

# 12

---

## Transliteration as a Linguistic Error or a Literary Style? A Study of Selected Statements from African Novels and Students' Essays

---

By

ECHEZONA IFEJIRIKA, (Ph.D)

*Department of English,  
Anambra State University,  
Igbariam.*

### Abstract

*The researcher's study of some novels by African novelists, and the reading of examination scripts of some students, reveal that some users of the English language ignorantly equate their vernacular with the English language. This comes in form of transliteration. This unattainable manipulation of the English language affects grammatical structures and meanings. To this end, this paper highlights the fact that for knowledgeable users of the English language such as the master story teller, Chinua Achebe, transliteration is purely a literary linguistic style to enable less educated African literary characters to express themselves. On the other hand, some educated but non-experts in the English language use transliteration as equivalent of standard English and in the process, commit avoidable grammatical errors. This paper gives examples of statements in transliteration forms and their standard transforms. Therefore, transliteration is a linguistic error and not a literary style for some users of English as a second language.*

In the course of reading some African novels especially those written by writers such as Chinua Achebe and those popularly and mischievously labeled "Achebe's children", because of their unpretentious imitation of his narrative styles and similar story lines, the researcher discovered three levels of the use of the English language. For Chinua Achebe and his literary followers, the English language is employed as a means of social and educational class distinction. For the very educated African literary characters such as Odili in *A Man of the people*, Obi in *No Longer Ease*

---

*Journal of Resourcefulness and Distinction, Volume 7 No. 1, April, 2014*

***Echezona Ifejirika, (Ph.D)***

---

and expatriate characters in all his novels, standard English is always their means of communication among themselves and the natives.

For the native characters such as Okonkwo in *Things Fall Apart*, Ezealu in *Arrow of God* and Chief Nanga in *A Man of the people* among so many others, transliterational English is always their means of communication in the novels. Transliteration variety of English (made popular by Chinua Achebe) involves the direct translation of a local language such as the Igbo language into the English language. This is done with the false understanding that the local language (vernacular) shares same, if not similar characteristics in terms of alphabets, word meaning (semantics) word formation (morphology) and sentence structure (syntax) with the English Language. However, Chinua Achebe used it as a literary style.

The study also reveals that the half-educated characters in the African novels earlier mentioned, speak a variety of English called pidgin. Pidgin is a variety of English that combines some words of the English language with local or vernacular languages with a view to achieving mutual intelligibility in a circumstance of obvious language barrier. Most local interpreters and early local church teachers or catechists used pidgin variety of English to communicate with the expatriates and the natives. From the in-depth study of some of the novels written by Chinua Achebe, the use of transliteration for literary characters that do not possess solid educational background or without any formal education, is a literary and linguistic style used by the novelist to empower his characters with the power of speech in the midst of a foreign and alien language challenges.

Unfortunately however, emergent literary writers and ordinary English language users mistake transliteration for a standard variety of English and use it as such. The sample sentences that are extracted by the researcher from some African novels and speech of well educated Nigerians, especially among the Igbo speakers of the English language are remarkable and strikingly interesting and revealing. The aim of exposing these grammatical misconceptions to the general readers is to create awareness of the existence of this linguistic problem and to enable them to use standard English in formal settings instead of the transliteration variety which is often colloquially used for stylistic purposes by knowledgeable creative writers. Some transliteration variety of English and their standard forms are shown in this paper to create awareness and great consciousness on the part of English language users, so that they would avoid the false approximation of two distinct languages. This is important because many English language users, especially among the Igbo speakers of the English language, often equate the Igbo language with the second language (L2) which is the English language.

***Transliteration as a Linguistic Error or a Literary Style? A Study of Selected Statements from African Novels and Students' Essays***

---

The purpose of this paper therefore, is to help the users of the English language as a second language to appreciate the fact that transliteration, though a variety of English in Nigeria, should not be used in equivalent grammatical and structural environment with the English language for the sole reason that no two distinct languages can be approximated in meaning and structure. Again, this paper shows that transliteration can be used as a literary style for people who understand the difference between transliteration and Standard English.

**Transliteration Linguistic Structures and their Standard English Transforms**

Below are some sentences supposedly written in English but which are mere direct translations of a local language into the English language. These are statements extracted from local novels, students' examination scripts and assignments and jottings from speakers oral renditions. The statements are not in Standard English structure but their users think they are. These usages impair meaning and understanding.

1. Your head is not correct. (Direct Transliteration (DT) into English)  
You are mad. (Standard English (SE))
2. Good market sells itself. (DT)  
Goods without blemish do not require advertisement for them to be sold.  
(SE)  
(From *The Year of the Locusts* by Ifeanyi Ezeifeh)
3. His mouth does not reach in the case. (DT)  
He does not have any say in the matter. (SE)
4. A toad does not run in the day time for nothing. (DT)  
Nothing happens without a cause. (SE) (From oral speech)  
(In *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe)
5. The young girl has lost her flower. (DT) (From oral speech)  
The young girl is pregnant. (SE)
6. The beautiful girl got the job because she has a long leg. (DT) (From oral speech)  
The beautiful girl got the job because she had extra ordinary influence or connections. (SE)
7. The man committed a sin against the earth. (DT)  
The man committed an abomination (SE) (in *Things Fall Apart* by Achebe Chinua)

8. The pregnant woman has been very well for sometime now. (DT) (From oral speech)  
The pregnant woman has been healthy for sometime. (SE)
9. I have a running stomach. (DT) (From oral speech)  
I have stomach upset or diarrhea. (SE)
10. I followed the back door to get this job. (DT) (From oral speech)  
I entered through the back door. (Idiomatic expression) (SE)
11. Did you put my mouth in the food you are preparing? (DT) (From oral speech)  
Do I have a share in the food you are cooking? (SE)
12. We sent him to school to read his books well. (DT) (From oral speech)  
We sent him to school to study hard. (SE)
13. The big man is just throwing money away. (DT) (From oral speech)  
The rich man is just being extravagant in spending or The rich man is wasting money. (SE)
14. John, please read that book fast fast or fastly. (DT) (From oral speech)  
John, read that book fast or quickly. (SE)  
NB: There is no English word called fastly.
15. My head is breaking me. (DT) (From oral speech)  
I have a headache. (SE)
16. My throat is calling me fire wood. (DT) (From oral speech)  
I am thirsty. (SE) or I badly need some water. (SE)
17. The security man eat bribe too much. (DT) (From oral speech)  
The security takes a lot of bribe. (SE)
18. Nkechi, turn the stew small small (DT) (From oral speech)  
Nkechi, steer the stew gradually (SE)
19. Please, allow me to drink water and keep cup. (DT) (From oral speech)  
-Please, let me have some rest. (SE)
20. Chief Egbuna and Dr. Uzor are my tight friends. (DT) (From oral speech)  
Chief Egbuna and Dr. Uzor are my intimate friends. (SE)

*Transliteration as a Linguistic Error or a Literary Style? A Study of Selected Statements from African Novels and Students' Essays*

---

21. Ijeoma does not hear English. (DT) (From oral speech)  
Ijeoma does not understand the English language. (SE)
  
22. Call me a good lawyer. (DT) (From oral speech)  
Arrange and get me an experienced lawyer. (SE) or  
Get an experienced lawyer for me.
  
23. Hunger cured them malaria. (DT) (From oral speech)  
- They were severely dealt with by hunger. (SE)
  
24. Please, borrow me one thousand naira. (DT) (From oral speech)  
- Please, lend me one thousand naira. (SE)
  
25. Mrs. Dike has a bad mouth. (DT) (From oral speech)  
- Mrs. Dike is very vulgar. (SE)
  
26. The Accountant was jailed for eating government money. (DT) (From oral speech)  
- The Accountant was sentenced to prison for embezzling government fund. (SE)
  
27. Uchenna my son, I have told you to remove your hand from that girl. (DT) (From oral speech)  
- Uchenna my son, I have warned you to stay away from that girl. (SE)
  
28. Go well. (DT) (Common expressions by Nigerian speakers')  
- Safe journey. (SE)
  
29. Do you hear me? (DT) (Common expressions in speech)  
- Do you understand me? (SE)  
NB: One can hear without understanding.
  
30. Please my dear son, carry what I told you in mind. (DT) (Common expressions in speech)  
- Please my son, do not disclose what I told you to anybody. (SE)
  
31. You may laugh if laughter catches you. (DT) (*Common expressions by many Igbo speakers*)  
- You may laugh if you feel amused. (SE)

32. Why are you killing my time? (DT) (*Common expressions by many Igbo speakers*)  
- Why are you wasting my time? (SE)
33. Power Holding Company of Nigeria has taken the light. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- Power Holding Company of Nigeria has switched off the light or There is power failure. (SE)
34. Where is my eye glass? (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- Where is my pair of glasses (SE)
35. David is a talkative (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- David talks too much or David talks like a parrot (SE)  
NB: Talkative is not an English word.
36. Please, open the radio. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- Please, turn on the radio or Please, put the radio on (SE)
37. Amadi's wife is a semi-illiterate. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- Amadi's wife is half-educated or Amadi's wife is semi-literate (SE)  
NB: There is nothing like semi-illiterate because an illiterate is an illiterate.
38. The yellow girl is my girl friend. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- The fair-complexioned girl is my friend. (SE)  
- NB: Human beings cannot be described as yellow
39. His head is not correct. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- He is mad. (SE)
40. Hot-drinks are not recommended for children. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- Hard drinks are not good for children. (SE)
41. She returned back yesterday. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- She returned yesterday. (SE)
42. Today's date is what? (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- What is today's date? (SE)
43. Please wait me there. (DT) (*Common expressions*)  
- Please, wait for me there. (SE)

*Transliteration as a Linguistic Error or a Literary Style? A Study of Selected Statements from African Novels and Students' Essays*

---

44. Time is against me. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- I am running behind schedule. (SE)
45. Njideka, you are purposely killing my time. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Njideka, you are intentionally wasting my time. (SE)
46. What is it by your time? (DT) (Common expressions)  
- What is the time? (SE)
47. Please sir, come again (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Pardon sir, or please sir, repeat. (SE)
48. I answered the question with my head. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- I answered the question off heart. (SE)
49. I came with bus. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- I came by bus. (SE)
50. Don't worry, I will pay your transport money. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Don't bother, I will pay your transport fare. (SE)
51. Ngozi is very fine. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Ngozi is a beautiful girl. (SE)
52. Orji came with legs. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Orji came on foot. (SE)
53. You are eating your money alone. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- You are enjoying your wealth alone. (SE)
54. Paul chase women plenty. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Paul is a womanizer. (SE)
55. Ndidi is a very small girl. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Ndidi is a little girl. (SE)  
NB: Small has a lot to do with size while little refers to age.
56. Nkiru is small in height. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Nkiru is a short girl. (SE)

57. Come and have sit. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Come and sit down. (SE)
58. Chinwe has a long nose. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Chinwe has a pointed nose. (SE)
59. Obioma has luck. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Obioma is lucky (fortunate). (SE)
60. You seem to be very sharp. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- You seem to be very smart. (SE)
61. I want Uche to follow me to the market. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- I would want Uche to accompany me to the market. (SE)
62. Ekene has no ears. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Ekene is a very stubborn or Ekene is stubborn. (SE)
63. Isabella cooked the dinner. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Isabella prepared the dinner. (SE)  
- NB: one does not cook dinner, one cooks food.  
-
64. Mrs. Udeh has delivered (what did she deliver)? (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Mrs. Udeh has given birth. (SE)
65. If you vote for me, I will give you fire and rain. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- If you vote for me, I will provide electricity and water for you. (SE)
66. Rita's heart is at her back. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Rita is very wicked or hard-hearted. (SE)
67. Nigeria is my father-land. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Nigeria is my native country or I am a Nigerian by birth. (SE)
68. Chukwudi is reading Microbiology at Nnamdi Azikiwe University (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Chukwudi is studying Microbiology at Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. (SE)



***Transliteration as a Linguistic Error or a Literary Style? A Study of Selected Statements from African Novels and Students' Essays***

---

69. The twins are the same, you won't know who is who. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- The twins are identical, it is difficult to differentiate them. (SE)
70. The light is burning now. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- The light is shining now. (SE)  
NB: Fire burns but light shines
71. My neighbour is looking at me with bad eyes. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- My neighbour hates me or my neighbor is jealous of me. (SE)
72. Children, always close your eyes while praying. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Children, shut your eyes each time you are praying. (SE)
73. John Peters has a long throat. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- John Peters is a greedy man. (SE)
74. Ndubuisi is our gate-man. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Ndubuisi is our gate keeper. (SE)
75. Joy is carrying a baby for Obiora. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Joy is pregnant for Obiora. (SE)
76. There is a big go-slow on Awka road. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- There is a heavy traffic jam on Awka road. (SE)
77. The food is very sweet. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- The food is tasty or palatable. (SE)
78. My battery phone is dead. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- My phone battery has run down. (SE)
79. Nchekwube has big eyes. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Nchekwube is greedy or covetous. (SE)
80. The present president of Nigeria really went to school. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- The present president of Nigeria is well educated. (SE)

81. In spite of the heavy presence of crude oil in Nigeria, hunger is still killing our people. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- The abundant presence of crude oil in Nigeria has not prevented Nigerians from dying of hunger. (SE)
82. Amaka got the job because of her long leg. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Amaka got the job because of her sociable connections. (SE)
83. Proverbs are the oil with which words are eaten. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Proverbs are used to embellish speeches. (SE)
84. The tap is not running. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- The tap is not functioning. (SE)
85. See me at the church this evening. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Meet me at the church this evening. (SE)
86. Chike does not stay at home. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Chike hardly stays in his house. (SE)
87. The church starts at 9.am. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- The church service begins at 9.am. (SE)
88. How many years are you? (DT) (Common expressions)  
- How old are you? (SE)
89. My throat is dried. (DT) (Common expressions)  
- I am very thirsty. (SE)
90. Those whose palm kernels were cracked by benevolent spirits should lean to be humble. (Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*) (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Those favored by providence or God should be humble and appreciative. (SE)
91. A boy whose father sends to steal always breaks his victim's door with axe (DT) (Common expressions)  
- Those firmly backed by law often act ultra-vires or beyond their powers. (SE)
92. Tell them your belly is full. (DT) (Common expressions)

*Transliteration as a Linguistic Error or a Literary Style? A Study of Selected Statements from African Novels and Students' Essays*

---

- (*The Year of the Locusts* p. 173)  
Tell them that you are not hungry. (SE)
  
- 93. The size of your belly shows that you are double (DT) (Common expressions)
  - The size of your tommy indicates that you are pregnant (SE)
  
- 94. Woman, if you have anything in this house of yours, let us see it. (DT) (Common expressions)  
(*The Year of the Locust* p. 177)
  - Woman, serve the visitors with food and drinks. (SE)
  
- 95. Put some water on the fire for me. (DT) (Common expressions)  
(*The Year of the Locusts* p.122)
  - Boil some water for me. (SE)
  
- 96. You bought a new bed, to night we will know if it can carry two people. (DT) (Common expressions)  
(*The Year of the Locusts* p.122)
  - You purchased a new bed. We shall test its strength in accommodating two people to night. (SE)
  
- 97. I am thinking of how to wake up early in the morning and till my land and she carried herself to my iba this midnight. I often wonder if it itches them. (DT) (Common expressions)  
(*The Year of the Locusts* p. 19)
  - As I think of how to get up early in the morning to cultivate my land, she comes into my room to solicit for sex. I wonder if their virgina itches them often. (SE)

### **Comments**

What the researcher has demonstrated so far in the above sentences is that there is a variety of English spoken by people who translate their thoughts or ideas in their vernacular directly into the English language. The sample sentences are typical productions of some uneducated, semi-literate and even educated Igbo speakers, who equate the English language with the Igbo language. This word for word translation is not good because the two languages differ remarkably in terms of alphabet, grammar, pronunciation, and structure.

It is however, pertinent to note that in spite of the comprehension problems that transliteration variety of English creates, especially for non-Igbo speakers, some

notable writers like Chinua Achebe had employed it to enable his uneducated or less educated characters in his novels to express their views, using the English language as equivalent to their vernacular. This variety of English enabled some writers in Chinua Achebe's category to deliver their messages to their local, national and international audience or readers. Whether some foreign readers clearly understand the transliterations is another issue for further research.

To this end, writers who use this variety of English must indicate that they understand the difference between the Standard English and the transliteration variety of English by ensuring that it is only semi-literate or uneducated characters that use it in their creative works.

### **Conclusion**

Therefore, for the master story teller like Chinua Achebe and his literary followers, transliteration is a linguistic literary style aimed at enabling his educationally disadvantaged characters to express themselves, but for ordinary speakers and less educated users of the English language, transliteration is an obvious linguistic error and inadequacy that exposes their ignorance in the formal use of the English language.

Speakers of the English language as official or second language (L2) must appreciate the fact that no two languages can be equated or approximated as being the same.

### **References**

- Achebe, Chinua (1980). *Things Fall Apart* Ibadan: Heinemann.
- Aluko, T.M. (1970). *One Man One Wife* London: Heinemann.
- Egbuonu, Ngozi (1999). *My Vision of Hope* Enugu: Format Publishers.
- Ezeife, IFeanyih (2007). *The Year of the Locusts* Onitsha: Africana First Publishers.
- Ifejirika, Echezona (2010). *The English Language Today*, Vol. 2 2<sup>nd</sup> Ed. Onisha: West and Solomon Publishers.
- Jowitt, David (1991). *Nigerian English Usage: An introduction*. Lagos: Longman Publishers.