

# THE LANGUAGE IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *A MAN OF THE PEOPLE*

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*Abstract: Achebe's 'A Man of the People' as a product of post-colonial literature shows an interaction between imperial culture and the native cultural practices especially, in terms of language. The limitation and failure of standard English to express local experiences i.e. indigenous metaphor is shown. The emergence of new English as a result of the reconstruction and expansion of the standard English is thus encouraged. It is resulted in the use of four different modes in the novel: standard English narration, standard English dialogue, pidgin English and native language which reflects different attitudes implied by the speakers.*

*Key words : post-colonial literature, standard English, pidgin English, native language, new english*

## POST COLONIAL LITERATURE

Achebe's *A Man of the People* is one of the products of what is called 'post colonial literature'. The term 'post-colonial' itself is defined as "the continuing process of imperial suppression and exchanges throughout this diverse range of societies, in their institutions and discursive practices (Ashcroft, 1995: 3).

Therefore, it can be said that post-colonial literature is a result of the interaction between imperial culture and the complex indigenous cultural practices. Although the term 'post-colonial' literature is still debatable and problematic but basically these studies are dominated by *literature in English* (Skinner, 1998).

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As a product of post-colonial literature, Achebe's *A Man of the People* contains activities which include the conceptions and actions which are or seem to be part of imperial enterprise. *A Man of the People* is told from the point of view of Odili, the first person narrator. With a very interesting background of the political situation in Nigeria after the independence, the novel depicts people's attitude in the post-colonial era.

However, the most interesting features of this novel is the language. As the narrator, Odili uses four modes. Firstly, his standard English narration. This mode is used to reveal Odili's thought, ideas and reflection on events. The second mode is dialogue in standard English which is different from the third mode, pidgin English. And the last one is the native language which is translated into English or into a mix between English and pidgin (Killam, 1969). Since Odili swaps from one mode to the other modes in this novel, the effect of the changes of mode is very interesting to discuss. Regarding the language of this novel, Innes (1990: 87) says).

'Throughout this chapter and throughout the novel, the English language is used to deceive rather than to communicate, and it can be used in this way because for most of the hearers, the form of *language* used conveys more than the content

### **THE LANGUAGE IN A MAN OF THE PEOPLE**

The novel is the story of Odili Kamalu and his involvement with Chief the Honourable M.N. Nanga, M.P., and the political life of the country. As a young man and a university graduate, Odili is sceptical about his own government, the corrupt and dishonest government. This novel shows how Odili plays with the language to Satirise, scorn, show his power and status, and develop a new English.

Odili the narrator, is part of the generation which is up-rooted from the tradition of his own nation as a destructive consequences of the rule of the colonial period, especially the colonialist policy in language. Viswanathan (1987) points out that:

British colonial administrators, provoked by missionaries on the other hand and fears of native insubordination on the other, discovered an ally in English literature to support them in maintaining control of the natives under the guise of a liberal education (cited in Ashcroft, 1989:7)

Through the Received - Standard English used in those literary studies, the British values and tastes can be taught. Therefore, it can be said that the control over language is one of the main features of imperial oppression.

Although the setting of the story is in the dependence Nigeria, Odili's choice to use standard English to narrate the story might be seen as the reflection of his attitude towards this language English is the official language Nigeria. The neutrality of this language bridges the differences in languages used by a different ethnic group. However, as a language introduced in the colonial period, English was used as a mean of imperial control. English brings the shape and ideological content of the colonial context and becomes the medium of the continuation of hierarchical power structure. It is used as a tool of power to cultivate a group of people who will identify themselves with the cultural and other norms of the political elite. Along with its role in political elite, English is also employed as a medium for understanding technology and scientific development (Kachru, 1986: 5-6)

Being a university graduate, Odili is a part of the small number of people who have professional skill; thus, he becomes the symbol of modernisation which often implies westernisation. One of the features of membership in that group is the competence in English. Odili's competence in English exceeds average people. Therefore, by having the ability to use standard English, Odili shows that he has the same status with the imperialist. This case also occurs in India when the 'brown sahibs' seemed to feel solidarity, at least attitudinally with the 'white sahibs' (Void: 7).

Odili's exclusiveness as a part of the elite group of educated people is expressed by Odili's cynical view of his incompetent and corrupt political elite in his country. The language used by the parliament reported by the pro-government newspaper is shown in a form of parody and satire (Innes, 1990):

Let us now and for all time extract from our body-politic as a dentist extracts a stinking tooth all those decadent stooges versed in textbook economics and aping the white man's mannerisms and way of speaking. We are proud to be Africans. Our leaders are not those intoxicated with their Oxford, Cambridge or Harvard degrees but those who speak the language of the people. Away with the damnable and expensive university education which only alienates an African from his rich and ancient culture and puts him above his people ... (Cited in Achebe, 1966:4).

As a hybrid class of 'western-educated' person who masters English language, Odili points out the imperfect use of English language by the political elite in his country such as the use of the strange proverb: 'as a dentist extracts a stinking tooth all those decadent stooges versed in text-book economics' By pointing this peculiar text, Odili implies that the current government is not run by properly educated people.

Odili's negative opinion about his government is emphasised when he describes one of the notices inserted in the Daily Chronicle by the City Clerk of Bori. The language used in this notice is a formal standard English. The attention of the Public is hereby drawn to Section 12 of the Bori (Conservancy) Bye-laws, 1951:

1. Occupiers of all premises shall provide pails for excrement, the size of such pails and the materials of which they are constructed shall be approved by the City Engineer.
2. The number of such pails to be provided in any premises shall be specified by the City Engineer.
3. The Public are warned against unauthorized increases in the number of pails already existing on their premises (Achebe, 1966: 46)

By narrating this notice, Odili, humorously, contrasts the improper and informal English used to express the political opinion to the standard English used in a notice which regulates the number of pails for excrement.

Furthermore, Odili's attitude as a member of elite group is portrayed in chapter one during Chief Nanga's visit to the school where Odili is working. In this chapter, Odili's attitude through the use of standard English is shown in contrast to the use of pidgin English by Chief Nanga and several other people in the dialogue. Odili's choice to use Standard English infers a dichotomy between the metropolitan language and the language of the people. As a product of colonisation the imperial education system applies a 'standard' version of the metropolitan language as the norm and classifies other 'variants' as impurities (Ashcroft 1989: 7). On the other hand, Pidgin has been used pragmatically as a simplified hybrid language use in ports and on ships, and in garrisons, markets, mines and the like. Pidgin usually occurs when the access to a full language can not be gained (McArthur, 1998). Therefore, pidgin in colonial and postcolonial times performs the same pragmatic function: to bridge the gap of communication between

speakers of different languages in everyday life. However, despite its pragmatic goal, pidgin English is considered negative because it is seen as a simplified and debased corruption of standard English (Killam, 1969). In literature, the prejudice is even worse because pidgin is not only seen as a mean of communication between people who live in different regions but also as a mark of different class since standard English is only performed by members of educated class (Ashcroft et al, 1989). Consequently, Odili's use of standard English might be viewed as a way to prove that he is part of a particular class.

Odili's superiority in using the standard language is emphasised by the standard and pidgin English spoken by Chief Nanga, As a Minister of Culture and ex-teacher, Chief Nanga is supposed to have competence in English, however, some grammatical mistakes that he makes produce the effect of irony:

'.. I use to tell the other boys in my class that Odili will one day be a great man...' (Achebe, 1966: 9).

'That is very good Sometimes I use to regret ever leaving the teaching field- Although I am a minister today I can swear to God that I am not as *happy* as when I was teacher (Achebe, 1966: 10).

Instead of saying 'used to' Chief Nanga says 'Use to'. According to Killam (1969: 182) Nanga says 'use to' to avoid the use of 'de' in pidgin which indicates progressiveness PT continuing action of the verb that follow ('I de tell the boys' etc). In substituting 'use to' for 'de' the imperfect learner of standard English feels comfortably correct. The mistakes occurred here imply Chief Nanga's incapability to speak standard English. Odili uses this mistake to describe the inferiority of Chief Nanga who represents people who rule the country.

Moreover, Odili's perspective on the inferiority of Chief Nanga is stressed by Chief Nanga's tendency to use pidgin English. The use of pidgin English by Chief Nanga gives negative effect. It implies that he is not a part of the elite group, the group of educated people who have or appear to have the same status with the imperialist. Yet, Chief Nanga's use of pidgin language can be seen from a different view. In one occasion Chief Nanga uses pidgin English to share his experience about being a minister:

'you call this spend? You never see some thing, my brother. I no de keep anini for myself, na so so troway if some person come to you and say 'I wan' make you Minister' make you run like blazes comot Na true word I tell you. To God who made me.' He showed the tip of his tongue to the sky to confirm the oath. 'Minister de sweet for eye but too much kata-kataa de for inside, Believe me yours sincerely' (Achebe, 1966: 16).

By doing so, Chief Nanga levels himself with the people, therefore the average people can also feel his closeness although he is a minister. The effect of closeness is opposed to the effect of distancing implied by the use of standard English by Odili

However, although Odili chooses to use standard English language in narrating the story about Chief Nanga's visit and always speaks standard English during that visit, it does not mean that he is not capable of using pidgin English. In other parts of the story, Odili also uses pidgin in his dialogue although he still uses standard English to express his thought *feeling* and reflection, Odili uses pidgin English joins nanga to interview a cook :

'wetin you de chop for your own house?' I asked, being irritated by the idiot. 'wetin I de chop for my house?' he repeated after me we country chop I de chop.' 'You country chop no be Africa chop?' asked Chief Nanga. 'Na him,' admitted the cook. 'But no be me de cook am. I get wife for house (Achebe, 1966: 52).

The fact that Odili is able to speak pidgin emphasises the effect of his use of standard English during the minister's visit. His refusal to speak English like the rest of the minister's group puts him in the higher status. Ashcroft et al (1989) mention that during the period of the colonisation. pidgin was used in context of master-servant relationship. Thus. Odili's choice to use standard English and his refusal to use pidgin in conversing with the Minister and his group is a way to gain his superior status. In other word, Odili scornfully puts the Minister and his, groups in the lower position through the use of the language.

In addition, it might be useful to see the fourth mode develops in the story. The fourth mode is the occurrence of the native language which is interestingly translated into a mix between pidgin and standard English:

'What can you enjoy there?' she asked with great spirit. 'Nine pence talk and three pence food. 'Hallo, hawa you Nice to see you again.' All na na lie' (Achebe, 1966: 41).

The speech is delivered by Mrs Nanga who can only speak 'our language' Odili's reason for translating it into both pidgin and standard English might be because he wants to emphasise the ridiculous perception of native towards English language which is shown by 'Hallo, hawa you'. Similar to Chief nanga's failure to speak English correctly, the inability of the native to pronounce the sentence correctly implies the inferiority of the native in front of Odili.

Yet, although the use of standard English indicates that Odili belongs to superior status, the choice is also a part- of the process of alienation ushered by the coloniser. In Odili case, the standard English that he uses to place himself in the exclusive position alienates him from his own society Achebe (1974) writes about this phenomena:

Now, did this mean that the educated native was no different at all from his brothers in the bush? Oh, no! He was different; he was worse, His abortive effort at education and culture though leaving him totally unredeemed and ungenerated had none the less done something to him - it had deprived him of his links with his own people whom he no longer even understood and who certainly wanted none. of his dissatisfaction or pretension (Cited in Ascroft, 1995: 58-59).

Meanwhile, like all who use a foreign language to describe their worlds and experiences, this second language fails to reproduce the experience of culture rooted in the medium of the native language (Skinner, 1998). There is a gap, which opens between Odili's experience and the English language which. is used to describe it. The gap occurs when the English as a new language learned by Odili is inadequate to describe Odili's experience of his own world. This alienation is inevitable until the colonising language has been replaced or appropriate as English.

According to Ascroft (1989), there are two processes to replace the language Firstly the abrogation or denial of the privilege of 'English'. It involves the refusal of the categories of the imperial culture, its standard of normative or correct usage, and its, assumption of a traditional and fixed meaning inscribed in the words. The second one the appropriation and reconstruction of the language of the centre. in appropriation the language is modified to bear the burden of one's own cultural experience.

The process of appropriation can be well noticed in this novel. As a world language, Ashcroft et al (1989) calls English as a continuum of 'intersections' in which the reconstruction of the language is intervened by

the speaking habits in various communities. Although Odili tries hard to use standard English which places him in the elite and powerful group, he has to admit that he is not capable to deny his root as one of the 'people'. The metaphors which appears in Odili's reflection of his life and his country are difficult to be expressed in the foreign language which is able to reach only the body but not the soul of the experience. Odili expresses his reflection on the problem of his new nation with this metaphor:

A man who has just come in from the rain and dried his body and put on dry clothes is more reluctant to go out again than another who has been indoors all the time. The trouble with our new nation- as I saw it then lying on that bed - was that none of us had been in door long enough to be able to say 'To hell with it'. We had all been in the rain together until yesterday (Achebe, 1966:421).

He expresses this concern because he sees the people who are currently in power do not care anymore about their nation's problems but their own status and power. Odili's incapability to use the expression in standard English to express his culture might be seen as the failure of standard English to voice other's values thus it needs to -be reconstruct to serve the speaker's needs.

Furthermore, this metaphor might be interpreted as an indicator of authenticity, the appropriation might be lead to an emergence of new English or localised English since it shows how the language might provide some terms but not others when it is used to talk about the world. Ashcroft et al] (1989) point out about this matter:

The use of metaphor shows the creative potential of intersecting languages when the syntactic and grammatical rules of one language are overlaid on another, and of the way in which cross-cultural literature reveals how meanings work (Ashcroft, 1989: 3).

Therefore, by accepting the innovation and imagination of other culture through the language blend, the language can extend its horizon as well as resist the incorporation into English.

The extended horizon of the language provides a way to bridge the cultural space. Cultural space is the 'absence' which makes a gap between the 'official' language of the text and the cultural differences brought into it. The inclusion of the new images and innovations into the text parallels the local culture with the English culture (Ashcroft, 1989). In other words,



the use of English to express local/traditional metaphor might be interpreted as the emergence of the new English which has the same level with the standard English.

Although Odili succeeds in compromising English language and his native expression using the new English there are some words which are left untranslated such as the words 'lappa' 'juju' 'kolanut' and 'foofoo'. Odili does not explicitly explain the meaning, thus the reader can only understand the meaning by reading the whole context. The absence of explanation is, according to Ashcroft et al (1989), a sign of distinctiveness as well as authority in the process of cultural and linguistic intersection. They indicate a gap between a certain culture experience with another which cannot easily be bridged by producing new words or translated into English. For example, the word 'lappa' is a kind of clothes used by woman. Lappa has special characteristics can neither be translated nor replaced by other words. These untranslated words underline the fact that the language used to narrate this story an/other language therefore, as the products of the colonised culture these words express the oppressed culture which are, surrounded by the oppressor culture (Ashcroft, 1989).

Hence, Odili's choice to use his native words shows an important thing i.e. although he seems eager to maintain the use of English language, he is also aware that there is a gap. There are differences between the culture and values of the land he lives in with the culture and values of English language. By using his own choice of language, the new English, Odili puts his own culture and the new English into at least the same level with standard English.

Furthermore, there is a phenomenon which is called 'defamiliarization' This occurrence happens as:

One way of creating a new African perspective is through a process of 'defamiliarization' through which common European phenomena are held at arm's length, as it were, and made to appear strange (Skinner, 1989:86).

The familiarization is shown by Odili's experience when he visits Mrs. Nanga at Christmas where he watches the traditional mask dance which dances comically to the song:

Sunday, bigi bele Sunday  
Sunday, bigi bele Sunday  
Akatakata done come!  
Everybody run away!  
Sunday, Alleluia! (Achebe, 1966: 109)

The effect of the song which accompanies the dance is unique. The song might derive from the song taught by the missionaries to spread Christianity. To make the teaching easier to understand by the natives, pidgins and employed; thus, make the song that is probably also sung in English seems strange for the native-speaker of English.

## CONCLUSION

Language plays a very important role in this novel, By noticing the different type of language modes which are used to narrate the story, many other things outside the content of the story can be inferred. The different modes used by Odili also show the status and position of standard English, Pidgin English., and the native language in post independence time. The attitude of the language speaker's might be shown from their choice of modes. Finally, this story also reveals the limitation and failure of standard English to express local experiences which in turn encourage the emergence of new english as a result of the reconstruction and expansion of the standard English.

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