

MULTILINGUALISM IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE: A STUDY OF CHIMAMANDA ADICHIE'S *HALF OF A YELLOW SUN*

OJEL CLARA ANIDI¹, GOODLUCK CHINENYE KADIRI² & EMEKA JOSEPH OTAGBURUAGU³

¹School of General Studies, Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu State, Nigeria

^{2,3}Use of English Unit, School of General Studies, University of Nigeria, Nsukka, Enugu State, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

This paper seeks to discover the features of multilingualism as portrayed in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*; to determine the extent to which the writer has accommodated aspects of her native culture and language into the English language.

The paper is based on the descriptive survey design. The bulk of the data is obtained through content-analysis of the novel. Adichie in her novel exposes the Igbo world-view and language to the larger world at the same time as she uses the English language. There are numerous instances of code-switching/ mixing, translations, and transliterations in the novel. The novel also exposes the complex interplay of the natural and supernatural in the actions of an average Igbo person. The novel is a typical example of the growing consciousness of contemporary Nigerian writers for a cultural adaptation of the English language in Nigeria. This paper stresses the importance of multilingualism for Nigerian writers and Nigerians. Proficiency in both the English Language and their own native language is needed to showcase their identity in the global literary world. The paper acts as a prompt to Nigerian writers of literature, to creatively employ the English Language and infuse the language into Nigerian usages and culture as Adichie has done.

KEYWORDS: Multilingualism, Multilinguals, Code-Switching, Cultural Identity, Mother Tongue, Bilingual

INTRODUCTION

Today, the debate which has dominated the African literary scene in the past fifty years about the use of the English language versus the vernacular languages in African literature has, to a large extent, been moderated. It is no longer a question of extreme 'radicalism' or 'accommodationism'. The former refers to those critics who call for an outright rejection of English and an immediate adoption of indigenous African languages as the medium of creative writing. They include Obi Wali, Lewis Nkosi, Tai Solarin, and Ngugi Wa Thiongo. The accommodationists, on the other hand, refer to those who favour an outright use of imperialist languages (like, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal).

This long drawn out issue over the usefulness of English in the writing of African literature is pragmatically solving itself in Nigeria, today. English in Nigeria has become a very important part of our development and national culture. English is a binding force in the diversity found in Nigeria. Different ethnic groups in the country have found in English a common means of communication and identity. Also, the minority ethnic groups have found in English a peculiar weapon with which to fight any form of 'neocolonialism' by the major ethnic groups in the country (the Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa). Again, English is a useful 'global language' which ensures mutual intelligibility among its adherents world over. Considering these utilitarian roles of English in the country, yet recognizing the close connection between

language and political/ cultural emancipation, Nigerian writers of literature have devised means of contextualizing and indigenizing the English language in their works. Apart from Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, whom many critics have studied, there are other writers, like, Ossie Enekwe, Gabriel Okara, Femi Fatoba, Amos Tutuola, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Kofi Awoonor, Buchi Emecheta, John Munonye, and Emeka Otagburuagu, among others, who have infused the Nigerian traditions into their literary works.

MULTILINGUALISM IN NIGERIA

Multilingualism is a term used in Sociolinguistics to refer to a speech community which makes use of two or more languages (Crystal, 2008:318). Adedimeji (1) says that it is a situation where two (i.e. bilingualism, specifically) or more languages operate within the same context (1). This sociolinguistic phenomenon arises as a result of language contact, brought about by factors which, according to Adedimeji, include political annexation, marital relation, economic transactions, cultural association, educational acquisition and religious affiliations. In most countries where English is used as a second language, multilingualism is usually an unavoidable reality. In Nigeria, for instance, every educated person, children of the educated, and other persons who regularly interact with people from other ethnic groups usually speak two languages – his ethnic language and English. Being the lingua franca of Nigeria, the language of instruction in virtually the whole school system in Nigeria, the principal medium of expression in our media, churches, administration, aviation and trade, English, however, enjoys a lot of prestige far and above any other Nigerian language, in spite of its colonial origin. Naturally, Nigerian writers of literature prefer to use this language in their works. The task facing these novelists today in the face of globalization and cultural assertiveness is how to bring into this language their own ethnic language and realities.

While Achebe and the earlier writers of literature in English in Nigeria have mainly experimented with transliteration, Adichie in *Half of a Yellow Sun* has gone beyond that to accommodate other stylistic uses of the Igbo language into her writing. Features of multilingualism in the novel include code-mixing, code-switching, translations and transliterations. Also relevant are the writer's mastery of the English lexicon, creative uses of structural parallelism, and keen interest in the natural and supernatural worlds.

By examining these multilingual usages, the paper hopes to show budding writers in the Nigerian environment the possibilities inherent in multilingualism. It is no longer a question of extreme views – of accommodationism or radicalism – that is, using only English or only our ethnic languages, these languages can be employed together in creative writing. So far, the issue of multilingualism in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* has not been analysed critically by researchers. The present researcher has previously discussed *Half of a Yellow Sun*, along with other war novels, in relationship with indigenous knowledge, but was unable to analyze, critically, aspects of multilingualism found in the novel. This study, therefore, attempts to remedy that deficiency.

IGBO WORDS/ EXPRESSIONS IN HALF OF A YELLOW SUN

Half of a Yellow Sun has many Igbo loan words and expressions, much more than we witness in any other contemporary Nigerian novel. Otagburuagu's *Echoes of Violence*, for instance, though full of Igbo worldview and communication strategies, has not patronized as many Igbo words as found in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Adichie seems to have purposely constructed the text to teach its readers the Igbo language. Some words or utterances are brazenly written in their vernacular forms, without any translations (code-mixing); some come as transliteration of Igbo expressions (as mostly seen

in Achebe); others as meaning-translations. Very few of the usages, however, belong to the Igbo wise sayings or proverbs (as seen in Otagburuagu's *Echoes of Violence*) or Nigerian Pidgin (as seen in Enekwe's *Come Thunder*). Adichie's main procedure of bilingualism, however, could be termed code-switching.

CODE-SWITCHING/ MIXING

Code according to Finch (2000:209) is a "system of rules which allows us to transmit information in symbolic form". He intones that human language is a code. That means that human language consists of words which symbolically represent ideas, events, and objects that enable humans to communicate (Finch, 2000:209). Code-switching is a situation where the speaker moves from one language to the other in the process of speech. Finch (2000:210) posits that many native English speakers will switch between speaking regional dialect, or non-standard English, casually among friends and standard English for professional, or business purposes. This study looked at movement from the English language, which is a second language in Nigeria, to an indigenous language and vice versa. In the novel, *Half of a Yellow Sun*, some dialogues are rendered in both English and Igbo languages. At times, there is, also, code-mixing within a particular utterance; that is, when the speaker uses (mixes) the two languages within a particular utterance, without necessarily explaining any of the words.

Code-switching in *Half of a Yellow Sun* appears mainly in forms of translations. It is either that Igbo expressions are first written, and then translated into English or English expressions are written first and then translated into Igbo.

A List of Some English-Igbo/ Igbo-English Translations in the Text

- 'Kedu afa gi? What's your name? Master asked (p. 5)
- '*Itetago?* Are you awake?' (p. 143)
- 'Our eyes have seen plenty, *anyi afujugo anya,*' Obiozo said. (p. 144)
- 'Yes, my brother. *Dalu.* Thank you.' (p. 145)

Code-switching – English, Igbo, English; translation – Igbo to English)

- 'Do you want some bread?' '*I choro* bread?' (p. 145)

The assumed Igbo translation here is a mix of Igbo and English. Adichie here depicts the typical Nigerian Igbo who cannot do but code-mix, even while speaking with a fellow Igbo who does not understand English.

- When Olanna loses many of her relatives in the Kano massacres, many friends and relatives "came by to say *ndo* – sorry – and to shake their heads ..." (p. 157)
- 'Bia nwanyi!' Come back, woman! Okoroma was talking to the woman who nearly abandons her jaundiced hungry baby to him because he announces there are no more supplies to give to the people. (p. 170)
- 'How are things? A na-emekwa?' Master asked. (p. 173)
- 'Ekwuzikwananu nofu! Don't say that!' (p. 195)
- 'Omaka, it is very nice' Harrison's admiration of Ugwu's room. (p. 210)

- Children soon surrounded them, chanting ‘Onye ocha, white man,’ reaching out to feel Mr Richard’s hair. He said, ‘Kedu? Hello, what’s your name?’ (p. 211)
- ‘Nkem, please open, biko, please open’ (p. 224)
- ‘Anyi ga-achota ya, we will find her’, her mother said’ (p.431)
- ‘What am I to say to him? Gwa ya gini? (rhetorical questions) Olanna’s mother was unhappy about her husband’s affairs with other women (p. 217)
- ‘Anugo m, I have heard you,’ he said (p.219)
- ‘O mu nwanyi,’ he said quietly. ‘She had a girl. Yesterday.’ (p. 247)
- ‘Unu anakwa ofuma? Did you stay well? (p. 222)
- I said you will give me my money today! Tata! (p. 225)
- ‘Ejima m’ Kainene said. Olanna could not remember the last time Kainene had called her my twin (p. 247).

The Non-Translated Igbo Expressions (Code-Mixing) in the Text

- His mother would be preparing the evening meal now, pounding *akpu* in the mortar (p. 7)
- ‘They were opportunities to find her bent over, fanning the firewood or chopping *ugu* leaves for her mother’s soup pot’. (p. 8) his mother will rub his body with *okwuma* (p. 14)
- His grand-mother had not needed to grow her favourite herbs, *arigbe*, because it grew wild everywhere. (p. 15)
- The only indication to the meaning of *arigbe* comes four lines away from its first mention ‘she cooked him spicy yam porridge with *arigbe*.
- ‘Ngwa, go to the kitchen, there can be something you can eat in the fridge. (p. 6)
- ‘moi-moi’
- ‘uziza’
- ‘ori-okpa’
- ‘mmuo’ (all on p. 86)
- ‘when she had coughed and coughed until his father left before dawn to get the *dibia* ...’ p. 87
- Odenigbo has told Olanna how, as children, he and his friends spend their time fighting over the fallen *udala* fruit (p. 190)
- ‘You can go and rest, I nugo’
- ‘Do you cook ofe nsala well?’
- ‘Abu m onye Biafra,’ Richard said
- ‘I fugo? Does he think we employed him to steal us blind’ (p. 219)

- Let me hurry up and make some abacha for you to take (p. 226)
- 'Osiso! Put my blender in the car. (p. 228)
- And when Special Julius came by to say *ndo*, Master was just as brisk and brief. (p. 301)
- I wanted to say 'kedu' Olanna said 247
- 'Ngwanu, Good night.' 247
- 'Deje' greetings from Chioke, Ugwu's step mother. (p. 89) 'Deje' here belongs to the Northern Igbo dialect.

Some **Hausa language** has also been captured in the text:

'Na gode. Thank you, Hajia,' Olanna said; while conversing with Muhammed's mother (p. 46). Adichie tries to naturalize the dialogues in the text by capturing bits of the vernacular typologies and dialects associated with particular ethnic groups and localities.

Transliterations in the Text

Depending on the status of the character speaking, the writer of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, at times, use transliterated English:

- 'Thank, sah, Thank, sah. May another person do for you' (p. 89)
- When Ugwu's father is thanking Odenigbo for treating his son kindly. Note the spelling of 'sah', rather than 'sir'
- 'They said she is controlling my son 'No wonder my son has not married while his mates are counting how many children they have (p. 97)
- Olana's parents paid her a visit at Nsukka and entreated her to come with them to Umuunnachi... 'until we know whether the war is coming or going' (p. 188)
- 'We do not look for quarrels, but when your quarrel finds us, we will crush you' (p. 190)
- 'Let the day break' (p. 291). Translated directly from the Igbo greeting 'Ka chi foo'. Note that Eberechi (Ugwu's dream-girlfriend) has used the transliterated expression; while Ugwu, himself, uses the correct English translation, 'See you tomorrow' (p. 291). The writer has consciously employed the two kinds of translation, here, to show the characters' different levels of exposure to the English language. No doubt, Ugwu's long stay with Odenigbo, a University scholar, has rubbed off well on him, in this regard.
- The man's head is not correct (p. 257)
- 'Did you come out well this morning?' (p. 337)
- 'Are you throwing your child away? Ujo anaghi atu gi? Are you walking in God's face' – Transliteration and code-mixing (p. 170).
- The woman being addressed here wants to abandon her child (transliterated as 'throwing child away') to the officer working at Caritas, who announces that relief materials for the refugees are not available. 'To walk in

God's face', here is a transliteration from the Igbo 'I bu Chukwu uzo'. This can be better translated as 'not trusting in God's providence'.

- 'He who brings the kola nut brings life. You and yours will live, and I and mine will live. Let the eagle perch and let the dove perch and if either decrees that the other not perch, it will not be well for him. May God bless this kola in Jesus' name.' (p. 164)

This is a typical Igbo prayer, purposely transliterated into English, to retain their idiomatic quality.

Proverb and Idiom

- "Let the eagle perch and let the dove perch and if either decrees that the other not perch, it will not be well for him". This Igbo proverb is embedded in (9) above. It preaches tolerance and co-existence. However, the original Igbo proverb mentions the strong birds, 'kite' and 'eagle'; not 'eagle' and 'dove'.
- Why is he coming to tell us how to put out a fire, when it is he and his fellow British who collected the firewood for it in the first place? (p. 158). This is a transliterated **Igbo idiom**.

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, one sees that distinctiveness of Igbo English writers, which, as Herbert Igboanusi asserts, "manifests itself in experimentation in language, in recreating distinct Igbo discourse in English, and in stylistic innovations" (Igboanusi, in *African Study Monographs*). The writer uses the native language of the characters (mostly Igbo) to capture some of their socio-cultural habits – emotions, greetings, abuses, and conversations.

As seen in the discussion, code-switching is the commonest device employed by Adichie to achieve bilingualism in *Half of a Yellow Sun*. One of the shortcomings of this device is that it causes redundancy. Meanings seem to be repeated, especially to the bilingual reader who understands English and Igbo. Nevertheless, the text's main objective of acculturating the English language in Nigeria is achieved. Hence, aside from selling the Igbo language/ culture to the wider world, the text becomes an encouragement to many Nigerian writers/ scholars researching on the unique issues of definition, identification, classification, norm and intelligibility of the 'Nigerian English'.

Sophisticated English Vocabulary

Notwithstanding the fact that Adichie freely borrows from the Igbo language and the Nigerian English, she has a good grasp of the vocabularies of English, especially in the area of lexicon. Below are some of the expressions in the text, which show Adichie's mastery of the English lexicon.

- 'how scrupulously they avoided any contact (p. 223)'
- 'It was grating' (p. 225)
- 'he was bereft (p. 235)
- 'too opulent for your abstemious revolutionary...' (p. 103)
- 'so theatrically implausible' (p. 231)
- 'halo of hairs'
- 'international press was saturated with stories of violence ... bland and pedantic (p. 167)

- 'spurious argument' (p. 191)
- 'awkward ineptness' (p. 218)
- 'She wondered if she should have been less histrionic (p. 244)
- 'It may have been his smug tone or the flagrant way he continued to sidestep responsibility' (p. 244)
- 'There is nothing more trite' (p. 256)
- 'Kainene greeted him with a stoic face' (p. 257)
- She unfurled Odenigbo's cloth flag (p. 280)

Adichie could have substituted some of the difficult words found above with simpler ones, but she must have chosen these words to also teach readers some aspects of the English language. Other stylistic usages discussed below are also evident of Adichie's mastery of the English language and could serve as lessons for learners of English.

Embedding

Embedding (or subordination) is a technique where one sentence or clause is included in another. This often features like explanatory comments found within the clause or sentence, as seen in the following instances:

- She sat alone at her bare dining table – even her table mats were in his house – and ate the rice. (p. 102).
- Their courting upset her because it – and they – assumed that her relationship with Odenigbo was permanently over. (p. 228)
- With each sound she heard – a lorry rumbling past, a chirping bird, a child's cry – she ran from the veranda bench to peer down the road (p.300)

At times, this device of embedding has been combined with that of **enumeration**, as evident below:

She felt bitter towards them at first, because when she tried to talk about the things she had left behind in Nsukka – her books, her piano, her clothes, her china, her wigs, her Singer sewing machine, the television – they ignored her and started to talk about something else. (p. 185).

One may also apply this term, embedding, to other cases in the text where one narrative is subsumed in another. For instance, 'The Book', "The World Was Silent When we Died", is sandwiched within the story of *Half of a Yellow Sun*. As discovered in the end, "The Book" is Ugwu's own reflections on the political issues of the time. It is remarkable that Adichie has used the new work, "The World Was Silent When we Died", as interludes when tensions become too much in the main story. It is in much the same way that she has applied the flash-back technique in the narrative. The episodes in *Half of a Yellow Sun* are not arranged sequentially, as they actually happened. For instance, Part Three should have come before Part Two. One major advantage of this flashback technique is that it seems to reduce the distance in the long period of years over which the novel's setting has spanned.

The Natural and the Supernatural

This aspect of the discussion has been included because it helps to depict the psychological, religious and social

make-up of the Igbo, a fact which Adiche has brought to limelight in her novel. In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie pays particular attention to the environment (the natural), and the unseen force (the supernatural) at sensitive moments, when characters are worried. Then, both the physical and the spiritual worlds seem to respond to the occasion or the character's feelings. The passages, below, adequately illustrate how Adichie resorts to nature and the supernatural in portraying her characters' feelings.

References to the Natural Environment

- At Richard's irritation, because of Kainene's remarks, the writer notes, He stood up and began to pace the veranda. Insects were humming around the fluorescent bulb (p. 81)
- When Odenigbo's mother drives Olanna out of her son's (Odenigbo's) house, the writer captures it thus, she got into her car and drove away. She did not wave. The yard was still; there were no butterflies flitting among the white flowers (p. 97).
- Olanna's disappointment at the way Odenigbo explains away his mother's nasty behaviour is expressed thus, She walked into the living room without drying her hands. The flat seemed small. (p. 102)
- When eventually Odenigbo leaves her flat after their quarrel, She thought she heard rustles in the ceiling. (p. 102)
- At Richard's condolence visit to Nnaemeka's family, They sat in silence. Dust motes swam in the slice of sunlight that came through the window. (p. 165)
- At Olanna's realization that Odenigbo has cheated on her, by sleeping with the girl, Amala, whom his mother brought for him, she went outside and sat on the backyard steps and watched a hen near the lemon tree, guarding six chicks, nudging them towards crumbs on the ground. Ugwu was plucking avacados from the tree near the Boys' Quarters. (p. 224)
- When Olanna, Ugwu and Baby are worrying over Odenigbo's safety, the day he attempts to cross over to the Biafran-Two side, when he hears about the death of his mother, Ugwu watched the sun fall. Darkness came swiftly, brutally; there was no gradual change from light to dark. (p. 301)

References to the Supernatural

At certain occasions, the supernatural has been alluded to, as the passages below indicate:

- Ugwu sees a black cat, and becomes worried; "A black cat means evil" (p. 104).
- About Olanna, the writer has previously noted that "Odenigbo's mother's medicine from the dibia – indeed, all supernatural fetishes – meant nothing to her". Yet when she worries about her future with Odenigbo, she longs "for a sign, a rainbow, to signify security". (p. 105)
- After Olanna watches Richard leave, following his visit to Odenigbo's house, "she stood at the door, watching a bird with a blood-red breast, perched on the lawn" (p. 106). This event prepares the ground for what is to happen between Olanna and Richard: Olanna has used Richard (by seducing him) to get back at Odenigbo.
- Just at that point when Olanna, finally, accepts Odenigbo's proposal of marriage; "a bat swooped down" (p. 187)

- Abba people rely on the **dibia** to foretell whether Abba will fall to the enemy or not. Of course, the dibia says that Abba has never been conquered (p. 195).
- Odenigbo and Olanna have found a **rain-holder** on their wedding day (p. 200).
- When Baby becomes sick at the heat of the war, coughing with drawn-out whistles, Olanna's supernaturally explains that as evidence that "she could not be harmed in an air raid" (p. 263).
- In a frantic effort to find Kainene, who gets lost (probably, killed) a few days before the war ended, Olanna, her twin-sister, resorts to the supernatural approach. She asks her uncle, Osita, to go to the dibia, with a bottle of whisky and a goat (p. 433). In addition, she throws in a copy of Kainene's photo into the River Niger. Again, she goes to Kainene's house in Orlu and walks around it three times. Disappointingly, though, Kainene does not come back the week the dibia has stipulated.
- "Our people say that we all reincarnate When I come back in my next life, Kainene will be my sister". (p. 433)
- The writer of *Half of a Yellow Sun*, from the comments above, realizes the central role that nature and the supernatural play in the life of the average Igbo person, the people about whose culture and language she writes.

CONCLUSIONS

In *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Adichie's main intention seems to be to sell the Igbo world-view and language to the larger world at the same time as she is using the English language. Through instances of code-switching/ mixing, translations (Igbo-English/ English-Igbo), transliterations and escapades in the natural and supernatural, Adichie becomes truly multilingual and multicultural. The novel is a typical example of the growing consciousness on the part of contemporary Nigerian writers for a cultural adaptation of the English language in Nigeria.

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