

STYLE AND MEANING IN IGBO ENGLISH NOVELS

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Abstract

This paper establishes Igbo English, in creative writing, as a deliberate but significant stylistic device, which arises from the influence or interference of the Igbo language and culture. This mode of writing transfers the oral style into the written tradition, and this way, it captures the Igbo worldview in English. Often, this peculiar and very effective linguistic style creates no problems for the Igbo or African reader. But for the Western reader whose language has been used, there are semantic problems arising from lack of knowledge of the African culture and worldview. This paper is, therefore, of the view that for a proper interpretation and understanding of Igbo English works, non-African readers have to understand the traditions, which give rise to such texts and also the contexts in which such adaptations are used.

Introduction

An outstanding contribution of contemporary Igbo novelists to African literature is their adaptative use of the English language, which has been demonstrated to be an effective linguistic style. Chukwuma (1994) rightly observes that these writers have no choice but to fashion the English language in a way to be able to carry the heavy burden of the African experience. They have carried out this task with vigour and freshness keeping within the English language while capturing the idioms and nuances of African languages.

Many aspects of their texts are typical adaptations of the oral style to the written tradition. There is, for instance, a preponderance of figurative language and idiomatic expressions with local colours in direct translation or transliteration from their mother tongues. To understand and interpret their meanings properly, one has to understand the tradition from which they are drawn. Otherwise, attempts at interpreting these works will result in semantic distortion and information skew (see Igboanusi 2001 & 2003).

Some past works have made useful observations on the interpretation of African worldviews in European languages. For instance, Oladipo (1995) observed that based on the relationship between the nature of language and meaning, no description or interpretation of African worldviews in alien languages can succeed if all it can do is to find out rough equivalences in these languages for certain key terms which define these worldviews in African indigenous languages. On his own part, Taiwo (1979) identified five varieties of English used in Nigerian novels:

- i. The first variety of English occurs where the writer's language is closely tied to that of his mother tongue, as in the works of Gabriel Okara and Amos Tutuola;
- ii. The second variety of English takes after the language of the speaking voice, a language that is closest to the roots of oral tradition, as in the works of Tafawa Balewa and also Amos Tutuola;
- iii. The third variety is that which merely benefits from the resources of the mother tongue, as in the works of many leading Nigerian novelists such as Chinua Achebe, Buchi Emecheta, Elechi Amadi, Timothy Aluko, Zaynab Alkali, Chukwuemeka Ike, Nkem Nwankwo, John Munonye, etc.;
- iv. The fourth variety of English tends to be extremely formal and usually difficult, as in the works of Wole Soyinka, Obi Egbuna, and Cyprian Ekwensi;

- v. The fifth variety is Pidgin English, as in the works of Ken Saro-Wiwa, Aig-Imoukhuede, etc.

It is difficult to draw a strict distinction among these varieties because the same writer may sometimes combine varieties 2, 3 and 5 in his works, as some writers such as Achebe, Soyinka, Nwankwo, etc. do. However, our concentration in this study is on variety three which is associated with the works of many of the most prolific and successful Nigerian writers. Variety three is largely responsible for the stylistic flexibility and linguistic experimentation that is now associated with Nigerian writers in general and Igbo writers in particular. The use of Nigerian English (NE) or Igbo English (IE) in Nigerian literature is appropriate for the situation in which the writers find themselves. Attempts to apply English to widely varying local situations have resulted in the use of varieties of NE that we find in the Nigerian literature, particularly the novel.

Often, this peculiar and very effective linguistic style creates no semantic or reading problems for the Nigerian or 'African' reader. But for the European or Western reader, whose language has been used, there may be semantic difficulties arising from lack of knowledge of the Igbo culture and worldview. However, an understanding of the tradition which gives rise to such texts and also a proper placement of contexts in which such usages occur will certainly enhance their interpretation and understanding.

Style and Meaning in Igbo English Novels

'Style as choice of linguistic means' (Esser 1993: 1) is a situationally determined way of writing. In other words, style results from contexts. This is because language is part of human social behaviour, which operates within a wide framework of human activity. Corroborating the view that any piece of language is part of a situation, which has a context, Haynes (1989: 8) observes: 'Whenever we actually speak or write we are affected by social and linguistic conventions and by the expectations of readers or hearers.'

The 'social and linguistic conventions' referred to by Haynes are, in fact, responsible for the linguistic experimentation which is identified in this work as Igbo English. Through their flexible use of English, Igbo writers have been able to establish IE in style, language and culture. This deliberate stylistic device (which is a reflection of the linguistic resources appropriate to the Igbo and the Nigerian cultural and sociolinguistic situation) enables the writer to express and translate his local experiences into English.

This linguistic creativity, which operates through a process of transfer, has resulted into three forms of lexico-semantic innovations: items transferred to fill lexical gaps, literal transfer, and transferred items with contextual units which are absent in the Western culture. While the first set of transfer may not create meaning difficulties, the second and third types of transfer often lead to distortion of meanings by non-Igbo readers. These processes are fully illustrated below.

The novels used in our analysis and discussion are identified as follows: *TFS=Toads for Supper*; *TOS=The Only Son*; *Danda=Danda*; *HAW=Head above Water*; *Estrangement=Estrangement*; *TPW=The Potter's Wheel*; *BW=Bridge to a Wedding*. In some of the examples, Igbo translations are given in order to trace sources of the interference. Their English English (EE) equivalents are also provided.

Items Transferred to Fill Lexical Gaps

One aspect of transference is where the writer is dealing with words that have no direct lexical equivalents in English. Such words are therefore used as loan words in English. A mother tongue word counts as a loan word in NE, provided, according to Jowitt (1991: 133) it satisfies the following conditions:

- i (a) It has no exact English equivalent, or

- (b) It is used in preference for the English equivalent if such equivalent exists.
 ii It occurs regularly and systematically in the English speech of Nigerian users.

Based on Jowitt's criteria, examples (a) to (m) may have been transferred not only to fill lexical gap but also to capture the Igbo worldview.

- (a) 'Then the *umuada*, direct female descendants of Ojemba, sent word that they would come and open the new house' (*TOS*, p. 19).
 (b) '... he will build up the homestead and keep the *ama* – the approach to the homestead – open and broad ...' (*TOS*, p. 63).
 (c) '... the two-gallon pots of special palmwine, tapped from the oil palm and usually described as *up wine* to differentiate it from the cheaper and more watery wine tapped from the raffia palm' (*TFS*, p. 52).
 (d) 'It took him two *market weeks* to recover completely' (*Danda*, p. 109).
 (e) 'Curiosity got the better of me and I followed gingerly and stood there by her little door as she took her pestle *odo handle* and cracked to pieces those extensive tusk ornaments' (*HAW*, p. 8).
 (f) 'Finally came the mouth-watering aroma of overnight *ogbono soup* as it warmed over the fire' (*Estrangement*, p. 23).
 (g) '... that was after she had nearly bitten off the finger of a school mate during a scuffle over one *udala fruit*' (*TPW*, p. 76).
 (h) 'He will be here on next *afo day*' (*TOS*, p. 135).
 (i) 'She would go to Umudiobia market on coming *oye day* – in three days' time; and she would take a heavy basket' (*TOS*, p. 102).
 (j) 'I think, though, Okaka is *a few moons* younger' (*TOS*, p. 45).
 (k) 'The five of them were doing very well ... would probably produce within *four moons or five*' (*TOS*, p. 79).
 (l) 'His *father's brother* who is a member took him ...' (*TOS*, p. 40).
 (m) 'Fetch one or two more pots for your *son's wife*' (*TOS*, p. 15).

Although the full meaning of the transferred items may not be easily understood by the Western reader, the contexts in which they are used may give some insight into their meanings. For example, the understanding of *umuada* in (a) and *ama* in (b) above is aided by the occurrence in apposition of their real meanings – *direct female descendents* and *the approach to the homestead*, respectively. While examples (c) and (d) are self-explanatory, the interpretation of (e) to (i) is facilitated by the collocation of the English items, which modify the Igbo words. Although examples (j) to (m) are instances of transference where some Igbo words have equivalents in English, their equivalents may not accommodate all the social and semantic nuances of the Igbo language items, which the author, aims to project.

Literal Transfer

In some of the novels discussed in this work, some collocational patterns have been transferred into English through a process which may be regarded as literal transfer. We see in these collocations, compounds or phrases that follow the process of analogy of Igbo language patterns. This form of transfer may create meaning difficulties. We have examples of literal transfer from *TOS* and *Danda*, especially with the use of Igbo number system.

- (n) I.E.: 'She counted them in units of five *heads*, one head being six shells. They totalled up to *fifty heads and five*' (*TOS*, p. 15).

IGBO: Ọ gụrụ ha n'isi ise isi ise. Otu isi bụ ayarị isii. Ha niile gbara nari atọ na iri atọ.

E.E.: She counted them in units of *fives* and they totalled *three hundred and thirty in all*.

- (o) I.E.: ‘She announced: *Twenty heads and ten* in five places. *Twenty heads and ten* in five places is what we give to you’ (TOS, p. 26).
 IGBO: O kwuru na ihe ha nwere bu *ogụ ise na iri n’uzo* ise.
 E.E.: She announced that they had *nine hundred* in all.
- (p) I.E.: ‘Far and wide, even in parts of Umudiobia of *ten villages and two ...*’ (TOS, p. 28).
 IGBO: Ma ya burugodu n’umu *mba iri na abuo* nke Umudiobia ...
 E.E.: Far and wide, and even in parts of the *twelve villages* of Umudiobia ...
- (q) I.E.: ‘That would give us *twenty pounds and five. Twenty and five*’ (Danda, p. 125).
 IGBO: Nke ahụ ga-enye anyi *ohu ego na ise. Ohu na ise.*
 E.E.: That would amount to *twenty five pounds. Twenty five.*

A careful examination of the above formations shows strong traits of interference both in the use of units as quantifiers and the grammatical structure of the units. Here, units of measurement are not just forms like one, two, three, four, etc., but in *heads* and *places*. In the examples above, there is a constant combination of the usual figures such as twenty, five, ten, and two, with Igbo units of *heads*. Though the Igbo number system has undergone some modifications in recent times, the examples reflect the traditional system of counting at the time covered by these novels.

Secondly, these units were modelled after the grammatical pattern of the Igbo counting system and not after the grammatical pattern of English, even though English figures are used. In Igbo counting system, the use of the conjunction *na* meaning *and* or *plus* is very vital when counting figures above ten. For instance, the figure *eleven* is *iri na ato* (literally meaning *ten plus one* or *ten and one*); *twenty five* is *iri abuo na ise* (*twenty plus five* or *twenty and five*), etc.

The interference pattern in examples (n) to (q) is regular. This counting pattern can only be meaningful when used in the context of the Igbo worldview. As at the time these novels were written, the Igbo number system was very limited, and to be able to express the unlimited English numeration, there have to be groups of numbers counted and kept differently with a view to recounting them in units, as we have seen in those examples.

Transferred Items With Contextual Units Which Are Absent in the Western Culture

Although the examples in this section illustrate some aspects of literal transfer, the process, which operates here, is that of transliteration. Transliteration rules, according to Catford (1965: 66) specify transliteration equivalents in two ways. First, in not necessarily being relatable to the same graphetic substance as the SL letters; second, in being (in good transliteration) in one-to-one correspondence with SL letters or other units. Transliteration may be regarded as a form of translation which is almost word-for-word.

In I.E. novels, transliteration is prominent mainly when the authors use expressions that may be termed ‘Igboisms’. ‘Igboisms’ are usages that reflect traditional Igbo life and cultural habits. These expressions are easily understood in Igbo but are lacking in English or Western contexts. Some examples are:

- (r) I.E.: ‘You have *unfortunate legs*’ (Danda, p. 37).
 IGBO: I nwere *ukwu ojo*.
 E.E.: Sorry, I have just finished eating.
- (s) I.E.: ‘Call them to feast and they would start very early to *watch the sun*, every now and then saying to their wives: is it time?’ (Danda, p. 143).
 IGBO: Kpoo ha n’orori, ha ga-ebido n’utu *na-achọ anyanwu* ma na-aju ndi nwunye ha ma oge o ruola.
 E.E.: Once it involves feasting, they would be very conscious of time.

- (t) I.E.: 'He flutes *from the cry of the cock to the time the chicken return to roost*' (Danda, p. 26).
 IGBO: O na-egbugide oja site n'oge okukọ kwara akwa rukwee mgbe ha labara na mpie ha.
 E.E.: He flutes from morning till night.
- (u) I.E.: 'We shall leave very early in the morning *before the chickens come out from the pen*' (TOS, p. 1).
 IGBO: Anyi ga-apu n'uzo ututu – tupu umu okukọ esi na mpie puta.
 E.E.: We shall leave very early.
- (v) I.E.: '*The shadow was almost at her feet* when Chiaku reached the entrance door of her house' (TOS, p.1)
 IGBO: Enyo anwu no n'ukwu ya mgbe Chiaku ruru n'ihu uzo ya.
 E.E.: It was almost noon when Chiaku got to the entrance door of her house.
- (w) I.E.: 'He didn't *speak with two mouths*. When he said yes, it was yes' (Danda, p. 114).
 IGBO: O naghị ekwu onu abuo. Ee ya bu ee.
 E.E.: He is quite reliable.
- (x) I.E.: 'Yours is a *bad tongue*, Mother' (BW, p. 98).
 IGBO: Nne m, i nwere onu ojoo.
 E.E.: Mother, you are very abusive.
- (y) I.E.: 'What I have come to tell you is that you must *wash your eyes in water*' (TFS, p. 43).
 IGBO: Ihe m bjara igwa gi bu na i ga-asa anya gi na mmiri.
 E.E. I have come to inform you that you must be very careful.

In (r) above, *unfortunate legs* or *ukwu ojoo* in Igbo is used when a visitor has arrived just at a time the host was finishing his/her food. This context is absent in the English culture. Examples (s) to (v) reflect Igbo concept of time. The Igbo concept of time is different from the Western concept of time. In Western societies, time is determined through the use of watches and clocks so that they can talk in seconds, minutes, and hours. They also use temporal adverbs to determine period of time such as days, weeks, months and years. In the Igbo traditional society, time is determined by monitoring the crow and movements of cocks. Morning begins with the crow of cocks. There are three stages of this – the first crow, the second crow, and the third crow. The movement of the fowls out or back to the roost marks a particular stage of time. This concept of time is reflected in (t) and (u). The Igboisms in (w) to (y) mirror traditional Igbo idiomatic expressions.

Conclusion

This paper establishes Igbo English in Nigerian novels through the use of language. Although the Igbo writer writes in English, his environment and sources of creativity are entirely Igbo. Igbo speech habits have been transported into English through the linguistic processes of transfer and translation. Through their flexible use of English, Igbo writers have been able to establish IE in style, language and culture. This deliberate stylistic device (which is a reflection of the linguistic resources appropriate to the Igbo cultural and sociolinguistic situation) enables the writer to express and translate his local experiences into English. It has to be noted that it is, in fact, only through the use of appropriate varieties of English in the treatment of local situations that Nigerian literature can command some respect and attract serious attention, globally. The semantic problems of readership, which may be experienced by non-Igbo readers follow the difficulties of 'cross-cultural understanding' (Wolf 2001) among speakers of different varieties of English which arise when cultural differences are neglected in the interpretation of works that reflect cultural contexts (see Igboanusi 2002).

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