

Varieties of English in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

*Chinua Achebe is one of the most reputable names in the literary world. The paper proposes that Achebe uses varieties of English in *Things Fall Apart*. The different English's and characters (who use the English's) in the novel – both Igbo and white men justify the proposition. The paper further shows how Achebe manipulates the white man's language (English). It concludes that, Achebe uses two major varieties of the English Language in diverse ways. Evidences have also been provided from the novel.*

Introduction

Perhaps it will be important to know that Chinua Achebe is among the front line African writers and a reputable name in the literary world. He is Nigeria's best known novelist and likely the best known writer of fiction from black Africa. He has several novels and short stories which have achieved international recognition. These include *Things Fall Apart*, *No Longer at Ease*, *a Man of the People* and *Anthills of the Savanna*.

Achebe has been straight forward in identifying and describing his own particular task of helping his society. As a committed writer who is always out to champion the course of his people, he has this to say in 1964 about the role of an African writer. 'Here then is an adequate revolution for me to respond to help my society regain belief in itself and put away the complexes of the years of denegration and self –abasement ...'

The language problem is one of the greatest problems with regard to the classification of African Literature. Many writers view African Literature as an appendage of Colonial Literature while others argue against it.

Aim of the Paper

The aim is to bring to lime light the varieties of English used by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*. Some fundamental issues are discussed before the main topic is analyzed.

The Novel:

The novel takes its title from a poem titled, *The Second Coming* by an Irish poet, W.B. Yeats. The relevant lines are: Things Fall apart; the centre cannot hold, mere anarchy is loosed upon the world: On the back ground of the novel it is imperative to know that, *Things Fall Apart* is about a clan which once thought like one, spoke like one, shared common awareness and acted like one. Then the Whiteman came, and his coming broke this unity.

The novel can also be an interpretation of the first European penetration of Igbo land in the eastern part of Nigeria. It is centered mainly on the manner it affects a reactionary tribal leader, Okonkwo, who failed in his bid to win the support of his clansmen to fight the Whiteman. It is noteworthy that the major issue of Achebe's novel is the catastrophic effect of the encounter between the traditional African Society and the Western Culture.

The Varieties of English Used

Achebe uses a third person narrative technique in writing the novel. His authorial voice therefore, is detached, controlled and restrained.

He attempts to solve the dilemma of how to impact the essential and individual quality of a traditional-African way of life by capturing its flavour and essence through certain unprecedented stylistic devices: the use of different Englishes, the speech patterns, the use of Igbo proverbs and the traditional folk stories and the use of particularized Igbo words and phrases. He weaves these linguistic features skillfully into the total fabric of the novel so as to beautify and overcome the communication gap between the Igbo and the Whiteman. This we see in the novel where he says,

Does the Whiteman understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not even speak out tongue? But he says that our customs are bad ... (Achebe, 1958)

Achebe has learned the Whiteman's 'tongue' and interpreted an African way of life for him (the Whiteman). In this paper particular attention has been paid on the use he makes of English language in the presentation of his materials. Achebe himself says, 'The African writer should aim to use English language in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out English which is at one universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.'

Achebe as a writer who is seeking to define the interaction of two (2) cultures, definitely, needs more than a single linguistic standard by which to define the ethnic predicament of his characters. In pursuance of the aforementioned task, he displays his skillful prowess in English language by examining and introducing two varieties of English language that could solve the communication problem that exists between his characters.

The Term Variety of English

In an attempt to see the varieties of English used by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*, it will be relevant for the purpose of the paper, to look at the concepts of variety of English. There are two varieties of English used by Achebe in the novel, which are standard and Nigerian varieties. Let us then examine what varieties of English are so as to relate them with the various usages within the context of the novel. A variety of a language can be thought of as some of the many general and complete language systems, each used by a substantial members of people and each possessing certain characteristics that distinguish it from other systems, without requiring it to be classified as another language (JOWITT: 1991). This is the case in which Australian English, British English, Nigerian English etc are referred to as varieties.

In some cases, the difference between one variety and another is simply phonological (example in vowel articulation or accent). In others, there may be numerous differences of vocabulary and structures, though differences of syntax are rare. In fact, varieties can be classified according to different parameters - national, regional, social etc. Now let us expatiate on the different varieties in order to know what to expect from the ones used in the text.

Standard Variety of English:

This is a kind of variety which is usually used in print media and which is normally taught in schools and to non-native speakers learning the language. It is also the variety used by the educated People and in news broadcast. Other names for it are Queen's English. Received Pronunciation (RP) and Oxford/ Cambridge/ BBC English. For a language to be counted as standard, it must pass through the following stages.

- (a) Codification: A language must have written dictionary and grammar books.
- (b) Selection: Somehow, a particular variety must have been selected and the one to be developed as standard.
- (c) Elaboration of Function: The selected variety should fit into all functions associated with central government with writing.
- (d) Acceptance: The variety has to be accepted by the relevant population usually as a national language.

This Standard English (SE) is the variety of English which is usually used in print and which is normally taught in schools and to non- native speakers learning the language (Trudgil: 1974).

Nigerian Variety of English:

According to Ubahakwe, Nigerian English is the variety fundamentally concerned with effects of Mother Tongue (MT) Interference here and there in the English of the Nigerians. Interference is mostly marked in the semantic component and is less marked in the phonological component and is least, but still noticeable in the syntactic component (Ubahakwe: 1979).

In a sense, on the basis of the narrow definition, Popular Nigerian English (PNE) plus Standard Nigerian English (SNE) equals Nigerian English (NE) (Jowitt: 1991). The above can be summarized using mathematical signs thus: PNE + SNE = NE.

Accordingly, Walsh says,

... It is suggested that the varieties of English spoken by educated Nigerians, no matter what their first language, have enough features in common to mark off a general TYPE, which may be called Nigerian English.

From the aforementioned views, we can conclude that there exists variety of English called Nigerian English.

Before citing the instances of the two varieties of English in the Novel, perhaps, it will be important to prove that, it is not only Achebe that uses varieties of English in his writing. There are some other African writers who answered Achebe's call that, the African writer should aim to use English language in such a way that his (the African) message will be sent across without distorting the language communication. For this, there are instances where some of them use Nigerian English in their writing apart from SBE therein.

These writers include Elechi Amadi, Chukwuemeka Ike, Okpewho and Munonye. For instance, in Ike's *The Naked Gods*, there is this statement showing time:

Professor Ikin drove into his garage by 9p.m. on the day after taking his car to capital city (p.212). In this case, the expression of clock time 'by' means at in Standard British English (SBE). Thus, it would read at 9.p.m.. . in SBE. Elechi Amadi, in his *The Concubine*, says, "Since if you can convince him to sleep" In the above expression, the verb convinces is used to cover the meaning of PERSUADE since in SBE it will read thus:

See If You Can Persuade Him To Sleep.

A character in Okpewho's *The Victims*, says,

I don't want any of your preaching today. Just give me the money and **let me be going away.**

The emphasis in the above quotation is ours, so as to see the part that is of relevant to the readers. In SBE, it will read thus: '... Let me go away!' Again, in Munonye's *Obi* (p.27), we see the NE, use of IN HIS DAYS which means (in NE) 'when he was alive', Where the SBE uses the singular IN HIS DAY. Thus he says,

Udemezue was the greatest man
Umudiobia had **in his days** (emphasis ours).

Instances of the Varieties of English Used In the Novel:

In relation to the novel, there are many instances of the use of Standard English by Achebe. This variety is used more than the Nigerian variety.

He uses the SBE variety whenever he is introducing a character of English Origin or those high class characters of the native society, Nigeria. It is displayed mostly in the speeches of the missionaries, the district commissioner and of course many other learned cathetists and other characters belonging to high class position.

Consider the following extracts:

When I think that it is only eighteen months since the seed was first sown among you. I • marvel at what Lord Hatch wrought' .

The above is an assertion made by Mr. Brown, the first white missionary at Umuahia while addressing a group of new converts. It is undoubtedly a Standard English sentence. The same character also, in another instance, says, 'The head of my Church is in England' He uttered the above statement when he was talking to Mr. Akunna (a native convert) when they were debating over the latter's traditional religion.

From the arrangement of the words in the sentence, we can see that it is a declarative sentence formed with simple vocabulary, and in a formal way. Mr. Smith, another white missionary while addressing the masquerades, says, This is house of God, and I will not live to see it desecrated.

The above statement is also a standard variety of English uttered by white man. Having seen some instances to prove that Standard English variety is used in *Things Fall Apart*, we can now proceed to show some instances where Nigerian English variety is also used.

Examples are as follows:

'Who killed this banana tree?'

The above remark was made by the main character, Okonkwo in the novel, when he was querying his family on who cut his banana tree. As mentioned earlier, based on mother tongue interference there can be a semantic change in the use of certain English vocabularies. The verb KILLED therefore would have been CUT if Standard English was to be used.

Again, the same character, Okonkwo, made another remark in the novel using Nigerian English. In it he says; 'if filled him with fire as it had always done before'. He made the remark as a nostalgic feeling to his good old wrestling days. The noun FIRE should have been a word like EXCITEMENT or any other suitable word. There is also Obierika, another character in the novel who made mention that,

'How can he when he did not even understand our tongue?'

He said this when he was condemning the whiteman's behaviour on their land. Notice that the noun TONGUE is a Nigerian usage. It should have been the word LANGUAGE if Standard English was to be used. From the foregoing, we observe that Achebe communicated the depth and value of an African Society by using a foreign language, English. By using it as a medium, he reaches a much wider audience. He recreated the African experience (Igbo past) and conveyed it through the alien language. He sees the use of English language as 'a new voice coming out from Africa, speaking of African experience by an African'.

Conclusion

It is quite evident that Achebe uses English Language in diverse ways in the novel. In the novel, we find Standard English utterances and Nigerian English utterances. Therefore, the main aim of the paper which is to show the varieties of English used in the novel is achieved.

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