

## **An Analysis of the Use of Pidgin in Achebe's A Man of the People**

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**Abstract:** *Language is an important means of human communication. It is an important tool in literature: writers express their thoughts through language. Bilingual/multilingual authors are faced with the task of deciding which language to use in order to express their ideas and thoughts effectively knowing full well that their style and language are paramount to the acceptability of their literary works. African literary artists are, sometimes constrained by some problems like the expression of their culture in the English language, the language of another culture. The language of expression becomes a problem because language is an integral part of culture; it is equally entwined with society. When pidgin came into use, English had acquired some local colouring that made African literature very unique, This paper examines the use pidgin in Achebe's A Man of the People. The text for analysis is A Man of the People which will be analysed using the textual analysis method. Instances of the use of Pidgin in this literary work will be discussed. The analysis will show the extent the author used pidgin to add aesthetic value to his literary work.*

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### **I. An Overview Of Sociolinguistics**

Language which supports the human race, is an integral part of human society." Language does not exist in a vacuum. It is always contextualised, that is, it is situated within a socio- culture; so language exists as an aspect of a culture." (Akindele and Adegbite 3) The study of the connection between language and society is termed sociolinguistics.

Sociolinguistics studies the way people use language in different social situations; "The study of language in relation to society,"(Hudson 1) According to Wardhaugh, A language is what the members of a particular society speak. However, as we will see, speech in almost any society can take many very different forms...many speakers may use more than one language, however we may define language. We should know that definitions of language and society are not independent: the definition of language includes in it a reference to society (1).

People adjust the way they talk to suit different social situations so, sociolinguistics gives a clearer understanding of why people speak differently in various social contexts, for instance, someone wouldn't speak the same way to a person of higher authority as he/she would to friends or family.

Sociolinguistics analyses the various ways in which language and society are entwined because language is central to social interaction in every society. The premise of sociolinguistics is that language is dynamic.

Language contact situations lead to most languages getting influenced at one time or another and this results in varying degrees of transfer of features from one language to another. Nigeria, for instance, is a multilingual nation with about "520 local languages" (Uzoezie viii) spoken alongside the English language and this results in some features of the English language rubbing off on the indigenous languages and vice versa. This co-habitation of languages affect one another and produces sociolinguistic results such as multilingualism, bilingualism, interference, code-switching, code-mixing, nativisation/accluturation, pidginisation etc.

### **II. Use of Pidgin in A Man of the People**

Pidgin is a contact language. The historical contact of the indigenous languages and the English language has given birth to what is today known as Nigerian pidgin. It is a marginal language that arises to fulfil certain communication needs especially where the persons involved do not have a common language. Elugbe and Omamor define pidgin as "some kind of a marginal language that arises to fulfil specific communication needs in well-defined circumstances.(3)

A pidgin language can either be restricted or extended. It is restricted if it dies out at the end of the situation that gave rise to it. Nigerian pidgin is an example of an extended pidgin since it has outlived the contact situation that gave rise to it. The emergence of Nigerian pidgin can be historically traced to the trade contact between the British and local people in the seventeenth century. The negative attitude of the colonizers towards the colonized and their languages gave birth to Nigerian pidgin. The language of the former became popular among the latter and the result of the attempt to speak the prominent language was broken English. This

was the first step taken towards the growth of Nigerian pidgin. As a result of development over the years, the features of Nigerian pidgin began to evolve and get documented. While Broken English is as a result of an inadequate mastery of the English language, Nigerian pidgin is an amalgamation of the English language and indigenous languages in Nigeria.

Pidginisation, according to Hudson, is the process "whereby PIDGIN LANGUAGES, or PIDGINS, are created." (60) it can also be seen as "the process of creating a new variety out of two (or more) existing ones." (Hudson 59) it involves a superstrate language and substrate languages. The superstrate is usually the language of power while the substrate languages are usually the local languages. The emergent language is called pidgin. In the case of Nigerian Pidgin, the English language is its superstrate while the indigenous languages are the substrate languages.

According to Elugbe,

Nigerian Pidgin is English-based or English related because most of its vocabulary is derived from English. Since it has Nigerian languages as its substrate or underlying influence, it can be said, and its often said that vocabulary of Nigerian Pidgin is English while its grammar is Nigerian." (qtd in New Englishes 286) Pidgin languages are massively reduced and spelled the way they are pronounced. A Pidgin language is generally reduced "in the direction of whatever features are common to the languages of all those using the Pidgin, for mutual ease in use and comprehensibility, thus arriving at a kind of greatest common denominator" (Hall 25). Hudson asserts that "each Pidgin is of course specially constructed to suit the need of its users which means that it has to have the terminology and constructions needed in whatever kind of context" (62). This definition affirms that Pidgin languages are languages in the true sense of a language. No language is inferior to the other instead languages are meant to rub off on another where two or more speech communities are in contact.

#### **A. Language Accommodation**

The Language Accommodation theory was developed by Howard Giles and Nikolas Coupland. It deals with language, context and identity and argues that people adjust their speech to accommodate other interlocutors. It is a process through which interlocutors adjust their diction, accent or other non-verbal behaviours according to the speech style of other interlocutors. Two main accommodation processes are

- i) Convergence
- ii) Divergence

Convergence requires choosing a language variety that suits the other speaker while divergence means choosing a language variety that is different from that of the other speaker thereby creating social distance. The excerpts examined show how characters used Nigerian pidgin to converge, diverge and reconverge in discourse.

#### **Excerpt 1**

'By the way, I said backing out and straightening up again, I met an American lady called Elsie at a party the other night...Whenever her name was called- my mind went to you.'

Who tell am say na Elsie be im name?

Who tell am say na Elsie be im name? When you see am again make you tell am say im own Elsie na counterfeit. But Odili you self na waa! How you no even reach Bori finish you don de begin meet another Elsie for party? Make you take am je-je o!

'Relax, I said, imitating Jean...Na lie, she said smiling her seductive two- dimpled- smile. The way I look you eye I fit say that even ten Elsies no fit belleful you.

Nonsense, I said, Abi dem take Elsie make juju for me? (Achebe

The above conversation is between Elsie and Odili. The latter started off with Standard English but later changed to Pidgin in order to converge with Elsie.

#### **Excerpt 2**

"Who is Edna?

Don't you know Edna, our new wife?

Oh that girl. Nonsense. She doesn't know half as much book as you.

Ah, she does o. I no go modern school.

But standard six in your time was superior to senior Cambridge today. I said in our language, refusing to be drawn into the levity of pidgin" (Achebe 99)

The above excerpt is a clear case of divergence. The second speaker tried his best to create social distance between him and the first speaker. He stood his ground and refused to be drawn into the 'levity' of pidgin.

### Excerpt 3

Na this boy dey halla so for master im face? I heard him ask.  
'Don't mind the stupid idiot', said Chief Nanga  
'E no fit insult master like that here and comot free. Hey! My friend! He shouted, coming after me.  
'Are you there?' His voice was full of menace...  
'Leave am, Dogo. Make e carry im bad luck de go. Na my own mistake for bring am here.  
Ungrateful ingrate! (Achebe 82)  
Mr. Nanga diverges and converges with his servant Dogo. It is worthy of note that Chief Honourable Nanga, the minister of culture, is well read. He first diverges with Dogo and later converges with him. Probably, the reason behind the convergence was to create an intimate relationship that will motivate Dogo to let the culprit go scot free.

### Excerpt 4

Abi you no fit read notice?  
'Don't be silly', I said, and don't shout at me!  
Be silly! He shouted. Idiot like you. Look him motor self. When they call those wey get motor you go follow them comot? Foolish idiot. (Achebe 117)  
The excerpt above is a case of divergence. The interlocutors were bent on maintaining the social gap between them probably because of their disagreement.

### Excerpt 5

If someday wan make you minister, said Chief Nanga, coming to my support, make you no gree. No be good life.  
'Uneasy lies the head that wears the crown', said Elsie.  
Na true my sister, said the Chief  
I think i tell you say Chief Nanga de go open book exhibition for six today, I said  
'Book exhibition?' asked Elsie. How they de make that one again? (Achebe 68)

Generally speaking, although some highly educated characters in *A Man of the People* can speak Standard English very well, at times, they prefer Nigerian Pidgin as an informal language gives them the impression that it can shorten the distance between people and create a kind of intimate, private and informal atmosphere. One outstanding example in the literary work is the case of Chief Nanga speaking Nigerian Pidgin in order to establish rapport with the masses and shorten the social distance between them.

## B. Code-switching.

Code-switching is one of the inevitable results of bilingualism/multilingualism. Every bilingual individual is faced with the choice of code to use according to the situation at hand especially in a situation where all interlocutors speak same languages. "Two speakers who are bilingual, that is, who have access to two codes, and who for one reason or another shift back and forth between the two languages as they converse by code-switching are actually using a third code, one which draws on those two languages." (Wardhaugh 1)  
"Code-switching can be defined as the use of two or more languages in the same conversation or utterance." (Gardner-Chloros 361) According to Coulmas, "code-switching must be rule-governed." (114) It is a process that involves switching code (language) at sentence boundaries in discourse.  
Some people believe that code-switching is as a result of lack of mastery of a language but Coulmas believes that:

It is not necessarily for lack of competency that speakers switch from one language to another, and the choices they make are not fortuitous. Rather, just like socially motivated choices of varieties of one language, choices across language boundaries are imbued with social meaning (109). Gardner-Ochloros differentiates sub-categories of code-switching, namely situational code-switching and conversational code-switching. Situational code-switching could be regarded as changes in language choice rather than code-switching proper: it refers to language switches which coincides with a change of interlocutor, setting or topic. Conversational code-switching, which many authors regard as code-switching proper, does not necessarily coincide with any such changes but is motivated by factors within the conversation itself (qtd in Coupland and Jaworski 361).

The relationship between the English language and Pidgin languages in West African novels can be described as code-switching between two relatively autonomous languages. It could be said that Nigerian novelists use code-switching as a means of decolonization, that is, "a radical dismantling of European codes and a post-colonial subversion and appropriation of the dominant European discourses." (Tiffin 17)

### According to Ibhawaegbele,

Code-switching is a common feature in Nigerian prose. This involves the characters in the choice of appropriate linguistic codes for different contexts in their interactions. The authors employ this as a stylistic device to cater adequately for the varying local situations in their novels. For instance, in *A Man of the People*, Achebe engages his characters in code-switching, depending on the situations in which the characters find themselves. Choices of appropriate codes enable the characters to assume corresponding roles, which best serve their communicative needs in different speech encounters (13)

### Instances Of Code-Switching In *A Man Of The People*

#### Excerpts 1

'Na this boy dey halla so for master im face? I heard him ask.

Don't mind the stupid idiot', said Chief Nanga

'E no fit insult master like that here and comot free. Hey! My friend! He shouted, coming after me.

'Are you there?' His voice was full of menace.(Achebe 82)

The participants in this conversation switch codes from Pidgin to English. Chief Nanga is well read and does not switch from English to Pidgin to make up for what he lacks in English. The skilful use of the two languages actually shows creativity and a mastery of the languages used.

#### Excerpt

'I no follow you black white-men for drink tea and coffee in the hot afternoon', said Chief Nanga  
Whisky and soda for me and for Mr. Samalu. (Achebe 37).

The speaker here switches from Nigerian Pidgin to the English language. This successful switching of codes at sentential boundaries does not tamper with the rules of syntax. It goes a long way in showing that code-switching is neither an outcome of semilingualism nor incompetency in the English language.

#### Excerpt 3

"What can you enjoy there?" She asked with great spirit.

Nine pence talk and three pence food.

"Hallo, hawa you. Nice to see you again. All na lie lie. (Achebe 41)

The speaker in the above excerpt expresses her disgust both in English and Pidgin. The juxtapositioning of two languages creates a kind of emphasis on what the speaker is saying.

In the above examples, speakers switch from the English language to Nigerian Pidgin at sentence boundaries. In *A Man of the People*, the author uses different codes for different situations. The characters switch codes depending on the situation at hand thereby paying attention to appropriateness (saying the right thing in the right situation to the right people in the right kind of situation) in language use. "Achebe's display of linguistic craftsmanship in *A Man of the People* confirms the assertion that different situations and roles shifts demand appropriate language codes for effective communication." (Ibhawaegbele 15)

The instances of code-switching analyses here show that for one to successfully switch-codes, a mastery of the two languages is needed.

### Nigerian Pidgin as Lingua Franca

"A lingua franca can be defined as a language which is used habitually by people whose mother tongues are different in order to facilitate communication between them: it is a language of wider communication which is used in cross-ethnic interaction." (Akindele and Adegbite 52)

In Achebe's *Man of the People*, he shows that Nigerian Pidgin should be regarded as both an independent language and as an effective means by which African writers can adopt and then alter the English language to make it their own. On many occasions in the novel, Nigerian Pidgin is spoken as a lingua franca. A very good example is at the minister's party where Mrs. Eleanor John, a trader and close friend of Nanga, speaks Nigerian Pidgin to people at the party.

#### Excerpt 1

"You call this speed? You never see something my brother. I no de keep anini for myself, na so so troway. If some person come to you and say "I wan make you minister" make you run like blazes comot. Na true word I tell you. To God who made me..."

'Big man, big palaver', said the one eyed man.

'Me one, he said. i no kuku mind the jatakata wey de for inside. make you put minister money for my hand and all the wahala on top. I no mind at all. Everyone laughed. then Mrs. John said:

"No be so, my frien. When you done experience rich man's trouble you no fit talk that again. My people get one proverb; they say that when poor man done see with im own eye how make big man e go beg make e carry him poverty de go je-je." (Achebe 16)

The above discussion is between Mr. Nanga, the one eyed man and Mrs. Eleanor and judging from Mrs. Eleanor's reference to 'my people', she was clearly from another ethnic group. According to Yankson, "her reference to 'my people' implies that she belongs to a different tribe, and we are also told " she had come all the way from Pokoma, three hundred and fifty miles." (10) People that speak different language use Pidgin to foster communication between themselves.

### **Excerpt**

'Wait, master', pleaded the cook

wait your head!' screamed his employer, going for him

'Why you put poison for my coffee?' his huge body was quivering like jelly

"Me put poison for master? Nevertheless! Said the cook, side-steeping to avoid a heavy blow from the master. (39)Nanga's cook speaks Nigerian Pidgin with his master. The cook might have come from a different ethnic group and cannot speak Standard English which makes Nanga converge with him. These two characters from different linguistic backgrounds use Nigerian Pidgin to foster communication. It is also used as a means of class identification.

In the aforementioned literary work, Achebe also uses Pidgin as an index of identification in another sense; by the educated to gain social acceptance or intimacy with each other. In the words of Chantal Zabus:

The use of NP (Nigerian Pidgin) among educated characters of the same ethnic and language group is often prompted by panoply of human emotions and "act of identity" ranging from solidarity to small talk.

Speaking Np can thus mean more than just speaking "over the fence". It can be a way of reaching out across boundaries other than social ones (81).

There is another instance where Nigerian Pidgin was used by some characters as idiomatic expressions. Pidgin evolved to the stage where idiomatic expressions were carved out of it. According to Bandia,

In Achebe's *A Man of the People*, an urban novel, there is an abundant use of pidgin by characters who have refined their Pidgin to a point where they can come up with idiomatic expressions fashioned after such expressions in the oral tradition. For example, when a character expresses disgust at the suggestion that the more modern Cambridge certificate is as good as the standard six certificate they obtained in their days, he says "who dash frog coat" (p.11) (meaning-You must be kidding"). Elsewhere in the novel one character says of another; "E fool pass garri" (p.56) (meaning-He is very foolish) (4)

### **III. Conclusion**

Achebe's adoption of Nigerian Pidgin in his novel at a time it was called a hybrid language may be seen as an attempt to reverse the prejudice against it and to prove that, that which was given a low status can be used positively by post-colonial writers to add aesthetic value and cultural relevance to their writings. This paper has shown that the use of Nigerian pidgin in certain social situations is also a reflection of the realities of the use of English in Nigeria. Nigerian Pidgin was used in *A Man of the People* as a lingua franca and a means of identification, both for people from same ethnic group and people that belong to different social positions.

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