

Chapter Seven

LANGUAGE, LITERATURE AND THE DEVELOPMENT OF OUR COMMON HUMANITY

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Introduction

Africa is experiencing a wave of enlightenment, the kind that the western world started experiencing since the 18th century. The provisions of computer and international communication network bring to the door-step of whoever cares the latest discoveries in science and technology as well as the latest procedures in politics and religion.

The age of great discoveries made popular by the Newtonian Mathematical Principles of Natural Philosophy is important in literature because of the revelation that the universe is not after all, “a mystery moving at the whim of an inscrutable God but a mechanism operating by a rational formula that can be understood by any rational man or woman. Men of this age sought order and found it in science but in spite of the attractions of science, life remains poisoned at the fount. We may be joyful on the outside but we are always aware of an inward groaning that produces tension. Nobody goes through the activities of the day indifferent to the pains of hunger and starvation, ravages of war and accident, the threats of armed robbery and kidnapping, the danger of assassination and VIP food poisoning and of course, the uncertainties of monthly wages. In all, ours is an age of mixed emotions. The political utopia of health for all by the year 2000, education for all by the year 2000 and food for all by the year 2000 is over. And the perfect socio-political system where all live in peace and joy is a forlorn hope.

The image of the enslaver remains a strong concept in African literature and artists explore the image to project the notion of unequal partnership between the “horse and the rider”. The writer has the responsibility to search out the subject matter within the experiences of society and these experiences usually derive from the socio-political and spiritual lives of the people that make up society. In most cases, therefore, the writer’s creative imagination and energy are directed towards the analysis of the socio-political contradictions of the time.

Communication between the older and younger generations of Nigerians has also entered a crisis as in Chimamanda Adichie’s “Purple Hibiscus”. The elders no longer understand the youths and the youths can no longer tolerate the inconsistencies of unfulfilled promises. Also important in the growth of African literature is the history of conflicting images of the same

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nation. As in George Orwell's "Animal Farm", all animals are born equal but some are more equal than the others. In a super-state, people are born free but their language and activities are kept under surveillance. When national days of freedom and independence are celebrated, such celebrations only remind the poor masses of the injustice and cruelty to which they are victims. For the poor masses, what we experience is just like what Akwanya (2001:151) describes as *The Career of Rough Beasts*.

There is no doubt, however, that some people like Odili in Achebe's "A Man of the People" are working hard to bring about positive changes in the machinery of governance. Certainly, there are many "intellectual politicians" like Odili who would want the political situation of their nation to conform to the rigid demands of absolute moral values. Many have, therefore, entered the field of politics with the aim of making themselves what is popularly referred to as "a show case of public morality". But in most cases, both the demands of the public whose interests these messiahs want to protect and the crushing weight of opposition from entrenched giants, force these messiahs to modify their principles of political morality.

The question of individuals and their lives including their confrontation of the socio-political problems have engaged literary artists for a long time. That is probably why African literature has never been totally divorced from the masses that make up society. Literary voices are being heard with new levels of commitment and sophistication. At the centre of society and the changing systems, therefore, is the artist who strives to capture and account for the socio-political and cultural events and changes and how they affect the lives of people. In doing this, these artists exploit the linguistic resources at their disposal. Since language is that special mechanism for information storage and conveyance (Onuigbo, 2005), this language is always manipulated to suit the creative needs of the artist.

Language in Literature

When Harold Whitehall (1957: 713) made a sweeping statement to the effect that "as no science can go beyond its mathematics no criticism can go beyond its linguistics", he was apparently making a claim which, at the time, was as audacious as it was extravagant. But, about twenty years later, Roger Fowler (1971:11) still insists that some knowledge of how language works provides some indispensable information for the student of literature, because linguistics is a theory of how language works, how it is acquired, how it communicates meaning and what kind of structure it employs. Literary criticism will certainly improve with the knowledge of language, especially as criticism is ordinarily an account of the use of language in a text. Otherwise, how can one, for instance make metric assertions in appreciation of a piece of poetry without adequate knowledge of the phonology of the language in which the verse is written. Since the concept of stress is a linguistic primitive which is central to the metrical analysis, any student of poetry who neglects that may after all, "be building a fancy castle with insubstantial foundation" (Fowler 1971: 13)

Although the concept and technique of linguistic description may be strange and complicated, it is an exceedingly satisfying subject with obvious intellectual and social relevance. That is probably why Leech (1981:150) believes strongly that everyday language is the starting point for the consideration of the way language is used to convey the mock reality of fiction. It appears, therefore, that no critic can adequately appreciate the beauty of literature outside language.

The discussion of literary creativity of an age is better conducted within the framework of her literary history, and the history of literary creativity cannot be properly discussed outside the development of literature. This assertion is based on the fact that literary history is not a mere chronology of literary works, but a representation of the dynamic processes sustained by the interaction of creativity and a responsive audience (Izevbye, 1995:309). Unfortunately, such a history was stained with impulsive stings, resulting from the gulf between the literary critics and linguists who were then applying the resources of language in assessment and appreciation of literature. What was actually disturbing was the extremity of emotions that characterized apparently polar ends at the time. Or how else could one describe Vendler's (1966:51) aggressive and hostile reaction to Sinclair's "Taking a Poem to Pieces"? Even when Professor Sinclair hinted that what he did in the essay was to show how some aspects of the meaning of the poem could be described quite independently of evaluation. Vendler could not accommodate "the unreasonable and barbaric collection of symbols and words" which characterized the triviality and tediousness of the jargons of Sinclair's linguistic description. Other instances of such negative reactions abound, but what actually drew the attention of the intellectual world was the crisis precipitated in the world's first Department of English in the University of Cambridge with the forced retrenchment of the only don with structuralist inclination as masterminded by the literary critical conservatives (Newsweek, Feb. 16, 1981, pp. 45-46). It appeared to Hough (1969:9) then that literary criticism and linguistics would never be a united field, but to many scholars, it was still agreed that just as no linguist can pretend for so long to be deaf to the poetic function of language, no literary critic can conveniently be indifferent to the linguistic methods of literary appreciation. To be critics, therefore, "we must be competent linguists and then become less of linguists". Surprisingly, however, Bateson (1971:58) feels, in the same spirit of aggression as Vendler, that one does not need to be such an ambidextrous genius to be able to comprehend and respond to literature. For him, language is not a necessary concomitant to the study of literature, especially to the native speaker to whom this additional knowledge of linguistics is merely supplementary. This, in fact, is the catchy point that underlies this essay: that unlike what happens in the native speaker's environment, nowhere is a mutual alliance between linguistics and literature more necessary than in the study of literature in a second language situation, especially as indigenous socio-cultural stimuli have to be accounted for in a foreign linguistic response. No matter who we are and how we feel, literary style includes, (and

Bateson 1971:57) consents to it the whole armory of rhetorical devices, phonetics and semantics with their larger structural extensions.

ENGLISH IN NIGERIAN LITERATURE

As a passive participant in a battle outside one's territory, one enjoyed thoroughly the awareness which the "literature of disaffection" between the literary and linguistic critics of English literature of the time provoked (Fowler 1971). In spite of the arrogance of the linguist, holding tenaciously to this unalienable medium of transmission, and in spite of the stubborn stance of the literary critic, with a heart emotionally impervious to the irresistible power of language, the whole struggle, to Oladeji (1981:2), was apparently a self-protective rear-guard action which the literary critic held against "the precocious child with imperialist ambitions". But as the reciprocal lack of respect began to give way to mutual recognition of the affinity between two unalienable disciplines, the arrogance, of the linguist was killed, and the unwillingness of the literary critic to consider the relevance of linguistics was strangled.

For the African writers, therefore, there is no dispute about the validity of linguistics in literary analysis. After all, literature is created from the basic material of linguistics and is allied to it in a way that music and painting are not (Chapman 1973:4). But for these same African writers, there was a dispute of a more fundamental nature: the justification for the use of the English language to carry the weight of literary creation of socio-cultural experiences that are entirely African.

Meanwhile, the frontiers of the English language continue to expand, as more and more people adopt it for peculiar communicative functions and varieties of the language continue to appear to suit the purpose of adoption.

As the resentment against the use of European languages as the media for African written literature was mounting, a more explosive protest over the continued colonial exploitation of the African continent was provoking great literary response. However, the attack on English as a language of African literary creation produced arguments different from the reactions of disillusionment over the colonial influence in Africa. Ordinarily, the protest against colonial exploitation was expected to promote the resentment against the use of English as a medium of literary expression in Africa, but the merger of these two developments produced an interesting result. Although the resentment against English in articulating peculiar African experience was strong, the urge to give vent to this experience through the medium of English was stronger, especially as the experience was to produce nationalist literature. The literary phase in Nigeria for instance captured the mood and tone for nationalist movement for independence, which transcend regional interests. Whether poetry, drama or fiction, the literature carried with it, protest against imperialist adventures. And when Achebe, in one of

the earliest works said that “they put a knife on the things that held us together, and we have fallen apart”, he caught the pulse of the time. For the emerging literature to be appreciated in a multi-ethnic and multi-lingual Nigeria, the medium of expression must be generally accessible. If literary experience has been carried through a local medium, the readership would have been drastically limited. The emergence of the national literature, therefore, grew with the English language as the only compromise language of expression, even when the same language was the language of colonization. Apart from the unifying force within the local front, the language enjoyed accumulated historical and geographical experience and power which drew from the worldwide connection with the imperial past. This language has produced and sustained a literary culture within and outside the native home and the expression of the “nationalist emotions” would have a wider readership and apparently popular appreciation.

With all the resentment, the English language is an important heritage from the West. We can jettison the cultural heritage and we can even jettison the political heritage, but the linguistic heritage is to remain with us for a very long time. But, we retain this gift on the condition that it be used according to our own circumstances and according to our own genius, since the language is in fact “a universal tongue that can no longer be a strict nationality or polity identification symbol (Ajulo, 1982:3). For anybody who accepts this position, the lexical choice and function must be such that will also appreciate the socio-cultural hiatus between the native speakers of the language and those in a second language situation. But for those scholars who were vehemently opposed to the English medium of literary expression, the position was, according to Walis (1963: 14), that:

The whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable media of African writing is misdirected and has no chances of advancing African literature culture. In other words, until these writers and their western midwives must be written in African languages, they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncertainty and frustration.

By implication, therefore, the best thing that can happen to African literature can only happen when, according to Ngugi (1986:85)

The African writer will naturally turn to African languages for his creative imagination, the African novel will truly come into its own, incorporation into itself all the features developed in different parts of Africa.

How I wish the walis were alive at the dawn of a new millennium to see, like Ngugi Wa Thingo’o has seen, that even with the development of departments in linguistics and Nigeria languages in many Nigerian universities, African literature has not received the kind of boost

imagined to come only from the use of Nigerian languages in creative writing. If anything, Ngugi continues to write, Achebe continues to write and many more, uncountable in number, have joined them, to express the Africanness of their literary creation in English.

That is why I re-affirm that one fundamental factor which influences society and all that live in it is growth. Education was an aspect of Nigeria development that witnessed a rapid growth. The establishment of the Department of English at the University of Ibadan was to effect literary creativity in Nigeria. And as Dan Izevbaye (1995:314) affirms, “the effect of this educational development was to re-direct new creative energies towards the imaginative experience revealed by the study of English literary history”. In fact, this movement produced an academic traditional of artistically gifted scholars who could synthesize both the material and the linguistic medium of expression to produce a literary genius that is uniquely fascinating in language and catchy in content and theme. So, when Achebe came out in 1958 with *Things Fall Apart*, he broke bounds with a literary feat that aroused the interest of the literary world to expect greater things to come and they came with *No Longer at Ease* (1960) and *Arrow of God* (1964). Surprisingly, Ekwensi appeared in the literary scene, a strange but welcome bedfellow, who was to fit into a popular slot to complement a movement that was to witness great followership. This movement had a sensitive saying that “when the colonial grass was burning, things fell apart and people were no longer at ease”. And for the nationalist movement of the time, the saying sharply explained the feeling of the people.

Today, African literature in English has more works than anyone can imagine, covering every aspect of the people’s life. Today, everybody scorns to agree with Emenyonu (1995:238) that English language was merely a victim of misplaced aggression. And both the writers and readers “recognize that the language could be made to blend with the ultimate”

It will perhaps serve an important purpose to appreciate the vitality of the English language in the first novel of the African Writers Series, and how Achebe in this novel, “achieves an extraordinary novelty of expression and yet all of them blossoming on the native root”. We must agree that this kind of achievement comes from the dexterity of a gifted artist. From the title, one sees a tensed up situation even before the events begin to unfold. A few years before Nigerian independence, when *Things Fall Apart* was written, things had actually started falling apart because the centre of African life and culture could no longer hold. With a very short clause (SVA) for the title, an emotionally tensed stage is set. And as the novel opens with a linguistic picture that spoke stronger words than the action, the idea was clear of a socio-cultural centre that was intact, as long as the cultural bonds were in place. The pattern repetition builds up to bursting emotions in the spectators, and breaking muscles in the competitors. Using linguistically parallel structures, Achebe creates centripetal forces that culminate in a unified cultural centre, as he presents the wrestling context between Okonkwo and Amalinze the cat (p.3)

Every nerve		on their arms
And	stood out	on their backs
Every muscle		on their thighs

The tempo of the action builds up with a selection of lexical items that do not only belong to the same grammatical category, but also occur in the same paradigm. This is further intensified with syntactic equivalents in repeated structural patterns as presented in the boxes above.

Towards the close of events in the novel, Achebe uses the same language to provoke a reaction against those forces that tended to put a knife on the things that held Umuofia together. So, after the imprisonment of Okonkwo and five other elders of Umuofia, the town crier calls the people to an assembly that was to affect the history of Umuofia forever. Obika speaks with the eloquence of an orator determined to force a reaction (p.182) and the subsequent events are clear to the readers.

NEW ENGLISHES: NEW DEVELOPMENTS

The 50th anniversary of the British Council in Nigeria was marked with an international conference whose intrinsic value lies on the country copious studies ... and the identical format of analysis comparisons. Years after the conference, the frontiers of English Language have continued to expand and new incentives are, therefore, provoked in the discussion of New Englishes.

New Englishes creates an expression of recent linguistic developments of expressive mode that turns English into what Soyinka (1993:88) describes as a new medium of expression in a new organic series of more, social goals and relationships ... all of which create a new culture. And the result is the conversion of the enslaving medium into an insurgent weapon. What is implied is that there is the West African English which is meaningful in terms of the attitudes and identities within the sociolinguistic and literary contexts that are uniquely African but recognizable within the emerging world of Englishes. There is therefore, an African canon in both linguistic and literary terms and this provides the African voice in English. There is the experiment with English to dramatize the interaction between the environment and man in a changing world. This experiment produces different varieties of the language with some strange and divergent forms and functions.

COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

It is commonly said, and we have also seen, that life is in a fast lane and the computer captures all that the world is saying and doing in different areas of life. The world witnessed

different phases and changes in the course of human development. The agrarian world of the past prospered with slave labour which Europe exploited to under-develop the world and Africa in particular. This was a dark period that saw man's inhumanity to man. Then came the age of Industrial Revolution that placed minimal value on human labour. The world heaved a sigh of relief with the abolition of slave trade. This period was phenomenal in human enlightenment and development but the capacity of human intellect was apparently yet to be exploited. In a world where man is constantly on the move, more changes and innovations are yet to occur. And then came the age of information when man 'travels' from one part of the world to another with the speed of sound. Our knowledge of elementary Physics shows that sound travels at the speed of 332m/s (332 metres per second). That is why the information about what is happening in America can be received in Nigeria within a few seconds. In all these, the English language remains the veritable vehicle for information transfer and storage.

The recent developments in information technology with strong hold on the design, realization, evaluation, use and maintenance of information processing system have given rise to Health informatics and Bio-informatics with similar impacts in the area of Linguistics and Education informatics. The effect of the emerging trends is experienced in the fast growing knowledge economy where computers are used for collation, storage and presentation of information (Onuoha: 2006). To all these developments, language, especially the English language remains at the centre of knowledge economy for the necessary collation, transfer, storage and retrieval of information. What is really important is the individual's right to expression following one's unquestionable right to information. The new trends in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) are properly captured in Akabogu (2006, 2008) with important insight on the UNESCO mandate which focuses on maintenance of culture and linguistic diversity. It is in fact the freedom of expression and the linguistic diversity which result from it that prosper this discussion.

Britain may have been the original source of the English Language but Britain no more controls the waves of its expansion and linguistic diversity. We live in a world without boundaries where information and ideals flow for the creation of new portfolios of knowledge. As the world experiences great revolution in information communication technology, new forms of structure and usage emerge. As new portfolios of knowledge emerge, the medium of transmission develops high profile especially as the global audio-visual market expands. In other words, new technologies in informatics place greater demands on the use of English and transformations in the structure of the language. Certainly, as we place new demands on general Minimum Intelligibility and Acceptability, students and sometimes teachers who are exposed to these national varieties bring the features of the varieties to bear on their linguistic interaction. There is, however, an interesting development which has continued to affect the literary world. That is the use of English to carry the socio-

cultural values that are entirely African. The resentment against the use of English as the medium of transmission, of African literature is profound. But our experience of the African literary terrain shows that many writers of African literature in English have achieved extraordinary novelty of expression in a way that brings out their messages best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of interactional exchange may be lost (Emenyonu: 1995:331). Achebe and Soyinka stand tall among the African writers who dignified the English language to a level where it can be conveniently manipulated to give the world an African ingredient in the art of storytelling and drama. In spite of this uncommon feat of modeling the European language to tell the story of African world, African literary artists sometimes employ literary devices that insult the sensibility of the western readers. The usual transliteration and code-mixing that punctuate the African literary language provides a model that does not fall in line with the demands of formal usage. Yet many students simply bring the features of these literary varieties to bear on formal interactions. That is one of problems that affected the development of English in Africa.

It is clear that the various communities of English speakers are experiencing an important communication evolution in which the literary, the cybernetic and social demands on the language leave indelible imprints. From the perspectives of cybernetic age for instance, man exploits the provision of cyber-journalism to coin a special communicative medium in which the resources of English are exploited for e-mail and text shorthand. As the language continues to expand as one universal means of information storage and dissemination, different situations place peculiar demands on the form, structure and function of the language. No wonder English is a complex of many features. As the language expands to bear the fresh burdens and needs of local and international trade, communication, commerce and scholarship, it develops new expressive features to suit both the users and the use to which they put the language. And these new features do not always fall in line with core phonological, syntactic and semantic features of English.

Conclusion

The growth and development of man continue and the frontiers of the language of human expression continue to expand. The dynamics of the language allows for radical developments in form, functions and contents of the language. We are today in the cybernetic age but who knows where we will be tomorrow. Arts involve communication and sharing. The humanizing experience in arts shows that the artist needs language to protect his experience and people with whom he can share the experience and whom he conveys his perception of human reality.

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*From a pedagogic point of view,
Frantzen (1998) based the difficulty
false friends
may pose for students on two factors:
intrinsic and extrinsic factors.*