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## Stress and Word-Class Shifts in Nigerian English: A Phonology-Morphology Interface Analysis

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### Abstract

This study examines the interaction between lexical stress placement and morphological category interpretation in Nigerian English, with particular attention to how prosodic restructuring affects noun-verb contrasts, compound cohesion, and lexical parsing. While previous studies have documented stress variation in Nigerian English, less attention has been paid to how such variation operates at the phonology-morphology interface and how listeners interpret stress as a morphological cue. Drawing on 320 stress-sensitive lexical tokens from recorded speech, broadcast media, academic presentations, and social media, alongside a perception-based task involving 80 respondents, the study analyses patterns of stress realisation and interpretation across lexical domains. Using Metrical Phonology as an explanatory framework, the analysis shows that stress variation in Nigerian English is systematic but non-uniform, reflecting L1-influenced prosodic templates, pragmatic prominence, and reinterpretation of morphological boundaries. The findings identify a continuum of outcomes ranging from maintained stress contrasts, through reduced contrast and variable alternation, to category neutralisation in a subset of stress-dependent noun-verb pairs. Rather than indicating communicative failure, these patterns reveal a reweighting of stress from a stable morphological signal to a more general marker of prominence. The study contributes by demonstrating how stress variation reshapes morphological signalling in Nigerian English and by integrating production and perception evidence to clarify its interpretive consequences.

**Keywords:** Nigerian English, Stress Misplacement, Phonology-Morphology Interface, Metrical Phonology

### Introduction

The interaction between phonology and morphology has long occupied a central position in linguistic inquiry, particularly regarding how stress placement contributes to word-internal category distinctions. In English, stress functions not merely as a prosodic feature, but as a morphologically relevant cue that differentiates lexical categories and supports word-formation processes. A classic illustration is the noun-verb alternation in pairs such as *REcord* (noun) and *reCORD* (verb), where stress placement correlates with morphological class rather than sentence-level configuration (Chomsky & Halle, 1968; Plag, 2003). In standard varieties of English, stress-based alternations serve a crucial role in distinguishing lexical categories, with nouns typically receiving primary stress on the initial syllable and verbs on a subsequent syllable. These patterns are best understood within the phonology-morphology interface, where phonological prominence interacts with morphological structure to encode category distinctions, as illustrated in classic noun-verb pairs such as *REcord* (noun) versus *reCORD* (verb) (Aronoff & Fudeman, 2011; Plag, 2003). Although stress may facilitate real-time processing and interpretation, the contrast is fundamentally word-internal and morphological rather than syntactic. In Nigerian English, however, these conventions frequently diverge from those observed in native varieties. As a second-language variety shaped by sustained contact with indigenous Nigerian languages, Nigerian English exhibits reduced prominence contrasts and a tendency toward more even syllabic timing, in contrast to the stress-timed rhythm characteristic of British and American English (Gut, 2012; Jowitt, 2020). Consequently, stress may be assigned in ways that do not consistently align with conventional noun-verb alternations.

Such variation has direct implications for morphological interpretation, particularly in lexical items where stress serves as the primary marker of category distinction. For example, realising *import* as *imPORT* rather than *IMport*

may obscure the noun-verb contrast, resulting in ambiguity at the level of word classification rather than sentence structure (Udofot, 2017; Ekpe, 2021). These tendencies suggest that stress placement in Nigerian English is often shaped by rhythmic preferences rather than inherited morphological stress rules. This study therefore examines stress misplacement in Nigerian English within the framework of the phonology-morphology interface, focusing on how deviations from standard stress patterns affect word-class distinctions. By situating the analysis at the level of morphological structure rather than syntax, the study provides a more precise account of stress-induced category shifts and their communicative consequences in Nigerian English.

### Aim and Objectives of the Study

This study aims to investigate the role of stress placement in shaping morphological category distinctions in Nigerian English, with particular attention to how prosodic variation influences word-class identification.

The specific objectives are to:

1. Examine stress patterns across major Nigerian linguistic groups and their influence on morphological category marking in Nigerian English (e.g., *REcord/reCORD*, *IMport/imPORT*).
2. Assess the effects of stress misplacement on word-class recognition and intelligibility in spoken and written communication, with particular attention to morphological interpretation.
3. Explore stress behaviour in morphologically complex items, including compounds, borrowed forms, and academic expressions, to clarify how prosodic prominence interacts with word-internal structure.
4. Propose pedagogically relevant insights for pronunciation and stress-focused instruction aimed at improving awareness of morphological cues encoded through stress in Nigerian English.

### Word-Class Distinction and Stress Placement

#### Standard English Stress Patterns

Stress plays a crucial role in distinguishing between nouns and verbs in English. Typically, nouns are stressed on the first syllable, while verbs receive stress on the second syllable (Gussenhoven, 2004). This distinction aids in meaning differentiation and grammatical clarity. For example, words like *contract*, *permit*, and *survey* change in meaning based on stress placement, demonstrating the importance of suprasegmental features in English phonology.

#### Common Stress Misplacement in Nigerian English

In Nigerian English, lexical stress patterns frequently diverge from those associated with Standard British English. These deviations are often linked to broader prosodic preferences and multilingual phonological environments rather than isolated pronunciation errors. One recurring pattern involves the weakening or loss of stress alternation in noun-verb pairs, where stress functions as a grammatical cue in Standard British English.

**Table 2.1** presents selected lexical items in which stress-based noun-verb contrasts are reduced or neutralised in Nigerian English, illustrating the resulting effects at the phonology-morphology interface.

**Table 2.1: Stress-Based Noun-Verb Neutralisation in Nigerian English**

Word	Standard British English (Noun / Verb)	Nigerian English Pattern	Interface Effect
Record	REcord / reCORD	reCORD (noun and verb)	Category neutralisation
Present	PREsent / preSENT	preSENT (noun and verb)	Reduced contrast
Contract	CONtract / conTRACT	conTRACT (noun and verb)	Morphological ambiguity
Import	IMport / imPORT	imPORT (noun and verb)	Stress neutralization
Permit	PERmit / perMIT	perMIT (noun and verb)	Category collapse
Contest	CONtest / conTEST	conTEST (noun and verb)	Loss of alternation
Survey	SURvey / surVEY	surVEY (noun and verb)	Verb-like stress generalization

The interface effects identified in the table reflect closely related but analytically distinct outcomes. **Category neutralisation** refers to the reduced reliability of stress as a cue for grammatical distinction, particularly in varieties of English where stress alternation is not consistently maintained in everyday usage (Wells, 1982; Cruttenden, 2014). **Category collapse**, by contrast, denotes a more advanced convergence in which noun-verb

differentiation is no longer perceptible through stress placement alone, a pattern that has been observed in several postcolonial Englishes, including Nigerian English (Jibril, 1982; Udofot, 2003).

The effects described as **reduced contrast** and **loss of alternation** represent intermediate stages along this continuum, where stress variation remains theoretically available within the English system but is variably realised in practice due to local prosodic preferences and multilingual phonological influence (Gut, 2004; Schneider, 2007). In such contexts, stress functions more as a general marker of prominence than as a stable morphosyntactic signal, leading to interpretive reliance on syntactic position and contextual cues rather than stress placement alone.

### **Phonological Factors Contributing to Stress Misplacement in Nigerian English** **Indigenous Prosodic Influence and Linguistic Transfer**

Empirical evidence indicates that stress placement in Nigerian English is strongly shaped by prosodic patterns transferred from indigenous languages. Melefa and Okenmuo (2023), in a study of English language teachers in Anambra State, report that a substantial proportion of speakers exhibit stress patterns traceable to their tonal linguistic backgrounds, resulting in deviations from Standard British English stress conventions.

Many Nigerian languages, including Yoruba, Igbo, and Hausa, employ tone, rather than stress, to distinguish lexical meaning, with pitch variation operating independently of syllable prominence (Akmajian et al., 2010). When speakers of such languages acquire English, stress may be distributed more evenly across syllables or shifted rightward, reflecting the influence of tonal and syllable-based prosodic systems. This transfer affects words whose lexical category is signalled primarily by stress, such as *PERmit/perMIT* or *REcord/reCORD*, leading to category ambiguity at the morphological level.

### **Syllable-Timed Rhythm**

Building on this transfer effect, Udofot (2003) observes that Nigerian English exhibits a predominantly syllable-timed rhythm. This rhythmic organisation weakens the prominence hierarchy essential to English stress patterns, particularly in polysyllabic words, where stress placement becomes less predictable and less contrastive.

### **Progressive Stress Shift**

Atoye (1991) further notes a tendency toward progressive or rightward stress shift in Nigerian English. Forms such as *hyGIENE*, with stress realised on a later syllable, exemplify how local prosodic preferences influence stress assignment beyond canonical English patterns.

### **Overgeneralisation of Stress Patterns**

In addition, speakers may overgeneralise non-initial stress placement across lexical items, resulting in forms such as *perFUME* instead of *PERfume* (Akinola & Oladipupo, 2021). This overextension reflects attempts to regularise stress in ways consistent with local phonological habits.

### **Educational and Sociolinguistic Factors**

Beyond phonological transfer, educational and sociolinguistic conditions also contribute to stress misplacement in Nigerian English. Research on English prosodic instruction in Nigerian schools indicates that suprasegmental features such as stress and rhythm receive limited attention in pronunciation teaching, which can hinder learners' acquisition of standard stress patterns and prosodic competence (Adegbite, 1995). Moreover, sociolinguistic norms within speech communities, including locally accepted stress realisations and communicative preferences, can reinforce non-standard stress patterns, making them prevalent in everyday usage and pedagogical contexts.

### **Communicative Effects of Stress Misplacement in Nigerian English**

Stress misplacement in Nigerian English has its most immediate consequences at the level of lexical interpretation and communicative clarity, rather than at sentence-level syntax. In English, stress serves as a salient cue for signalling word-class distinctions and highlighting contrast within lexically complex forms. When expected stress patterns are altered, listeners may experience temporary ambiguity in identifying a word's intended lexical category, even though the syntactic structure of the sentence remains intact.

Rather than causing grammatical breakdown, stress deviation primarily affects how words are processed and interpreted in real-time communication, especially in spoken interaction.

### **Lexical and Semantic Ambiguity in Interpretation**

Misplaced stress can obscure intended meaning by weakening the perceptual distinction between noun and verb forms. For instance, *REcord* (noun) and *reCORD* (verb) are morphologically differentiated in Standard British English through stress placement (Roach, 2009). When this contrast is neutralised, listeners may momentarily misclassify the word's lexical category, resulting in ambiguity at the level of meaning interpretation without any alteration to sentence structure.

Such ambiguity is resolved pragmatically through context, but its occurrence highlights the communicative role of stress as an interpretive cue rather than a syntactic determinant.

### Effects on Spoken Communication and Listener Processing

In spoken discourse, stress functions as part of the listener's predictive processing system, guiding expectations about word class and meaning (Jenkins, 2000). In Nigerian English, forms such as *import* realised as *imPORT* regardless of grammatical category may initially mislead listeners, particularly in formal, academic, or professional settings where reliance on stress contrasts is higher.

These effects remain interpretive rather than structural: listeners adjust their understanding based on surrounding syntactic and semantic cues, demonstrating that stress misplacement influences comprehension without disrupting grammatical well-formedness.

### Morphological Implications for the Phonology-Morphology Interface

Beyond communicative consequences, stress misplacement in Nigerian English has important implications for how the phonology-morphology interface operates in postcolonial varieties of English. In stress-alternating systems such as Standard British English, stress functions as a morphological exponent, encoding category distinctions within the lexicon. In Nigerian English, however, this exponent shows signs of weakening or reanalysis. This section therefore shifts from effects on communication to implications for morphological representation and processing.

### Reanalysis of Stress as a Morphological Cue

The reduced reliability of stress alternation suggests that stress is no longer consistently mapped onto morphological category distinctions in Nigerian English. While forms such as *REcord/reCORD* remain theoretically contrastive within the English system, their realisation indicates a partial decoupling of stress from morphological signalling (Plag, 2003; Aronoff & Fudeman, 2011).

As a result, morphological category identification increasingly depends on syntactic position and contextual interpretation, rather than on prosodic prominence alone.

### Interface-Level Neutralisation and Morphological Processing

In cases where stress contrast is neutralised, listeners and speakers engage in morphological reinterpretation, treating stress as a general marker of prominence rather than a category-defining feature. Words such as *contest* or *permit*, when realised with final stress across contexts, illustrate how phonological prominence can lose its morphosyntactic specificity while remaining communicatively functional.

This pattern reflects an interface-level adjustment rather than a phonological deficiency: the phonological system remains systematic, but its interaction with morphology is reorganised to align with local prosodic preferences and multilingual influence (Udofot, 2017; Ekpe, 2021).

### Empirical Evidence of Stress Misplacement and Morphological Ambiguity

#### Corpus-Based Studies

Stress misplacement in Nigerian English reflects the influence of indigenous languages on English pronunciation, often causing morphological ambiguity rather than syntactic disruption. Oladipupo (2021) analysed 194 lexical items and found that young Nigerians acquiring English as a first or second language frequently deviated from Standard English stress patterns. These deviations, shaped by the syllable-timed rhythm of many indigenous languages, led to confusion in word-class identification, particularly in noun-verb alternations.

Similarly, Orlu-Orlu and Dagba (2023) examined Tiv-English speakers and observed that stress shifts in multi-syllabic words sometimes obscured the morphological category, such as nouns versus verbs, without altering the syntactic structure of sentences. Their findings demonstrate that stress serves as a morphological cue, and deviations affect how listeners interpret word-internal category distinctions.

Observations from classrooms and media contexts further confirm that indigenous language prosody systematically influences stress placement, affecting the perception of morphological boundaries and word-class assignment, rather than sentence-level syntax.

#### Experimental Studies

Experimental evidence underscores the functional impact of stress misplacement on morphological interpretation. Faleye (2022) reported that inconsistent stress placement among Nigerian English speakers, including teachers, often resulted in word-class misidentification, highlighting the need for phonological training focused on morphological cues.

Although Guion et al. (2003) studied stress perception in nonwords in a non-Nigerian context, their work illustrates the cognitive challenge of mapping stress-timed English patterns onto a syllable-timed prosody, a

challenge mirrored in Nigerian English. Perception and listening tests with Nigerian English speakers show that misplaced stress frequently obscures morphological distinctions, particularly noun-verb alternations, affecting comprehension and category recognition.

### Implications for Nigerian English

The corpus and experimental evidence collectively highlight the systematic nature of stress misplacement in Nigerian English and its effect on morphological interpretation. Stress deviations primarily influence word-internal structure and category recognition, rather than sentence-level syntax. These findings point to the necessity of targeted phonological instruction that emphasises stress as a morphological cue, improving word-class identification and communicative clarity in both spoken and written English.

### Research Gaps and Future Directions

Despite extensive documentation of stress misplacement in Nigerian English, several gaps remain. Many studies overlook dialectal variations (e.g., Yoruba, Igbo, Hausa) that shape stress patterns, necessitating comparative analyses of regional influences. Research on real-time intelligibility of stress misplacement in live interactions is limited, particularly across different social and formal contexts. Additionally, while some pedagogical interventions have been proposed, there is a lack of large-scale evaluation of their effectiveness in enhancing morphological recognition. Future research should address these gaps by conducting dialectal comparisons, testing morphological intelligibility in live communication, and piloting phonologically informed training programs.

### Theoretical Framework: Metrical Phonology

Metrical Phonology, originally developed by Liberman and Prince (1977) and further refined by Hayes (1995), provides a robust framework for analysing stress placement in English. This theory explains how hierarchical stress patterns within words determine prosodic prominence and interact with morphological structure. In Standard English, stress placement often signals lexical category distinctions, particularly in noun-verb alternations such as *REcord* (noun) versus *reCORD* (verb), where the stress pattern is a morphological cue rather than a syntactic one (Plag, 2003).

In Nigerian English, deviations from Standard English stress patterns frequently occur due to transfer effects from indigenous tonal and syllable-timed languages, where pitch and rhythm rather than stress typically encode meaning (Gut, 2012; Jowitt, 2020). These deviations can obscure morphological cues, making word-class identification, such as distinguishing nouns from verbs, less transparent to listeners or readers, even though sentence-level syntax remains intact.

Applying Metrical Phonology to Nigerian English allows researchers to account for lexical stress misplacement in terms of prosodic structure interacting with morphology. The framework emphasises the phonology-morphology interface, demonstrating that stress patterns are crucial for morphological disambiguation. Pedagogically, this approach informs targeted instruction on stress placement to enhance learners' ability to correctly identify word-classes, thereby improving communication clarity in both spoken and written contexts.

### Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative, descriptive research design, supplemented by a small-scale perception-based component, and the focus is on how lexical stress placement is realised and interpreted in Nigerian English across different communicative contexts. The methodological orientation prioritises naturally occurring speech and listener interpretation rather than instrumental or acoustic phonetic measurement.

The design is intended to provide interpretive insight into stress behaviour and morphological signalling, rather than to generate statistically generalisable claims or predictive models.

### Data Collection

The primary data consist of spoken Nigerian English drawn from a range of natural and semi-natural contexts. Emphasis was placed on observing stress placement as it occurs in everyday usage rather than under laboratory-controlled conditions.

Four main sources of spoken data were utilised:

1. **Student Presentations and Lectures**

Audio recordings were drawn from undergraduate and postgraduate classroom presentations, seminar discussions, and lectures in Nigerian tertiary institutions. These settings were selected because they represent relatively formal speech produced by educated users of Nigerian English. Only segments containing clearly perceptible lexical stress were selected.

2. **Media Content**

Selected excerpts from Nigerian films, television programmes, and talk shows were analysed. These provided scripted and semi-scripted speech reflecting widely intelligible Nigerian English usage, particularly in stress-sensitive lexical items.

### 3. Professional Communication

Publicly available speeches, panel discussions, and professional interactions in domains such as law, medicine, education, and business were included to represent institutional uses of English.

### 4. Social Media Communication

Short audio and video clips from platforms such as WhatsApp, Facebook, TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter were examined to capture informal and spontaneous speech. Only publicly shared or consented materials were used; text-only posts were excluded.

Across all sources, a total of 320 lexical tokens involving stress-sensitive items were purposively identified. Selection was based on relevance to stress placement and potential morphological interpretation rather than random sampling.

## Transcription and Analysis Procedure

All tokens were transcribed using *broad phonetic transcription*, with particular attention to syllable structure and the location of perceived primary stress. Stress identification was based on auditory judgement, guided by established prominence cues such as relative loudness, syllable duration, and pitch movement. To enhance consistency and reduce subjective bias, each token was subjected to repeated listening across different sessions, and stress judgements were cross-checked before final classification.

No acoustic or instrumental measurements were employed. This methodological choice reflects the study's qualitative and descriptive orientation, which is grounded in metrical phonology and listener-oriented interpretation rather than experimental or laboratory phonetics. The focus is therefore on how stress patterns are perceived and function within the phonology-morphology interface of Nigerian English, rather than on fine-grained acoustic correlates of stress.

## Perception-Based Component

To complement the corpus-based analysis, a limited perception-oriented task was conducted to examine how Nigerian English speakers interpret stress placement in relation to grammatical category.

### Participants

Eighty (80) participants took part. All were final-year students or graduates of English or closely related programmes, selected to ensure familiarity with grammatical categories and metalinguistic concepts.

### Listening Task

Forty (40) participants completed a listening task involving short, recorded sentences containing target words produced with varying stress placements. Participants were asked to indicate the perceived grammatical category or intended meaning of the target item based on auditory cues.

### Word-Level Perception Task

Another forty (40) participants categorised isolated words or short phrases (for example, as noun or verb) based solely on perceived stress placement. This task explored tendencies in grammatical interpretation associated with stress perception.

The experimental component was deliberately limited in scale and complexity. Its purpose was illustrative and exploratory, not statistical generalisation.

## Methodological Scope and Limitations

The study does not employ acoustic instrumentation, inferential statistics, or large-scale corpus modelling. Consequently, its findings are interpretive rather than predictive. While the combination of naturalistic data and perception tasks provides a grounded basis for analysis, the results are best understood as context-sensitive observations, rather than universal claims about Nigerian English.

## Sample Stimuli and Qualitative Outcome Summary

The perception tasks employed carefully selected stress-sensitive lexical items drawn directly from the corpus analysed in this study. The stimuli were designed to reflect naturally occurring Nigerian English usage rather than constructed or laboratory-style contrasts.

For the sentence-based listening task, participants heard short sentences containing target words realised with differing stress placements. These included noun-verb alternations and stress-dependent lexical items such as *record*, *import*, *advice/advise*, and *comfort*. Illustrative examples of sentence frames include:

1. *They will reCORD the lecture tomorrow.*

2. *The reCORD was missing from the file.*
3. *She needs good adVICE before deciding.*
4. *They adVISE students to register early.*

In each case, the segmental content and syntactic structure of the sentence provided minimal disambiguating cues, such that participants' interpretations relied primarily on perceived stress placement.

For the word-level perception task, isolated words or short phrases were presented without sentential context. These included items such as *record*, *import*, *contract*, *advice/advise*, as well as selected compound nouns (e.g. *textbook*, *watchman*) realised with alternative stress patterns. Participants were asked to indicate the grammatical category or intended interpretation they associated with each form based on auditory prominence.

Responses were interpreted qualitatively rather than scored numerically. Listener judgements were examined for consistency, convergence, and divergence in relation to stress placement, with particular attention to cases where stress alone failed to yield a stable morphological interpretation.

Overall, the perception tasks revealed patterned tendencies rather than uniform outcomes. In many cases, participants successfully identified intended meanings despite non-canonical stress placement, drawing on contextual and lexical familiarity. However, in stress-dependent noun-verb pairs, variable interpretations and hesitation were recurrent, especially where stress contrasts were neutralised. These observations support the broader analytic claim of the study: that in Nigerian English, stress functions less reliably as a categorical morphological cue and more as a general marker of prominence, with interpretation increasingly mediated by contextual and syntactic information rather than by stress alone.

The perception component is therefore intended as illustrative evidence of listener-oriented effects, complementing the production data and reinforcing the interpretive analysis of the phonology-morphology interface in Nigerian English, rather than as a basis for statistical generalisation.

### Data Presentation

This section presents representative lexical items drawn from the 320 stress-sensitive tokens identified. The focus is on attested Nigerian English usage rather than idealised textbook contrasts. Each example occurred across multiple recordings or contexts, although the analysis does not rely on numerical frequency counts.

The data illustrates recurrent patterns of stress reassignment, neutralisation, and reinterpretation relevant to the phonology-morphology interface. These patterns are analysed within the framework of metrical phonology as systematic prosodic restructuring rather than random pronunciation error.

### Compound Nouns with Stress Shift

Compound nouns formed from two lexical items normally carry primary stress on the first element in SBE, reflecting left-headed prosodic structure. In Nigerian English, however, stress frequently shifts to the second element. This shift is significant because compound stress in English is closely tied to *lexical category formation*: first-element stress signals lexical compounding, while second-element stress may suggest phrasal interpretation. The items below represent recurrent compound patterns observed across academic speech, media productions, and informal interaction.

Word	SBE Stress	Nigerian English Stress	Primary Source Context	Observed Effect
Textbook	TEXT-book	text-BOOK	Academic (student presentations)	Compounding weakened
Bikeman	BIKE-man	bike-MAN	Informal / Social media	Reanalysis as agentive phrase
Watchman	WATCH-man	watch-MAN	Media / Professional	Prosodic deviation
Watchnight	WATCH-night	watch-NIGHT	Religious / Media	Rhythmic disruption
Watermelon	WA-ter-mel-on	water-MEL-on	Informal speech	Alters perceived word structure
Nutmeg	NUT-meg	nut-MEG	Informal speech	No major syntactic effect
Supermarket	SU-per-mar-ket	super-MAR-ket	Media / Informal	Meaning retained
Sitting room	SIT-ting room	sit-TING room	Academic / Informal	Compounding weakened
Bathroom	BATH-room	bath-ROOM	Informal speech	Non-native stress
Part-time	PART-time	part-TIME	Professional	Prosodic deviation
Skipping rope	SKIP-ping rope	skipping-ROPE	Informal	Unnatural compound rhythm
Bestman	BEST-man	best-MAN	Social / Ceremonial	Phrase-like interpretation

In these cases, rightward stress weakens the prosodic cues that normally signal compound nounhood. As a result, some forms are perceived as syntactic phrases rather than single lexical items, illustrating a clear interaction between prosodic structure and morphological interpretation.

In SBE, compound nouns typically form a single prosodic word with a left-headed metrical structure. The Nigerian English patterns observed here suggest alternative metrical parsing, in which compounds are not consistently compressed into a single foot. Instead, prominence is frequently assigned to the rightmost element, reflecting right-headed foot construction or prosodic rebracketing. This restructuring has morphological consequences, as the loss of left-headedness weakens the formal signal of lexical compounding.

#### Academic and Institutional Expressions with Stress Shift

Academic and institutional expressions were especially prominent in the corpus, especially in student presentations and professional discourse. These forms are morphologically complex and often rely on fixed stress for lexical recognition. In Nigerian English, stress is frequently reassigned to the second element, perceived as most informationally salient.

Expression	SBE Stress	Nigerian English Stress	Source Context	Observed Effect
Final year	FI-nal year	final-YEAR	Academic	Reduced structural clarity
JSS 1	JSS one	jss-ONE	Academic	Reorganised prominence
SS 3	S-S THREE	SS-THREE	Academic	Same pattern
First class	FIRST class	first-CLASS	Academic	Stress reanalysis
Second class	SECOND class	second-CLASS	Academic	Meaning retained
Third class	THIRD class	third-CLASS	Academic	Stress redistribution
Extra-large	EX-tra large	extra-LARGE	Professional	Meaning unchanged
Underage	UN-der age	under-AGE	Media	Phonological shift
Sociolinguistics	so-ci-o-lin-GUIS-tics	so-ci-o-lin-guis-TICS	Academic	Final-syllable prominence

Although these expressions do not always result in grammatical misinterpretation, the stress shifts show that morphological structure is often overridden by pragmatic prominence. Stress therefore functions less as a fixed lexical property and more as a discourse-level cue, a pattern that recurs across speakers and reflects shared prosodic conventions rather than individual variation.

Within Metrical Phonology, these expressions show reassignment of metrical heads based on informational salience. Elements such as *year*, *class*, or numerical labels attract primary stress, even when they are not stress-bearing in SBE. This indicates a shift from lexically fixed stress rules to prominence driven by semantic or pragmatic weighting.

In metrical terms, the foot structure is reorganised so that the most informative element becomes the head, overriding inherited stress patterns. This supports the view that Nigerian English stress placement is prosodically motivated, not random.

### Modern and Technological Terms

Newer lexical items, especially from digital communication, consistently show systematic reallocation of stress. These forms were mainly drawn from social media clips and informal speech recordings.

Word	SBE Stress	Nigerian English Stress	Source Context	Observed Effect
WhatsApp	WHATS-app	what-SAPP	Social media	Minor listener confusion
Facebook	FACE-book	face-BOOK	Social media / Media	Phonological variation
Online	ON-line	on-LINE	Informal	Rhythmic shift

These items illustrate how new or borrowed lexical forms are integrated into Nigerian English through metrical adaptation. Rather than preserving original English stress patterns, speakers impose familiar rhythmic structures, often favouring final-foot prominence. In metrical terms, these words are reanalysed as right-headed prosodic words, reflecting accommodation to existing stress templates.

### Words with Stress-Induced Meaning or Category Neutralisation

The most direct evidence for the phonology-morphology interface appears in items that contrast noun-verb meanings through stress in SBE. Rather than consistently preserving this contrast, Nigerian English frequently neutralises stress, leading to category ambiguity.

Word	SBE (noun/verb) Contrast	Nigerian English Pattern	Source Context	Effect
Advice / Advise	ADvice / adVISE	adVICE/adVISE (both)	Academic / Professional	Category ambiguity
Regret	REgret / reGRET	reGRET (both)	Media	Interpretation affected
Romance	ROmance / roMANCE	roMANCE (both)	Media	Structural ambiguity
Comfort	COMfort / comFORT	comFORT (both)	Informal	Reduced distinction
Record	REcord/reCORD	reCORD (both)	Academic	Noun-verb confusion

These cases are crucial: although fewer in number than compound shifts, they directly demonstrate how stress fails to serve as a reliable morphological signal. The interface issue here is not absence of alternation in principle, but its functional instability in actual usage.

In SBE, noun-verb alternations rely on distinct metrical configurations. The Nigerian English data show a collapse of this distinction, with both categories sharing similar foot structures. Stress therefore operates as general prominence rather than as a morphosyntactic marker, leading to category neutralisation rather than contrastive alternation.

### Other Common Words with Unusual Stress Placement

These items occurred repeatedly in everyday speech and academic contexts, but do not always cause semantic breakdown.

Word	SBE Stress	Nigerian English Stress	Source Context	Effect
Letterhead	LET-ter-head	letter-HEAD	Professional	Non-standard
Patience	PA-tience	pa-TIENCE	Informal	Phonetic shift
Gladys	GLA-dys	gla-DYS	Informal	Name stress variation
Senseman	SENSE-man	sense-MAN	Informal	Meaning retained
Hot water	HOT water	hot-WATER	Informal	Rhythmic oddity
Jackpot	JACK-pot	jack-POT	Media	Phonological only
Recorder	re-CORD-er	re-cord-ER	Academic	Category confusion
Recording	re-CORD-ing	re-cord-ING	Academic	Interpretation affected
Copycat	COP-y-cat	copy-CAT	Informal	Stress reanalysis
Workshop	WORK-shop	work-SHOP	Academic	Verb–noun ambiguity

The data reinforces a broader pattern in which flexible foot construction and rightward head preference reshape the interaction between stress and morphological interpretation. Although these patterns do not always lead to misunderstanding, they show a consistent tendency toward rightward prominence across the dataset.

Taken together, these data demonstrate that the phonology-morphology interface in Nigerian English is characterised less by stable contrastive alternation and more by stress reinterpretation, neutralisation, and reweighting. The study therefore does not merely catalogue misplacements, but shows how prosodic restructuring affects morphological signalling, including noun-verb distinctions, compounding, and category recognition.

### Discussion

The findings indicate that non-canonical stress placement in Nigerian English is recurrent and patterned across speakers and communicative contexts. Stress reassignment frequently favours rightward prominence, particularly in compound nouns, institutional expressions, and stress-sensitive lexical pairs.

Importantly, the effects observed are *variable in impact*. While many stress shifts do not result in overt misunderstanding, they affect the reliability of stress as a morphological cue, especially in contexts where stress is expected to signal lexical category or compound structure.

The discussion therefore interprets stress variation as a *feature of prosodic organisation in Nigerian English*, rather than as widespread communicative failure.

### Compound Nouns

Compound nouns exhibit the highest concentration of stress reassignment. While overall lexical meaning is often preserved, the shift in stress disrupts the expected left-headed prosodic structure associated with English compounding. This prosodic reorganisation weakens compound cohesion and, in some cases, encourages reinterpretation of compounds as phrasal sequences. The findings indicate that stress functions less reliably as a morphological marker of compounding in Nigerian English, revealing a clear interaction between prosodic structure and morphological interpretation.

### Academic and Institutional Terms

In academic and institutional expressions, stress reassignment frequently targets elements perceived as informationally salient, such as class labels, numerical identifiers, or evaluative terms. Although these shifts do not always result in misunderstanding, they affect fluency and perceptual clarity in formal contexts where stress is conventionally expected to signal fixed lexical structure. The data suggests that pragmatic prominence often overrides inherited stress patterns, leading to flexible metrical parsing within morphologically complex expressions.

### Modern Terms

Modern and technological lexical items display particularly fluid stress patterns, reflecting processes of prosodic adaptation within Nigerian English. Rather than preserving canonical English stress templates, speakers tend to impose familiar rhythmic structures, often favouring rightward prominence. These patterns contribute to prosodic divergence but do not necessarily impede intelligibility, indicating that stress reassignment serves as a mechanism for integrating new lexical items into existing phonological systems.

### Stress-Induced Category Neutralisation

The most consequential effects of stress variation emerge in noun-verb pairs that rely on stress contrasts for morphological differentiation in Standard British English. In Nigerian English, these contrasts are frequently neutralised, resulting in ambiguity in morphological category interpretation. Stress therefore operates less as a reliable cue for word-class distinction and more as general prominence, leading to reduced contrastive alternation and occasional difficulty in lexical category identification.

### Overall Pattern

Although the study does not rely on statistical quantification, the recurrence of these patterns across speakers, communicative contexts, and lexical domains confirms that stress variation is a defining prosodic characteristic of Nigerian English rather than an isolated performance phenomenon. Taken together, the findings show that stress reassignment, neutralisation, and reinterpretation reshape how prosodic structure interacts with morphological signalling, reinforcing the centrality of the phonology-morphology interface in the description of Nigerian English.

### Variation and Counter-Patterns in Stress Realisation

Although the data reveals widespread stress reassignment and neutralisation, these patterns are not categorical across all speakers or lexical items. In both naturalistic speech and perception tasks, some speakers maintain stress contrasts that align with Standard British English, particularly in high-frequency noun-verb pairs and in more formal speech styles. This indicates that stress-based morphological contrasts remain available within the Nigerian English system, even if they are not consistently realised.

The presence of such counter-patterns suggests that stress variation in Nigerian English operates along a gradient rather than representing a wholesale restructuring of the stress system. Lexical domain, communicative context, speaker background, and familiarity with standard pronunciation norms all influence whether stress functions contrastively or merely as general prominence.

Acknowledging these maintained contrasts is crucial, as it underscores that category neutralisation reflects probabilistic prosodic behaviour rather than categorical loss. The interface effects observed in this study therefore arise from variable cue weighting, not from the absence of contrastive stress in principle.

### Summary

This study investigated patterns of lexical stress variation in Nigerian English, with particular attention to compound nouns, academic and institutional expressions, modern lexical items, and stress-based noun-verb contrasts. The findings reveal a consistent tendency toward rightward stress prominence and flexible metrical structuring, which reduces the reliability of stress as a marker of morphological category. Although lexical meaning is generally maintained, stress contrasts that are morphologically contrastive in Standard British English are frequently weakened or neutralised in Nigerian English usage.

The major findings are summarised as follows:

#### i. Compound Nouns

Compound nouns such as *textbook*, *watchman*, and *sitting room* commonly attract primary stress on the second constituent. This deviates from the left-headed stress pattern typical of Standard British English compounds and weakens prosodic cues that normally signal lexical unity. While semantic interpretation is usually preserved, the altered stress pattern reduces compound cohesion and encourages phrasal rather than lexical parsing.

#### ii. Academic and Institutional Expressions

Frequently used academic and institutional expressions, including *final year*, *first class*, and *SS3*, show systematic stress realignment toward elements perceived as most informationally salient. These shifts disrupt expected rhythmic patterns in formal discourse, where stress is conventionally associated with fixed lexical organisation.

#### iii. Modern and Technological Vocabulary

Recently introduced lexical items such as *WhatsApp*, *Facebook*, and *online* exhibit variable stress placement. Instead of retaining inherited English stress patterns, speakers often adapt these forms to familiar rhythmic templates, with a noticeable preference for final stress. This reflects an ongoing process of prosodic integration within Nigerian English.

#### iv. Stress-Based Category Neutralisation

In lexical pairs where Standard British English relies on stress to distinguish grammatical category or meaning (e.g. *ADvice* vs. *adVISE*, *REcord* vs. *reCORD*), Nigerian English speakers frequently neutralise these contrasts. Consequently, stress functions less reliably as a cue for word-class identification, increasing the potential for category ambiguity during interpretation.

Taken together, these findings indicate a systematic pattern of stress reassignment in Nigerian English, shaped by local prosodic preferences, varying levels of exposure to standard pronunciation norms, and broader multilingual

phonological environments. This pattern underscores the reduced role of stress as a stable morphological signal and highlights the dynamic nature of the phonology-morphology interface in Nigerian English.

### Conclusion

The study concludes that stress variation is a salient phonological characteristic of Nigerian English. Stress functions less as a fixed lexical property and more as a general marker of prominence or emphasis. The observed effects are primarily morphological, influencing word-class interpretation and compound cohesion without altering syntactic structure.

While stress contrasts are frequently weakened or neutralised, the study does not claim their complete absence in Nigerian English. Rather, the findings point to a reorganisation of cue reliability at the phonology-morphology interface, where stress competes with syntactic position and contextual information in word-class interpretation. Given the qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, these conclusions are offered as descriptive insights into stress behaviour rather than as claims of deficiency or error.

### Pedagogical and Research Implications

In light of the findings, and within the limits of the scope of study, the following implications are suggested:

1. **Pedagogical Awareness**  
English language instructors may benefit from increased awareness of how stress variation affects morphological interpretation, particularly in noun-verb contrasts and compound forms.
2. **Pronunciation Practice**  
Learners may find focused listening and pronunciation activities on lexical stress helpful, especially in formal or cross-variety communicative contexts.
3. **Teacher Education (Exploratory)**  
Teacher-training programmes may consider incorporating more explicit discussion of stress as a morphological cue, though further empirical research is required before broad curricular changes are proposed.
4. **Media Speech as a Research Site**  
Media and broadcast speech may serve as a useful domain for future empirical investigation into stress norms and listener expectations, rather than as an immediate target for standardisation.
5. **Further Research**  
Larger scale, instrumentally supported, and regionally differentiated studies are needed to assess intelligibility effects and variation patterns more systematically.

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