

Speech Style-Shifts in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*

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Abstract

This paper examines the use of speech style shifts by interlocutors engaged in dialogues. In verbal discourse interactants employ different speech styles in different situations. This is because no one speaks in exactly the same manner on all occasions. A number of factors inform these shifts in speech style such as the speaker, the addressee, social background of the addressee, the speaker's relationship to the addressee, social distance, situation and power structure, among other factors. Using Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, this study seeks to identify the speech style shifts in the dialogues of the characters and the motivations for the shifts. It also seeks to determine the way the shifts affected the relationships between the characters as well as the power structures that are at play. To achieve these objectives, six sample excerpts purposively selected from the text were used as data while ethnography of communication was used as the theoretical framework. Findings revealed that the different speech style shifts identified were influenced mainly by the situation and social distance.

Introduction

In dialogues of characters in written prose, there is a tendency for display of shifts in the style of the speeches of interlocutors in different circumstances. Shifts in speech styles take place sometimes within the same conversation depending on the degree of the attention to the clarity of the discourse. A shift in speaking may be as a result of a change in the self-image that the speaker wishes to project, in the type of information to be communicated, in the situation the interactants find themselves such as a noisy background, arrival or departure of other individuals, the context of the dialogue and in the impression that the speaker has about the listener, for instance where he has a hearing impediment. These shifts depending on the occasion may be very formal, less formal or extremely formal and casual such as when the relationship between the interlocutors is very close or when they belong to different social classes. These shifts in style may be due to the speaker, the addressee, the age or the social background of the addressee, the social background, social distance or the situation. When such necessary adjustment in speech style are not made, it would attract social sanctions in formal situations for instance or if the purpose is misconstrued by the interactants, problems such as feelings of inferiority, contempt or avoidance may arise on the part of the interactants of lower status while the one of higher status may exhibit an air of pride, arrogance or insult. In informal interactions also, if such style shifts in speech are not applied or where they are not appreciated it could mar relationships and also lead to breakdown in communication. This study seeks to identify the speech style shifts in the speech styles of the characters in *Americanah*, what the motivation for the shifts are and how they affect the relationship between the characters. It showcases the different applications of speech style-shifts and the speech situations and speech events that informed the shift in the speech styles of the characters. To this end, the following questions were raised: what are the speech style-shifts in the text? What are the motivations for the speech style-shifts? How did they affect the relationship between the characters? What are the power structures at play?

Synopsis of the Novel

Ifemelu, the chief character is a Nigerian young lady living in Princeton, New Jersey. Her main source of income has been her blog about race and class. By the time the novel opens up she has decided to shut the business down and move over to Nigeria, where she has a ready appointment at a women's magazine called Zoe. She has disengaged her relationship with her boyfriend, Obinze and shipped her car to Nigeria to the amazement of her friends and family. She has lived in America for thirteen years and to them her actions appear very irrational. Ifemelu is however determined. She sends a brief email to her ex-boyfriend, Obinze, whom she refers to as Ceiling telling him of her plan to move to Nigeria.

Obinze receives her mail while stuck in traffic in Lagos. He is now a successful businessman with a wife, Kosi and a daughter, Buchi. He loves his daughter but does not have as much love for his wife. Ifemelu's mail stirs up reflections of the past in him. By this, the readers are taken back to Ifemelu's story. Her father gets fired from a federal agency for refusing to call his female boss "Mummy." Her family is subjected to poverty because of the father's joblessness and they occasionally borrow money from Auntie Uju, a relation who is a mistress to an army general to pay rent. Ifemelu nevertheless continues to excel in school. Ifemelu and Obinze meet as teenagers and both are excellent students. They meet and fall in love in Lagos where Obinze's mother, a university professor is on a two-year sabbatical leave. Obinze's mother approves of their relationship but is concerned about them having sex. She lectures them about contraceptives when Ifemelu had a pregnancy scare. Obinze enrolls at Nsukka University and Ifemelu joins him out of love. The frequent teachers' strike causes Ifemelu to enroll later at a college in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania and they part ways planning that Obinze would make his way to America after graduation

On arrival in America, Ifemelu breaks off contact. Her life in America is harder than she expected as she finds it difficult to get work. She finally starts school with the help of Auntie Uju who becomes a doctor after much struggles. She tries to find work to augment her partial scholarship but fails because of her skin colour. She is forced to take up a job as a sex worker but is later hired as a nanny for two children, Morgan and Taylor and gets well paid. She begins to date Curt, a white who is well-to-do and he uses his influence to find her a job at a public relations firm in Baltimore. She later runs into an old friend, Kayode who informs her that he recently heard from Obinze.

Obinze turns out as an illegal immigrant in England. He is unable to secure a visa and he is forced to work using an Englishman's National Insurance number and paying him thirty percent of all his earnings. He gets a job in a warehouse and starts saving for a contract wedding in order to earn citizenship. The Englishman turns him to Immigration authorities for refusing to pay him forty percent cut. He is arrested and deported back to Nigeria. His return to Nigeria is favourable and he becomes a very successful businessman in Lagos.

Here, the story gets back to the first chapter of the novel in which Ifemelu sits in a hair salon and sends a quick email to Obinze. He is excited to hear from her and responds. She breaks off again because her nephew Dike attempted suicide. She postpones her move to Lagos until he recovers. When Ifemelu arrives in Nigeria she takes some time to adjust to life in Africa again. She has become, according to her friends an 'Americanah' and has to learn to live the African way again.

She takes up a job as a features editor at Zoe, a new Women's website in Lagos. She is dissatisfied and very critical of the way the site is run. She notices some disarming things about

Nigerian culture and whenever she comments about them her friends tell her that she is Americanized. One day Ifemelu sees Obinze and on sending him a text, they reunite. However the happiness doesn't last because she has to share him with Kosi, his wife. When Ifemelu demands that he leaves his wife, Obinze hesitates out of a sense of duty to his family. She furiously breaks off with Obinze, calling him a coward. She refuses to speak to him and spends more time with her friends. She even calls her former friends Curt and Blaine enquiring after them. Then seven months later, Obinze knocks on her door and she lets him in.

Conceptual Framework

Speech Styles

Speech style according to Martin Joos, an online source is the form of language that the speaker uses which is characterized by the degree of formality. (Accessed 11:21 September 12, 2020) Speech style is a social feature of language use. (Yule, 2010:257) Ezeifeke (2018:136) asserts that they are linguistic options open to the speech community for particular events and activity types. She notes that they include: varieties (High/Low, Standard/nonstandard, dialects, register choices, formal/informal/casual etc.) and speech events where they are appropriate – political, academic, folk literature, casual conversations; degrees of formality within one standard language. In language use, speakers usually adopt different styles of speaking. They can speak very formally or very informally depending on the circumstances. Wardhaugh (2010:47) posits that ceremonial occasions usually require very formal speech; public lectures somewhat less formal, casual conversations between intimate persons on matters of little importance may be extremely informal and casual. According to him, the level of formality chosen may be related to a variety of factors such as the kind of occasion, the various social, age and other differences that exist between the interlocutors; the particular task that is involved such as writing or speaking, the emotional involvement of one or more of the participants. Holmes asserts that “language varies according to who is using it (2013:239) She notes that the addressees and the context influence our choices of code or variety be it language, dialect or style.

Joos identifies the types of speech style as frozen style, formal style, consultative style, casual style and intimate style. Frozen style according to him is the most formal communicative style that is usually used during respectful events and ceremonies. It is also used when one shows hesitation, disinterest or prejudice. Frozen speech is used generally in a formal setting, does not require any feedback from the audience and is the most formal communicative style for respectful situations. Intimate style is for very close relationships like couples, family, and best friends. It is used in conversation between people who are very close and know each other quite well because they have the maximum of shared background information. Formal speeches are straightforward speeches. In this speech style, the speaker avoids using slang terminologies. What the speaker says is something that has been prepared beforehand. Casual speech style is an informal communication between groups and peers who have shared background information but don't have close relations while consultative speech style is used in semi-formal communication. In this type speech sentences are shorter and spontaneous and the speaker does not usually plan what he/she wants to say. A change from one to the other according to Yule (2010:257) is called style-shifting.

Motivation for Shifts in Speech Style

Shifts in speech style are motivated by a number of factors such as speaker, addressee, age of addressee, social background of addressee, social distance, the situation and the speech event. Wardhaugh (2010:47) avers that speakers can adopt different styles of speaking. He posits that speaker's speech can be very formal or informal depending on the circumstances. Ceremonial

occasions according to him, require very formal speech, public lectures somewhat less formal, casual conversations quite formal while conversations between persons who are intimate on matters of little importance may be extremely informal and casual. He notes that the level of formality chosen may relate to a variety of factors. These factors include the kind of occasion; the various social, age, and other differences that may exist between the participants; the particular task that is involved such as writing or speaking; the emotional involvement of one or more of the participants and so on.

Holmes (2013:240) asserts that an addressee is an influence on style. She gives two examples to buttress her point thus:

- a) Excuse me. Could I have a look at your photos too, Mrs Hall?
- b) C'mon Tony, gizzalook

The first utterance according to her was addressed by a teenage boy to his friend's mother when she was showing the photos of their skiing holiday to an adult friend. The second utterance was addressed to his friend when he brought his own photos of the holiday. She posits that the better you know someone, the more casual and relaxed the speech style you will use on them. People according to her use considerably more standard forms to those they do not know well, and more vernacular forms to their friends. This generalization according to her holds across different languages.

Holmes (2013:241) also identifies age of addressee as an influence on style. She notes that people generally talk differently to children and adults though some adjust their speech style or accommodate more than others. Talking to younger brothers and sisters, even 3-year-olds, according to her, have been heard using sing-song intonation and 'baby talk' words like 'doggie' which they no longer use themselves. She observes that when talking or writing to a 6-year-old as opposed to a 30-year-old, most people choose simpler vocabulary and grammatical constructions. She adds that many speakers also use a different style in addressing elderly people, often with features similar to those that characterize their speech to children. Such characteristics according to her include a simpler range of vocabulary and less complex grammar, the use of "we" rather than "you" to refer to the addressee and sometimes even the sing-song intonation which characterizes baby-talk.

The social background of addressee is another influence on speech style that Holmes (2013:242-243) identifies. She illustrates it thus:

a) Last week the British Prime Minister Mr. David Cameron met the Australian Premier Ms. Julia Gillard in Canberra... their next meeting will not be for several months

b) Las' week British Minister David Cameron met Australian Premier Julia Gillard in Canberra... Their nex' meeting won't be for several months

These utterances according to her, illustrates a number of linguistic features which distinguish the pronunciations of newsreader on different radio stations. In (b) there is simplification of consonant clusters, so [la:st] becomes [la:s] and [nekst] becomes [neks]. The pronunciation of [t] between vowels is voiced so it sounds like a [d] hence meeting sounds like meeding. The definite article 'the' is omitted before the titles Prime Minister and Premier and the honorifics Mrs and Mr disappear. And finally utterance (b) contracts *will not* to *won't*. All these features according to her have been identified as typical of the contrasting styles of newsreaders on different New Zealand radio stations.

Holmes (2013:240) observes that the speaker's relationship to the addressee is crucial in determining the appropriate style of speaking. She points out that "how well you know someone or how close you feel to them – relative social distance/solidarity- is one important

dimension of social relationship”. Many factors according to her, may contribute in determining the degree of social distance or solidarity between people such as relative age, gender, social roles, whether people work together, or are part of the same family and so on. These factors she notes may also be relevant to people’s relative social status.

Social distance according to an online dictionary is “the perceived or desired degree of remoteness between a member of one social group and the members of another, as evidenced in the level of intimacy tolerated between them.” It describes the distance between groups in society and is opposed to locational distance. The notion includes differences such as social class, race/ethnicity, gender or sexuality, and also the fact that the different groups mix less than members of the same groups.

On situation as an influence on style, Hudson (2001:199) notes that many of the studies carried out have considered the effects on speech of variations in the situation. In two of such instances he reports that Labov found out that shop assistants were more likely to pronounce the /r/ in fourth floor when he asked them to repeat it and he also found that people spoke differently in his interviews according to what they were talking about, and who they were talking to – their speech became less standard when they were talking about situations where they were in danger of dying than when talking about routine matters and it was less standard when talking to other members of their family than when talking to him.

Speech events can influence style. Speech event according to Ezeifeke (2018:136) is the basic unit of analysis in ethnography of speaking. She states that “it involves the particular activity or aspect of the activity that are directly governed by rules or norms of the situation.” Instances she gives are lecture, inaugural speech, vote of thanks, convocation speech, sermon, welcome address etc. Coulthard (1977:39) notes that speech event occurs in a non-verbal context which is the speech situation. He observes that speech events are the largest units for which one can discover linguistic structures and so do not have the same pattern with the situation. That is to say that several speech events can occur successively or simultaneously in the same situation just as different conversations can take place in a party. Yule (2010:145) adds that in investigating what is known about participating in conversation or any other speech event such as debate, interview and other various types of discussions, it is quickly realized that there is enormous variation in what people say and do in different circumstances. He observes that in order to describe the sources of that variation, account would be taken of a number of criteria. For example, according to him, we would have to specify the roles of speaker and hearer(s) and their relationship(s), whether they were friends, strangers, men, women, young, old, of equal or unequal status, and many other factors. All these factors, he notes have an influence on what is said and how it is said. We would have to describe what the topic of conversation was and in what setting it took place.

Power structure is another influence on speech style. Pfetsch (2011) asserts that the various forms of relations between the negotiation partners are power. A power structure is an overall system of influence between any individual and other individuals within a group. Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English defines it “as the way in which the groups of people who control a country, society, or organization are organized.” It comprises symmetrical and asymmetrical relationships. Pfetsch avers that symmetrical relationships are characterized by a balanced mutual relationship based on similar allocations of power resources. Asymmetry according to him “is a structure one can find among most social and political relations and in relations between unequal parties.” He further observes that it is a relationship between the

small and the great, the weak and the poor.” The unequal allocation of power resources, he notes, can lead to a point when the most powerful party makes threats and exerts pressure.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored in the theoretical frameworks of Ethnography of Communication (EOC) (formerly called Ethnography of Speaking) and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) The study focuses on how different culture represent different speech communities with different speech situations, speech styles, speech events and speech acts the five taxonomy of units of social communication with speech event as the minimal unit of analysis in the framework. The relevance of CDA in the study is based on the notion of ‘power’ at play in the interactions among the different characters in the literary text. Luke cited in Ezeifeke (2018) notes that “CDA usually begins with the assumption that systematic asymmetries of power and resources between speakers and listeners, readers and writers, can be linked to their unequal access to linguistic and social resources.”

Ethnography of communication was championed by Dell Hymes (cited in Ezeifeke, 2018). According to her, it is a branch of studies in Linguistics and Anthropology that x-rays the study of language beyond the lexicon and grammar. She asserts that it is an approach to the study of discourse which is focused on particular ways of seeing the world and how these are showcased in particular ways of speaking. She notes that ethnographers observe patterns of communication and the symbols of meanings, premises and rules applied to speaking within specific groups of people which entails culture, race, ethnic group, or speech community. Their focus according to her is on the verbal and non-verbal ways of sense-making in different cultures in order to find out particular communication acts or codes that are important to particular groups, what types of meanings each group attach to different speech events, and how group members learn these codes. This qualitative approach to discourse analysis, she observes, is designed to increase awareness of enormous culture-bound assumptions such as what is normal, appropriate, usual and correct in human communication. Objects of study (e.g. the study of Igbo culture) according to her include:

1. Ways of speaking – distinct patterns of talk that is symbolically meaningful to that particular group within the broader spectrum of communicative behaviour generally. For example, speech communication the speech situations/speech events reflected in the different excerpts from the selected literary text.
2. Speech communities defined by Hymes as people who share at least one valued way of speaking and interpretative resources within its location.
3. Native terms of talk – group specific labels for communicative practices that index their symbolic importance and meaning, for example words /expressions used within a specific ethnic group (in this case the Igbo tribe).

The foundational premise of ethnography of speaking formulated by Hymes as noted by Ezeifeke, 2018 134-135) includes:

1. Diversity in the systems of language use is to be explored in all its complexity
2. Societies differ as to what communicative resources are available to their members, in terms of language, dialects, registers, routines, genres, artistic formulae etc.
3. Societies differ in how these resources are patterned in use, in the work done (or doable) through speech and other communicative means and in the evaluation of speaking as an instrument of social class.

She also cites Hymes as arguing that any description of language on ways of speaking will need to provide data along four related dimensions, linked to judgments of situational correctness:

1. The linguistic resources available to a speaker – how many different styles he/she can choose from: formal, informal, casual, distant or frozen
2. Supra-segmental structuring – how many differently structured linguistic (speech) events like trials, religious ceremonies, debates, songs are recognized in the cultures
3. The rules of interpretation by which a given set of linguistic item comes to have a given communicative value
4. The norms which govern different types of interaction, for instance, different ethnic groups, among peers and for elders and for elders I different speech communities, speech styles, speech situations and speech events for example disclosure of information of a fellow to strangers.

She notes that based on the above premise, Hymes proposed the social units of ethnography of speaking research arranged in descending order of magnitude as shown below:

speech community
speech styles
speech situation
speech event
speech act

Speech community – This refers to a group of speakers who share both linguistic resources and rules for interaction and interpretation.

Speech style – These are the linguistic options open to the speech community for particular speech events and activity types. These include varieties (High/low, standard/nonstandard, dialects, register choices, formal/informal/casual etc.) and speech events where they are appropriate – political, academic, folk literature, casual conversations, degrees of formality within one standard language.

Speech situation – This is the social occasion in which the speech may occur and it defines the appropriateness of speaking, the context of the speech event.

Speech event – This is the basic unit of analysis in ethnography of speaking. It involves the particular activity or aspect of activity that are directly governed by rules or norms of the speech situation.

Speech acts – This involves ways in which particular speech communities perform certain actions through speech, such as how thanking is done or requests are made in some speech communities.

The Speaking Grid

In order to analyse speech events, Hymes proposed a classificatory grid for identifying and defining a speech event which he argues can be useful in discovering the culturally relative taxonomy of communicative units described above. He calls this the SPEAKING grid: each letter representing a different possible component of communication.

S – Setting – (i) physical circumstances (ii) scene – subjective definition of an occasion.

P – Participants – (i) speaker/sender/addresser (ii) hearer/receiver/audience/addressee

E – Ends – purposes and goals/ outcomes

A – Act sequence – message form and content (discourse analysis), the words used to inform, direct, promise, request, mandate, question, invite, declare.

- K – Key – tone, manner or spirit with which a particular message is conveyed: satiric, Ironic, serious, light-hearted, joking, mocking, sarcastic, pedantic, pompous, sad, happy etc.
- I – Instrumentalities – channel (oral, written, signed, multimodal). This also includes physical forms of speech drawn from community repertoire: dialect, code, register and whether the speech is formal, informal, frozen, consultative and intimate. Code-switching may also be relevant here.
- N – Norms of interaction and interpretation: - specific properties attached to speaking interpretation of norms within cultural belief system. There are norms of greeting, addressing elders, cultural differences in loudness, silence, gaze return, body posture when talking to elders, comfortable conversational distance among strangers and among friends.
- G – Genre – Textual categories such as a lecture, sermon, vote of thanks, convocation address, a market transaction, a political speech, a marriage transaction, a welcome address and numerous such other genres. These different genres are text types with their unique internal structures which accord with different social goals. For instance, there is a difference between how a lecture is structured as different from an inaugural speech or a vote of thanks. Each has its own internal patterning and schematic structures and this enables one to discover when the speaker switches from one genre to another, like when somebody in a lecture is asked to stop “sermonizing” in a situation where they digressed from lecturing which is an academic genre to a religious genre.

Research Questions

1. What are the speech-style shifts in the text?
2. What are the motivations for the style shifts?
3. How did the style shifts affect the relationship among the characters?
4. What power structures are atwork?

Methodology

The speech style-shifts in the selected literary text, chosen because of the ingenious language use of the author are identified, the motivations for the style-shifts and the speech situations and speech events that informed the shifts in the speech styles of the characters are highlighted and subjected to Hymes SPEAKING grid. Six excerpts of the speech style-shifts would be used as data.

Data Presentation and Analysis

Excerpt 1

Finally Aisha finished with her customer and asked what colour Ifemelu wanted for her hair attachments.

“Colour four.”

“Not good colour,” Aisha said promptly.

“That’s what I use.”

“It looks dirty. You don’t want colour one?”

“Colour one is too black, it looks fake,” Ifemelu said, loosening her head wrap

“Sometimes I use colour two, but colour four is closest to my natural colour.”

... She touched Ifemelu’s hair. Why don’t you have relaxer?

“I like my hair the way God made it.”... (23-24)

The speech-style shift as showcased in the expression “I like my hair the way God made it” is from consultative to formal style. The speech situation/speech event that informed the shift in style of the character in the excerpt above is the expression of disapproval of Ifemelu’s choice of the colour of attachment by Aisha the hairdresser when Ifemelu went to her salon to braid her hair. The motivation for the style shift was social distance between the two characters.

Excerpt 2

(Aisha) “You have boyfriend? You marry?”

“I’m also going back to Nigeria to see my man,” Ifemelu said surprising herself...

“Oh! Aisha said, excited; Ifemelu had given her a comprehensible reason for wanting to move back. “You will marry?”

“Maybe we’ll see.”

Oh! Aisha stopped twisting and stared at her in the mirror, a dead stare.

“I want you to see my men. I call them. I call them and you see them. First I will call Chijioke. He work Cab. Emeka he work security. You see them.”

“You don’t have to call them just to meet me.”

“No really. I can’t do that”

Aisha kept speaking as if she hadn’t heard. “You tell them. They listen to you because you are their Igbo sister. Any one is okay. I want marry.” (29)

In a further interaction between Ifemelu and her interlocutor, Aisha, there is another style shift from casual to formal style as seen in the expressions “You don’t have to call them just to meet me” and “No really. I can’t do that.” The speech situation/speech event that informed the shifts in the speech style of the character in the excerpt above was Aisha, the hairdresser’s request to Ifemelu to meet with and convince one of her Igbo boyfriends to marry her. The motivation for the shift in speech style was social distance.

Excerpt 3

She arrived at the flat wearing a sequined boubou that caught the light, glistening like a flowing celestial presence, and said that wanted to tell Ifemelu’s parents about it before they heard the gossip. “Adi m ime,” she said simply.

... “My God why have forsaken me?”

“I did not plan this, it happened.” Auntu Uju said.

“I fell pregnant for Olujimi in the university. I had an abortion and I am not doing it again.”

He wanted to hear more, but Auntu Uju said nothing else so he sat back assailed.

“You are an adult. This is not what I hoped for you, Obianuju, but you are an adult.”

... “Brother, this is not what I hoped for myself either, but it has happened.

I am sorry to disappoint you after everything you have done for me, and I beg you to forgive me. But I will make the best of this situation. The General is a responsible man. He will take care of his child.” (102-103)

The speech style shift as reflected in the expression “You are an adult. This is not what I hoped for you, Obianuju, you are an adult.” is from intimate to frozen style. The speech situation /speech event that informed the shift in the speech style of the character in the excerpt above was Auntu Uju’s announcement to Ifemelu’s parents that she was pregnant, being a spinster. The motivation was the speaker’s relationship with the addressee and the situation.

Excerpt 4

“I borrowed my landlord’s car. I didn’t want to come get you in my shit-ass car.

I can’t believe it, Ifemsco, you’re in America!” Ginika said. There was a metallic unfamiliar glamour in her gauntness, her olive skin, her short skirt barely covering her

crotch, her straight-straight hair that she kept tucking behind her ear, blond streaks shinning in the sunlight.

“We are entering University City, and that’s where Wellson campus is, shay you know? We can go to see the school first and then we can go to my place, out in suburbs, and after we can go to my friends place in this evening she is doing a get-together.” (145)

Another speech style shift in the excerpt above as seen in the expression “We are entering University City, and that’s where Wellson campus is, shay you know?” is from intimate to casual style. The speech situation/speech event that informed the shift in the speech style of the character was the fact that Ifemelu, her friend was new in America. Ginika, her old secondary school friend from Nigeria now living in America came to welcome her when she moved over to Philadelphia in search of a job. The motivation was the situation.

Excerpt 5

Good afternoon. Is this the right place for registration?” Ifemelu asked Christina Tomas, whose name she did not then know

“Yes. Now. Are. You. An. International. Student?”

“Yes.”

“You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. A. letter. From. The. International. Student. Office.” Ifemelu half smiled in sympathy, because Cristiana Tomas had to have some sort of illness that made her speak so slowly, lips scrunching and puckering, as she gave directions to the international students office. But when Ifemelu returned with the letter, Cristiana Tomas said, I. need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. This. Out?” and she realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and she felt for a moment like a small lazy limbed and drooling.

“I speak English.”

“I bet you do.” I just don’t know how well.” (157)

One other speech-style shift used as speech-style shift adopted as accommodation strategy by the characters is from frozen to formal style. This is seen in the expression “I bet you do. I just don’t know how well” in the interaction between Ifemelu and Christina Tomas, a white lady who was registering international students when she (Ifemelu) went to register at the international students’ office in America. The motivation was the situation.

Excerpt 6

Later, as they discussed the price of the land, Edusco said, Look, my brother. You won’t sell it at that price, nobody will buy it. Ife esika kita. The recession is biting everybody.” “Bros, bring up your hand a little, this is land in Maitama we are talking about, not land in your village.” Obinze said.

“Your stomach is full. What else do you want? You see this is the problem with you Igbo people. That is why I like Yoruba people. They look out for one another. Do you know that the other day I went to the Inland Revenue office near my house and one man there, an Igbo man, I saw his name and spoke to him in Igbo and he did not answer! A Hausa man will speak Hausa to his fellow Hausa man. A Yoruba man will see Yoruba person anywhere and speak Yoruba. But an Igbo man will speak English to an Igbo man. I am even surprised that you are speaking Igbo to me.” “It’s true,” Obinze said. It’s sad; it’s the legacy of being a defeated people. We lost the Biafran civil war and learnt to be ashamed.” It is just selfishness!” Edusco said, uninterested in Obinze’s intellectualizing. “The Yoruba man is there helping his brother, but you Igbo people? I gasikwa. Look at how you are quoting me this price.”

“Okay, Edusco, why don’t I give you the land for free? Let me go and bring the title and give it to you now.” Edusco laughed. Edusco liked him, he could tell; he imagined Edusco talking about him in a gathering of other self-made Igbo men, men who were brash and striving, who juggled huge businesses and supported vast extended families. (513-514)

The speech-style shift used as accommodation strategy adopted by the characters in the excerpt above is from consultative to casual as evident in the code-switched expressions “Look, my brother, you won’t sell it at that price. Nobody will buy. Ife esika kita. The recession is biting hard.” and “The Yoruba man is there helping his brother, but you Igbo people? I gasikwa, Look at how you are quoting me this price” This is seen in the interaction between Obinze and Edusco, an Igbo wealthy man who wanted to buy land from him when they were negotiating the price. The motivation was the situation.

Applying the SPEAKING grid, we represent the speech events as follows:

Excerpt 1

S=Setting: A hairdressing salon scene. Ifemelu, the protagonist and Aisha, a Senegalese hairdresser are engaged in a discussion when she was about to braid her hair.

P=Participants: Ifemelu and Aisha, the hairdresser

E=Ends: The goal of the dialogue is the determination of the colour of the attachment Ifemelu wanted for her hairdo.

A=Act Sequence: Questioning, informing

K=Key: Light-hearted, pedantic

I=Instrumentalities: Oral communication with systematic turn-taking between interactants.

Norms of Interaction and Interpretation: The interaction between hairdressers and their customers are usually formal.

G=Genre: Hairdresser-customer interaction

Excerpt 2

S= Setting: An interaction between Ifemelu, the protagonist and Aisha, a Senegalese hairdresser when she went to braid her hair.

P= Participants: Ifemelu, the protagonist and Aisha, the Senegalese hairdresser.

E= Ends: The goal of the interaction is the bid by Aisha to determine why Ifemelu wanted to move back to Nigeria and also her desire that Ifemelu would help her convince one of her men friends from Nigeria to marry her.

A= Act Sequence: Questioning, responding, requesting.

K= Key: Light-hearted, serious.

I= Instrumentalities: The interaction is oral, informal and consultative.

N= Norms of interaction and interpretation: Formal interactions are usually consultative.

G= Gere: Hairdresser – customer interaction.

Excerpt 3

S=Setting: A discussion among family members. AuntUju, Ifemelu’s aunt was in Ifemelu’s house to confide in them that she was pregnant.

P=Participant: AuntUju, Ifemelu’s aunt and Ifemelu’s parents

E=Ends: The goal of the interaction is to inform Ifemelu’s parents that she(AuntUju), a spinster was pregnant.

A=Act Sequence: Informing, questioning, declaring

K=Key: Serious, sad

I=Instrumentalities: The communication is oral with systematic turn-taking among interactants.

N=Norms of interaction and Interpretation: The interaction among family members is usually cordial.

G=Genre: Family members' interaction

Excerpt 4

S= Setting: An interaction between Ifemelu and Ginika, her secondary school friend from Nigeria now living America.

P=Participants: Ifemelu and Ginika.

E=Ends: To welcome Ifemelu on her first visit to Philadelphia.

A=Act Sequence: Proclamation, questioning.

K= Key: Light hearted, Jubilant.

I= Instrumentation: The interaction is oral and casual.

N= Norms of Interaction and interpretation: Interactions are usually cordial.

G=Genre: Friend –friend interactions.

Excerpt 5

S= Setting: An interaction between Ifemelu and Cristina Tomas, a white lady, who was registering the international students at the international students' office in America.

P= Participants: Ifemelu and Cristina Tomas, a white lady.

E= Ends: The goal of the interaction is getting direction at the international students' office in America.

A= Act sequence: Questioning, informing, declaring

K= Key: Serious, pompous.

I= Instrumentalities: The interaction is oral, consultative and frozen.

N= Norms of interaction and interpretation: formal interaction and consultative.

G= Official – client interaction

Excerpt 6

S= Setting: An interaction between Obinze and Edusco, an Igbo wealthy man who wanted to buy land from him.

P= Participants: Obinze and Edusco, an Igbo wealthy man.

E= Ends: The determination of the prize of a piece of land.

A= Act sequence: Requesting, declaring, and questioning.

K= Key: Serious, satiric and joking.

I= Instrumentalities: The interaction is oral, informal and then casual.

N= Norms of interaction and interpretation: formal interactions are consultative.

G=Genre: Buyer- seller interaction.

Discussion

In excerpt 1, the speech-style shift is showcased in the expression “I like my hair the way God made it” and it is from consultative to formal style. The speech situation/the speech event that informed the style shift is the expression of disapproval of the colour of attachment by Aisha, the hairdresser when Ifemelu went to her salon to braid her hair. Ifemelu evidently does not wish to continue with the topic under discussion. The style-shift may have dampened Aisha's spirit. There is a reflection of asymmetrical power relation which depicts social distance.

In excerpt 2, the speech style shift is evident in the expressions “You don't have to call them just to meet” and “No really. I can't do that” which is from casual to formal. The motivation for the style shift is Aisha, the hairdresser's request to Ifemelu to meet with and convince one of her Igbo boyfriend's to marry her. The absurdity of such a request may have influenced the

shift. The style shift may have further dispirited Aisha and thus strained the relationship between them. Asymmetrical power relation which is an indicator of social distance is reflected here as Ifemelu belongs to the upper social class.

In excerpt 3, the speech style shift is reflected in the expression “You are an adult. This is not what I hoped for you, Obianuju, you are an adult.” The shift is from intimate to frozen style. The speech situation/speech event that informed the shift in the speech style of the characters was Aunt Uju’s announcement to Ifemelu’s parents that she was pregnant, being a spinster. The motivation was age of addressee and the situation. The style shift showed the disapproval of Ifemelu’s parents for Aunt Uju’s conduct especially as they are her elderly relations. The power structure at play is asymmetrical.

In excerpt 4, speech style shift is showcased in the expression “We are entering University City, and that is where Wellson campus is, shay you know” which is from intimate to casual style. The speech situation /speech event that informed the shift in the speech style of the character was the fact that Ifemelu, her friend was new in America. Ginika, her old secondary school friend from Nigeria now living in America came to welcome her when she moved over to Philadelphia in search of a job. The motivation was the situation. She speaks Nigerian English possibly to arouse fellows-feeling in a strange land. It helped to strength their relationship. Symmetrical power relation is in force here.

In excerpt 5, the speech style shift adopted as accommodation strategy by the characters is from frozen to consultative style as seen in the expression “I bet you do. I just don’t know how well” The speech situation was the interaction between Ifemelu and Christina Tomas, a white lady was registering international students when she (Ifemelu) went to register at the international students’ office in America. The motivation was the situation. Christina Tomas assumes that Ifemelu, being a foreign student in America and a fresher, is not proficient in English and so she simplifies her vocabulary and grammar in talking to her. Ifemelu is resentful of Christina’s derogatory attitude and she sets out redeem her image. Asymmetrical power is in force here which denotes social distance

In excerpt 6, the speech style shift used as accommodation strategy is from consultative to casual as evident in the code-switched expressions “Look, my brother, you won’t sell it at that price. Nobody will buy. Ife esika kita. The recession is biting hard.” And The Yoruba man is there helping his brother, but you Igbo people I gasikwa. Look at how you are quoting me this price. The speech situation/speech event was the interaction between Obinze and Edusco, an Igbo wealthy man who wanted to buy land from him when they were negotiating the prize. The motivation was the speaker’s relationship to the addressee as well as the situation. Both of them belong to the Igbo tribe and so there was this need for a show of solidarity in code-switching English and Igbo which Edusco probably hoped to use to influence Obinze to reduce the price of the land for him. There is symmetrical power display here.

From the above discussion, it is seen that language use is dynamic. The different speech events thus informed the shifts in speech style from consultative to formal; casual to formal; intimate to frozen; intimate to casual; frozen to formal and consultative to casual respectively. The different speech style shifts identified were influenced mainly by the situation and social distance. The shifts also depict more of asymmetrical power relations between the different characters than symmetrical.

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