The clash of Englishes in the lives of educated Kenyan and Nigerian migrants

This paper addresses attitudes to different Englishes among educated Kenyan and Nigerian migrants as well as the reactions they have encountered with respect to their own accents. Mobile anglophone Africans have generally come into contact not just with several languages but also with different varieties of English both in their home country and their current country of residence. Diverse Englishes can consequently be assumed to play a role in their linguistic repertoires and these varieties interact and compete in the global “English language complex” (McArthur 2003: 56; Mesthrie and Bhatt 2008: 1–3). The “polycentricity” (Blommaert 2010: 41) of this linguistic landscape results in hierarchical structures between varieties of English and “the concert of World Englishes is not a happy democracy of voices” (Mair 2013: 257). These inequalities become particularly apparent in translocal migration contexts as different norms come into play in different settings and ‘good English’ in one place is considered ‘bad English’ in another (Blommaert 2010: 99).

The focus here lies on the question, which role individual varieties of English play in the linguistic environments and personal biographies of anglophone African migrants from Kenya and Nigeria. In order to identify their attitudes to and experiences with different accents of English, data were collected in semi-structured qualitative interviews among Kenyans and Nigerians in Germany and the UK. Firstly, the interviews provide information on the linguistic norms the respondents experienced in their respective home countries. Secondly, they show the interviewees’ attitudes to different Englishes (particularly their home country varieties and British and American English) and how their attitudes have developed after they moved away from their home countries. Thirdly, they give an account of experiences with different Englishes in a diaspora setting and of the personal consequences of the clash of linguistic norms.

The accounts of these mobile speakers contribute to the description of the current (perceived) status of selected varieties of English within the “World System of Englishes” (Mair 2013) and provide an insight into how the hierarchical structures within this system affect the lives of Kenyan and Nigerian migrants.

Works Cited


