
Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a Tool for Countering Ethnocentric Language Use: Implications for Applied Peace Linguistics

Clifford Irikefe Gbeyonron

Abstract

*Prevailing ideological, political and ethnic divides in Nigeria make it a fragile state. One of the drivers of these divides is inflammatory language. Inflammatory language that exacerbates conflict abounds in spoken and written fictional and non-fictional discourse. Inflammatory language in the form of ethnocentric language use deepens hate, sustains distrust and engenders insecurity. The objective of this study is to expose how fiction can be used by English language scholars to counter ethnocentric language use thus enhancing peaceful communication and peaceful co-existence in Nigeria. In order to achieve this, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's **Half of a Yellow Sun** was analysed. It was found that the writer uses the principle of verisimilitude to make characters use ethnocentric language and ethnic profiling in the novel. Using the principles of critical thinking and peaceful communication, the study exposes the effect of the ethnocentric language – used by the characters in the novel – to peace, security and development. The study suggests how peace linguistic theories can be used by scholars of English to raise the consciousness of learners of English, to identify how ethnocentric language use flouts the principles of politeness. It is envisioned that, such will make the learners imbibe the skills of becoming communicative humanizers through critical thinking as*

such minimizing ethnocentric language use and facilitating peace, security and development in Nigeria.

Keywords: Adichie, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, ethnocentric language use, Peace Linguistics, communicative humanizer

1) Introduction

Despite the fact that language can be used as a viable tool for propelling the creation and sustainability of a positively dynamic world (Gbeyonron, 2014), words; the bricks of language, can hurt (Beebe, Beebe & Ivy, 2004; Siddiq, 2016; Thorne, 2006). This implies that despite being the prime tool with which conflicts are managed and resolved (Osoba, 2008), language has been misused via ethnocentrism to exacerbate conflict thus stunting societal quest of enshrining sustainable development in a peaceful and dynamic world. Ethnocentric language use engenders racial profiling (Laurencin & Walker, 2020). This is not unconnected with the fact that in some instances, interlocutors from some speech communities and cultures use demeaning and derogatory terms to label or disparage others thus discriminating the victims from the mainstream group (Bennet, 2014; Gamble & Gamble, 2005; Schaefer, 2006). This type of bias and hate is projected via the medium of ethnocentric language. And this is perpetrated overtly and covertly in all domains across the globe. Ethnocentric language use impedes peace and engenders conflicts. For instance, in Nigeria, a plethora of conflicts have been associated with identity or ethnicity with language being the strong index (Bello, Ahmadu & Bulakarima, 2008).

Cultural and pragmatic competence demands that one uses a humanizing language. This means that language use should be driven by virtues that embody dignity, human rights, justice, peace, equality, cooperation, goodness, kindness, and mutual understanding (Gomes de Matos, 2008). Such use of language is devoid of linguistic and paralinguistic substances that offend or discriminate against others just because the source has characteristics, beliefs, values, and attitudes different from those of the recipient (Camp & Satterwhite, 2002; Gomes de Matos, 2014). In principle, there is the need to imbibe the attitude of speaking peace with the intention of practicing it through awareness creation, effective listening, self-reflection, self-correction as well as repeated practice (Oxford, Boggs, Turner, Ma & Lin, 2014).

The novel and creative literary works of art can be used to assure peaceful attitudes. This is because hate and violence are triggered via what is learned and not exclusively innate just the way violent approaches to conflict are reinforced through institutions, and ideologies (Chamberlain, 2012; Sayed & Novelli, 2016). For this reason, a culture of peace through peaceful communication can be internalized by the means of a systemic reshaping of these same structures. For instance poems, stories, biographies or autobiographies and even personal narratives present conflicts which can actuate the consideration of choices and values and also make the reader consider situations, behaviours, and ethical concerns with a certain salutary amount of distance (Moncrieff & Corredera, 2015). The reader, viewing the characters, assumes the non-existence of the author and considers how the characters communicate with one another through humanizing language to enhance peace or use miscommunication and non-communication through dehumanizing language to exacerbate conflict. Nigeria as a country can be considered a fragile state not only because of the

overwhelming security challenges it is facing since 2011 but the ideological and ethnic fault-lines manifested through hate language. This is evident in copious literary and non-literary works. The *Minneapolis Star Tribune* in the praise to the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* asserts that "... if you want to understand a country's soul, read its fiction." It is in view of this that this work examines how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* can be used as an instrument for countering ethnocentric language and used to enhance applied peace linguistics.

2) Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*: An Overview

The novel is set in Nigeria to reflect events before and during the Nigerian Civil War fought from 1967 to 1970. The Northern and Southern protectorates of Nigeria were amalgamated in 1914 leading to the formation of one country christened 'Nigeria'. As Nigerians get involved in governance by the colonial administrators and the quest for self-government began to emerge, the veiled fragility of the country began to manifest through the utterances of politicians from the various ethnic divides. Sir Ahmadu Bello, the then Premier of the Northern Region captured this in his autobiography. He lamented how politicians from other Regions regard the North as *uneducated savages, backward and hidebound by tradition*, and did not hide the disdain of the North for Lagos which he described as *strange and alien* to North's ideas of life concluding that politicians from other Regions appear to *belong to another world* as far the North is concerned. He also reported how the ill-feelings between the north and the south in respect of polemics around the date for self-government triggered the first inter-ethnic violent conflict between Kano City and Sabon Gari (occupied by *native foreigners*) from 18 – 20 May, 1953 which led

to 31 deaths and 241 person sustaining injuries (Bello, 1962). This deepened the distrust between the North and South. The North threatened secession instead of being in a union in which it is humiliated and ill-treated. The West also contemplated secession when Lagos was not considered as part of the West in the 1953 Constitution (Obasanjo, 2015). Prior to the first coup d'état in Nigeria, on January 15, 1966, some revolutionary soldiers have concerns about the health of Nigeria. There were concerns that the *fanatics* that infest government machineries in Nigeria must be forestalled. The then Prime Minister, Sir Tafawa Balewa was described as an *agent of the so-called Hausa-Fulani oligarchy* and *ally of the Western capitalist interests* while Sir Ahmadu Bello was described as an *arch-tribalist* and *implacable enemy of Nigerian unity* because the North refer to non-Muslims as *infidels* (Gbulie, 1981). Pre-independent Nigeria and the period before the first coup d'état witnessed a situation whereby all political leaders in Nigeria fanned the ugly embers of tribalism and sectionalism into a deadly flame (Obasanjo, 2015). This led to the first coup, the counter coup and the civil war in Nigeria (Madiebo, 1980; Muffett, 1982).

It is against the background above that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie set her novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* relying on credible sources that experienced events during the period. The novel reveals what Nigerians thought of their fellow countrymen and women through the lens of profiling even before the outbreak of the civil war. The novel depicts life before the civil war and the effect of the civil war as it unfolds through the lives of the various characters like Odenigbo, Olanna and her twin sister, Kainene; Ugwu, Richard, Miss Adebayo, etc. exposing themes around political and ethnic struggles and identity in post-colonial Nigeria, neo-colonialism, marriage and women empowerment etc.

3) Methodology and Theoretical Framework

This work employs content analysis as the technique for data analysis. The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie was read to enable the study establish instances where ethnocentric languages are vividly used in the novel. Purposive sampling was utilized to pick fourteen (14) excerpts around ethnocentric or inflammatory language use from the novel. The excerpts are analysed based on the two principles adopted by this work. They are: the principle of critical thinking and the principle of peaceful communication. The principle of critical thinking emphasizes the act of using cognitive and affective abilities to evaluate and judge, in a reflective way, what to do or what to believe (Lau, 2011). It involves clear and rational thinking in a precise and systematic manner based on the rules of logic and scientific reasoning. It is propelled by language. On the other hand, the principle of peaceful communication in peace linguistics underscores the use of approaches that assure the deployment of linguistic principles, methods, findings, and applications as means of enhancing peace and human rights at all levels of human endeavour (Curtis, 2017). This implies that even though human beings have the tendency of being aggressive and violent, they are also inherently imbued with the traits of being considerate and peaceful. As such, they are expected to invariably choose verbal or non-verbal language that will promote and strengthen peace instead of violence to assure inner peace, interpersonal peace, intergroup peace, international peace, intercultural peace and ecological peace. Thus, any language use that flouts the principles of politeness and attempts to threaten the face of fellow interlocutors, individuals, groups, cultures etc. negates the principles of critical thinking and peaceful communication.

4) Content Analysis and Discussion

Excerpt 1: I am a Nigerian because a white man created Nigeria and gave me that identity. I am black because the white man constructed *black* to be as different as possible from his *white*. p. 25

The above excerpt is attributed to Odenigbo the major character in the novel. Elsewhere, Odenigbo has this to say:

The nationalism that means we should aspire to indifference about our own individual cultures is stupid. p. 139

A lighter word like ‘insensitive’ or ‘inconsiderate’ instead of ‘stupid’ would be more polite in this context. While in reality there was nothing like *Nigeria* until 1914 when the colonial government amalgamated the northern and southern protectorates, the tenor in the context it is used in the novel is dehumanizing. This is because to the white, pan-Nigerians and people that believe in an indivisible Nigeria as well as his fellow interlocutors during the course of the discourse in the novel; the utterance can cause social harm. Social harm is evident when the social identity of target persons can be damaged thus lowering the power or status of the target persons, this is because the channels of social harm include insults, reproaches, sarcasm, and various types of impolite behaviour (Culpeper, 2011). Marginalization and other triggers of conflicts have made people from different nationalities to threaten the balkanization of Nigeria even before independence (Bello, 1962; Obasanjo, 2015). Thus, in discussions around keeping Nigeria as a single entity, interlocutors

enter discourse on the subject matter with points of view (sometime highly opinionated and deep-rooted) that could deepen hate and fault-lines. Some communicate non-peacefully on the subject matter. They do this in spite of being aware that their position is not in consonance with critical thinking and national interest. This is done to avoid being considered as sell-outs by the gullible and extremist members of their respective ethnic and religious affiliations who are carried away by populist victimhood narratives instead of superior argument. In a situation like this, the applied peace linguist is expected to facilitate dialogue in such a way that superior positions based on critical thinking would establish the need to accept 'Nigerianess' or otherwise on the basis of remaining as one entity based on mutual respect or peaceful referendum.

In her response to Odenigbo, Miss Adebayo states:

The problem is that Odenigbo is a
hopeless tribalist, we need to keep
him quiet ... p. 25

To be profiled, labelled or stereotyped as a tribalist, ethnocentric or culturally blind can breed intolerance because it is face-threatening. Face is the positive self-image, sense of self or self-esteem that one enjoys as a reflection of one's estimation by others (Leech, 2014). For this reason, interlocutors who enter discourse should acknowledge the face of others and strengthen social relationships by avoiding face-threatening acts (FTAs) (Birner, 2021; Cutting & Fordyce, 2021). No rational human being would like to be addressed as tribalist, irredentist, extremist or terrorist even if such a person is one. The use of the word 'tribalist' negates the principle of peaceful communication. The use of other terms that are conflict-sensitive would have been better. She would have said that "I appreciate your love for your tribe but consider ..." The

intervention of the applied peace linguist is to emphasize that interlocutors in a discourse should focus on what they are *for* (rather than *against*) by offering positive stories about shared values, open-mindedness, freedom and democracy; highlighting how the activities of people that breach peace negatively impact on the people they claim to represent; demonstrating the hypocrisy of violent groups and how their actions are often inconsistent with their own stated beliefs; emphasising factual inaccuracies used in extremist propaganda and setting the record straight; and tactfully deconstructing outlaw propaganda to undermine its credibility (Tuck & Silverman, 2016). This is because some interlocutors can be highly opinionated as a result of extremist or populist propaganda. For instance, the novel provides:

Richard handed Kainene the phone. The sacrilege of it, that some people could betray Biafra. He remembered the Ijaw and the Efik men he had spoken to at a bank in Owerri, who said the Igbo would dominate them when Biafra was established. Richard had told them that a country born from the ashes of injustice would limit its practice of injustice. When they looked at him doubtfully, he mentioned the army general who was Efik, the director who was Ijaw, the minority soldiers who were fighting so brilliantly for the cause. Still, they looked unconvinced. p. 395

This is an evidence of distrust for a position or opinion one may have. And it is held by people who are for or against the disintegration of fragile Nigeria. In this type of situation, the applied peace linguist is expected to intensify awareness creation and

confidence building via peaceful communication. The essence of awareness creation is to assure and influence positive change in community attitudes, behaviours and beliefs (Sayers, 2006) because it is apparent that existing realities in Nigeria indicate that persons come into discourse with some perception about others thus dictating their dispositions towards others.

The novel has this to say about Ugwu, Odenigbo's house help:

He worried that she would marry Master and bring her Yoruba-speaking house girl into the house and his herb garden and tell him what he could and could not cook. p. 26

Elsewhere in the novel, one finds:

... she still remembered the meeting where irritated men and women talked about the northern schools not admitting Igbo children. p. 47

The impact of discrimination is that it breeds counter-discrimination, nepotism and sectionalism. The novel reports:

The man in charge was Igbo, and Madu said he was keen to give it to a fellow Igbo... p. 102

And Olanna reminded her northern blue-blooded ex-boyfriend, Mohammed, of the dehumanizing language used to describe her:

I am no longer the Igbo woman you wanted to marry who would taint the lineage with infidel blood... p. 57

During the violent protest that erupted in the northern part of the country in the novel, a man using a loud speaker says:

The Igbo must go. The infidel must go ... p.
185

A German compares thus:

Nothing like the bloody Kaffirs in Congo. p.
390

In the above seven excerpts, one could see how one's language breeds ethnic identity and discrimination. Language is indeed not only a marker of ethnic identity but also serves as a mediator of cultural, symbolic and material resources. It also serves the role of mitigating conflict when used in peaceful communication (Lo Bianco, 2013; Siddiq, 2016). But then, in the above seven excerpts, language as a marker of ethnic identity has been used as an instrument of profiling and discrimination which is used overtly and evidently by some people and in some cases veiled or camouflaged to avoid backlash thus escalating conflicts. Peaceful communication based on the tenets of critical thinking requires that interlocutors address one another politely using optimistic vocabulary. Interlocutors in peaceful communication should place themselves in the shoes of one another by showing empathy and expressing emotional intelligence in the light of how they will feel if dehumanizing language is used against them. In Nigeria, one will find that several ethnic groups use some ethnocentric words to describe others (Gbeyonron, 2014). These words can be translated into English language to mean *infidel*, *unbeliever*, *parasite*, *lazy*, *docile* etc. This ethnocentric use of language informs acts of injustice through discriminations around employment, ownership of

property, freedom of association etc. that are inimical to peaceful coexistence.

The more people use ethnocentric language against one another, the more others outside the clime of those profiling and counter-profiling one another begin to view them as such. Susan, an expat woman resident in Nigeria, as portrayed in the novel opines:

She told him the Hausa in the North were a dignified lot, Igbo were surely money-loving, and the Yoruba were rather jolly even if they were first-rate lickspittles ... The Yoruba get into huge debt just to throw these parties. p.

69

Ascribing attributes like 'a dignified lot', 'money-loving', 'first-rate lickspittles' etc. to ethnolinguistic groups amount to ethnic profiling which could lead to the deepening of distrust between people coexisting in the same environment. Some of the opinions expressed through ethnic profiling could be deliberate falsehood or misinformation. This can make the groups praised wittingly to develop false pride while the ones described derogatorily express the feeling of being dehumanized. Humanizing language attempts to invest in handling differences constructively instead of amplifying them. Such utterances attempt to enhance peace instead of deploying language to achieve strategic agenda that will bolster pomposity and escalate separation as well as conceal the obnoxious agenda. Peaceful communication helps interlocutors to positively change affective dispositions, strengthen inner harmony, assure relationships, calm and reverse potential or actual violence in society, enhance social justice and human rights among others; than escalate division and hate (Oxford, Boggs, Turner, Ma & Lin 2014).

Susan's utterance indicates that outsiders can serve as triggers of division through ethnic profiling instead of serving as agents of peaceful communication and conflict resolution. Miss Adebayo also reports that after the coup in the novel:

Those North Africans are crazy to call this an infidel versus righteous thing. P. 159

When one group within a country is called 'infidel' and the other 'righteous' by a foreign country, the foreign country is using a dehumanizing language to sustain the escalation of conflict. But then, sometimes the perception of parties not directly involved in a conflict is shaped by how the parties directly involved in the conflict describe one another using humanizing or dehumanizing language. For instance, a guest at Special Julius's house states:

They are surprised because the arms Harold Wilson gave those Muslim cattle-rearers have not killed us off as quickly as they had hoped! p. 249

A supervisor has this to say:

... we all thought those animals have done her what they did to the others ... p. 338

The use of expressions like; 'Muslim cattle-rearer', 'those animals' etc. flouts the principles of critical thinking and peaceful communication despite being used in a war situation. The role of the applied peace linguist in this respect is to explore the opportunities provided by these expressions to deconstruct them based on multidimensional peace perspective. Despite being uttered in war situation, emphasis should be placed on humanizing language with particular emphasis on raising the spiritual awareness of the parties

involved in the conflict; in addition to promoting tolerance, forgiveness and reconciliation, social justice, the worth, dignity and rights of one another, among several peaceful vocabulary instead of polemics.

5) Conclusion and Implications for Applied Peace Linguistics

The main objective of this study is to expose how Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie uses the principle of verisimilitude to make characters in the novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* use ethnocentric language and ethnic profiling and how the excerpts from the text can be used to portray applied peace linguistics. Analyses of the contents of the excerpts from the novel via the principles of critical thinking and peaceful communication reveal the effect of the ethnocentric language on peace, stability, security and development. This study concludes that the ethnocentric language use and ethnic profiling used in the novel reflect the existing realities in present day Nigeria more than half a century after the end of the Nigerian civil war (1967 to 1970). Utterances made without consideration for critical thinking and peaceful communication – even without any provocation – by politicians, community leaders, religious leaders, academics etc. in present day Nigeria suggest ethnocentrism, hate, feeling of self-righteousness and being insular or supremacist which can trigger, escalate and sustain violent conflict.

The use of ethnocentric and hate language on the media, at political rallies, via sermons, in the academia, in literature of power and literature of knowledge etc. is inimical to peaceful coexistence thus it is the responsibility of the applied peace linguist to select excerpts from literary and non-literary materials that can enhance or impede peaceful communication, deconstruct them by using peace

linguistic theories and raise the consciousness of learners of English, languages and literature to identify how ethno-centric language use flouts the principles of politeness thus a trigger of conflict.

It is the responsibility of the applied peace linguist to ensure that the semantics of the vocabulary of peace which provide opportunity for peaceful discourse are prioritized to make the language user realize that even though every individual has the right to freedom of language use not all such rights are right in a dynamic world where no single ethnolinguistic group is an island and should assume that it is superior to others. As a result, there is the need for all ethnolinguistic groups to have their worth and dignity respected in a dynamic world that encourages peaceful communication. It is envisioned that, such will make the learners imbibe the skills of becoming communicative humanizers through critical thinking as such minimizing ethnocentric language use and facilitating peace, stability, security and development in Nigeria.

References

- Adichie, C. N. (2007). *Half of a yellow sun*. New York: Anchor Books.
- Beebe, S.A., Beebe, S. J. & Ivy, D. K. (2004). *Communication: Principles for a lifetime*. Boston: Pearson.
- Bello, A. (1962). *My life*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Bello, B. M., Ahmadu, H. J. & Bulakarima, S. U. (2008). Harnessing the potentials of language and culture for conflict resolution and management in Nigeria. Paper presented at the 22nd Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria held at the University of Maiduguri, 9-13 November.
- Bennet, M. J. (2014). *Basic concepts in intercultural*

- communication: Paradigms, principles and practices, second edition.* Boston: Intercultural Press.
- Birner, B. J. (2021). *Pragmatics: A slim guide.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Camp, S. C. & Satterwhite, M. L. (2002). *College English and communication: Eighth edition.* New York: McGraw-Hills.
- Chamberlain, L. (2012). Teaching peace peacefully: A call for collaborative dialogue within peace education, nonkilling linguistics, and early childhood education. In Patricia Friedrich (Ed.) *Nonkilling linguistics: Practical applications.* (pp. 39 – 68). Honolulu, Hawaii: Center for Global Nonkilling.
- Culpeper, J. (2011). *Impoliteness: Using language to cause offence.* Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Curtis, A. (2017). Whatever happened to peace (Linguistics)? *ELTJ*, 21(3), 23 – 24.
- Cutting, J. & Fordyce, K. (2021). *Pragmatics: A resource book for students, fourth edition.* London: Routledge.
- Gamble, T. K. & Gamble, M. (2005). *Communication works: Eighth edition.* New York: The McGraw-Hill Companies.
- Gbeyonron, C. I. (2014). Ethnocentric language use and the challenges of making Nigeria a model in a dynamic world. In Olatunde Ayodabo & Nahum Butari (Eds.). *Issues in language and linguistics: Perspectives from Nigeria*, 2, 59 – 66. Ilorin: Haytee Press and Publishing and Co. Nig. Ltd.

- Gbulie, B. (1981). *Nigeria's five majors: coup d'etat of 15th January, 1966 – first inside account*. Onitsha: Africana Educational Publishers (Nig.) Ltd.
- Gomes de Matos, F. (2008). *Encyclopedia of peace education*. Columbia: Teachers College, Columbia University.
- Gomes de Matos, F. (2014). Peace Linguistics for Language Teachers. *D.E.L.T.A*, 30(2), 415 – 424.
- Lau, J. Y. F. (2011). *An introduction to critical thinking and creativity: Think more, think better*. New Jersey: John Wiley & Sons, Inc.
- Laurencin, C. T. & Walker, J. M. (2020). Racial profiling is a public health and health disparities issue. *J Racial Ethn Health Disparities*, 7(3), 393–397.
- Leech, G. (2014). *The pragmatics of politeness*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Lo Bianco, J. (2016). Conflict, Language Rights, and Education: Building Peace by Solving Language Problems in Southeast Asia. *Language Policy Research Network Brief April 2016*. Retrieved from www.cal.org/lpren on 19/7/2017.
- Moncrieff, S. & Corredera, V. (2015). Thoughts on teaching potentially controversial narratives. *The Journal of Adventist Education*, October/November, 22 – 27.

- Madiebo, A. A. (1980). *The Nigerian revolution and the Biafran war*. Enugu: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Ltd.
- Muffett, D. J. M. (1982). *Let truth be told: The coups d'etat of 1966*. Zaria: Hudahuda Publishing Company.
- Obasanjo, O. (2015). *My command: An account of the Nigerian civil war – 1967 to 1970*. Lagos: Kachifo Limited.
- Osoba, G. A. (2008). (Mis)use of language in conflict management in Nigeria's Niger-Delta crisis. Paper presented at the 22nd Conference of the Linguistic Association of Nigeria held at the University of Maiduguri 9-13 November.
- Oxford, R. L., Boggs, R., Turner, J., Ma, R. & Lin, C. (2014). Peace lessons in multicultural literature for children. In Rebecca L. Oxford (Ed). *Understanding peace cultures*. pp. 193 – 228). Alabama: Information Age Publishing.
- Sayed, Y., & Novelli, M. (2016). *The role of teachers in peacebuilding and social Cohesion: A synthesis report of South Africa, Uganda, Pakistan and Myanmar case studies*. Sussex: Research Consortium Education and Peacebuilding, University of Sussex.
- Sayers, R. (2006). *Principles of awareness-raising for information literacy: A case study*. Bangkok: UNESCO.
- Schaefer, R. T. (2006). *Sociology: A brief introduction; sixth edition*. New York: McGraw-Hills.

Siddiq, M. R. (2016). Peace, conflict, and language: Coping with linguistic intolerance and violence. *MA TESOL Collection, Paper 715*.

Thorne, S. (2006). *The language of war*. London: Routledge.

Tuck, H. & Silverman, T. (2016). *The counter-narrative handbook*. London: Institute for Strategic Dialogue.

Clifford Irikefe Gbeyonron, PhD.
Department of English,
Yobe State University, Damaturu
[*erykh01@yahoo.com*](mailto:erykh01@yahoo.com)