

The Usage and Deployment of Nigerian English in Prose Fiction: A Study of Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*

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Abstract

Language change is an inevitable consequence of language contact. The English language having made contact with Nigerian indigenous languages is no exception. It has been modified to suit the Nigerian environment reflecting the culture of which the indigenous languages are a part. This is the reason why Nigerian authors in their prose fiction use a form of English that is distinctly Nigerian in order to portray the Nigerian cultural context in their stories. This study was aimed at identifying the usage and deployment of Nigerian English in prose writing using Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. The qualitative research design was adopted and using the purposive sampling technique, the researcher identified samples of Nigerian English used by the two authors and analyzed them. Findings reveal that a variety of English that can be called Nigerian now exists. It has come to stay and is deployed even by the elite in prose fiction. The researcher concluded that Nigerian English is a reality. It should not and cannot therefore be regarded as a misnomer especially as most of its expressions are now being included in English dictionaries. It should rather be considered as a distinct variety reflecting the peculiar Nigerian environment with which it has made contact just like British English, American English, Australian English, Indian English and other emerging new Englishes.

Key words: Language, Nigerian English, Prose, Fiction

Introduction

The English language is a second language in Nigeria. In second language situations of language use, the speakers having already acquired a first language together with their culture may have problems learning the second language as their proficiency in the second language is usually affected by interference from their first language. Learning a second language involves learning a second culture. Similarly, when a language makes contact with another language, it has made contact with another culture. Its use in its original environment cannot therefore be the same with its use in a contact situation. So it is with the English language in Nigeria. Being a second language in Nigeria, the English language is affected by interference from the indigenous languages which sometimes produces erroneous or non standard forms of the language spoken by the uneducated members of the Nigerian society. There is, however a variety of English that has acquired a distinct Nigerian flavour so that it reflects the Nigerian culture and environment. This variety cannot be classified as erroneous but rather a regional variety of the English language. It is spoken by the elites and educated Nigerians and is

deployed by Nigerian authors in prose fiction. It is could be said to be one of the New Englishes emerging in second language situations. It is the deployment of this variety in prose fiction in general and by Achebe in *No Longer at Ease* and Emecheta in *The Joys of Motherhood* that is the concern of this study. Its specific objectives are to identify the Nigerian English expressions used by Achebe and Emecheta in the selected prose works, interpret the meanings of these expressions in the Nigerian environment and offer suggestions with regard to the current status of Nigerian English.

Statement of the Problem

It has been observed that a variety of English that bears the imprint of the Nigerian environment has emerged. It is not the kind of English that can be said to be broken or pidgin spoken by illiterate and semi-literate Nigerians, rather, it is a local variety of standard English spoken by the elites and is even deployed in literary works. Ignorance may make people consider this variety of English as an error or language corruption as language purists may term it but this is an inevitable outcome of language change in contact

situations. This study is therefore, an attempt to join other researchers in creating awareness on the status of Nigerian English as a distinct variety of standard English which has come to be nativized so that it can fully carry the Nigerian experience. Its usage in Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood* is analyzed to lend credence to its existence.

The concept of Nigerian English

Every living human language changes in contact situations because it influences the language with which it comes in contact and the language in turn influences it. Nigerian English is therefore, a product of the contact of English with Nigerian languages. The concept of 'Nigerian English' (NE, henceforth) is associated with the transfer of features of the language of Nigerian learners of English to the target language. It is a common belief among linguists that language is embedded in the culture of a people hence learning a second language involves learning a second culture. Culture in turn encompasses a people's worldview. Therefore, for the English language to reflect the culture and serve the particular needs of Nigerian speakers, it has to be manipulated to suit the Nigerian

environment. It has to acquire a distinctive Nigerian flavour in order to reflect and represent the worldview of Nigerian speakers. Akindele and Adegbite (1996) sees it as the variety of English that has developed in the Nigerian non-native English situation which is not wholly native English nor totally Nigerian but a blend of the two situations. For Banjo (1996), it is the variety of English that has been localized or nativized in Nigeria by adopting some language features of its own such as sounds, intonation patterns, sentence structure, words and expressions. This nativization also involves the creative development of English including the evolution of distinctively Nigerian usages, attitudes and pragmatic use of the language. Bamgbose (1995) noted that the English language has yielded to some modifications in its adaptation to the Nigerian environment through nativization, acculturation and twists to express the local sociocultural concepts, modes, norms and forms in social interactions.

Variationist studies support the view that language is heterogeneous within the context of use. This trait is exhibited by the English language in its native-speaker and non-native speaker environments. Language is therefore as various as the people who use it. In the case of NE, variations abound. There are variations in terms of the various indigenous languages

in Nigeria so that the English speech of an Igbo person can be distinguished from that of a Yoruba or an Hausa person as each exhibits influences and interference features from the ethnic language of the user.

Generally, one can say that the English language is undergoing an indigenization process in Nigeria whereby the different levels of linguistic description, that is, phonological, lexical, syntactic, semantic and pragmatic systems of English are being modified and adapted to meet the communicative needs of its Nigerian users. At the phonological level, one finds some sounds in English that are lacking in the phonological systems of the indigenous languages and also some sounds that are present in some indigenous languages but absent in the English language. In such cases, Nigerian speakers of English make approximations to adapt the phonological system of English to the phonological system of the indigenous languages. Some lexical features of NE includes the extension of the semantic field and the referential functions of some English words, the narrowing or restrictions on the referential and social meaning of words, distinctive pattern of lexical choice and collections, coinages, compounding, derivations, loan blends and loan translations. Non-lexical features of NE manifest as the use of idiomatic expressions

and proverbs. These emerging patterns reflect the communicative needs of NE users with respect to various functional domains and in the context of the sociolinguistic and cultural constraints which characterize the multilingual second language situations.

Moreover, a good number of NE expressions have become internationally accepted and have been added to the latest edition of the Oxford English Dictionary. Among them are ‘next tomorrow’ meaning ‘the day after tomorrow’ in Standard British English (SBE), ‘tokunbo’ meaning ‘an imported second hand product’; ‘K-leg’ meaning ‘a problem or a flaw’; ‘send-forth’ meaning ‘a party or a celebration to mark someone’s departure’; ‘ember-months’ meaning ‘the last four months of the year’; ‘put to bed’ meaning ‘to give birth to a child’; ‘rub minds together’ meaning ‘to consult with another person on a matter’ ‘japa’ meaning ‘to travel abroad for better opportunities’; ‘agbero’ meaning a young person who works at bus stops collecting money from commercial drivers for loading their buses’; ‘419’ which means ‘internet scam’ in NE parlance. Other are ‘eba’, ‘adire’, ‘abi’, ‘area boy’, ‘cross-carpet’, ‘gele’, ‘suya’, ‘yahoo boy’, ‘Naija’ and so on with their meanings and pronunciation guide.

The usage and deployment of Nigerian English in prose fiction

Before colonization, literary tradition in Nigeria had been oral. Early attempts by Nigerians to produce literary works in English were derivative and imitative. The question as to whether it was possible to produce African Literature in a foreign language arose among scholars. It was argued that African culture was different from European culture to a large extent. If literature is a reflection of real life, then it will be unsatisfactory to use English language to portray Nigerian culture in literature. Achebe (cited in Banjo, 1996) in effect affirms his belief in the possibilities of cultural translation saying that the English language is able to carry the weight of his African experience only if it becomes a new English still in full communion with its native environment but altered to conform to its new African context. Soyinka (cited in Banjo, 1996) also reasons in the same direction noting that an alien language must be manipulated unapologetically to bear the burden of experiences of the culture the borrowing culture.

It can be observed that Nigerian creative writers have been able to adapt the English language to the complex cultural sociopsychological and linguistic situations over which the language was superimposed. Writers like Chinua Achebe

concern themselves with the communicative functions of language among the indigenous societies that provide the setting for their writings. Their interest in the power of language as it is used in the local communities is reflected in their use of English in creative ways to convey the regenerative candour in indigenous proverbs, local imagery, transliterations, similes and metaphors in portraying the peculiar African experiences. Achebe points out that a world language like English must be prepared to pay the price of submitting to many kinds of use.

Ajeigbe (2009) makes a distinction between English Literature and Nigerian Literature in English. According to him, English literature is written in English and is rooted in the English culture while Nigerian literature in English which also employs the tool of the English language has to express Nigeria's distinct culture and sensitivities which accounts for its departure from the norms of other Standard Englishes.

In Nigeria, a writer is obliged to make one of three choices. The first is to write in his mothertongue in which case he limits his audience. He could choose to relexify the indigenous language by using the vocabulary of English but imposing mother tongue structures and rhythm on it. This involves the patterning of the mother tongue while using the English language

which may result in producing unEnglish sentences. The third group of Nigerian writers uses English in full awareness that it is no longer just the language of Britain and America but also part of the linguistic heritage of Nigerians. They therefore mould the English language in such a way that it expresses their cultural roots. It is to this third group, in the opinion of this researcher, that Achebe and Emecheta belongs. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Akachi Ezeigbo, Flora Nwapa, Chukwuemeka Ike and so on also deploy NE in their works, albeit, to variable extent. NE features manifest in prose fiction as lexical borrowings, native similes and metaphors, rhetorical devices, translation of native proverbs and idioms, codeswitching and codemixing and so on some of which are found in the selected prose works.

Data presentation and analysis

Excerpts from *No Longer at Ease*

S/N	Expression	Meaning
1	Anger against a brother is felt in the flesh not in the bone (4)	This is an Igbo proverb translated into English meaning that one does not stay angry at one's relative for a long time but rather easily forgives him or her. It was used by one of the elders of Umuofia Progressive Union in relation to Obi Okonkwo's problem.

Methodology

The qualitative research design was adopted for this work and purposive sampling technique was used to select expressions of Nigerian English in the two prose works selected for this study, namely Chinua Achebe's *No Longer at Ease* and Buchi Emecheta's *The Joys of Motherhood*. These works were selected based on the fact that one is a male author and the other a female author and both reflected the Igbo culture in their works as they are both of Igbo origin. Both works were also set in both Igbo land and Lagos. Both of them reflect the features of NE in their prose fiction. 27 and 20 expressions were selected from the former and the latter respectively making a total of 47. The expressions were interpreted according to their meanings in NE and where necessary, their equivalents in Standard English were supplied.

2	We are just <i>throwing money away</i>. What do our people say? (5)	The italicized expression is just a transliteration of Igbo sentence into English. Standard English would say ‘we are wasting money’.
3	The fox must be chased away first; after that, the hen might be warned against wandering into the bush. (5)	An Igbo proverb meaning that the enemy has to be dealt with first before warning an offender to be careful next time.
4	If you want to eat a toad, you should look for a fat and juicy one. (5)	This proverb was used with regard to Obi Okonkwo who took a bribe that his kinsmen regarded as too small for the risk he took. They meant that he should have asked for an amount that is worth the risk.
5	...the house rat that went swimming with the lizard and died from cold for while the lizard’s scales kept him dry, the rat’s hairy body remained wet. (5)	This proverb was used to refer to Obi Okonkwo who they said did what every other civil servant does but got caught in the process.
6	An only palm fruit does not get lost in the fire. (6)	This is used to mean that Obi Okonkwo was the only educated son of Umuofia and the only man from Umuofia in the civil service that they would not give up on him. He is also his father’s only son among four daughters.
7	You have the yam and you have the knife; we cannot eat unless you caught us a piece. We are like little children who only wash their stomach when they bath, leaving their back dry. (8)	This statement was made by Mary while praying during the send forth party organized for Obi Okonkwo. She was addressing God as the sole provider for mankind and acknowledging that

		mankind compared to God is like innocent children who are ignorant.
8	A man who lives in the banks of the Niger should not wash his hands with spittle. (9)	‘Niger’ here connotes ‘river’. This is an Igbo proverb used by Obi’s father who was known for his openhandedness to mean that one should spend money whenever it is available and not be miserly.
9	We are sending you to <i>learn book</i>.... (10)	The italicized expression is a typical transliteration of Igbo to English. standard English would say ‘to study’
10	If you see a white man, <i>take off your hat for him</i>. (13)	The italicized expression is also a transliteration of Igbo to English. The standard English equivalent would be ‘doff your cap for him’.
11	Our people say that if you pay homage to the man on top, others will pay homage to you when it is your turn to be on top. (19)	This is an Igbo proverb which was used to mean that if one respects one’s superiors, one would in turn be respected by one’s subordinates. It was used in the novel with regard to the civil service where Obi Okonkwo worked.
12	Ours is ours and mine is mine (29)	This is an Igbo proverb that denotes public possession as against personal possession. It was used to emphasize that Obi Okonkwo, having studied abroad, is an illustrious son of Umuofia in particular, at a time when every town

		struggled to have one of their own, who is educated.
13	...those of you who know book.... (31)	This is a typical transliteration from Igbo to English meaning ‘those who are brilliant.’
14	...eat bribe.... (31)	Nigerian usage meaning ‘to take or accept bribe.’
15	...a man does not challenge his <i>chi</i> to a wrestling match. (37)	This is an Igbo proverb meaning that one should not take unnecessary risk by challenging someone who is obviously stronger or more influential.
16	... a man’s in-law was his <i>chi</i> (42)	An Igbo proverb meaning that a man is expected to treat his in-laws well and take care of them.
17	...four market weeks... (46)	This is an Igbo method of counting the days. A market week is made up of four days so that four market weeks is made up of sixteen days.
18	...took up his <i>goat-skin</i>... (47)	The italicized word refers to an animal skin carried by older people which they spread on the ground to sit on.
19	I have seen it with <i>my two eyes</i> (48)	The italicized expression is the Nigerian way of saying ‘I was an eye witness’ or ‘I witnessed it myself’.

20	A person who has not secured a place on the ground should not begin to look for a mat. (54)	This is an Igbo proverb meaning that first things should come first.
21	Let joking pass (72)	This is the Nigerian way of saying ‘I am not joking’.it is a transliteration from Igbo to English.
22	A child of yesterday (74)	This is a way of saying that Obi Okonkwo to whom reference is made is still very young and despite his education, he is inexperienced with regard to the complexities of life.
23	...unless you see people (79)	This is in the Nigerian context means ‘unless you give bribes to the relevant people’
24	...she showed that she was a <i>been-to</i>... (84)	The italicized expression is the Nigerian way of referring to those who have travelled outside Nigeria to other countries.
25	I went and poured sand into your garri (85)	This expression means ‘I spoilt everything for you’.
26	... Joseph who was a <i>bush man</i> (99)	The italicized expression is a NE usage meaning that the said Joseph acts like one who is in the village even though he lives in the city.
27	To <i>home people</i>.... (114)	The expression in italics is a NE usage referring to one’s relatives in the village.

Excerpts from *The Joys of Motherhood*

S/N	Expression	Meaning
1.	She had been used all her life to walking in the bush paths, so she knows the tricks of avoiding thorns. (12)	This is a proverb used in reference to Ona, Nwokeocha Agbadi's mistress meaning that she has gotten used to Nwokeocha Agbadi knows exactly how to handle him and how to carry herself.
2	Your <i>chief wife</i> is very ill. (21)	The italicized expression is used to refer to the first wife of a man. The English has no such word because a man is supposed to have just one wife in the English culture.
3	...that is why this child has the fair skin of the water people... (27)	This expression may sound meaningless to the English people but in the Nigerian context especially in Iboza where the novel was set, it is very meaningful as it refers to the fact that the child is believed to have come from the water stemming from the belief in reincarnation.
4	'...the kegs are very full. Nnu Ego has not shamed us.' (31)	This expression in the context of Iboza means that Nnu Ego has not defiled her virginity before getting married to her first husband, Amatokwu.
5	Medicine man (46)	NE word for a herbalist.
6	...back her baby... (54)	Nigerian way of saying that she carried her Baby on her back.

7	‘You are shaming your womanhood, shaming your motherhood.’ (61)	This speaker was speaking to Nnu Ego who was trying to drown herself following the death of her son, Ngozi. The expression in British English would read ‘you are a disgrace to womanhood and motherhood’.
8	‘What of my mothers, his wives and my brothers and sisters?’ (76)	Here, Nnu Ego was asking after her father’s wives who. She calls them ‘mothers’ and their children her ‘brothers and sisters’. In the English culture, a man has only one wife and it is only one’s biological children that address her as ‘mother’.
9	Your <i>big mother</i> said I should.... (76)	The italicized expression is a transliteration used to refer to one’s grandmother in Igbo.
10	...evening meal.... (79)	The English would say ‘dinner’.
11	...any <i>evil eye</i> people may cast on him.... (79)	The italicized expression is used to refer to ‘any evil plan by enemies’
12	In his <i>daylight sleep ... afternoon sleep</i> (103)	The italicized expressions are alternative NE usages meaning siesta in standard English.
13	‘<i>Senior wife, I will take the market things in for you</i>’ (118)	Here, Okpo, the junior wife of Nnaife was addressing Nnu Ego. The italicized expressions are Nigerian usages. ‘Senior wife’ does not occur in English. Since an English man has only one wife, the issue of senior and junior does not arise. ‘market things’ is a transliteration from Igbo to English.
14	...our husband.... (126)	This expression connotes more than one wife and is only meaningful in the Nigerian context.
15	‘Why are you so rude to your <i>father’s wife?....</i>’ (129)	Nnu Ego was here addressing her son Oshia. The italicized expression connotes that the father has another wife apart from the mother of the addressee. It is a typical Nigerian usage.

16	‘I shall give him a piece of my tongue’ (138)	This is a Nigerian version of the English idiom ‘I shall give him a piece of my mind’
17	...one day they will become people’ (174)	This is a NE usage used by Nnu Ego to mean that one day, her children will become successful.
18	‘Oh Mother!’ (156)	Here, Nnu Ego was referring to the eldest wife of her husband’s elder brother, Adankwo. In the English culture, she is her sister-in-law no matter the age gap between them.
19	‘...the children’s father.... (176)	This expression was used by Nnu Ego to refer to her husband. An English woman would rather say ‘my husband’ in the same context.
20	‘...my little husband Adim....’ (197)	This is Okpo referring to Adimabua, the second son of Nnaife. This expression can only make sense in the Igbo cultural context where a wife is not just married to her husband but to every member of her husband’s family.

Taking a comparative look at the two works, Achebe used NE expressions than Emecheta. Achebe’s work is rich in proverbs and idioms which he puts in the mouth of his characters to reflect the Igbo culture. This observation, however, is not significant to this work.

Discussion of Findings

Language is the vehicle of culture through literature which is a reflection of life as in a mirror. The three are therefore closely intertwined. The culture of a people is best expressed and preserved in their literature through language. Language is central to

literature because every work of literature is constructed with language which implies that every literary work is a cultural artefact. Every culture is unique and has its own peculiar way of looking at the general world. Therefore in order for Nigerian prose writers to represent Nigerian culture in literature adequately and effectively using the English language as a medium, the English language has to go through some adjustments so that the varying local situations would be catered for. From the analysis above, it can be seen that Achebe and Emecheta made good use of NE in their

works. This made the works interesting and familiar to any Nigerian reader. Since Nigerian writers must write in the English language in order to increase their readership, it does not have to be a foreign English that is alien to the Nigerian environment, rather, it should be an English with Nigerian colouration, one that is at home with the Nigerian environment so that readers of any race or colour or country will have a vicarious experience of the Nigerian environment. According to Uwen, Bassey and Nta (cited in Uwen and Nta 2021), the use of English to express 'Nigerianness' in literature for international readership and comprehension is due to the increasing and enormous roles of English. NE has helped Nigerian prose writers express their world view their own way. Adegbija(2004) asserts that the special use of English for literary purposes in Nigeria is to achieve special effects such as giving the language a local flavour that creates a Nigerian national identity. Igboanusi (2002) notes that NE vocabulary contains a large number of words which either does not exist in Standard English or are used in ways peculiar to the Nigerian situation. This is so because there are instances where English does not have expressions that cater for nuances of the Nigerian experience. Bearing these in mind, one can deduced from the foregoing that the usage of NE in literature, in general and prose, in particular

is not in question. The data gathered from the texts used for this study also proves the obvious. A critical look at the data above clearly shows that they are used to give a local flavour to the English language in a second language situation such as ours.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, one can deduce that a language in contact situations cannot remain the same since language reflects the worldview of the people who use it. Nigerian English emerged as a result of the contact of English with the Nigerian society. Nigerian authors have to deploy it in their prose forms otherwise, their stories will sound artificial and may be difficult to understand. Looking at the expressions above, one cannot say that they are erroneous. They are only a reflection of the Igbo cultural heritage in English language. If Nigerian authors have to write in English, then just as Achebe puts it, it has to be an English that is in full communion with its ancestral home but is adapted to suit the Nigerian environment. it is no longer in doubt that a Nigerian variety of English does exist. The need to codify it cannot be overemphasized as this would give it its proper place among the New Englishes emerging in different parts of the world where English serves in the second language capacity.

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