

A STUDY OF LANGUAGE VARIATION IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE*

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Abstract

This research paper investigates Achebe's depiction of English language variation in his novel, 'No Longer at Ease', and examines his purpose for doing so and how this has contributed to the success of his narrative. The research makes use of primary and secondary data which are the extracts drawn from the chosen text and from published sources on the core concerns of the study. Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory is employed as a theoretical framework while the content research analysis method is used in analyzing the writer's depiction of linguistic variation in accordance with the research objective. Findings of the research indicate that Achebe's English language use in No Longer at Ease depicts the English language variants (standard, Nigerian, pidgin, and a blend of local colour) that exists in Nigeria which are occasioned by socio-cultural factors such as education, ethnicity, age, sex, and speech contexts. The paper concludes that a key contributor to Achebe's success in the novel is his ability to fictionally depict the language variants in use in Nigeria, the socio-cultural constraints that give rise to these variants and how

these ultimately reflects his country's sociolinguistic environment.

Keywords: Sociolinguistics, language, variation, literary, artistry

Introduction

Language is central to all literary activity, irrespective of genre. As a human medium of expression, the creative artist relies on language to communicate his ideas to the society. Language becomes even more crucial to any literary artistic endeavor considering that the entire human history, experience, wisdom, triumphs, and woes find a reservoir in language which makes it indispensable to the creative artist, not just as a medium of expression but also as a source material from which the artist dips to furnish his art. It is against this backdrop that language, literature and society are inseparable.

The foregoing also explains why language use by literary artists displays distinctive socio-cultural colorations. This is especially true of literary works of African origin where art is functional and is tailored towards address topical, and often times, troubling issues. Ayo Kehinde (2005:87-88) in a succinct comment states that "...for any [African] literary work to merit meaningful consideration, it is necessary that it bears relevance, explicitly or implicitly, to the social milieu in which it is set". African artists, writing under this consciousness therefore, deploy various methods and techniques in conveying their messages aesthetically to the reader. This, consequently, results in the varied methods of textual presentations noticeable in their works.

Chinua Achebe, the artists whose text, *No Longer at Ease*

(1994), is studied in this paper, has been especially praised for his artistic language - a fact that has distinguished his creative works, placing him permanently at the forefront of African and world writer's roll-call. Okechukwu (2001) notes that, "part of the greatness of Achebe, part of the pleasure we get from reading him, lies in the very fact that he has a sure and firm control of his English, exemplified particularly in his rendering of Ibo - language processes-idiom, imagery, syntax and so forth - into English." Kabwe Kasoma (qtd in Sumaili 1991:31) also points out that "when you read Achebe you, recognize a lot of Ibo patterns of thought in his writing". Palmer (1978) in praise of the writer's linguistic dexterity also opines that, "Achebe has produced something new and valuable to the English language as well as to the material he is trying to put over". These views indicate the writer's awareness of the peculiarities of the sociolinguistic community he engages in his fictional text.

This paper makes the assertion that Achebe's language in *No Longer at Ease* is tailored to reflect the sociolinguistic variants in existence in his country Nigeria – a fact that demands clarity and faithfulness to detail for his output to have the illuminating and pedagogic effect he clearly desires to achieve. After all, as Taiwo (1976:14) notes: "it is through a writer's language use that he reflects his individual awareness of a given situation". *No longer At Ease* is a very good example of the author's creative vision and a perfect illustration of his awareness of Nigerian's unique usage of English language and the various variants spoken across socio-cultural divides in the country.

Theoretical Framework

This research paper is anchored on Variationist Sociolinguistic Theory. The theory was founded and popularized by the American linguist, William Labov, who is

widely described as being influential in creating much of the theory's methodology (Trask 1997:124). Notable publications in the field include Labov's *Sociolinguistic Patterns* (1972), *Principles of Linguistic Change* (1994), *The Social Stratification of English in New York City* (2006); J.K. Chambers' *Linguistic variation and its social significance* (2009); S. F Kiesling's *Language variation and change* (2011); S. A. Tagliamonte's *Variationist sociolinguistics: Change, observation, interpretation* (2012), among others.

The choice of Variationist sociolinguistics for this paper is because it provides explanatory paradigms that facilitate a better understanding of the paper's focus which is the variants of English Language observable in Achebe's fictional text, *No Longer at Ease*. The central assumption of the theory is that there is variation in human language and the variation is **ordered and heterogeneous** and not a random chaos (Labov 1972; 1994). Against this backdrop, the theory tries to account for linguistic variation and change as a product of the social distribution of language varieties. Variationists also believe that speakers select from a variety of available codes (languages, dialects, varieties) from which they switch or mix in the course of communication. This is what Achebe has achieved in the studied text which then explains the choice of the theory for this paper.

Labov (1984: 29) also states that “each speaker has a vernacular form in at least one language; this may be the prestige dialects (as in the case of “RP”), or a nonstandard variety” from which they alternate in speech situations. Generally, Variationists contend that the frequency of a particular variant in a speaker's speech is constrained by social variables such as gender, age, ethnicity, status and the social context of speech. A major goal of the variationist enterprise therefore, is to specify and order the constraints or motives

that inform one choice rather than another. To them, not only is variation essential and intrinsic to human language, but the detail of systematic, socially embedded variable behavior is the key to an understanding of the dynamics of human language (Labov 1966: 209).

The theory, although with a distinctive research focus on variation in human language, does not operate independently of other theories of linguistic science or historical antecedents that have shaped its development. Worthy of mention in this regard is the assumption in linguistic theory of the invariance of language that has led to the dismissal of variability as unstructured and of little or no theoretical value (Chomsky 1986). Weinreich, Labov, and Herzog (1968) therefore maintain that a language system that did not display variability would not only be imaginary but dysfunctional, since structured variability is the essential property of language that fulfils important social functions and permits orderly linguistic change.

Sociolinguistics enquiry is typically based on data obtained through interviews with speakers of a language, their dialects, or speech situations. In this current study however, the object of study is language use by Achebe's characters in the fictional text, *No Longer at Ease*, which depicts the Nigerian sociolinguistic community. In accordance with this emphasis, the paper examines the characters' use of the various variants of English language (standard, Nigerian and pidgin Englishes) which are realized primarily through a blend of English with the country's indigenous languages (Igbo and Yoruba) - which does not only depict the country's socio-cultural and geographical peculiarities, the richness of the country's linguistic situation, but further illuminates the artistic craft of the writer and the literary work under study.

Language Variation in Achebe's *No Longer at Ease*

Achebe's novel, *No Longer at Ease*, has one main story around which other issues revolve. The main character, Obi Okonkwo, is sent to England by his kinsmen under the auspices of Umuafia Progressive Union to acquire higher education that will empower him to help them. On his return however, Obi fails to meet their expectations because his education has alienated him from his culture and tradition. Obi consequently, ends up disgracefully when he is convicted on charges of bribery and corruption and sentenced to prison.

The reader of the novel sees that not only is the division between city and village marked by language; variants of language use by characters are closely related to education, class, age values or contexts of use, all characterized by a fusion of phonological, syntactic, morphological and semantic elements of Yoruba and Igbo languages with the English language. The use of these variants is not merely different ways of saying the same thing but vehicles for expressing completely different attitudes to life. Where one variant or another proves inadequate, the writer substitutes it with another variant or form. Consequently, the variant of language any of the characters uses at any point in the novel is indicative of tribal origin, social class, economic means or location or experience.

Elderly men who are grounded in the Igbo traditions are made to speak a variant of English language rich in folkloric material, replete with proverbs, idioms. To achieve this, the writer utilises such linguistic features as borrowing, code mixing and transliteration in showing the diverse English language variants in use in his country in order to communicating his thematic focus to his readers. Several instances exist in the text where mixtures of English, Igbo and Yoruba that reflect the language variants spoken in Nigeria are found.

In the scene after Obi's speech at the reception organized in his honor by the Umuofia Progressive Union on his return from England, we are told that "...the women began to sing about Umuofia and about Obi Okonkwo *nwa jelu oyibo* - Obi who had been to the land of the whites" (29). In this instance, Achebe presents an expression that is a mixture of Igbo language (*nwa jelu oyibo*) and English (Obi who had been to the land of the whites) to avoid ambiguity thus, making this accessible to his non Igbo readers.

Also, at Obi's father's house where the elders chat among themselves as they rejoice over Obi's return from England; Iguedo, an elder, sings praises of Obi's return while Odogwu, another elder, says the following about Obi: "He is the grandson of Ogbuefi Okonkwo who faced the white man single handed and died in the fight....He is Ogbuefi Okonkwo come back. He is Okonkwo *kpom-kwem*, exact, perfect" (48-49). Thus, the reader has no difficulty understanding the meaning of the Igbo "kpom-kwen."

In another scene where Obi and Clara went for a dinner to celebrate Obi's new car, Clara tells Obi why she cannot marry him, "...I am an *Osu*, she wept..." (64). *Although the meaning of word "Osu" is not explained immediately as in the previous instances of "nwa jelu oyibo" and "Okonkwo kpom-kwem", probably because the concept cannot be explained completely by an equivalent English word or phrase, the writer unveils the meaning of the word through the crisis that follows this revelation in the ensuing sections of the text where "osu" is explained as an outcast (56-103). Also, when Obi and Clara drive through the slums of Lagos to Clara's seamstress, we are told that every few yards one met bands of dancers often wearing identical dress or "aso ebi!"(15). Later on in the course of their drive as Obi slowed down to give way to a band of drummers and dancers, a taxi driver hooted impatiently and*

overtook him, leaning out at the same time to shout “*Ori oda*, your head no correct! *Ori oda* - bloody fool!” replied Obi” (15). *In this instance, Achebe reverts to the transliteration technique often used by Nigerians in their everyday speech activity.*

Furthermore, the man who came to bribe Obi to get his son a scholarship to England is described as wearing “a very expensive *agbada*” (152). Other indigenous words mix with English to produce a distinctive English language variant peculiar to the Nigerian sociolinguistic community in the text are such words as “Egusi soup”; “*garri*” (*foods*); “*ozo*, *isa-ifi*, *ochu* and *uri*” (local traditions, and ritual ceremonies); “*umunna*, *umuada*, and *Nne*” (*family relations*); “*obi* and *ilo*” (homestead or village grounds), among others recurrent throughout the text.

In order to make these Nigerian variants of English meaningful to a foreign reader, the writer either links the item to its English meaning using a hyphen or a conjunction *or* places the borrowed item in an appositive relationship to the given English meaning. The meaning of the Yoruba “*agbada*” is grasped through the context. First we are told that Obi’s visitor was wearing “a very expensive *agbada*.” After Obi had offered him a seat, we are told that the man “...brought out a little towel from somewhere in the folds of his flowing gown and mopped his face...” We are therefore, able to guess that “*agbada*” means “flowing gown” which is reinforced by the reference to “the wide sleeves of his *agbada*” and “front pocket of his *agbada*” which confirms the meaning of “*agbada*” already guessed from the context (152). Thus, the reader is left in no doubt that the writer’s mixture of English with indigenous languages in his novel is a conscious effort to show the variants of English language obtainable in the Nigerian sociolinguistic community.

Achebe, in the novel, also engages in code switching where his characters alternate between variants in their interactions. This is what Coulmas (2005:109) says about code-switching in the comment that: “It is not necessarily for lack of competency that speakers switch from one language to another, and the choices they make are not fortuitous”. The choice of one variant over the other by characters in the studied text is therefore imbued with meaning and not haphazardly made.

It may be consequently assert, with a reasonable certainty that Achebe's deployment of code switching in his novel under study is a deliberate design to showcase the variants of English in use within the speech community in which his novel is set. In the studied novel, the writer misses no opportunity to display his competence in language through the variants of English that his characters use.

A notable case of this is in the character of Obi Okonkwo whose education makes it difficult for him to maintain a steady variety, especially when he converses with his kinsmen. When Obi wants Umuofia Progressive Union to lend him money, he tries to arouse a sense of brotherhood by speaking in Igbo. He endeavours to make his language impressive by using a few proverbs in his entreaty: “Our fathers also have a saying about the danger of living apart. They say it is the curse of the snake. If all snakes lived together in one place, who would approach them? But they live every one unto himself and so fall easy prey to man” (92-93).

The above, though reportedly spoken in Igbo by Obi, is related to the reader in English and not actually written in Igbo on the pages of the text. The reader is thereby made keenly aware of an alienated African whose circumstances have compelled to resort momentarily to a mother tongue that now tastes sore on his tongue. Obi in the course of his speech, again, uses another

proverb to crack a joke, but soon he finds it difficult to carry on the speech in Igbo. So he quickly switches to English which is welcomed by the audience as “they liked good Ibo, but they also admired English” (93). The reader also perceives that Obi's use of Igbo and English may not only be on account of his alienation but also to manipulate his listeners who like good Ibo but also appreciates English.

When Obi is made angry by his kinsmen, the reader notices that he reverts to English where he has greater proficiency to exercise authority as a government official. This is seen when the President of Umuofia Progressive Union brings out the subject of Obi's love affair with an “osu” woman and warns him against such unacceptable behavior, in which case Obi abandons Ibo and expresses his anger in English, “Sit down, my foot!” Obi shouted in English. “This is preposterous! I could take you to the court for that . . . for that . . . for that” (95). His assertion of authority and individualism comes in English but he again switches to Ibo to enforce his point, “but don't you dare interfere in my affairs again. And if this is what you meet about,” he said in Ibo, “you may cut off my two legs if you ever find them here again” (95).

Later on, when Obi faces extreme financial crisis, he realizes the danger of displaying self-pride and feels repentant for not accepting the four months' loan extension offered him by the Umuofia Progressive Union. But this realization comes to him only through an Ibo proverb, “could a person in his position afford that kind of pride? Was it not a common saying among his people that a man should not, out of pride and etiquette, swallow his phlegm?” (177) Also, when Obi returns from England, he attends the meeting of Umuofia Progressive Union for the first time. The members are very happy to have their illustrious son in their midst.

As soon as Obi enters the venue of the meeting in his car, the

people began to greet one another in their language: “*Umuofia kwenu!*” *shouted one old man. “Ya!” replied everyone in unison “Umuofia Kwenu!, Ya!, Kwenu! Ya! fe awolu Ogoli azua n 'afia; he said”* (7). These greetings are conveyed in Ibo because their imbedded socio-cultural significance would be lost otherwise. The old man's proverb at the occasion which, literally translated, means “what has been denied a man now sells in the market”. Again, this translation does not convey the full meaning of the proverb in Igbo. The old man, in using this proverb, refers to Obi as an important person whom they have the opportunity and honor of having in their midst. The use of Ibo and English in this narrative is therefore symbolic, fulfilling diverse contextual needs. This consequently, is an affirmation of the writer's awareness of the contextual constraints that necessitate the use of certain linguistic variants within the sociolinguistic community that he fictionalizes.

Another distinctive variant of English language deployed by the author throughout the text is Pidgin English. Pidgin in Achebe's novel is a variant that is used by most of the characters in the text. The variant essentially depicts the socio-economic and cultural stratification of the characters, as is obtainable in the Nigerian sociolinguistic community. The reader is made to see a very good illustration of this when Obi tries to shunt a queue on which many others have been waiting for long to be attended to by a doctor and provokes torrents of abuses in the process: “You tink because Government gives you car you fit do what you like? You see all of we de wait here and you just go in.... Foolish man. He tink say because him get car so derefore he can do as he like. Beast of no nation!” (173). The reader in this instance is made conscious of a distinctive variant of English employed by the character in addition to the writer's satirical comment on the attitude of highly placed Nigerians who have little regard for the less privileged and for

established protocol and rule of law. Also, the angry man's outburst that Obi is a "beast of no nation" may be understood as authorial comment on Obi's alienation that makes him neither an English man nor a complete Igbo man since he has lost most of his cultural etiquettes.

Also worthy of note is the writer's linguistic transliteration which further showcases a distinctive variant of the English language spoken in Nigeria. Phaniel *Egejuru in a comment says that* Achebe "...perfectly simulates Igbo expressions into English while preserving the structure of his vernacular" (102). A number of instances drawn from the novel illustrate the above point. In the speech made by the oldest man present at the emergency meeting of Umuofia Progressive Union convened to look into Obi's case of bribery; the man says, "***He that brings Kola nuts brings life. We do not seek to hurt any man, but if any man seeks to hurt us may he break his neck***" (5). What is transliterated into English here is the Igbo culture of Kola nut breaking. In Igbo land, the introduction of a kola nut into any gathering usually calls for a prayer before it is broken, shared and eaten. The short prayer offered before the event is in honor of Kola nut. The second sentence is followed by an echo of "amen" (typically "ise", in Igbo language) from the audience.

Pastor Ikedi's advisory speech during the prayer meeting organized by Obi's father in honor of his son as the latter is about to leave for England is another example of the writer's use of transliteration: "We are sending you to learn book, enjoyment can wait. Do not be in a hurry to rush into the pleasures of the world like the young antelope that danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come" (9-10). In this context, two expressions are translated directly from Igbo to English: "to learn book" and "the young antelope who danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come".

The first being a reflection of the Igbo grammar; while the second, an Igbo proverb that emphasize the virtue in patience and the danger inherent in impatience. Transliteration is further seen in the dialogue between Obi and one of his father's kinsmen. Obi narrates the experience of his journey from England to the old man's amazement:

Obi: Sometimes, for a whole market week there is no land to be seen. No land in front, behind, to the right and to the left, only water.

Kinsman: Think of that. No land for one whole market week. In our folktales a man gets to the land of spirits when he has passed seven rivers, seven forests and seven hills. Without doubt you have visited the land of spirits (46).

The phrase “market week” is a transliteration of the Igbo (African) concept of weekly shopping, which is different from that of English seven week days. In Igbo, a week is made of four market days: “*Nkwo, Eke, Orie, Afo*” **which** contrasts with the English week of seven days. Also, the significance of the number seven in Igbo is reflected in the expression “seven rivers, seven forests and seven hills” as highlighted in the Kinsman's speech.

Evidence of transliteration in the text is further noticeable in the explanation offered by an elderly member of the Umuofia union in respect of Obi's non-challant attitude on hearing the news of his mother's death: “... *As our people say! Whenever something stands, another thing stands beside it. You see this thing called blood. There is nothing like it*” (144 - 145). The quoted expression is a transliteration of an Igbo proverb,

which means that nothing happens without a cause.

Conclusion

From the foregoing textual analysis, it can be seen that Achebe, through the instances of language variations cited above, has dexterously brought to the reader the distinctive variants of English language spoken in Nigeria. On the whole, the writers of this paper feel that the author's achievement in the studied novel lies in his ability to fictionally depict the linguistic variants in use in Nigerian sociolinguistic environment.

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