

THE LOCAL COLOUR VARIETY OF ENGLISH IN ACHEBE'S *NO LONGER AT EASE*

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Abstract

This paper was an examination of Chinua Achebe's use of the local colour variety of English Language to accommodate his African experience. He has been able to fashion out the local colour English in *No Longer at Ease* through borrowing of words and phrases from the vernacular, occasional switch from English to Igbo, and direct translation of Igbo expressions into English.

Introduction

The local colour variety of English is one of the varieties of Nigerian English identified by Nigerian scholars. In the views of *Adekunle (1979) and Taiwo (1986)*, it is the Nigerianised English spoken according to the linguistic environment, but tries to approximate the native English. It benefits from the resources of the mother tongue. Other varieties identified by *Adekunle (1979) and Taiwo (1986)* include the near-native speaker variety, the incipient bilingual variety, and the pidgin variety.

The near-native speaker variety is what *Achebe (1979)* calls the conventional English. It is the variety spoken by the elite, and enjoys local as well as international intelligibility. The incipient bilingual variety, according to *Adekunle (1979)* is the variety that relies more on transliteration and is characterised by deviations from English syntactic structures. Here the second language is closely tied to the mother tongue. The pidgin variety though regarded by some scholars as a language of itself is seen in the Nigerian situation as a variety of English. It is mostly spoken by people with no formal education.

Chinua Achebe is one of the pioneers in the crusade for the use of Nigerian English in creative writing. His literary works reveal an effective use of the near-native speaker variety, the pidgin variety and the local colour variety. However, the local colour variety is the hallmark of his literary creativity. Achebe's use of this variety is a practicalisation of his view that African writers need to extend the frontiers of English language to accommodate African thought patterns, and that this should be done within the limits of standard English (*Achebe, 1973:12*). He has been hailed by critics for this rare achievement.

Of particular interest to *Egejuru, (1978:102)* is Achebe's 'perfect simulation of Igbo expressions into English while preserving the structure of his vernacular'. *Olagoke (1982:24)* fascinated by Achebe's technique of transliteration, observes that:

Igbo idioms, expressions and proverbs are translated directly into English in a way as to reflect the speech practices of the culture of his people, and this has resulted in his creation of new English which can bear the burden of his African experience without degenerating into bad or substandard English.

The Local Colour English In *No Longer At Ease*

The local variety of English, as used by Achebe in *No Longer at Ease*, is characterized by the following:

- (1) Lexical borrowing from Igbo and Yoruba
- (2) Occasional switch from English to Igbo
- (3) Transliteration of Igbo Expressions into English

Lexical Borrowing

This is one of the features of Achebe's unique English in *No Longer at Ease*. Words are borrowed from Igbo and Yoruba into English. For example, after Obi's speech at the reception organized in his honour by the Umuofia Progressive Union,

Cold beer, minerals, palm wine and biscuits
were Then served, and the women began to sing
about Unuiofia and about Obi Okonkwo *nwa
jelu oyibo* - Obi who had been to the land of
the whites (*NLE* p. 29).

Another example can be drawn from the scene at Obi's father's house where the elders chat among themselves as they rejoice over Obi's return from England. As he sings the praise of Iguedo family, Odogwu says the following about Obi:

He is the grandson of Ogbuefi Okonkwo
who Faced the white man single handed
and died In the fight...He is Ogbuefi
Okonkwo come Back. He is Okonkwo
Kpom-kwem, exact,
Perfect. (*NLE*, p. 48-49).

In another scene where Obi and Clara have gone for a dinner to celebrate Obi's new car, Clara tells Obi why she cannot marry him:

i am an Osu', she wept - (NLE, P. 64.)

Another instance of lexical borrowing from Igbo is seen in a scene between Obi and Joseph. After Obi has narrated his experience at the interview, especially his confrontation with a member of the interview board, Joseph tells him:

'..... a man does not challenge his *Chi*
to a wresting match

Apart from introducing Igbo words into English, Achebe has also borrowed words from Yoruba language into English. On page 15, for example, as Obi and Clara drive through the slums of Lagos to Clara's seamstress, we are told that

every few'yards one met bands of dancers
often wearing identical dress or 'aso ebi!

Later, on the same page, as Obi slows down to give way to a band of drummers and dancers,

a taxi driver hooted impatiently and
overtook him, leaning out at the same
time of shout:
'*Ori oda*, your head no correct! *Ori*
oda- bloody fool!' replied Obi.

Again, on page 152, one of the man who came to bribe Obi to get his son a scholarship to England was described as wearing 'a very expensive agbada'. The word agbada is used three times on this page.

One can make two observations on Achebe's lexical borrowing in *No Longer at Ease*. First, Achebe has borrowed words from both Igbo and Yoruba, even though his mother tongue is Igbo. The explanation one may give for this is that the author has done that in order to reflect the linguistic backgrounds of the two geographical settings of the novel: Umuofia and Lagos.

Another observation is that Achebe has employed certain devices to make the borrowed items intelligible to a reader who does not understand Igbo (in the case of borrowed words from Igbo) or Yoruba (in the case of borrowed words from Yoruba). He explains or translates these items directly into English and then relates them to their English meaning through the following ways:

- (1) Linking the item to its English meaning using a hyphen or the conjunction *or*.
- (2) Placing the borrowed item in an appositive relationship to the given English meaning.
- (3) In some cases, he makes the meaning of the borrowed words clear through the context.

In the first example of lexical borrowing from Igbo given above, the author connects the translated meaning 'Obi who had been to the land of the whites' to the borrowed item 'n u a jelu oyibo' through the use of hyphen. He uses the same method in Obi's reply to the taxi driver in the second example of borrowing from Yoruba, 'Ori oda - bloody fool!'

In the second example of lexical borrowing from Igbo the author places the borrowed items 'kpom-kwem' in an appositive relationship to its English meaning 'exact, perfect'. The same method is used in the driver's words to Obi 'ori oda, your head no correct!'

Achebe uses the conjunction *or* to relate 'aso ebi' to its English meaning 'identical dress' in the first example of borrowed items from Yoruba. In the last example, the meaning of 'agbada' is grasped through the context. First we are told that Obi's visitor was wearing 'a very expensive *agbada*; After Obi had offered him a seat, we are told that the man

Brought out a little towel from
somewhere In the folds of his flowing
gown and Mopped his face.

From this context the foreign reader is able to guess that 'agbada' means 'flowing gown'. As if he has not made the meaning clear enough Achebe makes further reference to 'the wide sleeves of his *'agbada'* and front pocket of his *'agbada'*. These go to confirm the meaning of agbada already guessed from the context.

There are, however, cases where the author does not care to provide the English equivalent of a borrowed item. In such cases, it is either the borrowed item is a culture-specific item which does not have meaning outside the language in question, or its English language equivalent would not convey the exact meaning of the item in its native form. Such words as *osu* and *chi* in the last two examples of lexical borrowing from Igbo are instances of culture-specific items. Translations such as 'outcast' and 'personal god' respectively, do not convey the exact meaning of the words in Igbo culture. While the author attempts an explanation of the word *osu* towards the end of the novel (p. 120), the word *chi* remains obscure to the foreign reader throughout the novel.

Switch From English To Igbo

There is only one instance of this in *No Longer at Ease*, This is seen on page 7. Obi attends the meeting of Unnifia Progressive Union for the first time after his return from England. The members are very happy to have their illustrious son in their midst. As soon as Obi enters the venue of the meeting in his car, the people begin to greet one another in their language:

Umuofia kwenu!' shouted one old man.
'Ya! 'replied everyone in unison
'Umuofia Kwenu!
'Ya!
'Kwenu!
'Ya!
'Ife awolu Ogoli azua n 'afia; he said.

The writer relays the words of the greeting in Igbo because there is no way they can be translated into in English. The last sentence of the old man is a proverb which, literally translated, means 'what has been denied a man now sells in the market'. This however does not bring out the full meaning of the proverb in Igbo. The old man, in using this proverb, refers to Obi as an important person whom they have the opportunity and honour of having in their midst. Readers who do not understand Igbo would find it difficult to understand the meaning of the Igbo expressions.

Transliteration Of Igbo Expressions Into English

This is another feature of Achebe's unique English in *No Longer at Ease*. It involved direct translation of Igbo idioms, expression, proverbs and other established forms into English in a way as to reflect the speech-style of Igbo. Achebe does this so perfectly that he does not render his English unintelligible to his readers. Instances of transliteration can be drawn from the text. An example is seen in the speech made by the oldest man present at the emergency meeting of Umuofia Progressive Union (UPP). The meeting has been called to look into Obi's case — his involvement in bribery. The old man breaks one of the Kolanuts presented to the meeting by the President saying:

***He that brings Kolanuts brings life.
We do not seek to hurt any man,
but If any man seeks to hurt us
may he Break his neck (p. 5).***

What is translated into English here is the Igbo culture of Kolanut breaking. In Igbo land, the introduction of a kolanut or kolanuts into any gathering usually sparks off a prayer. The speech is a ritual prayer in honour of Kolanut. The second sentence is followed by an echo of 'ameiv from the audience. The first sentence shows how much regard Igbo people have for Kolanut; it is equated to life.

Another example of transliteration is seen in Pastor Ikedi's advisory speech during the prayer meeting organized by Obi's father in honour of his son as the latter is about to leave for England. Ikedi counsels Obi in the following words:

We are sending you to learn
book enjoyment can wait. Do
not be in a hurry to rush into the
pleasures of the world like the
young antelope who danced
herself lame when the main
dance was yet to come (Pp. 9 -
10).

Here, two expressions are translated directly from Igbo to English. The first is 'to learn book' (i.e. to study) and the second is the young antelope who danced herself lame when the main dance was yet to come'. This second expression is a transliteration of an Igbo proverb, which emphasizes the need for one to exercise patience in approaching things.

A third example of transliteration is seen in the dialogue between Obi and one of his father's kinsmen. Obi narrates the experience of his journey from England to the old man's amazement:

Obi: ***Sometimes, for a whole market week
there is no land to be seen. No
land in front, behind, to the right
and to the left, only water.***

Kinsman: ***Think of that. No land for one whole
market week. In our folktales a man
gets to the land of spirits when he has
passed seven rivers, seven forests and
seven hills. Without doubt you have
visited the land of spirits (P. 46).***

The phrase 'market week' is a translation of the Igbo concept of week, which is different from that of English. In Igbo a week is made of four market days - *NkM'o, Eke, Ori, Afo*. This contrasts with the English week which is made of seven day - Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday,

Thursday, Friday, Saturday and Sunday. Also, the significance of the number seven in Igbo is reflected in the expression 'seven rivers, seven forests and seven hills'.

Finally, we have another example of transliteration in the explanation offered by an elderly member of U. P. U, in respect of Obi's non-challant attitude on hearing the news of his mother's death:

Whatever happens is this would has a meaning As our people say! Whenever something stands, another thing stands beside it. " You see this thing called blood. There is nothing like it. (p. 144 - 145).

The quoted expression is a transliteration of an Igbo proverb, which means that nothing happens without a cause. The last two sentences are word for translation from Igbo.

You / see / this thing / called /
blood / huru / ilie a / bu / obara.
There / is nothing / like / it.
O / nweghi ilie / dika / ya.

Conclusion

In conclusion, Achebe has used language in a peculiar way to convey the peculiar culture of his people depicted in *No Longer at Ease*. He has arrived at this special English through lexical borrowing from the vernacular, switch from English to Igbo expression, and transliteration of local materials into English.

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