

# Realisations of the Past Tense Allomorphs by Selected Nigerian English Language Teachers

\*Adesina B. Sunday and Yetunde Comfort Fasunon

Department of English, University of Ibadan, Ibadan

\*sinadaybuk@gmail.com

## Abstract

*This study investigated the pronunciation of the regular past tense morpheme by selected Nigerian English Language teachers, with a view to determining the manifestation of this morpheme in Nigerian English. Twenty-four English Language teachers from both public and private secondary schools in Ibadan, southwestern Nigeria served as participants in this study. The data, which consisted of fifteen words with regular past tense forms, were woven into isolated sentences and a reading passage. Besides, the participants were requested to speak on a given topic. The renditions of the participants were audio tape-recorded. The participants pronounced the regular past tense morpheme '-d' or '-ed' as /d/ and /t/ in words whose bases end with a voiceless sound, as /d/ in words whose bases end with a voiced sound, and as /ed/ and /d/ in words whose bases end with either of the two alveolar plosives /t/ or /d/. Based on these findings, the study concluded that the participants' pronunciation of regular past tense words varied a little from the pronunciation of such words in Received Pronunciation.*

**Keywords:** Past tense morpheme, Allomorphs, Alveolar plosive, Nigerian English Language teachers

## Introduction

The English language is a second and a prestigious language in Nigeria. It is the nation's official language, with French as the second official language. The variety of English spoken in Nigeria is referred to as Nigerian English (NE) (Brosnaham, 1958; Banjo, 1996; Josiah, Bodunde and Robert, 2012). It performs an important function in the education sector of the country, as it is the language of instruction. It is also a compulsory subject at primary and secondary levels of education. Even at the tertiary level, it is compulsory for all undergraduates to take Use of English as a General Studies course. In secondary schools in Nigeria, English Language teachers are the ones saddled with the responsibility of teaching English in a second-language classroom. These English Language teachers are expected to demonstrate competence in written and spoken English.

One of the aspects taught by these teachers is the morphophonemics of English. Morphophonemics is a level of phonological analysis recognised in classical phonology to involve morpheme alternations (Ogunsiji and Sunday, 2010). The rules used in morphophonemics are referred to as morphophonemic rules. These are formal rules that guide the phonetic realisation of certain morphemes of a given language. Lieber (2009) avers that the English language inflectional endings are rendered differently depending on the surrounding phonemes. In Standard British English (SBE), the regular past tense marker '-d' or '-ed' is realised as /t/ after a

voiceless sound, as /d/ after a voiced sound and as /d/ after each of the two alveolar plosives /t/ and /d/ (Al-Janaideh and Mahadin (2015)). This study investigated the pronunciation of regular past tense words by selected Nigerian English Language teachers, with Optimality Theory serving as the theoretical framework. This is to bring out the way constraints are ranked in the realisation of these allomorphs and describe the peculiarities of Nigerian English.

## Literature Review

Although the majority of the studies that examined the morphophonemic awareness of English morphology dealt with native speakers of English (Al-Janaideh and Mahadin, 2015), studies on morphophonemics have been carried out by scholars who are native speakers of other languages. Some of these studies are Hsieh (2008), Sharmini, Pei Leng, Singaram and Jusoff (2009), Al-Janaideh and Mahadin (2015) and Tamba (2016).

Hsieh (2008) conducted a study on the acquisition of English tense morphology by L1-Chinese-speaking learners of English. Using 20 L1-Chinese-speaking learners of English who have learnt English for a period of four to seven years as the sample size, the study found that only 5% and 17% L1-Chinese-speaking learners of English correctly used the regular past tense marker '-ed'. Hsieh (2008) concluded that the omission was due to the effect of the morphophonemic realisation of '-ed' as /t/ and /d/. Hsieh's (2008) position on allomorphic

variations in the English language should not be used to account for the omission of these sounds. Since these L1-Chinese-speaking learners of English are not less than 11 years of age and have learnt English for at least four years, they ought to know that English, unlike Chinese, has subject-verb agreement and tense marking. The case of wrong usage is still tenable compared to a complete omission of these allomorphs. For example, it is better to hear an L1-Chinese-speaking learner of English pronounce the morpheme '-ed' /t/ in 'looked' /lukt/ as /d/ instead of a total omission of this sound.

Unlike Hsieh (2008), Sharmini et al. (2009), discovered that Chinese speakers were able to acquire the past tense marker although the Chinese language does not have this feature. According to Sharmini et al. (2009:133), 'the L1 Chinese speakers are able to acquire the regular past-tense marker better compared to the irregular form.'

In order to check the acquisition of the English regular past tense morpheme by Arabic-speaking students in Jordan, Al-Janaideh and Mahadin (2015) carried out a study involving 120 female Arabic-speaking students. They were eighth and eleventh grades of Retaal International Academy and Islamic Educational College in Amman-Jordan. They were presented with a randomised list of 15 nonsense verbs. The findings of the study showed that morphophonemic awareness played a role in the proficiency level of Arab EFL (English as a Foreign Language) learners. The eleventh-grade students outperformed the eighth-grade students in the overall morphophonemic awareness in English past tense allomorphs /t/, /d/ and /d/.

The issue with Al-Janaideh and Mahadin (2015) concerns the preference given to wrong pronunciation over right pronunciation. In the words of Al-Janaideh and Mahadin (2015: 525), 'If the subject did not apply the past tense form properly, she was asked to repeat the past tense form to make sure that her pronunciation was clear enough.' Why should the students be asked to repeat their pronunciations only when the researchers noticed that they did not apply the past tense forms correctly? Why was this not done for correct pronunciations as well?

Furthermore, Tamba (2016) did a contrastive analysis of verb inflectional processes of English and C'lela, with a view to finding out the teaching implications. The study used a descriptive design to assess the elements of contrast in the two languages. Four thousand (4000) verbs constituted the population for the research. Stratified sampling was used to arrive at a sample size of 50 verbs. The

findings of the study revealed that there were more varieties of inflectional processes in C'lela than in English. However, Tamba (2016) merely considered the inflectional aspect of morphophonemics without due recourse to the phonological aspect of it. This stems from the descriptive design used in the study.

### Theoretical Framework

This study adopted Optimality Theory (OT) by Prince and Smolensky (1993). Optimality Theory is relevant to this study as it is useful in checking the pronunciation of regular past tense words by the selected Nigerian English Language teachers.

GEN (Generator) and EVAL (Evaluator) are two important components of OT. GEN generates a candidate set for possible analysis, while EVAL evaluates the candidates, imposing an order on the entire set (Prince and Smolensky, 2004). In OT, some constraints are more important than others, and the less important constraints can sometimes be ignored or violated. The concept of violable constraints is a major characteristic of OT and constraints differ in their ranking in different languages. The violation of the most important constraint(s) in OT is termed fatal violation and this is represented as (!). The candidate with the lesser violation of constraint(s) emerges as the optimal output and this is indicated with a pointing finger ( ) (Archangeli, 1997; Sunday, 2008; 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; Sunday and Oyatokun, 2016; Sunday and Olarewaju, 2020; Olarewaju and Sunday, 2020).

The goal of a speaker is to pronounce a word using the optimal or best pronunciation of that word (Stemberger and Bernhardt, 1997). The optimal output does not violate the most important constraint(s) but may violate the less important one(s). The elements of a ranking argument are illustrated with a tableau. According to McCarthy (2004), there are two tableaux in OT: violation tableau and comparative tableau. The goal of violation tableau is to argue for violation, whereas the goal of comparative tableau is to argue for ranking.

The constraints relevant in the discussion of the pronunciation of regular past tense words (as found in Kager (1999) and McCarthy (2002)) by the selected Nigerian English Language teachers are listed below:

- (1) MAX: Does not allow deletion of segments.
- (2) \*DEP: Output segments are not dependent on having an input correspondent; this constraint allows insertion or epenthetic sounds.
- (3) IDENT (voice): Agree in specification of

- voicing. That is, the voice of a consonant in the output should be identical with the voice of the same consonant in the input.
- (4) FAITH C or FAITH (Coda): Coda in the output must be faithful to the coda in the input.
  - (5) \*IDENT (voice): Do not agree in specification of voicing. That is, the voice of a consonant in the output should not be identical with the voice of the same consonant in the input.
  - (6) IDENT (back): Allows the occurrence of back vowels.
  - (7) \*IDENT (place): Does not permit in the output a constraint that shares the same place of articulation with the input.
  - (8) IDENT (front): Allows the occurrence of front vowels.
  - (9) \*IDENT (low): Does not permit the occurrence of low vowels in the output.

### **Methodology**

English Language teachers in both senior and junior secondary schools in Ibadan North Local Government Area (LGA), Ibadan were purposively selected for this study. The choice of English Language teachers in Ibadan was due to the prestige accorded Ibadan, as the largest city in West Africa. In the same vein, Ibadan North LGA was selected as the study location because it has the highest number of schools in the city of Ibadan.

Purposive sampling was used in selecting only English Language teachers. This is because English Language teachers are trained and skilled to teach English Language unlike the other subject teachers who only use English as a medium of instruction. Also, the choice of secondary school English Language teachers was purposive as English is a compulsory subject in all secondary schools in Nigeria and is taught only by qualified or trained English Language teachers, unlike in some primary schools where class teachers, irrespective of their qualifications, teach English Language. In addition, simple random sampling was used in selecting certain English Language teachers from the total population of English Language teachers in Ibadan North LGA, Ibadan. This sampling technique was used in an attempt to prevent the analysis from being cumbersome.

Twenty-four secondary school English Language teachers in Ibadan North LGA, Ibadan

were chosen as the sample size for this study. The public secondary schools whose English Language teachers served as participants in this study were Cheshire Secondary School, Ijokodo, St Louis Grammar School, Mokola, Anglican Commercial Grammar School, Orita- mefa, Methodist Grammar School, Ojurin, Immanuel Grammar School, Orita U.I. and Ikolaba High School, Agodi GRA. The private schools whose English Language teachers served as participants in this study were All Souls High School, Old Bodija, Starlite College, Ijokodo, Hillcrest High School, Agbowo, Walbrook College, Samonda, Maverick College, Samonda and The Apostolic Church Model College, Ijokodo.

Two English Language teachers from each of the six selected public secondary schools and two English Language teachers from each of the six selected private secondary schools, constituted the twenty- four participants used as the sample size in this study. The choice of English Language teachers of public and private secondary schools was due to the fact that English Language teachers from these sets of schools make up the total number of English Language teachers in Ibadan North LGA, Ibadan. It was, therefore, expedient to consider these two categories of teachers in a bid to arrive at fair representation.

Isolated sentences and a reading passage were the test materials used in getting the data for this study. Each of the three isolated sentences consisted of a regular past tense word, while the passage, which consisted of 90 words, had 12 regular past tense words woven into it. Each of the sampled English Language teachers was also asked to speak on the topic 'My experience as a secondary school English Language teacher' for five minutes. Furthermore, a six-item questionnaire was used to obtain the demographic details of the participants. These demographic details were information on the sex, ethnicity, academic qualification(s), course studied for the academic qualification, year of practice as an English Language teacher and school type. Responses to the test materials and the delivered speech were audio tape-recorded. Perceptual analysis of each of the tested words pronounced by the participants was done and presented using frequency and percentage. The acoustic analysis was done using Praat speech analytical software. The theoretical analysis was carried out with Optimality Theory.

### Analysis and Discussion of Findings

The socio-demographic details of the participants are presented below.

**Table 1: Socio-demographic details of the participants**

	Ethnicity			Academic qualification				Course studied for academic qualification				Teaching experience				School type	
	I	Y	O	A	B	C	D	P	Q	R	S	0-5	6-10	11-15	16 & above	G	P
Male	-	7	-	2	3	1	1	01	02	-	4	1	-	2	04	04	03
Female	2	14	1	3	7	3	4	04	01	1	11	3	3	6	05	08	09
Total	2	21	1	5	10	4	5	05	03	1	15	4	3	8	09	12	12
%	8.3	87.5	4.2	20.8	41.7	16.7	20.8	20.8	12.5	4.2	62.5	16.7	12.5	33.3	37.5	50.0	50.0

Key: I–Igbo      A–Bachelor of Arts      P– English Language  
 Y–Yoruba      B– Bachelor of Education      Q–Linguistics  
 O–Others      C–Master of Arts      R– Communication and Language Arts  
 D–Master of Education      S– Education (Adult, Language Arts, Communication and Language Arts, English Language and Management)

G– Government-owned secondary school  
 P– Private-owned secondary school

### Pronunciation of regular past tense words by the participants

In order to check the pronunciation of regular past tense words whose bases end with a voiceless sound, *banished*, *looked*, *laughed*, *jumped* and *packed* were tested. The analysis is presented in Table 2.

**Table 2: Pronunciation of regular past tense words whose bases end with a voiceless sound**

Regular past tense words	Number of participants	RA		
		/t/	/d/	NA
Banished	24	01	21	02
Looked	24	10	13	01
Laughed	24	08	14	02
Jumped	24	10	11	03
Packed	24	08	15	01
Total/Frequency	120	37	74	09
Percentage	100	30.8	61.7	7.5

Key:

RA– realisation of the allomorph

NA– no allomorph

Table 2 shows that 30.8% of the participants realised the allomorph of the regular past tense marker in words whose bases end with a voiceless sound as /t/, 61.7% of them realised it as /d/, while 7.5% of the participants did not make use of any allomorph.

The analysis of *jumped* and its spectrogram are presented sequentially below.

**Tableau 1: Emergence of *jumped***

Input /dʒʌmpt/ → Output /dʒʊmpd/

	*IDENT (voice)	IDENT (back)	MAX	FAITH C
(i) /dʒʌmpt/	*!	*		
(ii) /dʒʊmpd/				*
(iii) /dʒʊmp/			*	*

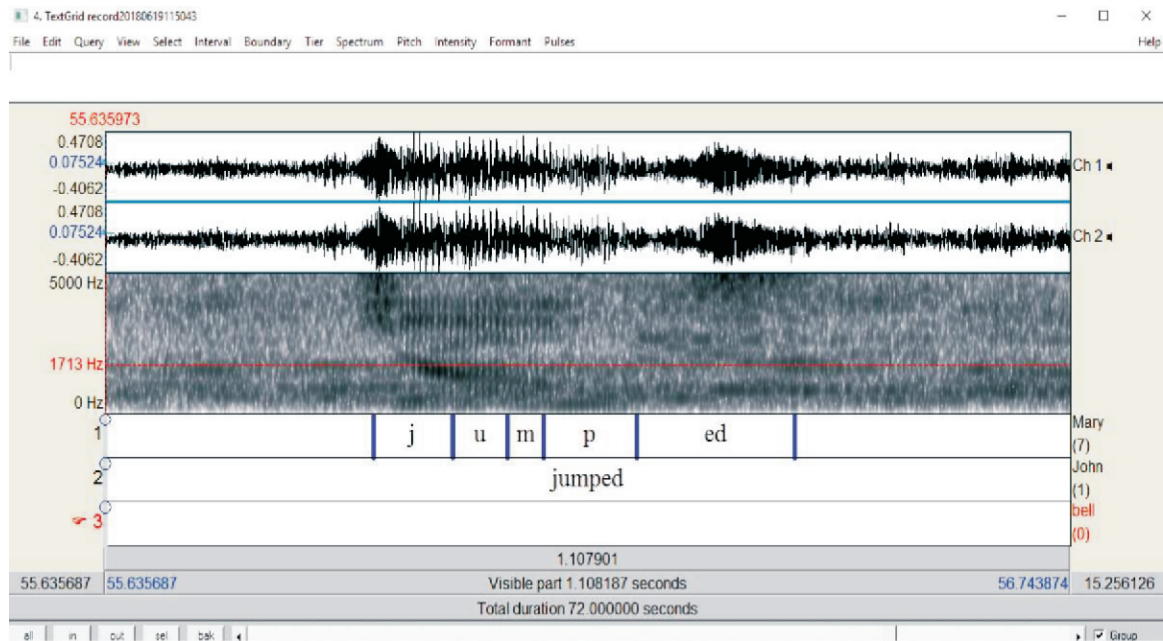
Constraint ranking: \*IDENT (voice) >> IDENT (back) >> MAX >> FAITH C

Optimal candidate: /dʒʊmpd/

Four constraints: \*IDENT (voice), IDENT (back), MAX and FAITH C –are used in the tableau. Candidate (i), the RP output, has a fatal violation of \*IDENT (voice), which prevents the output consonant from having identical voice with the input. It also violates IDENT (back), as it does not have the back vowel /ʊ/, which candidate (ii) has. However, candidate (i) does not violate FAITH C, which ensures that the coda in the output is faithful to the

coda in the input. Candidate (ii) violates FAITH C, a low-ranked constraint, but does not violate \*IDENT (voice), IDENT (back) and MAX, constraints higher in ranking than FAITH C. Candidate (iii) violates MAX, by deleting the voiceless alveolar plosive /t/ present in the input, and also violates FAITH C. Candidate (ii), which has only one violation, thus emerges as the optimal candidate.

**Figure 1: Spectrogram of *jumped***



This spectrogram shows how each of the segments in *jumped* was pronounced by the majority of the participants. The letter "j" was pronounced as /ʃ/, the letter "u" was pronounced as /ʊ/, the letter "m" was pronounced as /m/, the letter "p" was pronounced as /p/, and the letters "ed" were pronounced as /d/, instead of /t/.

Furthermore, *Slammed*, *delivered*, *banged*, *charmed* and *aroused* were used to test the pronunciation of regular past tense words whose bases end with a voiced sound. The analysis is presented in Table 3.

**Table 3: Pronunciation of regular past tense words whose bases end with a voiced sound**

Regular past tense words	Number of participants	RA		
		/d/	/t/	NA
Slammed	24	19	4	01
Delivered	24	19	-	05
Banged	24	23	1	-
Charmed	24	19	-	05
Aroused	24	12	-	12
Total/Frequency	120	92	05	23
Percentage	100	76.6	4.2	19.2

As shown in Table 3, 76.6% of the participants pronounced the allomorph of the regular past tense marker in words whose bases end with a voiced

sound as /d/, 4.2% of them pronounced it as /t/, while 19.2% of them did not make use of any allomorph.

Tableau 2 shows how *aroused* was pronounced by the participants.

**Tableau 2: Emergence of *aroused***

Input /əraʊzd/ → Output //æraʊsd/

	IDENT (front)	MAX	IDENT (voice)
(i) /əraʊzd/	*!		
(ii) /æraʊsd/			*
(iii) /æraʊs/		*!	

Constraint ranking: IDENT (front) >> MAX >> IDENT (voice)

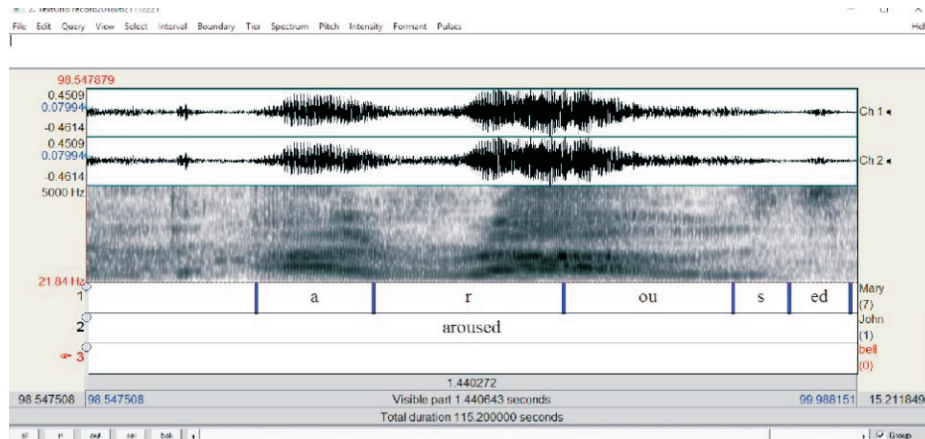
Optimal candidate: /æraʊsd/

Tableau 2 shows that candidate (i), the RP output fatally violates IDENT (front), as it does not have the front vowel /æ/, which candidates (ii) and (iii) have. However, the RP candidate does not violate MAX, which does not allow deletion of segments, and IDENT (voice), as it shares the same voice with the input. Candidate (ii) does not violate IDENT (front)

and MAX, although it violates IDENT (voice). Candidate (iii) fatally violates MAX, by deleting the voiced alveolar plosive /d/ present in the input, but does not violate IDENT (front) and IDENT (voice). Therefore, candidate (ii) emerges as the optimal candidate.

Figure 2 shows the spectrogram of *aroused*.

**Figure 2: Spectrogram of *aroused***



This spectrogram shows how each of the segments in *aroused* was pronounced by the majority of the participants. The letter "a" was pronounced as /æ/, the letter "r" was pronounced as /r/, the letters "ou" were pronounced as /aʊ/, the letter "s" was pronounced as /s/, while the letters "ed" were pronounced as /d/.

Finally, *doubted*, *listed*, *wounded*, *fainted* and *surrounded* were used to test the pronunciation of regular past tense words whose bases end with either of the two alveolar plosives /t/ or /d/. The analysis is presented in Table 4.

**Table 4: Pronunciation of regular past tense words whose bases end with either /t/ or /d/**

Regular past tense words	Number of participants	RA	
		/ɪd/	/ed/
Doubted	24	08	16
Listed	24	09	15
Wounded	24	06	18
Fainted	24	08	16
Surrounded	24	08	16
Total/Frequency	120	39	81
Percentage	100	32.5	67.5

As seen in Table 4, 32.5% of the participants realised the allomorph of the regular past tense marker in words whose base ends with either /t/ or /d/ as /d/, while 67.5% of them realised it as /ed/.

Below is the theoretical analysis of *surrounded* as pronounced by the majority of the participants.

**Tableau 3: Emergence of *surrounded***

Input /səraʊndɪd/ → Output /sɹandrɛd/

	IDENT (back)	*IDENT (low)	MAX
(i) /sɹandrɛd/			*
(ii) /səraʊndɪd/	*!	*	

Constraint ranking: IDENT (back) >> \*IDENT (low) >> MAX

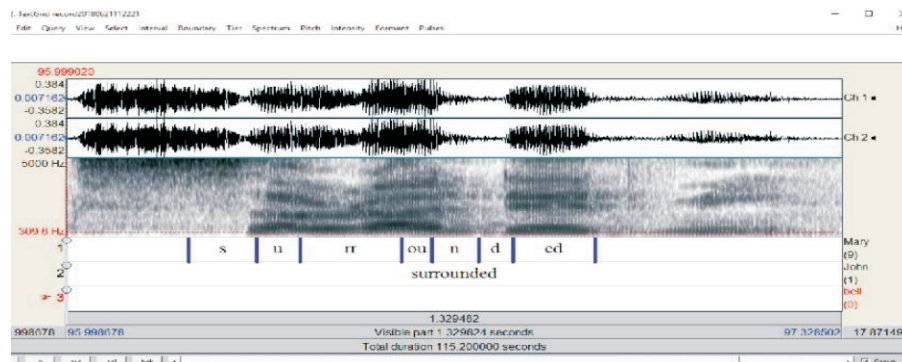
Optimal candidate: /sɹandrɛd/

There are two output candidates for the input /səraʊndɪd/, as seen in Tableau 3. Candidate (i) violates MAX, due to its deletion of the back vowel /ʊ/, that is present in the input. Yet, it emerges as the optimal candidate, because it records only one violation of a low-ranked constraint. Candidate (ii) fatally violates

IDENT (back), because it does not have the back vowel /ʊ/, which is present in the optimal candidate. It also violates \*IDENT (low), which disallows the appearance of the vowel /ɪ/ in the output.

The spectrogram of *surrounded* is presented below in Figure 3.

**Figure 3: Spectrogram of *surrounded***



The spectrogram in Figure 3 shows how each of the segments in *surrounded* was pronounced by most of the participants. The letter “s” was pronounced as /s/, the letter “u” was pronounced as /ʊ/ the letters “r” were pronounced as /r/, the letters “ou” were pronounced as /a/, the letter “n” was pronounced as /n/, the letter “d” was pronounced as /d/, and the letters “ed” were pronounced as /ed/ (a strong vowel was used instead of a weak vowel).

### Conclusion

This paper examined how the regular past tense marker in English (‘ed’) is realised by teachers of English Language in Nigeria, using secondary school teachers Ibadan North Local Government Area, Ibadan, Oyo State as sample. The analysis of the data revealed that the English Language teachers in Ibadan North Local Government Area, Ibadan pronounced the regular past tense marker of words whose bases end with a voiceless sound as /d/ and /t/, the regular past tense marker of words whose bases end with a voiced sound mainly as /d/, and the regular past tense marker of words whose bases end with either of the two alveolar plosives /t/ or /d/ as /ed/ and /d/. The recorded connected speeches of the participants also corroborated this. Based on these findings, the study, therefore, concluded that the pronunciation of words with regular past tense by English Language teachers in Ibadan North LGA varies a little from the pronunciation of such words in Received Pronunciation.

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