



A SURVEY OF “NEW ENGLISHES” IN AFRICAN LITERATURE: A REVISIT OF ACHEBE’S THINGS FALL APART

Peace Chinwendu Israel¹ and Nnawuihe Fidelis Echendu²

¹Department of English Education, University of Education, Winneba, Ghana

²Department of Languages Federal Polytechnic, Bida Nigeria

ABSTRACT: *The English language has been used by many African writers to achieve their desired goal of telling their stories to the global audience. One of the earliest African writers to experiment with the English Language in this area was Chinua Achebe, who without any shadow of doubt remains one of the most well-known names not only in African literature but in the entire global literary world. This paper examined Achebe’s use of English Language in Things Fall Apart. It aimed at identifying various language manipulations in the novel and their meanings which reflect the taste and flavour of the African indigenous (Igbo) culture. The evidence provided in the novel justifies Achebe’s position in the domestication of English. Contrary to the debate on whether African literature should be written in African languages or in the imperial languages, this paper concentrated itself on exploring the “Africanness” as manifested in the novel which underscored the rich culture of Africa and deeply portrayed the effective domestication of English in African soil.*

KEYWORDS: New Englishes, African Literature, Achebe’s Things Fall Apart

INTRODUCTION

Language is the vehicle through which thoughts, ideas, feelings and wishes are conveyed to the desired destination—the listener. It is indeed one of the most effective media through which culture, custom, tradition, belief, cultural practices and rites are transferred from one generation to another. Saul Bellow argues that language “is the most extraordinary invention in the history of humanity, the one which came before everything, and which makes it possible to share everything” (qtd. in Aniakor, 2011 p. 81). Similarly, according to Menang, there is no doubt that language and literature have both been considered as significant attitudes of national identity and distinctiveness (p. 1). This is because the literature of any nationality serves to define the language of that particular society. In other words, literature in any language embodies the indigenous knowledge of the society which it reflects.

African literature exists both in the indigenous African languages as well as European languages. While African scholars such as Ngugi waThiong’o, Abiola Irele and Obiajunwa Wali believe that African experiences, belief systems and identity can only be expressed using the indigenous African languages, others such as Chinua Achebe and Saro Wiwa argue otherwise. To the former, there is need to believe that the people’s language is the best and authentic means through which their experiences can be passed across. The latter group believes that such experiences can equally be expressed through the imperial languages



(Abdul-Hafiz, 2015 p. 2). Thus, they have chosen to write and/or express their opinions through the colonial languages (Eme & Mbagwu, 2011 p. 114 -127).

This paper sets out to mirror the functional load and role of the English language in African literature by highlighting the domestication of the English language in African literature. This is done by examining how the English language—being in close contact with its ancestral home—effectively carries the weight of African culture through the use of some literary devices like proverbs and simile in Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart*.

THE NEW ENGLISH

The English language is one of the most widely spoken languages in the world. Unarguably, it is the fastest spreading language in the world. Kachru (p. 135–155) groups the countries where English language is used to perform official duties into three concentric domains—'Inner Circle', 'Outer Circle' and 'Expanding Circle'. The 'Inner Circle' represents the native English-speaking countries such as Britain, the U.S.A and Australia. The 'Outer Circle' refers to countries which use the language because of their colonial experiences with the native speakers (e.g., Nigeria, Ghana, Singapore, India, Malaysia and Zambia). These countries use English in different settings for official and other administrative purposes. The 'Expanding Circle' represents countries which have acquired English language as a matter of need such as trade, commerce/industry and international relations such as United Nations Organization. Examples of such countries are Korea, Thailand and China. These countries use English as a foreign language. According to Ngula, these concentric groups communicate with different norm-guiding patterns (p. 180–200). As a result, the 'Inner Circle' may be defined as a norm-providing group; the 'Outer Circle', a norm-developing group; and the 'Expanding Circle', a norm-dependent group (Kachru p. 137). This means that all these groups use English in different forms for different communicative values. The 'Outer' and 'Expanding' concentric domains have helped the growth and development of English language over the years.

A good example is the recent event in the history of Oxford English Dictionary (OED). In January, 2020, twenty-nine (29) Nigerian words and expressions were added into the updates of OED and approved by the renowned Oxford University Press. This became necessary because of the way Nigerian writers such as Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and many others use Nigerian English in their works. According to OED, the adoption of these 29 expressions and coinages is due to how widely used and acceptable they have become among the users of English. Again, the move was also triggered off by how Adichie describes her relationship with English, the language which she uses in her writing, and which millions of her fellow Nigerians use in their daily communication—"My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English." The OED's World English editor, Danica Salazar, explained:

OED used linguistic research technology to track the evolution of words and identify which are notable. Our job is to tell the story of English and the story would not be complete without including the part Nigerians play in that. The fact that we are adding more and more world English words really reflects the global reach of English (The Punch published on January 21, 2020).



THE ROLE OF ENGLISH IN THE ENGLISH AS A SECOND LANGUAGE ENVIRONMENT

Language is one major tool that serves the communication needs of human beings. Social and other needs of human existence are given through language. In fact, ideas are kept and transformed through language and it is the element from which social environments are shaped. It is a symbolic system of power endowed with the inherent ability to make people see vision of their world (Adejunmobi p. 37). At the beginning of the contact between English and the indigenous languages in many parts of Africa, the propelling force in learning the language was the benefits and respect the mastery of the English language conferred on the learner. Today, there are more to that. This is because English has consistently continued to perform diverse functions. Political, educational, legal, administrative, economic, and religious institutions in these countries effectively carry out their duties in the language of their colonizers. The ability to speak English often means access to privileges and rights, while speaking only African languages could mean in some situations, deprivation and in many cases, economic disadvantage. And most importantly, the ability to go beyond one's region and tell one's own story by oneself to the world depends on one's ability to learn and use a more centralized language that transcends beyond the region—English. Achebe and his contemporaries, recognizing this fact had to ask: did reaching global audiences to challenge their perceptions about Africa matter more than enriching their own languages by helping African readerships flourish?

Unarguably, it is enriching and exciting when African writers choose to contribute to global literatures in their mother tongues. Indeed, Chike Aniakor believes that “African languages represent a mine of oral narratives that tell us lot [sic] about who we are, what we are, what we were, and perhaps what we shall be” (81). But when these African writers want to go beyond national and international boundaries and tell their own story by themselves, English, to the Anglophone readers, becomes inevitable. According to Achebe, the English we are talking about is “...a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings...I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience....” (Achebe, 1975a p. 1). This type of English is the English I set to explore in this study.

INSTANCES OF NEW ENGLISH IN THE NOVEL

The relationship between language and culture is more or less paradoxical; language is a reflection of culture while culture itself is reflected in language. Therefore, the role of cultural context is vital to an understanding of meaning of certain usages in a language. Proverbs, for instance, are the distilled wisdoms of sages handed down from time immemorial. They provide valuable insight into life and provoke thought; they are often used for the sake of arguments and to add depth and colour to composition. An appropriate proverb used in speech adds a volume of meanings and makes it instantly appealing. Proverbs, like idioms, are tied to specific cultures and are difficult to be attributed to one particular author. Therefore, they are institutionalized structures whose component parts have no role to play in their meaning. Their conservative property is sacrosanct as they are peculiar to a culture and are approved by usage. The meanings words convey are often different from their grammatical or logical meanings (Deaton p. 6).



Both Bernth Lindfors and Gareth Griffith have studied Achebe's use of proverbs in his novels. While Bernth Lindfors examined Achebe's proverbs in isolation, arguing that they provide a grammar of values "by which the deeds of characters can be measured and examined"; Griffith on the other hand, "rejects context-free proverb analysis as inadequate because it fails to consider the 'total linguistic structure' in which the proverbs are set" (qtd. in Lindfors, p.61). Thus, it can be said that both Lindfors and Griffith studied Achebe's proverbs within the context of their meanings and relations with the deeds of the characters in these Achebe's novels. The present study however, differs markedly from both Lindfors' and Griffith's methods of analyses because we are examining these same proverbs within the context of their deviation from the Standard English usage. This is why we present these proverbs as instances of *New English* in African literature while at the same time, we attempt to render their Standard English meanings.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is characterized by a profuse usage of *flavoured* English. This includes the use of transliterations, proverbs, in such a manner that distinguishes him as a well-known *domesticator* of the English language. Achebe's *flavoured* English in his novels brings out his African (Igbo) experiences to the fore. In other words, English language is thus made to bear the weight of the author's indigenous knowledge and by so doing, enrich it. Below are some of such usages in *Things Fall Apart* and their loose interpretations.

Extract

Meaning

1. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. p6	Important matters are treated first before the less important ones
2. If a child washes his hands he could eat with kings. p6	Hard work and perseverance are usually rewarded.
3. When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for walk. p7	People always hunger for what they used to do whenever they find themselves in a situation where that is being done, and are not able to do that any longer.
4. Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to other, let his wing break. p14	Live and let live
5. A man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness. p15	Respect begets respect; just as evil begets evil etc.
6. A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing. p15	Things do not happen in a vacuum; things are always triggered off by something else.
7. An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. p15	People are always uncomfortable when their inadequacies are being discussed in their presence.
8. The lizard that jumped from high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did. p16	Used to describe the situation when people are happy and proud of their accomplishments despite how small.



9. ...you can tell a ripe corn by its look. p16	Used to say that maturity speaks for itself because it is easily noticed especially in someone's behaviour.
10. A proud heart can survive a general failure because such a failure does not prick its pride. It is more difficult and more bitter when a man fails alone. p18	Used to say that collective tragedy, ill-luck, misfortune, etc., are usually preferred to personal ones
11. Looking at the king's mouth, one would think he never sucked at his mother breasts. p19	Expression used says that age is cruel.
12. ...those whose palm kernels were cracked for them by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble. p19	Used to say that the fortunate should not look down on the less fortunate.
13. ...when a man says yes, his chi says yes also. p19	Used to say that a man should remain positive at all situations if success is to be achieved. A positive disposition brings success.
14. They called him the little bird nza who so far forgot himself after a heavy meal that he challenged his chi. p22	An expression used to caution someone who has temporarily forgotten his former bad/low/unfavourable situation just because things have improved for him.
15. A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts into its palm. p47	This means that someone who cares will not intentionally harm you. It explains that one cannot be consumed by doing what his loved one has asked him to do because his loved one will not intentionally expose him to danger.
16. A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches. p46	Expression used to say that maturity, bravery, goodness, etc., easily manifest themselves.
17. When mother-cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth. p49	Expression used to say that people are easily influenced by what they see/are exposed to.
18. If one finger brought oil, it soiled the others. p88	This is another way of saying that one bad apple spoils the rest; when one person in a group is involved in anything bad, the rest are in one way or another affected.
19. Mother is supreme. p94	This is an expression used to emphasize the value or importance of womanhood.
20. Never kill a man who says nothing. p98	Used to say be careful when dealing with people especially the humble ones.
21. There is nothing to fear from someone who shouts. p99	An expression used to discourage people from being loud in their approach to things; used to show the undignified treatment towards such. Expression used to say that restraint is a virtue.



22. Living fire begets cold, impotent ash. p103	An expression to say that strength/bravery does not last forever.
23. A child cannot pay for his mother's milk. p117	Used to emphasize the indebtedness of a child to the parents. It also used to express gratitude to those one has benefited from.
24. I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle. p117	Used to urge people to utilize the opportunities at their disposal.
25. Men have learned to shoot without missing their mark and I have learned to fly without perching on a twig. p144	An expression used to say that one has learned to tackle a situation from whatever angle it presents itself. Used to describe the situation when one takes all precautions concerning a situation.
26. Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. p3	This suggests unstoppable speed. The harmattan is a season experienced in many African countries, which is characterized by dry, dusty and hazy wind. This usually results in whirling winds and wide fires.
27. Okonkwo was also fending for his father's house. It was like pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes. p16	This emphasizes the magnitude of the dry season and its negative resultant effects on the livelihood of the people of Umuofia, who are basically farmers. The heat and dryness destroyed the planted crops.
28. The earth burned like hot coals and roasted all the yams that had been sown. p17	This emphasizes the magnitude of the dry season and its negative resultant effects on the livelihood of the people of Umuofia, who are basically farmers. The heat and dryness destroyed the planted crops.
29. The drummers took up their sticks and the air shivered and grew tense like a tightened bow. p35	This elaborates the readiness, tension and "militancy/battle-ready" nature of the players of the drum. It also means excitement.
30. For three years, Ikemefuna lived in Okonkwo's household...He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season. p37	This is used to show the characterized rapid growth of teenagers. Yam, and indeed grasses, grow so rapidly overnight. It also implies vulnerability, since a tendril is fragile.
31. ...something seemed to give way inside him, like the snapping of a tightened bow. p43	This means the gut instinct, that hunch people do feel when something is true about a situation. Nwonye, Okonkwo's first son and a good friend of Ikemefuna, feels that Ikemefuna has been killed and is devastated; Nwoye sees him as an older brother.
32. He drank palm-wine from morning till night, and his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of	Okonkwo takes to drinking as many men do when they are drenched in sorrow. He has loved Ikemefuna as one of his own and



a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor. p44	deeply regrets his role in Ikemefuna's death. The rat suggests his wrong behavior and the fact that he may have to pay for it.
33. He felt like a drunken giant walking with the limbs of a mosquito. p44	Okonkwo is a huge, strong and brave man, but he becomes weak after two days without food or sleep.
34. ...Ezinma bubbled with energy like fresh palm-wine. p56	This means that Ezinma was full of life and energy. Her lively disposition is likened to palm-wine which is highly prized and valued among the Igbo race. This goes a long way to emphasize what a gem she is to her father in particular and her family in general.
35. "Agbala do-o-o-o! Agbalaekeneo-o-o-o-o," came the voice like a sharp knife cutting through the night. p70	The sharp knife means the shrill voice characterized by diviners whenever they are performing their duties to their gods. It also suggests the fear and shiver people experience in the night; pain, death.

From the foregoing, the domestication of English is manifested in Achebe's numerous uses of proverbs and similes in the novel. Almost at every juncture, we see "Igboness" in Achebe's use of English language. For example: Okonkwo's second wife, Ekwefi, narrating her ordeal to her friend, Chielo, at the market—how her husband, Okonkwo nearly shot her dead out of anger in the Week of Peace—says: "I cannot yet find a mouth with which to tell the story." (p. 34).

Similarly, Okonkwo, while congratulating Maduka, Obierika's son, on his impressive performance at the wrestling contest says "Come and shake hand with me." (p. 45). In chapter 10, we see "...silence descended from the sky and swallowed the noise..." (p. 66). "As soon as the day broke, a large crowd of men from Ezeudu's quarter stormed Okonkwo's compound..." (p. 88). These give Achebe's language usage that special taste and colour which is different from the native speakers' usage. It is therefore not surprising that Chike Aniakor praises Achebe's achievement in the area of language use thus: "...his literary language, remains ever terse, if not epigrammatic" (p. 79).

CONCLUSION

The morphological and syntactic variations in *Things Fall Apart* occur due to Achebe's continuous attempts to bend the English language to reflect the structures of African indigenous language (Igbo) and the preference to structurally simplify sentences owing, on the one hand, to the convergence between African languages and the English language and, on the other hand, to the inadequate exposure of many Africans to the English language. This move has since opened the door to many African writers who continue to twist and turn the English language in their various endeavours. To say the least, this strategy has created a kind of power, control, and self-identity to the African users of English and ultimately has given English an indicator of viability and vitality.



REFERENCES

- Achebe, Chinua. *Things Fall Apart*: London: Heinemann, 1958.
- Adejunmobi, M. Routes: language and the Identity of African Literature. *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 37, 4581-4596. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0022278X99003146>, 1999.
- Aniakor, Chike. Global Changes in Africa and Indigenous Knowledge: Towards its Interrogation and Contestations. *Indigenous Knowledge & Global Changes in Africa*. Ed. Sam M. Onuigbo. Nsukka: Institute of African Studies, 2011. 55-108.
- Bernth, Lindfors. The Blind Men and the Elephant. *African Literature Today*, No 7. London: Heinemann Educational Books, 1975, 53-64
- Deaton, C. "Idioms as a Means of Communication: Writing in the Middle Grades (in the Classroom)". *Reading Teacher*. 45.6. 1992.
- Eme, C. & Mbagwu, D. U. African Language and African Literature. *Unizik Journal of Arts and Humanities*, 12(1). <https://doi.org/10.4314/ujah.v12i1.7>, 2011, 114-127
- Kachru, B. B. World Englishes: Agony and Ecstasy. *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 30(2), 1996, 135-155
- Menang, T. Which Language(s) for African Literature: A Reappraisal? Yaounde. Retrieved from www.inst.at/trans/menang 11, 2001
- Ngula, R. S. Hybridized Lexical Innovations in Ghanaian English. *Nordic Journal of African Studies*, 23(3), 2001, 180-200
- The Punch Newspaper: <https://punchng.com/full-list-29-nigerian-words-in-oxford-dictionary-latest-update/>
- Achebe, C. Retrieved on May 8, 2020 from <https://edsitement.neh.gov/lesson-plans/new-english-chinua-achebes-things-fall-apart> 1975a.