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ON SOME SIMILARITIES AND DISSIMILARITIES ACROSS AFRICAN ENGLISH VARIETIES

Abstract: *The linguistic situation in African countries which constitute ex-British colonies is similar across the continent: it is typical of a postcolonial country. A blend of indigenous and non-indigenous languages is to be found in these countries, alongside the offsprings of colonial descent. In most of them, some form of English is spoken throughout the country as it fulfills the expected functions of a second language variety: it is the common lingua franca in areas such as business, mass media and commerce, or it is used as a medium of instruction in education and a communication vehicle in social interaction among the educated elite. The present study focuses on Ghanaian English, Sierra Leone English, Nigerian English, Cameroon English and Kenyan English. The main differences, as well as some common phonological features, among the African varieties at issue are brought forth and highlighted so as to establish the spread of "non-native" English features across the African continent.*

Keywords: *non-native varieties, phonological feature, unique, regional, monophthongs, consonants.*

1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to identify some phonological features which could stand as similarities and dissimilarities across African New Englishes, namely Ghanaian English (GhE), Sierra Leone English (SLE), Nigerian English[2], Cameroon English (CamE) and Kenyan English (KenE). 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 RP has been restructured in the discussed varieties (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. Undoubtedly, there are aspects of the subject which have been left unexplored and some which will be treated in more detail than others. I am aware that important varieties in the southern part of the continent are missing from the annexed pronunciation chart[3] around which this discussion revolves. Unfortunately, the lack of dictionaries providing accurate phonetic transcriptions for words which would illustrate the analyzed phenomena prevented this operation.

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[2] It has been split here into two subvarieties: Nigerian Southern English (NigSE) and Nigerian Hausa English (NigHE), the latter coming from the language included in its label which is spoken mainly in the northern part of the country.

[3] I am greatly indebted to Professor Augustin Simo Bobda from University of Yaoundé, Cameroon, for providing me with valuable material without which this article would not have been possible and for granting me permission to use his data.

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

Schmied (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 either drop consonants or add vowels (either prothesis, epenthesis, or paragoge) to split them.

The phonological standard used for reference and ease of comparison, to which I will refer hereinafter as RP, is the 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 is focused 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 to various African New Englishes

RP		GhE	SLE	NigSE	NigHE	CamE	KenE
/ɜ:/		[ɛ]	[a]	[a]	[a]	[ɛ]	[a]
			[ɔ]	[ɔ]		[ɔ]	
/ʌ/		[a]	[ɔ]	[ɔ]	[a]	[ɔ]	[a]
/ɛə/		[ea]	[ea/ia]	[ea/ia]	[ea]	[ɛ]	[ea]
/ɪə/		[ia]	[ia]	[ia]	[ia]	[iɛ/iə]	[ia]
Final syllable /ə/		[a]	[a]	[a]	[a]	[a]	[a]
			[ɔ]	[ɔ]		[ɔ]	
The treatment of syllabic /l/		non-syllabic, clear - epenthetic V [a/ə]	non-syllabic, clear - epenthetic V[a/u]	non-syllabic, clear - epenthetic V[a], [u][4]	non-syllabic, clear - epenthetic V[a], [u][5]	non-syllabic, clear - epenthetic V [a/ə]	non-syllabic, clear - epenthetic V [ɔ][6]
The treatment of *muta-*	Obstruent + lateral liquid clusters	maintained	maintained	maintained	epenthetic V - vocalic copy	maintained	epenthetic V - vocalic copy

[4] For this epenthetic V the /l/ may be dropped, turning the vowel into a paragogic one.
[5] For this epenthetic V the /l/ may be dropped, turning the vowel into a paragogic one.
[6] As in other cases, on many occasions the /l/ is dropped changing the function of the vowel from an epenthetic to a paragogic one.

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cum-liquida clusters	(O + L)						
	Obstruent + rhoic liquid clusters (O + R)	maintained	O + uvular [R]	maintained	default epenthetic V [ə]	maintained	± epenthetic V - default V [ə]
The treatment of consonant clusters[7]		± stop deletion	stop deletion	stop deletion	stop deletion	stop deletion	paragogic V used to break the cluster
Final /g/ deletion after velar nasal /ŋ/		yes	spelling pronunciation	spelling pronunciation	spelling pronunciation	yes	spelling pronunciation/ paragogic copy V [i]

2.1 The restructuring of some vocalic elements

2.1.1 The levelling of length difference for vocalic segments

The RP vowels /i:/ and /ɪ/ are almost invariantly rendered as [i][8] 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:ʧə]

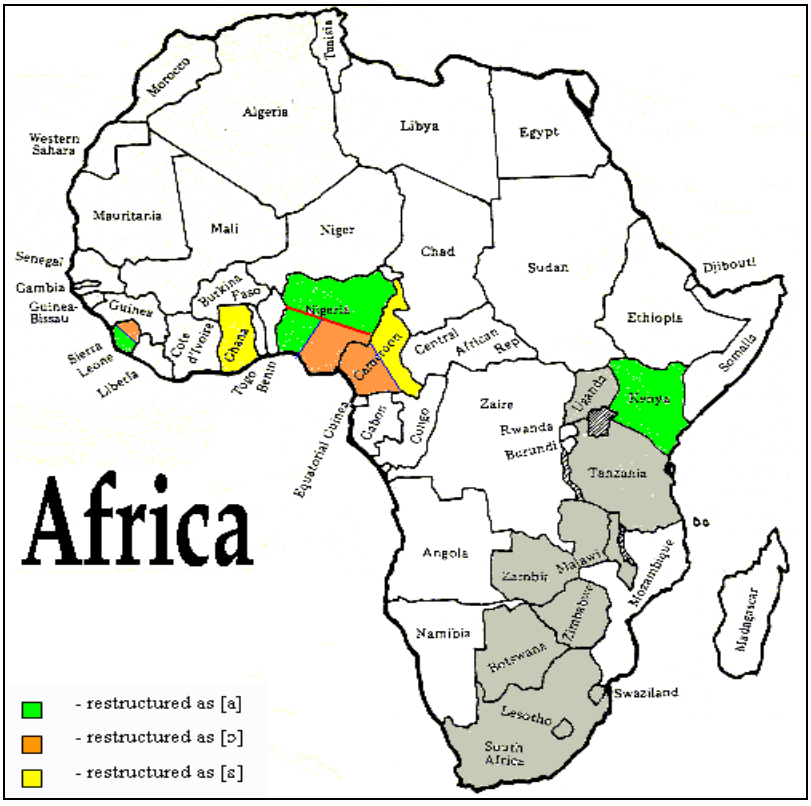
2.1.2 Restructuring of the RP vowel /ɜ:/

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, all the others display it at least as [a][9].

[7] Word-final /st/ and /ld/ here.
[8] This /i/ is short but it also has the feature [+ advanced tongue root], i.e. [+tense], which characterizes long vowels in RP (Brozbă 155).
[9] Simo Bobda does not include one in his chart but I have run over the example *maternity* in (Atechi), who argues that Cameroonians pronounce it [mɛtaniti] instead of the RP [mətɜ:niti].

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Map 1 - Restructuring map[10] of the RP monophthong /ɜ:/



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

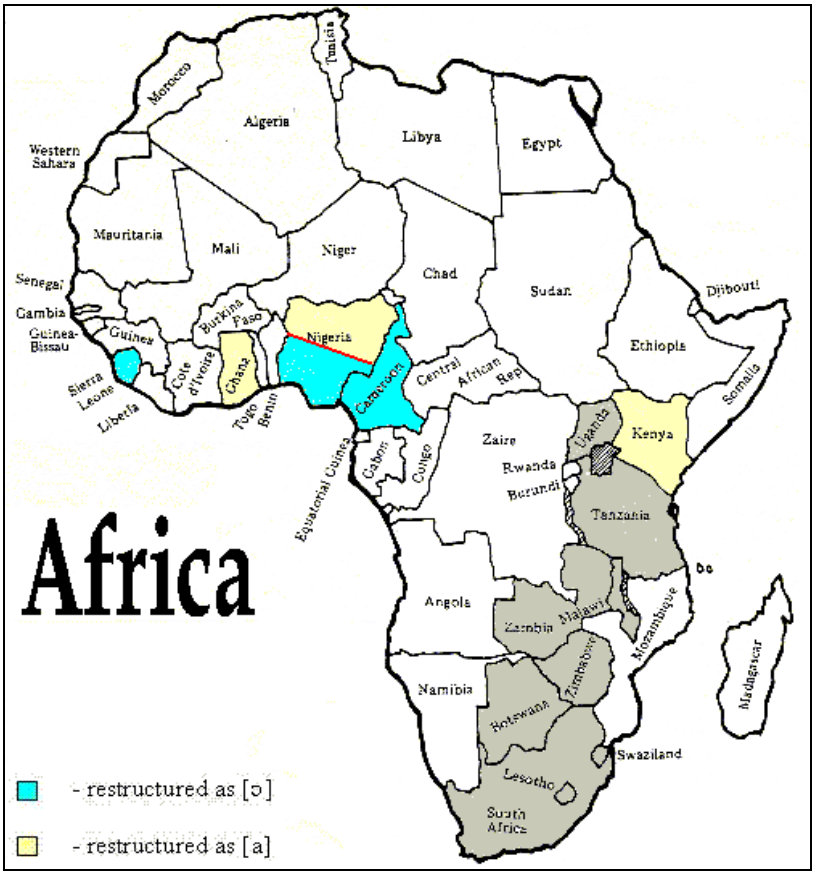
2.1.3 The restructuring of the RP vowel /ʌ/

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

[10] All the lines have been conventionally drawn in order to enable the viewer to easily trace 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.

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Map 2- Restructuring of the RP monophthong /ʌ/

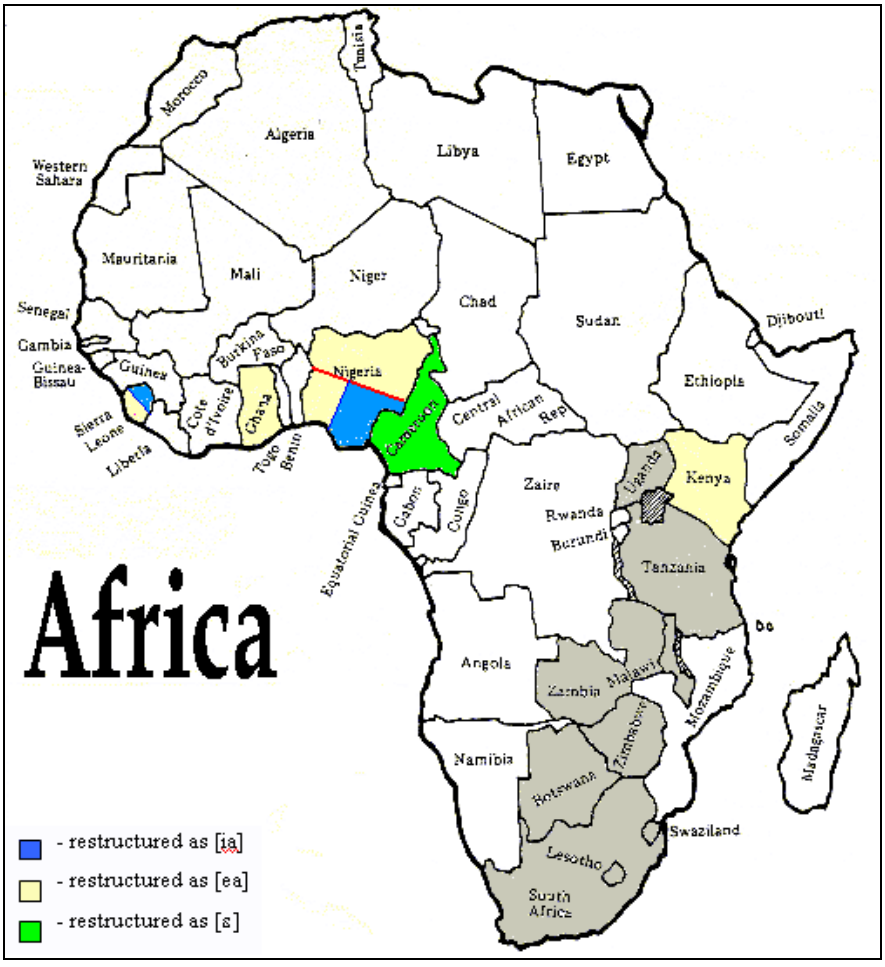


2.1.4 The restructuring of the RP diphthong /ɛə/

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

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Map 3 - Restructuring of the RP diphthong /ɛə/



Parallel to this pronunciation we notice 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 map[11]. Cameroon dissociates from the group altogether by monophthongizing the diphthong to its first vocalic element [ɛ].

2.1.5 The restructuring of the RP diphthong /ɪə/

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 five of the studied varieties: both vocalic elements have undergone changes (in length, height/aperture);

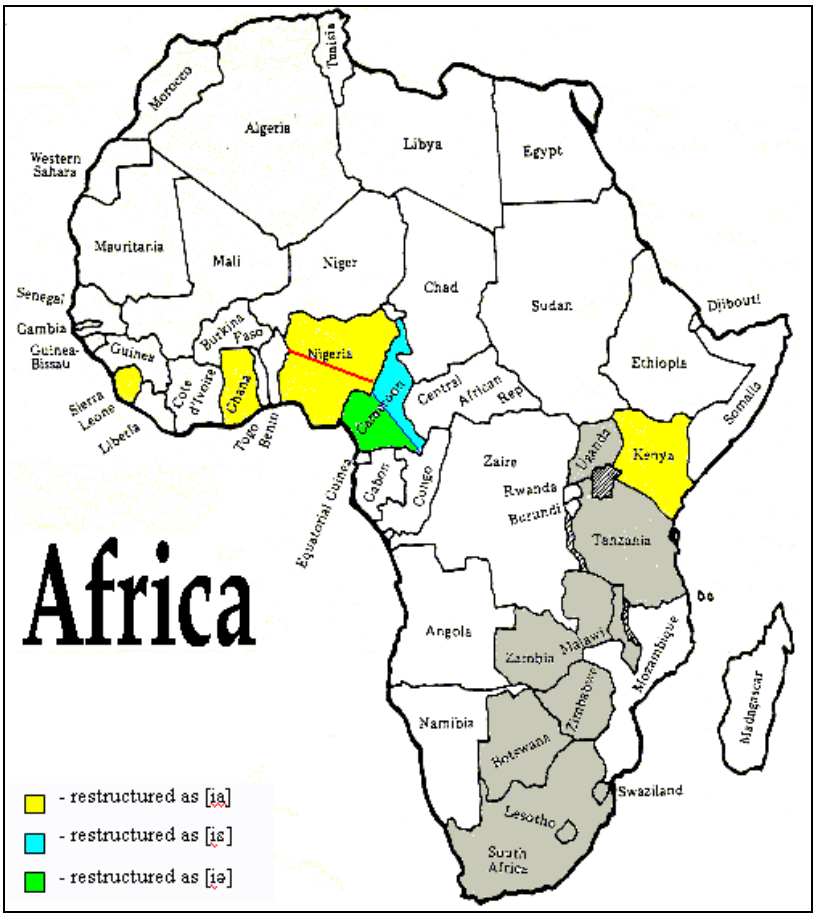
(6) RP /ɪə/ → [iɛ/iə] in CamE: either both vowels display differences (the first is shortened and the second has been replaced by a front counterpart), or only the first vowel of the diphthong is affected;

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

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

Map 4 - Restructuring of the RP diphthong /ɪə/

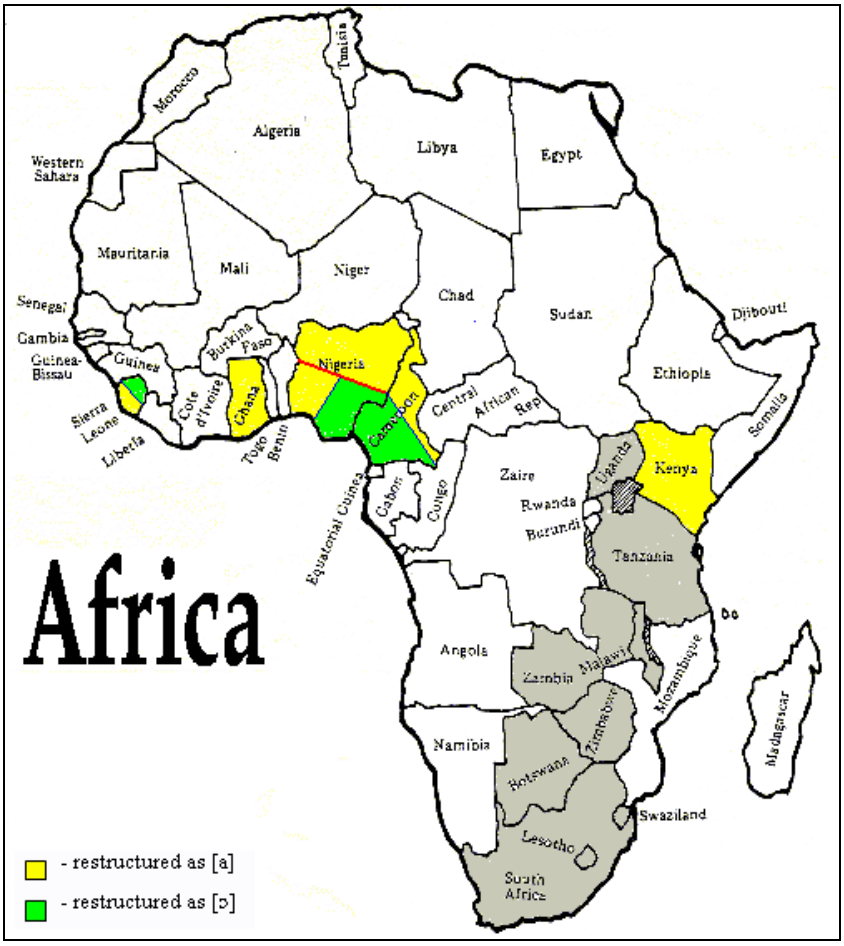


2.1.6 Restructuring of the RP final-syllable /ə/

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

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



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* - [strɔkʧɔ] or *forum* - [fɔrɔm] this transformation must be an instance of vowel copy, but if we look at *labour* - [lebɔ] we could say that this is a clear example of labial attraction. Moreover, in the case of *pompous* – [pɔmpɔs] it is ambiguous which one applies. The example of *sector* – [sɛktɔ] 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 common choice of the speakers in the respective geographical areas in rendering the final-syllable schwa.

2.2 The restructuring of some consonantal elements

2.2.1 The treatment of /l/

In the RP sound system the phoneme /l/ can be syllabic, i.e. it can function as a nucleus of a syllable. In all of the discussed varieties we deal with a clear, non-syllabic sound. In five out of the six varieties the epenthetic vowel [a] is used for this purpose for a word like *formal*, whereas in the case of KenE the default vowel [ɔ] is used instead. GhE goes together with CamE in using the vowel schwa, while SLE and NigE use [u] after the velar stop in a word like *single*.

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Sometimes, users drop the [l] altogether (in NigE or KenE), so that the epenthetic vowel employed becomes a paragogic one.

2.2.2 The treatment of consonant clusters

If we take a quick look at the pronunciation chart in the Annex we can see that in most of the varieties[12] the speakers do not have a problem with pronouncing consonant clusters belonging to syllable onsets 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/. Notwithstanding, NigHE and KenE make a single block this time in splitting the 'obstruent + liquid' group by inserting an epenthetic vowel. For the 'obstruent + rhotic liquid' clusters, the speakers use the default vowel schwa, while for the 'obstruent + lateral liquid' groupings, we have a clear instance of vowel copy in the case of the word *quickly*.

On the other hand, speakers across all these African New Englishes systematically simplify the consonantal clusters in the coda. Irrespective of the cause for which they do it (either this kind of consonantal groups 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 discussed varieties. In five of the studied varieties, the 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 for 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. KenE sets apart by invoking a different strategy in treating such clusters, i.e. a paragogic vowel is used so as to avoid anything besides singleton codas.

2.2.3 The treatment of /g/ in final, post-nasal position

Only two of the six varieties, namely GhE and CamE, maintain the original pronunciation and drop the voiced velar stop in word-final, post-nasal position, with a minor difference affecting the length of the vowel. For all the other varieties we seem to be dealing with a case of spelling pronunciation. KenE singles out again by adjusting the instance of spelling pronunciation with a paragogic vowel in order to avoid the final sequence which can stand as consonantal cluster *per se*.

3. Conclusions

In this paper I have underlined points in which some or all of the studied African New Englishes are similar or differ flagrantly in rendering one or other of the selected phonological segments. If we were to examine again at the pronunciation chart (Table 2) and at the patterns in the restructuring chart (Table 1), first horizontally and then vertically, we would see other striking similarities among some accents in restructuring some vocalic elements and a few unique features for some of the varieties.

On the one hand, at a horizontal scanning, we can notice that three out of the six varieties (i.e. SLE, NigHE and CamE) render as [ɔ] three RP vocalic elements: /ɜ:/, /ʌ/ and /ə/, as predicted

[12] There are some exceptions to which I will refer when discussing the 'obstruent + liquid' clusters.

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in the introduction of this study. Also, we can notice that, in one way or another, all the discussed varieties alter the coda consonant clusters so as to fit their speech needs.

On the other hand, if we look vertically, we can identify at least two varieties which have a unique behaviour in some respects. First of all, CamE has three distinctive features which separate it completely from the others: it is the only one to have three patterns of realization for 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 a totally different, double pattern in rendering the diphthong /ɪə/ (see 8).

(7) RP /ɜ:/ → CamE [ɛ]; [ɔ] or [a][13]

(8) RP /ɪə/ → CamE [iɛ] or [iə]

Secondly, KenE stands out by its systematic use of paragoge in dealing with illegitimate consonant clusters in the coda.

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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.

[13] See footnote 8.

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ANNEX - Table 2: Pronunciation Chart across New English African Accents[14]

Word	RP	GhanE	SLE	NigE		CamE	KenE
				NigSE	NigHE		
term	[tɜ:m]	[tɛm]	[tam]	[tam]	[tam]	[tɛm]	[tam]
thirty	[θɜ:tɪ]	[tɛti]	[tati]	[tati]	[tati]	[tɛti]	[tati]
first	[fɜ:st]	[fɛs(t)]	[fɔs]	[fɔs]	[fas]	[fɛs]	[fast(i)]
person	[pɜ:sn]	[pɛsən]	[pɔsɪn, pɛ-]	[pɔsɪn]	[pasən]	[pɛsin]	[pasən]
work	[wɜ:k]	[wɛk]	[wɔk]	[wɔk]	[wak]	[wɔk]	[wak]
journey	[dʒɜ:nɪ]	[dʒɛne]	[dʒɔne]	[dʒɔne]	[dʒane]	[dʒɔne]	[dʒane]
murder	[mɜ:də]	[mɛda]	[mɔda]	[mɔda]	[mada]	[mɔda]	[mada]
cut	[kʌt]	[kat]	[kɔt]	[kɔt]	[kat]	[kɔt]	[kat]
square	[skwɛə]	[skwea]	[skwea, -ia]	[skwea, -ia]	[skwea]	[skwɛ]	[skwea]
beer	[bɪə]	[bia]	[bia]	[bia]	[bia]	[biɛ, biə]	[bia]
teacher	[ti:ʧə]	[tiʧa]	[tiʧa]	[tiʧa]	[tiʧa]	[tiʧa]	[tiʧa]
sector	[sɛktə]	[sɛkta]	[sɛktɔ]	[sɛktɔ]	[sɛkta]	[sɛktɔ]	[sɛkta]
labour	[leɪbə]	[leba]	[lebɔ]	[lebɔ]	[leba]	[lebɔ]	[leba]
structure	[strʌkʧə]	[straktʃa]	[strɔkʧɔ]	[strɔkʧɔ]	[straktʃa]	[strɔkʧɔ]	[straktʃa]
pompous	[pʌmpəs]	[pɔmpas]	[pɔmpɔs]	[pɔmpɔs]	[pɔmpas]	[pɔmpɔs]	[pɔmpas]
forum	[fɒrəm]	[fɔram]	[fɔrɔm, -um]	[fɔrɔm, -um]	[fɔram]	[fɔrɔm]	[fɔram]
formal	[fɔ:m(ə)l]	[fɔmal]	[fɔmal]	[fɔmal]	[fɔmal]	[fɔmal]	[fɔmɔ(l)]
single	[sɪŋg(ə)l]	[siŋgəl]	[siŋgul]	[siŋgu(l)]	[siŋgu(l)]	[siŋgəl]	[siŋgɔ(l)]
try	[traɪ]	[trai]	[tRai]	[trai]	[tərai]	[trai]	[t(ə)rai]
quickly	[kwɪklɪ]	[kwikli]	[kwikli]	[kwikli]	[kwikili]	[kwikli]	[kwikili]
told us	[təʊldəs]	[tol as]	[tol ɔs]	[tol ɔs]	[tol as]	[tol ɔs]	[tɔldə as]
bring	[brɪŋ]	[briŋ]	[briŋg]	[briŋg]	[briŋg]	[briŋ]	[briŋg(i)]

[14] Source: Slightly adapted from Simo Bobda (263).

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