Code Diversity, Language and Creative Writing in Nigeria: A Study of Achebe’s Selected Novels

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Abstract
The English language has become functionally fundamental to the survival of Nigeria and has also developed important varieties in the world. Today in the face a onetime overwhelming debate as to which variety African writers should adopt for its literature, Achebe can be said to have resiliently and successfully scored a high point by his stand. There is therefore a need to take a closer look at a variety of English in Nigeria vis-a-vis creative writing. Some of Achebe’s works, Things Fall Apart, Arrow of God and A Man of the People shall be employed for this treatise. The sociological theory of language use is adopted while textual analysis and secondary data collection methods shall be employed. Interestingly, these novels reveal varieties, such as the Popular Nigerian English (PNE) or Nigerianisms, Pidgin and the Standard British English (SBE). This paper concludes that apart from the (SBE) variety, writers have the option of writing creatively in the (PNE) in ways so alluring and illuminating.

Keywords: code diversity, creative writing, language use, variability.
**Introduction**

The term ‘code’ in linguistics implies a specific type of language or dialect. Hence, we have instances of code-switching and code-mixing where different languages are mixed or switched in sentences during conversations. Yankson posits thus:

Language - any language - is a code: a set rules for generating what generative transformational grammarians call “well formed”. A breach of the code could, therefore, result in an “ill-formed sentence”... However, creative artists are noted for breaching the language code, for stylistic effect (1).

Harald (19) on his part sees language as, ‘human-learnable communication system with conventionalized form-meaning pairs capable of expressing the entire communicative needs of a human society. A chain of dialects, each mutually intelligible with its neighbours, which extends over one and a quartered million square kilometers.’

Language is diversified, structured and functional and as a result, this study should reflect on what the speakers use the varieties for, the functions they perform for them since, according to Austin, “We do things with words (13). If we use words “to do things” as we use different tools for various situations to perform different functions most appropriately in the context of what sociolinguists call ethnography of communication or ethnography of speaking. It encourages social interaction..., has the additional advantage of ensuring that users interact freely without being overly conscious of
how they will be assessed. Sociolinguists study the characteristics of language and its varieties, the characteristics of their functions and that of their speakers as these three constantly interact, change and change one another within a speech community”. Since this takes variations approach, the crucial question is not grammaticality (well-formedness) of utterances rather appropriateness, acceptability and conversational implicature (Fishman 4).

Code diversity is defined as a range of linguistic alternatives that speakers have at their disposal for use in varying settings (“writing.wisc.edu/wac 2016 ,”). While creativity is the use of skill and imagination to pursue something new. A writer’s ability to utilize the potentials of language to negotiate meaning for his text, based on how what is said is expressed and how meanings are realized within the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic ambience of the text (Hornby 273). On his own part, Blomart (1) posits that language is one of the most immediate and sensitive indexes of diversity. Small differences in accent and speaking patterns betray one’s regional, social class, ethnic and gender backgrounds. Hearing a different language spoken instantly provokes impressions of ‘foreignness’, and seeing public signs in a language you don’t read is a reliable indication that you are not in your familiar habitat. Language is also the most immediate and sensitive index of social change. Hearing or seeing languages not hitherto heard or seen in an area is a sure and immediate sign that the area has changed. Going by the example of Things Fall Apart which is a bilingual and bicultural text, Achebe manipulates and adopts the semantics, register, syntax and rhythm of the English language to the cultural and linguistic nuances of
the Igbo language. The complexity in telling the story of the Igbo people and attempting to convey their peculiar sensibilities in a language (English) that is not theirs on one hand, and on the other hand, retaining the meaning of each segment of the account through the same English language that is deficient as a good linguistic vehicle of the narrative, lends credence to what makes Achebe’s novels icons in the world of creative writing. Achebe’s principle of word economy, short and catchy sentences and the conventional harmony created between his characters and their speech are part of what researchers have discovered as his novelistic distinctness (112).

**Theoretical Framework**
Accordingly to Uzoezie (2), although most linguists and non-language scholars agree on the near mysterious nature of language, however, there is a chasm in terms of their agreement on characterization and description, between formalist and functionalist orientations to language analysis, its origin and development. This work takes a sociolinguistic perspective as regards language use which stipulates that for one to use a second language effectively, one has to be immersed in its culture. This idea probably brought about the insistence of many second language educators on students use of the target language even outside the classroom. This approach is basically concerned with the function of language to its users and expounds the fact that language is marked by its diversity, variability and variation in concrete situations. In support of this notion a sociologist, Fishman made the following observation:

Many linguists believe that a linguistic theory that can specify an adequate
grammar, live the rules that native speakers implicitly grasp and that constitute their native speaker competence will also specify the language-acquiring and language using nature of man… the rules that native members of speech comities implicitly grasp and that constitute their member sociolinguistic behaviour will also specify the nature of the social man as an acquirer and utilizer of a repertoire of verbal and behavioural skills (Asatd in Uzoezie, 3).

Uzoezie (3) further opines that with this notion, sociolinguistics becomes not only the characterization of grammatical structure of language, but also the description of rules of language use within a speech community; it becomes not only acquisition of community speech repertoire but also of this repertoire in varying concrete speech settings. It becomes not only having monolingual speech community because no community uses language in a monotonous way.

**Creative Writing**

Language is diversified, structured and functional. Achebe vividly captures this aspect of language in his works. One of his greatest claims to fame is the remarkable competence with which he handles the English language. Of all Anglophone writers, he has probably given most serious thought to the problems facing the African Writer who is forced to write in English and is evidently the most successful in solving them. Palmer, asserts that: He may attain the urbanity, verbal dexterity (which sometimes degenerates into linguistic gymnastics and self conscious mastery of Soyinka, but he displays greater versatility and range (75).
Achebe himself opines that:

For an African, writing in English is not without its set-backs. He often finds himself describing situations or modes of thought which have no direct equivalent in English way of life. Caught in that situation, he can do one of two things. He can try and contain what he wants to say within the limits of conventional English or he can try to push back those limits to accommodate his ideas. The first methods produced competent, uninspired and rather flat work. The second method can produce something new and valuable to the English language as well as to the material he is trying to put over (As qtd in Palmer 12).

He concludes by asserting that those who can do the work of extending the frontiers of English so as to accommodate African thought patterns, must do it through the mastery of English and not out of innocence (12). In Achebe’s works, this philosophy is exemplified. His own narrative style which is standard and idiomatic radiates a dazzling beauty. In Things Fall Apart in particular, it possesses a grandeur and rhythmic beauty which distinguishes it from the prose of other works. During the marriage ceremonies of Obierika’s daughter, this is how the conversation goes Life to us all…let there be friendship between your family and ours. The crowd answered; E-e-e-e-! We are giving you our daughter today, she will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town!’ E-e-e-e!
The oldest man in the camp of the visitors replied, ‘it will be good for you and it will be good for us…’(106).

With this episode, the reader believes that this is how sentiments are expressed in native Igbo communities. Achebe often introduced direct translations from Igbo into English sentence, as when in the *Arrow of God*, Ezeulu’s wives seeing the new moon say,

> May your face meeting mine bring good fortune (2).

When Ezeulu determined to see what is locked up in Oduche’s box says,

> Whether it be bad medicine or a good one, I shall see it today (43).

**Achebe’s Use of Pidgin**

Achebe is also aware of the use of pidgin in the urban environment especially by Nigerians belonging to different tribes. This is reflected in the urban novels, *A Man of the People* and *No Longer at Ease*.

**Excerpts** from *A Man of the People*.

> I no follow you black white men for drink tea and coffee in hot afternoon (33).

This statement was made by Chief Nanga to the Hon. Minister Simon Koko.

Me? Put poison for master? ...why I go kill master? ...’Abi my head no correct? And even if to say I dey craze why I no go go jump inside lagoon instead to kill my master? “But S.I., you too fear death. Small thing you begin holler, ‘they have
The dialogue is between Chief Nanga and Hon. Koko the day Hon. Simon Koko felt he had been poisoned by his cook. He, Achebe skillfully uses language to douse every tension and also create humour and friendship between the two men. According to Palmer;

The range of varieties achieved by Achebe in *A Man of the People* is most impressive. There is the normal, standard idiomatic English such as that used by John or Agnes the ‘been to’, there is the modified garbles variety used by Odili, not so much to impart an African flavour as to ‘place’ him ironically, there is pidgin which reflects the realistic linguistic situation among urban Nigerians, there is the modified version of English used by Odili’s father and Edna’s father which is Achebe’s way of rendering the *Igbo* they would have actually used.

Listen to her,’…because she ate yesterday, she won’t eat today? This is the time to enjoy my in-law, not when he has claimed his wife and gone away. Our people say: if you fail to take away a strong man’s sword when he is on the ground, will you do it when he is up…? No, my daughter, leave me and my in-law. He will bring and bring and bring and I will eat until I am tired…and thanks to the man above he does not lack what to bring (58).
There is the formal variety used in Chief Nanga’s speeches, and the Prime Minister’s comments, famous or infamous, solemn declaration:

From today we must watch and guard our hard-won freedom jealously. Never again must we entrust our destiny and the destiny of our Africa to the hybrid class of Western educated and snobbish intellectuals who will not hesitate to sell their mothers for a mess of pottage…”

And there is the part-educated variety used in Edna’s letter. It is in this, his last novel that Achebe unquestionably demonstrates his control over language, his ability to bend it to accommodate his insights.

Palmer (29) adduces that one of the hallmarks of Achebe’s language is the effective use of similes and images drawn from an exclusively African environment. Here is a typical example from *Things Fall Apart*: Okonkwo did not taste any food for two days after the death of Ikemefuna. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it is caught by the tail and dashed against the floor (57). This narration in Achebe is characteristic, standard, grammatically current idiomatic English: and the powerful imagery of the rat caught and dashed against the floor, a common occurrence in most West African rural environments gives an African flavour and succinctly conveys Okonkwo’s internal torment. Almost all the similes in the novels set in traditional society are drawn from rural African experience. According to Palmer (59), the most significant aspect of Achebe’s language, however, is his extensive use of proverbs in order to give a genuinely African flavour to the characters’ speech. The proverbs are
particularly noticeable in the speech of older people, appropriately so, since the ability to use them expertly came with experience and was regarded as a sign of wisdom.

In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* we see their use by older men to expose the in-experience and ignorance of the younger. The proverb is invaluable in debate, and the speaker’s skill can be assessed by the facility with which the speaker conjures up proverb after proverb in rapid succession to buttress his points or to expose the hollowness of his opponent’s argument. Below are some excerpts from *Things Fall Apart*.

A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches (67).

Here Okonkwo is talking to Obierieka about his fears for his son, Nwoye, that if the lad had been destined to become a real man, the signs would be already apparent.

A chid’s fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam it’s mother puts into its palm (53).

Here Okonkwo tries to absolve himself from the responsibility of taking part in Ikemefuna’s murder.

**Excerpts from *Arrow of God***

When an adult is in the house, the she goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its tether (21).

This proverb suggests that men in important positions should act sanely and responsibly when others around them are losing their heads.
The man who brings ant-infested faggots into his hut should not grumble when lizards begin to pay him a visit (163).

This proverb implies that a man should be prepared to take responsibility for the consequences of his actions.

Otagburuagu (6) postulates that the English language has undergone cultural metamorphosis that has helped to make it a distinctive variety in the template of world Englishes.

Its peculiar characteristics are most evident at the phonological, lexical and semantic levels where the tonal features of the indigenous language often interfere with the standard B.E. variety model…

The cultural mix at the lexical, semantic and discourse levels have led to coinages and usage patterns which are known in literature today as Nigerianisms.

The legitimacy of a Nigerian variety is no longer in doubt when one notes that linguistic geography and statistics show that Nigeria ranks third among the 124 countries in the world where the English language is used either as a first language (LI) or a second language (ESL) or as a foreign language (FL) or a language of wider communication (LWC). All these tilt to the fact that language is not only a means of communication but an important tool to literacy creativity and production.

Chinua Achebe on his part suggests:

….a live and let’s live attitude which, while encouraging the use of English in creative writing
in literature, advocates equally the development of African indigenous language and their use in creative writing by those who, by training and instinct, are competent to do so. This position highlights the aesthetics of English usage in second language situations (329).

Advocates of this position believe that English language could be tamed and imaginatively manipulated to accommodate its foreign surroundings. They recognize that the language could be made to blend with the environment to produce artistic work that is aesthetically pleasing to their audience (32). Achebe further admonishes that the African writer, should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. With all these assertions, Achebe has given to all writers who use English in their creative works, against the background of a second language situation, a theory on which to base their creativity. The African Writer and the English language in a classic essay by Achebe, where he provides insights that are most beneficial to all citizens of former European colonies when he says:

Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance or we may go on resenting it because it came as a part of a package deal which includes many other items of atrocity, of racial arrogance and prejudice. But, let us not in rejecting the evil, throw out the good with it (332).
Conclusion
This then is the golden rule for English usage for Nigerian writers who must use the English language to communicate ideas of their peculiar human condition. Indeed, native speakers as well as non-native speakers of English have something to learn from Achebe in his adroit manipulation of the English language to achieve aesthetically pleasant effects. The prominence Emenyonu gave to Achebe’s explanation on how he approaches the use of English in his fiction is perhaps the best way to conclude this essay. The passage is taken from Achebe’s *Arrow of God*:

The Chief Priest in the story tells one of his sons why it is necessary for him to send his son to church. “I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it, you will come back. But, if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a mask, dancing. If you want to see it well, you do not stand at one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white-man today will be saying had we known, tomorrow” (61).

That is Achebe the artist from whom Achebe the theorist now takes over and declares; Supposing I had put it in another way like this for instance: I am sending you as my representative among these people just be on the safe side in case the new religion developed. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight (33).
And finally, Achebe the critic pronounces judgments as follows:

The material is the same, but the form of one is in character different from the other. It is largely a matter of instinct, but judgment comes into it (26).

The corpus to this would be for Nigerian writers who choose to write in this second language to feel free to adopt the PNE and to write creatively in ways so alluring, in ways so illuminating and alluring. This will in no small way make people derive pleasure in reading and the urge to read more would have been achieved. We wish and pray to have writers such as Chinua Achebe who have quite simply, honoured the English language yet spicing it up with a touch of Nigerianness in terms of her culture, rituals, ceremonies, proverbs, diction, anecdotes, idioms, folklores, and so on. He and a few other writers have thus proved that PNE is not to be thrown into the thrash but can also be adopted beautifully in creative writing.
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