.

Similarly, Pennycook (2007) argues that English should not be attributed to any specific country or speech community and emphasises the transcultural flows that characterise modern English. Social norms and local conditions always influencing it. These viewpoints cast doubt on the idea that American or British English may be used as a universal benchmark for evaluating other dialects. These claims are supported by recent studies on African multilingualism. According to Ndhlovu (2018), the "big battalions of language" philosophy is critical of prevailing linguistic ideologies that support inflexible and limited notions of speech while ignoring the flexible and hybrid communicative behaviours common to African communities. A decolonial approach to multilingualism that questions Eurocentric ideas of language ownership, legitimacy, and normativity is also proposed by Ndhlovu et al. (2024). By challenging the ideological assumptions that underpin the traditional validation of African languages and Englishes, this method marks a substantial shift.

According to this perspective, disputes on English language proficiency in Africa are reflections of historical cultural language conventions and symbolic discrimination rather than objective linguistic assessments. The privileged role of native-speaker standards is being challenged by the current state of Global Englishes studies. English has developed into a global resource characterised by plurality, hybridity, and intercultural communication, according to Rose and Galloway (2019). Therefore, multicultural awareness and communicative efficacy should be taken into account when evaluating English proficiency rather than adherence to American or British standards. Jenkins (2015) asserts that rather than rigorous adherence to native-speaker pronunciation and usage, mutual comprehension among English language users is frequently attained through shared pragmatic tactics. This viewpoint supports the notion that intelligibility, not accent imitation, should be used to evaluate English proficiency. Pennycook & Otsuji's (2015) view of metrolingualism emphasises the flexibility and interconnectedness of linguistic resources in multilingual communities. They demonstrate how speakers frequently employ a range of linguistic repertoires without rigorously adhering to linguistic boundaries. Linguistic hybridity is pervasive rather than being restricted to multilingualism in African contexts. When taken as a whole, these perspectives oppose monolithic and fundamentalist ideas about language in favour of a more dynamic understanding of African English as evolving communicative

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resources within complex multilingual ecologies. Therefore, variations like Nigerian English should be evaluated according to their particular social and communicative context rather than how closely they resemble British or American norms.

In order to ascertain language perceptions, critical sociolinguistics emphasises ideological views. Despite the lack of intrinsic linguistic superiority, McKenzie (2015) contends that listeners frequently identify certain accents with prestige, intelligence, and credibility. These perspectives show how language ideologies affect perception and judgment. In the African setting, these ideas frequently prioritise American and British English over regional dialects. Therefore, prejudices about African Englishes and language discrepancies may be reinforced by political discourse, education, and media. The validating paradigm of early World Englishes studies is giving way to an ideological framework that is by definition "decolonial" in African sociolinguistics today, which challenges the underlying causes of linguistic disparity. While modern approaches contest colonial epistemologies and language ideologies that uphold the hierarchical distinction between "standard" and "non-standard," earlier research attempted to validate African Englishes by proving their systematic and communicative efficacy (Bamgbose, 2001; Kachru, 1992; Schneider, 2007). This paradigm shift highlights the significance of analysing discussions regarding English fluency as forms of historical power relations and symbolic dominance rather than as a lingua franca, reflecting broader developments in critical sociolinguistics.

This combination of theoretical and analytical methods offers a comprehensive framework for examining current debates over English competency in Africa. Bourdieu asserts that linguistic capital sustains linguist hierarchies; Kachru's World Englishes theory validates the legitimacy of multiple versions of English; and contemporary decolonial and sociolinguistic techniques reveal the ideological foundation of such systems. According to this study, claims on English language competency in Africa are not supported by linguistic data, but rather by the evolution of linguistic ideologies that have been developed over time and by uneven symbolic power structures.

Discussion and Systematic Explication of Ruto's Statement

A. **The concept of Ideological positioning**

The statement ascribed to William Ruto —"*Yes…We (Kenyans) speak some of the best English in the world…If you listen to a Nigerian speaking, you don't know what…you need a translator…even when they are speaking English*"— provides for deep sociolinguistic interrogation which is captured in the first research question of this paper:

> *What is the meaning of William Ruto's comments on Nigerian English in terms of sociolinguistic and ideological factors?*

On the surface, Ruto's claim presents Kenyan English as superior and Nigerian English as inferior, creating a double standard between the two. It is discourteous of Ruto to say that the communication system of Nigerian English requires a "translator," as this suggests that one cannot comprehend the language. Sociolinguistic research questions Ruto's presumption.

Nigerian English is typically regarded as a stable, structured form with systematic phonological and lexical components (Gut, 2012; Mesthrie & Bhatt, 2013). As a result, the assertion is based on an ideological stance rather than historical or sociopolitical truth.

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The claim that "We speak some of the best English in the world..." is the source of identity work, according to discourse analysis techniques. It requires criticism to refute the claim that Kenyans speak "some of world-class English." Similar to Nigerian English, the Outer Circle variety of Kenyan English has been developed by multilingual interaction and specialised usage patterns. Ruto elevates Kenyan English, so separating Nigerian English from perceived legitimacy while implicitly aligning Kenya with Inner Circle prestige norms. One example of "orders of indexicality," according to Blommaert (2010), is the categorisation of language variants based on their socially constructed prestige rather than their communicative function. Going by that statement, Ruto is indirectly implying that Kenyans do not or hardly speak English with indigenised forms or interferences; that is to say that Kenyans use of English is highly intelligible to international users of English whereas the English of Nigerian speakers is unintelligible. What Ruto, perhaps, did not realise is that Nigerians speak two forms of English: one is the "Nigerian English" used for official and international communication, which is the language of instruction in schools and is quite intelligible in the speech community; and the other is the "Pidgin English", which is the Nigerianised form that many international speakers of English, including native speakers find a bit challenging to comprehend.

One of such instance, is ex-Leicester City's prolific forward, Jarmie Vardy, who in 2017 responded to a Nigerian news platform that he found it difficult to comprehend what his Nigerian teammates at the time, Wilfried Ndidi, Ahmed Musa and Kelechi Iheanacho, said when they spoke Pidgin English, not Nigerian English that is recognised by Kachru's categorisation. Conversely, the ironyof his frustration was his willingness to learn Pidgin English. In his words, "…but I am trying to learn it and speak it as they do…" (Salami, 2017, line 10). It is noteworthy that Vardy never complained of a challenge to comprehend his Nigerian teammates when they spoke the Nigerian English variety. Notwithstanding several non-Nigerian speakers of English react to Nigerians' accent and use of English words when speaking both Pidgin English and International English as captured in some YouTube videos[2,3,4] one thing they all share is their interest in learning it because of its uniqueness and communicative effectiveness. So, it is on the foregoing premise that perhaps one may assert that Ruto was also expressing his view: he might also be reacting like every other non-Nigerian, as Jarmie Vardy did, to the Pidgin English. That may be why after series of public backlash he issued a statement that his comment was misrepresented, a position which has been criticised as a damage-control move.

But then, it is difficult to conjecture if Ruto was referring to Pidgin English or not, given that as an individual he distinguish between "Nigerian English", which is clearly intelligible and the

[2] Americans reacts to Nigerian accent
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=American+reacts+to+Nigerian+accent

[3] British people react to Nigerian accent
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=British+people+react+to+Nigerian+accent

[4] Foreigners reacting to Nigerian Pidgin English
https://www.youtube.com/results?search_query=foreigners+react+to+Nigerian+Pidgin+English

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"Pidgin English" which unarguably poses some challenges to foreigners. Therefore, what readily comes to mind when he said translation is often required when Nigerians speak English is the former – Nigerian English – the one Braj Kachru categorised as belonging to the Outer Circle.

The moot aspect of Ruto's statement is his reason for rating Kenyans over Nigerians. Saying that a translator would be needed when Nigerians speak and that Kenyans speak "some of the best English in the world" practically implies that Kenyans are better speakers of the [Inner Circle] English than Nigerians, although as second language speakers of the language, they both belong to the Outer Circle. This buttresses the notion of ideological positioning, resulting in the two suppositions below which could be viewed through the lens of critical sociolinguistics:

i. The assertions made by Ruto seem to reflect enduring colonial language conceptions that favour varieties linked to historical centres of cultural influence. Studies conducted earlier have revealed that English holds significant prestige in Kenya and is closely associated with education, socioeconomic advancements, and institutional power (Kioko & Muthwai, 2003; Musau, 2002). Furthermore, British Received Pronunciation is still regarded as "mythical" by many Kenyan educators and language policymakers, according to Buregeya (2022).

ii. It is possible to interpret Ruto's comments as a manifestation of language concepts embedded in educational practices that still uphold British English norms. Historically, the English language policy and pedagogical practices in Kenya have been focused on upholding British standards (Bunyi, 1997; Buregeya, 2022). Thus, African English forms with distinctive indigenous norms, such as Nigerian English, may be judged for their perceived closeness to Inner Circle standards rather than communicative effectiveness or sociolinguistic legitimacy. The assessments align with Bourdieu's (1991) observation of the unequal distribution of linguistic capital and the persistence of colonial language ideologies, according to recent decolonial scholarship (Ndhlovu et al, 2024).

The perspective of World Englishes and critical sociolinguistics suggests that Ruto's musings are founded on preconceptions that contemporary scholarship has largely rejected. If it is the case that one national speech community speaks English "better," then it implies that there are universally agreed standards for ranking different variations of English. Nonetheless, these benchmarks are still subject to debate, as modern methods prioritise clarity and understanding over conformity to Inner Circle principles (Jenkins, 2015; Rose & Galloway, 2019). Accordingly, the assertions that Kenyan English is superior to Nigerian English should be viewed more as reflecting ideologies of language and symbolic status than as facts on a linguistic level.

While the current study challenges the use of Inner Circle standards to classify English varieties for historical purposes, it is noteworthy that research shows a consistent dominance of Nigerians in Cambridge International English examinations among African nations. A 2025 report from EduTimes Africa revealed that twelve Nigerian students were the top English learners in the world at the 2024 IGCSE and Cambridge O'Level (Ajayi, 2025). The evidence suggests that Nigerians are not only content with their localised version of the Inner Circle English standard but could also employ them even more effectively than Kenyan speakers.

B. **The Fallacy of Hierarchy**

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Braj Kachru's World Englishes paradigm directly challenges the assumptions of Ruto. In Kachru's Three Circles Model, the concept of English as a pluricentric language with multiple legitimate normative standards rejects the idea of merely having one "best English". English has been institutionalised and indigenised within the Outer Circle, where both Kenya and Nigeria belong. The latter leads to the second research question:

> *How does the level of linguistic prestige and intelligibility shape the perception of Nigerian English in relation to other aspects of English distribution?*

To clarify, Ruto's comparison deviates from the theoretical distinction of World Englishes by reintroducing a hierarchical model that benefits perceived proximity to the native-speaker norm. This should be taken into account while responding to the question. However, empirical studies in World Englishes show that no single variety is intrinsically superior. Sociocultural requirements prompt varieties to develop, resulting in functional differentiation rather than linguistic inadequacy (Schneider 2007).

Jenkins (2015) highlights that in international communication environments, comprehension is influenced by context and is co-constructed by both listeners and speakers. It is argued that Nigerian English requires translation but this view of the language not only challenges understanding but also overemphasises the role of accent as barrier to comprehension. According to Jenkins (2015), Nigerian speakers have effectively adapted English to their local contexts, which legitimises the Nigerian form. Although Ruto believes Kenyans speak some of the best English, the theory of World Englishes dissociates itself from his hierarchical fallacy and rather promotes indigenisation.

So, in assessing the foregoing question, Iniamagha (2024) in Table 1 **(**Inner Circle English Standard versus Nigerian English) below provides some Nigerianised lexical/semantic features of English that may have affected the comprehension of speakers from other English-speaking communities, including Ruto's. This could have also made him to say that translators would be needed when Nigerians speak English and asserted that Kenyans speak some of the best English in the world.

Table 1: Inner Circle English Standard versus Nigerian English

s/no	Inner Circle English Standard meaning	Nigerian meaning
1.	**severally** It means 'separately, individually, singly' in British/American English. e.g. 'I called *severally* but you didn't respond.' Here, severally means the caller put a call through to different persons at different times.	**severally** This word means several times (more than two, but not unlimited) in Nigerian English. e.g. 'I called you *severally* but you didn't respond.' This, in Nigerian English, means the caller put a call through to just one person more than twice.

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2.	**borrow** To receive something from someone with the intention of giving it back after a period of time. e.g. Please, can I *borrow* 50 naira from you?	**borrow** In Nigerian English, this word is used to mean to give (lend). e.g. (1) Please, *borrow* me 50 naira. (2) I will *borrow* you this money on one condition.
3.	**mate** It means a friend, sexual partner, helper, a ship. e.g. Hello, *mate*!	**mate** In Nigeria English, it means 'of the same age group'. e.g. Listen, I am not your *mate*.
5.	**gist** It is the most important pieces of information about something, or general information without details. It is strictly a noun. e.g. I'll give you the gist when I return.	**gist** In Nigerian English, it means to tell a story, to have a conversation. It is a verb. e.g. I'll gist you when I return.
6.	**dupe** Someone who has been tricked. e.g. He is an innocent *dupe* that lost 5 million naira.	**dupe** Someone who tricks others. e.g. The *dupe* has been apprehended by the police.
7.	**tout** To make known, advertise or praise something or someone repeatedly, especially as a way of encouraging their sale, popularity or development. That man over there came to me yesterday to tout his goods.	**tout** Nigerians misconstrue tout for lout, who is a young man who behaves in a very rude, offensive and sometimes violent way. e.g. That man is a *tout* at the motor park ('bus station' in (Standard English).
8.	**are you okay?** When a Brit or American say this, they generally mean they care about you enough to want to know how you are feeling.	**are you okay?** In Nigeria, it is said out of annoyance—which could be interpreted as 'is something wrong with you?'
9.	**I don't blame you** It means the speaker	**I don't blame you** This means the speaker is

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	understands why you acted in a particular way. e.g. Ken, I don't blame you for what happened. It wasn't your fault.	painfully and sadly taking responsibility for giving the other party the opportunity to display his/her foolishness in their presence. e.g. Anita, I don't blame you; I am the one who belittled myself to associate with you.
10.	**feeding** In American English, for instance, it is when a baby has something to eat or drink. E.g. The baby has had four *feedings* today.	**feeding** It means money for food when away. e.g. 'You seem to have forgotten something. What about my *feeding*?'
12.	**follow:** To go directly after. e.g. 'Jim is driving. I'll *follow* him.', means go in your own car, behind John's car	**follow:** To go with, accompany e.g. I want to *follow* Efe to church.

Source: Iniamagha (2024, p. 270-273)

The foregoing Nigerianised forms are what define the concept of World Englishes; that English is a pluricentric language with multiple legitimate norms. The Nigerian versions of the English words in Table 1 are unique to Nigerians but pose comprehension challenges to other non-Nigerian English-speaking communities. This study posits that it is on this premise that Ruto likely made that statement, and therefore the Nigerian English should never be seen as a lesser variety but independent of the Inner Circle English standard.

Drawing from Schneider's (2007) Dynamic Model, all Outer Circle varieties are structurally legitimate. Therefore, ranking one against another, lacks theoretical justification. Privileging perceived proximity to British English reinforces colonial linguistic hierarchies that sociolinguistics has long sought to deconstruct. It implicitly re-centres British English as the benchmark of "correctness," thereby contradicting the pluralistic ethos of World Englishes.

C. **The Politics of Prestige**

Pierre Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital provides a crucial explanatory framework for understanding why such perceptions as Ruto's persist despite contradictory linguistic evidence. This is where the third question of this study comes in:

> *How is it possible that discussions about English proficiency in Africa perpetuate stereotypes and linguistic biases?*

Discussions centred on English proficiency often stem from linguistic biases and hierarchies, as evaluations of English varieties are frequently influenced by language attitudes and inherited ideologies. The evaluation of "good" or "bad" English in sociolinguistic studies is often based on past power dynamics and prestige orientations, rather than differences in communicative

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capabilities.

Bourdieu (1991) argues that the value of language is not determined by its natural structure, but rather by how it is associated with socially dominant groups. Colonial power structures have historically granted British English the status of a linguistic asset, which has now been relinquished to varieties that are more in line with British customs. According to Bourdieu, the concept of linguistic capital has been used to explain this phenomenon, which suggests that certain language varieties gain symbolic significance due to their association with socially dominant groups. The prestige of British and American English in the African context has been largely due to colonial legacies and global political influence. Accordingly, localised varieties such as Nigerian English and Kenyan English are frequently assessed for their perceived closeness to Inner Circle norms rather than communicative suitability.

This symbolic economy is implicitly conveyed in Ruto's statement. His assertion of Kenyan English being "one of the best in the world" aligns its language with linguistic capital. However, by presenting Nigerian English as unintelligible, he diminishes its value within the same symbolic framework and labels it as globally illegitimate. The judgment is not based on language but rather on social values that are determined by past power dynamics.

Empirical studies support this position. According to McKenzie (2015), listeners tend to associate prestige, intelligence, and credibility with accents that are perceived as standard or native-like, despite the lack of inherent linguistic superiority. According to Kioko and Muthwij (2003), British English is the preferred language for public speaking and formal education among many Kenyans, while Musau (2002) asserts that English proficiency has significant implications for socioeconomic status and educational achievement. Buregeya (2022) highlights the enduring presence of Received Pronunciation in Kenya's educational circles, promoting native-speaker ideologies. As a result, Ruto's assertion is more likely to be seen as an endorsement of global linguistic ideology rather than empirical lingual truth.

Nigerian English, despite its proffered intelligibility, has high structural consistency and communicative efficiency. The findings of Gut (2012) suggest that Nigerian English phonology follows identifiable patterns that are systematically different from British English but internally coherent. Nigerian English's lexical innovations are also relevant to communicate culturally grounded principles (Opara, 2016), which Iniamagha (2024) presented in Table 1: Inner Circle English Standard versus Nigerian English. Intelligibility research reveals that comprehension is not solely dependent on native-likeness, but rather on exposure and familiarity. (Jenkins, 2015). Those unfamiliar with Nigerian English may struggle to process the language at first, but this doesn't mean that they are incompetent. It demonstrates variations in linguistic exposure, not in lack of it. Negative stereotypes are also found in Nigerian English through research. According to Bamgbose (2001), the perception that African Englishes are lacking or substandard is often based on external standards, which is problematic. Gut (2012) and Mesthrie and Bhatt (2018) have found that Nigerian English displays systematic phonological and lexical characteristics (semantic features as well) that are indicative of a legitimate and institutionalised form, rather than evidence of insufficient linguistic competence.

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The claims of linguistic superiority are contradicted by intelligibility studies. Smith and Nelson (1985) maintain that effective communication is not solely dependent on conformity to native-speaker standards, but rather on the ability to comprehend and interpret texts. According to Jenkins (2015), communication strategies for English language interaction should be shared among users rather than based on pronunciation differences. Bello and Abdullahi's examination of Nigerian and Malaysian Englishes in 2022 revealed that having no prior knowledge of certain accents significantly improves comprehension, suggesting that communication difficulties are more often caused by inadequate knowledge than by deficiencies in the varieties. Therefore, the argument that Nigerian English requires translation is empirically unfeasible. This implies perceptual prejudice rather than communicative dissonance.

In the same way, Ruto explains how language ideologies are replicated through political discussion and media expansion. Language ideology is a set of socially constructed beliefs about language that shape perceptions of correctness and prestige (Woolard, 1998). The education systems, media coverage, and political rhetoric in postcolonial Africa are all heavily influenced by these ideologies. The popularity of statements like Ruto's stems from their ability to align with commonly held but seldom examined assumptions about linguistic stratification. The historical asymmetries of political power and identity formation that shape social stratification are embedded in these beliefs, as demonstrated by sociolinguistic research.

Conclusion

Debates about English-speaking in Africa are not based on linguistic realities, but rather on historically embedded ideologies of language, prestige, and symbolic power as demonstrated by this study. The assertions of Kenyan superiority and Nigerian intelligibility cannot be empirically proven or theoretically justified, as evidenced by the combined viewpoints on World Englishes, Bourdieu's concept of linguistic capital, and contemporary decolonial approaches to language. Despite their different sociocultural backgrounds, the differences between Kenyan English and Nigerian English are institutionalised and functional varieties that demonstrate both ethnic identity as well as linguistic competence. The study uncovered a significant gap between sociolinguistic scholarship and public perception. Additionally, even though contemporary studies acknowledge the plurality and legitimacy of African Englishes, language is still analysed in public discourse through the lens of native-speaker ideologies. To bridge this gap, it is essential to reframe English not as a national language but as an international communicative tool that can be enhanced by improving its intercultural competence and contextual relevance.

This study has important implications for sociolinguistic education, English language instruction, and the public's perception of language diversity. The outcomes highlight the necessity of integrating decolonial viewpoints and critical language awareness into research on African multilingualism in sociolinguistics. The teaching of English is based on pedagogical approaches, which are influenced by World Englishes, and prioritise communicative competence over strict adherence to British or American standards. Such pedagogical mindset can help learners overcome linguistic insecurity and enhance their understanding of local English dialects.

Moreover, the research emphasises that public sociolinguistic education must challenge stereotypes and promote greater understanding of African Englishes as valid linguistic systems,

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rather than flawed imitations of Inner Circle principles. It is important for policymakers, educators, media professionals, and public intellectuals to foster inclusive language attitudes and promote respect for linguistic diversity. Moving beyond hierarchical ideas of "better English" in Africa requires a more diverse understanding of English as essentially a shared global resource, reflecting the varied histories, identities and communicative realities of different societies.

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