

## LANGUAGE OF NIGERIAN LITERATURE IN A GLOBALIZED WORLD

By

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### **Abstract**

*This paper examines the language of Nigerian literary writers by x-raying the interrelatedness of language, literature and culture. The study is analytical and qualitative in nature. It traces the origin and development of the English language in Nigeria and the effect of the globalized status of the language on its usage especially literary writers. The paper examines the language debate of African literary writers and comes to the conclusion that Nigerian literary writers use the Nigerian variety of English in their oeuvres as a way of getting wider readership for their work. The study also believes that the use of Nigerian English ensures the inclusion of linguistic features of the writers' indigenous languages as one of the ways of promoting the Nigerian cultural identity.*

**Keywords:** Language, Literature, Globalization, Culture.

### **Introduction**

The 21st century has witnessed unprecedented growth and a remarkable change in every area of life such as trade, commerce, security, communication, education politics, etc throughout the world. With the emergence of globalization, the whole world has become condensed into a compact unit or global village and this has come with attendant challenges of language and culture contact or conflict. Every human activity or transaction in the now globalised world is conducted through the instrumentation of language (verbal or nonverbal); language in its own right is the custodian of the speakers' culture. Therefore, there is always an imminent threat that the globalised language/culture of the super powers will suffocate the languages/cultures of the developing countries of the world. This is the case with Nigeria where over 400 indigenous languages are spoken in the country which makes it impossible for different speech communities to communicate with other people outside their speech community. It is into this complicated and difficult mix of culture and languages that Nigerian literature was born over fifty years ago. Although there are many literary works that are written in the indigenous languages, the bulk of literary works are done in English language. This paper examines the language of Nigerian literary writers and tried to adduce reasons for their choice. The next section of the paper examines the relationship between language, literature and cultural identity.

### **Language, Literature and Cultural Identity**

Language, Literature and Cultural identity are intricately related and dependent on one another. Language is formed by culture just as culture is influenced and impacted by language; while literature is said to be a window to understand the nuances of culture within a given society. In order to understand the connections among these phenomena, we would attempt an explanation of each of the concepts.

Language has been variously defined by linguists. In the words of Eka and Udofot (1996), “Language is the most brilliant of human inventions... By means of language, people who live together are able to interact and express their thoughts and feelings (p.3). This explication highlights the importance of social interaction in every human community and indicates that only humans can use language to express their thoughts and feelings. On his part, Daramola (2001) sees language as “a tool for producing meaning by at least two people which may occur as either spoken or written forms”. In Daramola’s view, language can be employed in two forms: spoken or written. The spoken form comes in the form of speech while the written form is documented on paper. A language reflects and affects a people’s culture and changes in a culture influence the development of its language because language is the means by which people express their world view. It is a means of communal understanding of the world around them. Language defines the general attitude of people to cultural influences in their lives; their dos and don’ts are captured in the milieu of communication.

Talking of literature, Afolayan (1998, p.175) cited in Ogunsiji, Kehinde and Odeunmi (2013, p.31) posits that it “explores the relationship between the word (spoken or written) and the world; it relates “language style” to “life style”. Zou (2012) also sees literature as any piece of writing that expresses human experience and feeling through imagination. It is perceived as a vehicle for ideas and a reflection of social reality. Literature is often referred to as the living memory of a nation. Igboanusi (2002) describes literature as an expression of a culture’s perception of its problems and the solution to these problems. According to Igboanusi (op cit.), the writer’s source of creativity are his tradition. His mode of expressing his feeling is language. The above facts show that the work of a literary artist is to portray the culture of his society to a willing audience. Language is the best way through which one expresses himself and communicates with others, either through written or oral literature. While language can exist independent of literature, literature depends solely on language for its existence because language gives expression to literature. It is the prerogative of the literary artist to choose the language with which to deliver his message.

It is important to gain some deeper understanding of “culture” because it relates to the key term – cultural identity. In the anthropological sense, culture has to do with a ‘people’s way of life’ or ‘shared values’ (Zou, 2012). Ugbam, Chukwu and Ogbo, 2014, p.63) refers to culture as “the way of life of the members of a society, the collection of ideas and habits which they learn, share and transmit from generation to generation”. From the definitions of culture above, it is clear that culture is a very broad concept that generally encompasses basically every aspect of human life. People consider culture to be important for several reasons. Firstly, it is seen as defining people’s identity and consequently, it has been argued that people without culture is a people without identity. By defining people’s identity, culture helps to distinguish between or among people of different societies or communities. In the words of Adedimeji (2006, p. 10), “to be removed from one’s culture is to be deprived of one’s identity. To lose one’s identity is to be tossed in the wind fluttering along life like a leaf separated from its tree”. In the light of the above exposition, cultural identity can be seen in terms of one shared culture, a sort of collective belief/traits which people with a shared history and ancestry hold in common. It is believed that members of the same culture must have broadly speaking, the same cultural identity (Zou 2012).

In Africa today, there has been an on-going debate on “which language to use for African literature”, in order to explicitly portray the African cultural identity. This debate is necessitated by

the feeling that “language and literature have been considered as important attributes of national identity.” Two major groups are identified in the debate – one group led by Ngugi wa Thiong’o opines that African Literature should be only those works written in African languages and the other group led by Chinua Achebe believes that English or any European language that is well mastered by the writer, could equally be used by the African writer (Yeibo, 2011). This debate is as a result of concern over the cultural implication of language use in the literature of the African people. Apart from the fact that culture has serious business implications, it is the people’s identity and also, a binding force that holds them together. Consequently, to lose one’s culture amounts to losing one’s identity, and as stated by Ugbam, Chukwu and Ogbo (2014, p.63) “a society cut off from its roots may thrive for a while on its own momentum but eventually, it will wither like cut flowers in a vase”. Little wonder therefore, that literary writers are making serious efforts to imbue their cultural nuances into their works to ensure that the cultural identity of their people are portrayed in such a manner that “outsiders” will know that Africans did not learn about culture from the Europeans (Achebe 1975). The above summation goes to say that language is the building blocks of literature and literature aims at portraying people’s cultural identity

### **The Advent and Development of English in Nigeria**

Many critics of Nigerian Literature are agreed that this generation has witnessed an unprecedented spread of the English Language to nearly all parts of the world due to the search for a common means of communication. The English Language is fast acquiring the status of a global language. And according to Crystal (1997, p.2), “a language achieves a genuinely global status when it develops a special role that is recognized in every country”. As far back as the 5th Century, British Colonial expansion took English Language from its birth place to many countries around the world (Udofot, 2007). Before this spread of the English Language, the term was often used to refer to the language of England and people living in the Southern parts of Scotland (Eka, 2000). Today, the status of the English Language has changed completely, as “it is the world’s lingua Franca and the language of international communication, politics, commerce, travel, the media and so on” (Schneider, 2007, p. 1)

The English Language which came into Nigeria during the colonial era is no longer the same. It has lost a measure of its foreignness which led to the birth of another form of English that is widely acclaimed and popularly referred to as Nigerian English. (Bamgbose, 1995, Eka, 2000, Adegbija 2004, Udofot, 2007, Aboh, 2013, Igwenyi, 2015). This goes to support BrajKachru’s concentric theory which is an influential model of the spread of English. It draws attention to the various manifestations of English as it leaves its original home and gains globalised character. In this model, the diffusion of English is captured in terms of three Concentric Circles: the inner circle, the outer circle, and the expanding circle.

The Inner Circle refers to the users of English as a native language or mother tongue such as users of English in America, Australia, New Zealand, Ireland, Anglophone Canada and South Africa, and some of Caribbean territories. In these countries, English the native language or mother-tongue of most of the populace. The Outer Circle comprises the users of English in the former British Colonies and include users in Nigeria, India, Malaysia, Kenya, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tanzania, non -Anglophone South Africa etc. English is not the native tongue but serves as a useful lingua franca between ethnic and language groups. The Expanding Circle encompasses countries where

English plays no historical or governmental role but where it is used as a medium of international communication. This includes countries like China, Japan, Korea, Indonesia etc.

With this level of spread all around the world, it is not surprising, that many varieties of the English Language would develop to meet the communication needs of the language users all around the world where it has spread to. According to the concentric theory, the inner circle is 'norm-providing', which means that the English Language norms are developed in these countries. The outer circle is 'norm developing'. The expanding circle is 'norm-dependent' because it relies on the standards set by native speakers in the inner circle. English is bound to have different varieties due to its global expansion. The Nigerian variety of English belongs to the outer circle which is said to be norm developing. It has clearly defined features which distinguish it from the other circles. These features point to the cultural nuances of the language users in this circle. This is generally true of Nigerian literary writers as a look at their works point to linguist features that portray the local and cultural identities.

### **The English Used in Nigerian Literature**

At the onset of the development of literature in Africa as a body of knowledge, literary writers were faced with the question of which language to use in their writings. They are to decide to either write in their native language or in the colonizers languages which are French, Portuguese or English. This language question in African literature has attracted heated controversies for a long time. According to Igboanusi (2002, p.9), "two dominant positions have emerged, with each drawing support from writers and critics alike". On one side of the divide are intellectuals such as NgugiwaThiong'o, and Obi Wali who are of the opinion that African literature consists only of those literary works which are written in African languages. According to Udofia (2013, p.339), Ngugi feels that "it is contradictory to talk of African literature in European languages". In Ngugi's opinion, for any literary work to be called African, it must be written in African language.

On the other hand, writers like Achebe, and Soyinka recognise the legitimacy of literature in African languages but insist that African literature written in European languages is historically legitimate and that the use of these languages to communicate African experiences enrich both the languages in question and the literature itself (Yeibo2011). In this regard, Soyinka calls for a continental language understood by the majority of Africans to be used in writing African literature. However, this is not feasible as there is no such language that is understood by the people of one African country talk more of the whole continent. Osundare (2004), cited in Yeibo (2011), informs us that:

This debate which has dominated African literature in the past fifty years stems from the recognition among African scholars/writers of the centrality of language to literature, and the close connection between political independence and cultural emancipation (p.34).

Scholars who advocate the use of indigenous language for writing African literature are of the view that the continued use of colonial languages in African literature is a willing perpetuation of imperialism. Yet, it is worthy of note, that most majority of Nigerian writers belong to the group that prefer to use the European languages. These group of writers believe that the best medium of expressing African life and experiences is the colonial languages but in the indigenized forms.

Chinua Achebe, Gabriel Okara, Amos Tutuola, Elechi Amadi, J.P. Clark –Bekederemo, Kofi Awoonor, Chimamanda Adichie and many others fall into this category. These writers' views of language use in African literature contrast seriously with those writers who believe that the use of the colonizers' language "is to cave into hegemonic pressures" (Yeibo, 2011, 203). Ngugi waThiong'o is one of such authors. For waThiong'o, English is that triumphing force that invaded and plundered—the homeland of the best riches of African literature, both oral and written. He challenged other African authors who write in English to return to their indigenous languages. But today Ngugi waThiong'o writes in English and has also translated his earlier novels written in his native Kikuyu language to English. One wonders if English has seized to be an agent of colonialism. Achebe, on the other hand welcomes the use of English Language in African literary writings with an accommodating philosophy. He sees himself as an African writer who uses the English Language for the enhancement of African art. The positive attitude of Achebe and other writers like him who embraced the English Language as their medium of writing, enabled them to expand their methods of expression, their purposeful use of literary devices and their multi-layered themes.

Although, some critics have argued that the adoption and adaption of indigenous expression has to do with style this study supports Aboh's (2014) view that "the use of indigenous expressions is a linguistic practice which by passes stylistic motivation" as Nigerian literary artists especially Achebe, Soyinka, Okara, Emechata, Adichie among others show in their works. According to Awoyemi-Arayela (2013), the global acceptance of the genre of literature is evident when one considers the award of the Noble prize for literature to Professor Wole Soyinka in 1986. Awoyemi-Arayela (op. cit) avers that:

Nigerian Literature does reflect various stages of the development in which the Nigerian peoples have found themselves; this is probably as a result of the fact that in most cases literary writers are products of the society they write about; hence, the society nurtures and nourishes the writer (p.30).

The summation of Awoyemi-Arayele is that Nigerian literary writers use their works to portray the experience and nature of their society and to do this effectively, they need a language that can "carry the weight" of their African experiences (Achebe 1975). The study of an African writer who writes in English should be understood as a study of a writer who uses English as a second language. This means that his English should not be expected to be like that of a native speaker of English. This is premised on the fact that when a person learns a new language, there is the possibility that he will transfer some of the linguistic behaviours of his first language into the second language performance. This action is usually an involuntary action but it has been established by literary critics that literary writers often times, consciously imbue the features of their L1 into their artworks. This may be done to accommodate their audience who may be both Africans and Europeans. The writers use the English Language which is European in such a way that they incorporate the idioms and language resources of their L1 while ensuring that the grammar of the English Language is not terribly distorted. In this way, some of the writers' cultural nuances are transferred into the English Language. Therefore, for the English Language to adequately express the way of life of a different culture, it must endure some internal structural changes. This goes to support Achebe's (1975) opinion that an African creative writer must alter the English Language to suit his African experience. When this is done, the outcome is a new English which is able to carry the weight of the writers' African experience.

### Conclusion

From the discussions so far, one can boldly conclude that there is an intricate relationship between language, literature and culture. Language is the building block of literature and literature aims at portraying people's cultural identity. Also, the major reason why Nigerian writers use English in their literary works is not for lack of patriotism rather they are faced with the need to make their works available to a wide international readership. Again, the variety of English used by Nigerian literary artist in their oeuvres is referred to as Nigerian English. These modes of writing help them to achieve special effects in such a way that it gives their use of English a local flavor and (Nigerian) identity in the globalised world.

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