

The Environmental Power in Language Acquisition: A Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*

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Abstract

Language skill is priceless gift. It is a valuable life instrument which every child should not be deprived of. Unfortunately, some parents and caregivers fail to give this the required pride of place. In the life of Kambili and Jaja as depicted in *Purple Hibiscus* by Adichie, one discovers that a lot depends on social environment and interactions within the sociocultural milieu. The turn of events in the life of the duo after their visit to their aunt speaks volume about the positive change a friendly and reassuring environment can create in the life of an individual. This work is an awareness call to parents and caregivers to pay close attention to their children's unspoken needs. It concludes that an authoritarian environment rescinds inner freedom and power of expression leaving an individual unequipped in scaling through today's competitive global world.

Keywords: Language, Sociocultural, Environment, Power, Expression.

Introduction

Most Psychologists, Linguists and Educationists are in agreement that Language acquisition, development and usage are influenced by combination of factors such as quality of interaction between the child and the caregivers, the Physiological condition and motor development, and the socio-cultural milieu where the child finds himself/herself.

Among these factors, the environmental factors stand out as the most influential. It is capable of stalling the child's ability of self-expression. Mwiinga observes that favourable and stimulating environmental conditions improve the development of early speech, the development of every speech and unfavorable environment retards it. He further observes that:

“The role of environment is therefore of extreme importance in the development of Language. The effects of stimulating environment on speech development are quite lasting and more or less permanent. The verbal ability (of a child) is restricted and inhibited in poor and an illuminating environment where the child does not get any encouragement to speak” (3)

Mwiinga is not alone in this opinion. Landau and Caleitman (5) in their research observed that orphans adopted in foster homes have better language development than orphans staying in institutions or orphanages having stimulating environment. This shows that a child in an assuring environment builds up confidence and expresses his/her thought freely. Over protected, strict and anxious parents allow their children to speak less and restrict their language. The research goes further to show that democratic and flexible attitude of parents would encourage their children to speak more.

Language acquisition, development and usage go beyond verbal expression; it includes attitude and family culture since language is a societal product. Language, according to Ibeagha (120),

involves also the process of organizing experience in order to understand events. It is more than the utterance of the first word. It is a purveyor of culture.

It, therefore, becomes problematic whenever this interaction among people is violated. This happens, where according to Ibeagha, (123), some high handed parents and caregivers, stall the language development of their children by shouting on them, beating or ignoring them. Such a child remains insecure and unable to form an opinion of his own. If paradvature, this is not corrected, the person's thought pattern remains stunted and this affects his/her participation in conversational discourse.

This article, therefore, would apply the foregoing in examining the text *Purple Hibiscus*: Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie. It intends to investigate the impact of authoritarian rule of Mr Eugene on the protagonists: Kambili and Jaja and how the democratic environment that prevailed in Auntie Ifeoma's house at Nsukka serves to remedy their stunted self and language development.

Statement of the Problem

Language is the lifeblood of any society. If properly understood, parents and caregivers will be more cautious in child's language developmental stage. Efforts will be geared towards getting it right. Many of the crisis in our world today has something to do with language misuse or abuse of language. When one fails to communicate properly, violence is the result. It, therefore, follows that if one intends to minimize the problems that result from improper use of language, one is to pay more attention to the process of language development and factors that influence it positively or negatively.

Concept of Language

Human beings are essentially different from other lower animals because of the formers' capacity to use language. Language is a distinguishing characteristic of human beings. Language is life; one dreams, thinks, prays, and meditates via language. Performative function of language is very essential for life and communal life in general. Over the years, Scholars have expressed their different opinions about language; the underlying connection among them is that language is a very important means of communication among humans. The foremost among the opinion of Scholars include Edward Sapir: For him, language is primarily a cultural or social product and must be understood as such (124); language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires through a system of voluntarily produced sounds (Sapir 8). Language, according to Calderon, is an interactive tool that allows communication, thought and knowledge. A systemic functional grammarian, Michael Halliday, understands language to have a range of possibilities. According to him, language is an open-ended set of options in behaviour that are available to the individual in his existence as social person. The context of culture is the environment of any particular selection that is made of possibilities that are open. The actual choice among these possibilities takes place within a given context of situation. He expanded his view on language by saying that language serves for the expressing of "content", that is, of the speaker's experience of the real world, including the inner world of his own consciousness, [Ideational Function] Language, he goes on to say, serves to establish and maintain social relations, (Interpersonal Function) ... finally, language has to provide for making of the situation in which it is used (143). Vygotsky, as qtd in Palomino, sees language as the mechanism through which the negotiation of meaning occurs, even during cognitive activities like reading a book, drawing, solving a crossword puzzle, writing or reflecting on past events. For Lyons, language is the principal system of

communication used by particular groups of human beings within the particular society of which they are members (5) He further elucidates that language is the best communicative system of human beings by particular social groups. These social groups, writes Villalobos (2007), follow the rules of human verbal interaction materialized in the right communication. Use of words, eye contact, appropriate response and maintenance of the common thread on a given topic are helpful skills which aid right communication.

Stork and Widdowson opine that all languages are highly developed and sophisticated communication systems, all capable of meeting the demands of the society in which they are used, and the personal needs of the individual of the society in terms of expressing emotions and giving and receiving information. It is clear from the foregoing that one cannot separate language from society.

Nancy Bonvillain lends much support to this article's stand point. According to him, language is an integral part of human behaviour. It is the primary means of interaction between people. Participants in a discourse use language to convey their thoughts, feelings, intentions and desire to others. The quality of this interaction is very important especially to a growing child. It creates his/her picture of the real world. In Pearson's opinion, language is a collection of symbols, letters or words with arbitrary meanings that are governed by rules used to communicate". Language, whether spoken or written has a purpose to fulfil: to create meaning and perfect communication.

Daramola identifies four attributes of language as: to create unity in a community, facilitate sense of belonging for the speaker of the language, a tool of mass mobilization and can cause disharmony if not properly used and guided (9). Adebisi and Ojo explain that language is a phenomenon which allows human being to express their feelings, aspirations, desires and to interact with one another as far as human society is concerned. According to them, to understand language, one needs to know how it is used to create meaning. They also observed that there is arbitrariness in language usage which allows people to impose meaning on a word based on their conviction (10). In the words of O. Jespersen, "language is a set of human habits, purpose of which is to give expression to thoughts and feelings" (4) Webster dictionary says that "language is an audible, articulate human speech as produced by the action of the tongue and adjacent vocal organs". Language is a vehicle of culture.

Language and its Nature

Languages share the following features or characteristics as documented by Adebite. Language is a human phenomenon which has form; it can be described in terms of the units of sounds, morphemes, words, phrases, or groups, clauses, sentences, paragraphs and discourse. Human language has its own structure and system of organizing its component units into meaningful patterns. Language is governed by rules which determine organization of sentences, tense, concord and gender. Language, the writer further elucidates is characterized by a set of arbitrary symbols; outrightly, there is no one-to-one correspondence between the object and the symbols it stands for. What an object stands for is arbitrarily decided by the community.

Again, human language is conventional. This entails that an object or symbols acquire meaning by convention or unwritten agreement within a speech community.

Furthermore, language is culturally transmitted. Language reflects many features of a given culture. Just like culture, it is a learned behaviour which can be improved through direct or indirect context and acculturation.

Mothers who have a higher education level expand their children's utterances more during conversation with their children. They employ more partial self-repetition and expansions and ask more questions. This type of linguistic behaviour is beneficial to a child's language development. The type of language a child hears in his/her microsystem is essential because it can affect the child's language skills. In this regard, Huttenlocher observes that children who hear more complex language structure understand and produce more complex language structures than those children who are exposed to simpler structures. Similarly, Weisleder and Fernald (13) found that the quantity of language infants hear correlates with their vocabulary size at twenty four months of growth. In summary, the frequency with which words are heard also affects their acquisition order.

Environmental Factors Affecting Expressive Power of Language in an Individual

This part of work examines the influence of sociocultural factors on an individual's power of expression and his/her capacity to use language. The article draws from the wealth of research results of many scholars especially one conducted by Frenette Southwood. Sociocultural factors impact on a child's development of expressive power in the use of language. Ecological system theory perspective propounded by Bronfenbrenner holds that the individual's development is understood in terms of interactions between different microsystems and exo or macrosystems. The individual has direct interaction/contact with microsystem, such as home environment. According to Southwood:

“Components in the home microsystem for example, household socioeconomic status, education of caregivers, and number of children and adults in the household shapes everyday socialization practices. Interaction between the microsystem, such as home and school, make up the mesosystem that is in turn linked to and shaped by the larger exosystem” (12).

He further clarifies that the exosystem relates to the individual without his involvement as an active participant, for instance, the location/geographic area of extended family and neighborhood; and larger economic and social influences. He concludes that everyday practices and activities making up different cultural environment both shape and are shaped by these different ecological systems that contribute in different ways to the individual's developmental processes and outcomes.

Succinctly speaking, the following environmental factors influence language development in an individual especially in early stage namely: socio-economic status of the family, parental level of education, quality of communicative interaction between the parents and their children, geographic location of their house and the family policies. Hoff-Ginsberg observes that children from more affluent backgrounds have been found to demonstrate better language skills than those from poorer backgrounds.

According to Hoff, children from such an affluent environment are found to have larger vocabularies and they build these vocabularies at a faster rate. Socio-economic status does not directly affect language outcomes, such as build-up of confidence to express one's thought; rather its effect is seen on children's physical and psychological environments. These environments, according to Southwood, in turn, affect children's home learning environment.

It also influences the language input they receive and the opportunities they have for vocabulary learning. Socioeconomic status can have an indirect influence on an individual language experience. In this regard, Burchinal observes that children who attend day-care as found in more affluent areas with low teacher-child ratio show more rapid development of grammatical skills (23) Again, joint book reading has been shown to accelerate language development in a range of settings. This practice as the opinion of Coley, is seen more in homes with higher socioeconomic status than those with lower socioeconomic status.

Another environmental factor which has been found to exact much influence on individual's language expression is maternal level of education, and by extension, paternal level of education. Simply put, the parental level of education and exposure influence their children's ability to acquire language and use it properly in expressing their thought. Parents are immediate caregivers a child gets acquainted with early in life. The nature and quality of interaction among them is of paramount importance to the child.

Studies show that children of parents (mothers in particular) with higher levels of education have been shown to demonstrate better language skills than their peers whose parents have lower levels of education. In the words of Tomblin, Higher level of maternal education correlates with a higher level of expressive vocabulary at different ages.

Theoretical Framework and Methodology

The article finds a hinge on "Theory of mind" otherwise known as "Sociocultural" theory propounded by Lev Vygotsky. Worthy of mention is the fact that Lev Vygotsky's theory of learning within which he discussed sociocultural theory has two other antecedent stages which are cognitive and motoric stages. Before highlighting on the stages, this work will succinctly give the organogram of Vygotsky's theory. Vygotsky upholds that culture play important role in child's development of cognitive abilities such as reasoning and communication. According to this theory, in a society, adults foster cognitive development in children by engaging them in meaningful and challenging activities.

Talking about the various stages that are involved in the learning of children, Vygotsky opines that at the cognitive stage, children learn ideas and concepts. At the motoric stage, children learn things by doing them and finally at the sociocultural stage, children learn through interaction with others. This last stage is a very crucial stage in the learning process of children such that when it is not properly done, the children are adversely affected. In the sociocultural learning, there are two outstanding groups. From the fore going, it is fitting to say that effective and positive social interaction between a learner and someone more knowledgeable is a must for successful learning and social development. Worthy of mention is that the medium of this social interaction remains language.

Further commentaries on this wonderful theory of Vygotsky will be of immense help in appreciating this wonderful theory of his. Below are some further elucidations of this theory. A student of his, Lantolf has this to say about the theory:

"Despite the label "Sociocultural" the theory is not a theory of the social or of the cultural aspect of human existence ...it is rather, ... theory of mind ... that recognizes the central role that social relationships and culturally constructed artifacts play in organizing uniquely human forms of thinking" (Lantofl,1)

According to Zubaidi, “Through Sociocultural theory, Vygotsky focused on the relationship between individual’s Psychological aspects and the social and culturally produced contexts and artifacts that transform the individual’s cognitive or mental function.” (Zubaidi, 4). The above two submissions give direction to the article’s path of thought. Such support helps to buttress the effort so far made in establishing the influence one’s environment (Psychological, Social and Cultural context) impact on an individual’s cognitive development which in turn affects language skill acquisition and usage.

The source of data used for this article come mainly from both primary and secondary data. The secondary data refers to previously published works in text books and other information materials. The Novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, is used as a secondary source while observation from acts and culture of the Igbo source is used as primary source. This article lifted some lines from the novel and applied personal observation to decipher the level of influence socio-cultural environment has on the acquisition of speech skill as depicted in the novel. The work also sought clarification from cultural groups on areas of interest, adding up to the data collection method for the article. The study makes its analysis using the content analytical method. It is a method that involves reviewing of acts and representation by the character in the novel and observing actions in the lives of individuals within the work’s environment.

Implications and Analysis of the Data Collected

In this novel, *Purple Hibiscus*, an apt demonstration of the claim of this article – that democratic and friendly sociocultural environment fosters an individual’s expressive power and capacity to use language, while unfriendly environment stalls the process. In doing this, a close look at Mr. Eugene’s household, governance style and atmosphere as well as Auntie Ifeoma’s was examined and their impact on the protagonists’ linguistic and cognitive development shown. One gets the feeling of the narrator from some of her direct expressions in the novel. All indices of failed real human interaction and communication are aptly expressed: restricted association with neighbours; tensed silence in the family even during meal time; fear of offending papa, if one should express personal opinion over any matter in the family and sense of lost freedom. For instance, the narrator speaks thus:

I lay in bed after mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all. Auntie Ifeoma’s little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence. Jaja’s defiance seemed to me now like Auntie Ifeoma’s experimental purple hibiscus: rare, fragrant with the undertones of freedom, a different kind of freedom from the one the crowds waving green leaves chanted at Government square after the coup. A freedom to be, to do. (26)

Thought is meant to be verbalized through language. Proficiency in the use of language is a skill which one perfects by participating in conversational discourse. In the above except, Kambili recalls how unfriendly and tensed their home environment is which makes communication difficult. They communicate more with “spirits than with lips”. Furthermore, while describing one of the encounters with papa, she writes “I wanted to search his eyes to know what he knew, how he had found out about the painting. But I did not, could not. Fear. I was familiar with fear, yet each time I felt it; it was never the same as the other times, as though it came in different flavor and colours.” (203)

It is clear that psychologically, the protagonists are traumatized by the violent disciplinary measures in their family which stifles healthy interaction among the parents and their children. The effect is that the children become socially unfit. Amaka questions if they are normal people; “Are you sure they’re not abnormal, mum?she behaves funny. Even Jaja is strange. Something is not right with them” (150). Amaka further observes that Kambili and Jaja speak in whispers “why do you lower your voice? You lower your voice when you speak. You talk in whispers” (125)

At this juncture, a recourse will be made to the questions which have guided this article in its enquiry towards proving that healthy social interaction aids acquisition of speech skills, competence and performance. The analysis done here is based on the questions generated here. **How does strict and unfavorable home environment contribute to mal-development of use of language in Kambili and Jaja as depicted in *Purple Hibiscus*?**

From our everyday observation children tend to say less if the adults in their environment fail to encourage them to say more mostly by repeating their utterance even when it appears unintelligible. In this regards, Ibeagha observes:

When the early cries and vocalization of infants are responded to, they learn to re-fine them, to more specialized signals. The more they know that their signals or message are received, the more skilled they become in sending them. They require the partnership of the caregiver for the purpose of conveying a variety of feelings – hunger, discomfort, anger and pleasure distinctively. The key to infants beginning to connect sounds with meaning is the caregivers’ responsiveness. If no one responds to the initial cries and vocalization made by infants, there would be no reason for infants to strive to make signals. (120 - 121)

From the above psychological fact, one is left with no doubt about the influence of Mr. Eugene’s family administration style in the lives of Kambili and Jaja. Since they received little or no affirmation from their immediate environment in their tender age, they remained doubtful about their ability to express their inner thoughts and yearnings even among their peers most of the times, until their visit to Nsukka. Kambili’s description of her relationship with her classmates affirms this:

I remained a backyard snob to most of my class girls until the end of term. But I did not worry too much about that because I carried a bigger load – the first this term. It was like balancing a sack of gravel on my head every day at school and not being allowed to steady it with my head I memorized what teachers said because I knew my textbooks would not make sense if tried to study later. After every test, a tough lump like poorly made fufu formed in my throat and stayed there until our exercise books came back (60)

Kambili is nicknamed “backyard snob” because she could not associate with other girls. Her classmates misinterpreted this attitude of Kambili. Chinwe, one of her classmates once remarked “just because your father owns a newspaper and all those factories does not mean you have to feel too big”. This is actually far from the truth. Kambili and her brother Jaja were simply products of a tyrannical home environment. They never interacted with their parents; therefore, they find it hard to associate with the outside environment. From the excerpts above, the young Kambili carries so much emotional burden on her that her outside environment and their demands matter little to her.

A balanced and emotionally healthy child ordinarily looks out for time to spend with his/her mates especially during school hours. Kambili is so withdrawn that she prefers to spend the long break period in the library whereas her mates meet in school canteen to buy ice cream and the likes from the school canteen.

Mr. Eugene specializes in creating frightening scenes both in the house and outside the house. These create awful experience in the young minds of Kambili and her brother Jaja. The term Kambili took second position in the class cannot be forgotten in a hurry. Papa was very furious with her. He dramatized it in such a way that Kambili preferred “the ground to open and swallow the whole compound” (54). Such method of training leaves little to be desired.

Concisely set, the home environment in the house of Eugene crippled the psychological, cognitive, emotional and social development of his children, Kambili and Jaja. His autocratic way of administering his household left the family members in fear. The children witnessed a number of miscarriages their mum had as a result of their dad’s sadistic and violent nature. These experiences negatively influenced them. Kambili expresses one of such experiences thus: “I still saw the print in my textbook as a red blur, still saw my baby brother’s spirit strung together by narrow lines of blood” (60)

This is her recollection of her mum’s last miscarriage which was occasioned by her dad’s violent beating of the mum. Kambili’s hope of having a second brother was shattered when the incident occurred. In such a home environment as described above, the negative effect is innumerable.

What is the level of awareness of this problem among parents?

The text did not actually specify the awareness level among other parents, but one sees in one of the major characters in the text, Auntie Ifeoma, a demonstration of this awareness. Her attitude and family governance style confirm this work’s earlier claim that maternal level of education and exposure do a lot on the overall development of the children. Despite the fact that she is a widow, with meager monthly income as a lecturer in a Nigerian University - the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, her children are strong footed unlike her brother who despite his wealth succeeded in producing children of fearful nature. Auntie Ifeoma represents the enlightened parents, who pass on healthy attitudes to their children. She gives them the basic things needed for successful human development. A look at Obiora, Amaka and Chima shows people who are confident, who have experienced love and are well prepared to withstand the world. Through Auntie Ifeoma’s insistence, Mr. Eugene agreed to allow his children, Kambili and Jaja to visit Nsukka, a journey which proves to be the turning point in their lives. At Nsukka, Auntie Ifeoma exposed them to life changing experiences. It was at Nsukka that Kambili for the first time learnt how to peel yam, prepare dishes and learnt how to relate with people including the opposite sex. Kambili affirmed that her real life started at Nsukka when she visited the apartment even when she knew that Auntie Ifeoma and the family had travelled out of the country. She records her experience thus:

I asked the new family in Auntie Ifeoma’s flat if I could come in, and although they looked at me strangely, they asked me in and offered me a glass of water ... As we drove back to Enugu, I laughed loudly, above Fela’s stringent singing. I laugh ... because Nsukka could free something deep inside your belly that would rise up to your throat and come out as a freedom song, as laughter (302 - 303).

Conclusion

The plight of the characters, Kambili and Jaja as depicted by the writer, Chimamanda Adichie in *Purple Hibiscus* prompted this work. More importantly is the change observed in the protagonist and narrator, Kambili, by mere change of environment. This change is so fundamental that one can rightly say that there are “early Kambili” and “later Kambili”: The former being a fragile personality, fearful, timid, and without personal opinion while the latter is a transformed individual, capable of acknowledging her feelings and expressing her opinions.

The work argues that it is the change in environmental factor that brought about the change in the personality of Kambili and Jaja. Even the protagonist is aware of these changes and the factors responsible for them. For she observes:

“I lay in bed after mama left and let my mind rake through the past, through the years when Jaja and mama and I spoke more with our spirits than with our lips. Until Nsukka. Nsukka started it all; Auntie Ifeoma’s little garden next to the verandah of her flat in Nsukka began to lift the silence” (24)

The article shows that a number of sociocultural and individual factors affect an individual’s overall development especially acquisition of language skills and power of expression. Quality social interaction in homes and one’s immediate environment stand out among the sociocultural factors as a defining factor of a child’s ability to acquire these life changing tools for verbal assertiveness at a younger age. Other contributing sociocultural factors include the educational level of caregivers and especially the parents, mothers in particular, socio-economic status of the parents, number of children in the house, geographical location of the family house among others. These factors influence socialization, social interactions and other parenting practices; these in turn influence the child’s language learning ability.

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