

The Use of Folkloric Craft in Indigenizing the English Language: A Study of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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ABSTRACT

After many decades of the emergence of *Things Fall Apart*, the novel continues to generate a lot of scholarly conversation both literary and linguistic wise. Basically, because of Achebe's craftsmanship skills which he deploys in creating the story of *Things Fall Apart*. The major appeal in this story, is how Achebe judiciously uses the English language to enact the folklore of the Igbo-Nigerian culture. Through this skill, Achebe creates a unique type of English that is domesticated and indigenized, with which he ferries his Igbo-Nigerian folk culture into the world stage. And because of the anthropological nature of the novel, the study is anchored on the Structural-Functionalism theory. The theory is anchored on the belief that social structures had to be drawn out of observations; and organizing principles that had to be identified. Consequently, it was discovered that Achebe's English is indigenized and domesticated. It is this indigenized English which Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart* that is investigated in this study. The study was able to reveal that Achebe used the following linguistic devices; glossing, reversal or transliteration, lexical words, compounding, discourse markers or rhetorical devices, interpretations of some Igbo-Nigerian expressions and nominals and prepositional linguistic tools.

Keywords: *Craft, Domestication, English-Language, Folklore, Indigenized, Things-Fall-Apart.*

Introduction

After over six decades of its publication, *Things Fall Apart* continues to generate scholarly interest among scholars, literary critics and would be readers of the novel, resulting in continuous scholarly works in journals, internet sites and books. This is because of the obvious fact that *Things Fall Apart* "was the catalyst that led to the opening of doors for African Literature ... all over the world. That novel made the literary world take serious notice for the

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first time, of the emerging voices of imaginative creativity from the continent of Africa (Emenyonu, xiii).”

The imaginative creativity that is asserted by Emenyonu above, has continued to make *Things Fall Apart* a trail blazer in the literary world. Simply, because the novel is filled with innovative creative style that is always alluring and enduring to both scholars and those who which to seek for its pleasurable reading. As important as the fact that *Things Fall Apart* is an anthropological novel, it is also a novel that tells the story of how the Europeans came into Africa, but specifically how they came to the Igbo-Nigerian society. Over the years, scholars have continued to carry out studies in both the content and form of the novel. In line with this, this study attempts to throw more light in the form of *Things Fall Apart*, paying particular emphasis on the peculiar nature of the language that is employed in the novel. In doing so, this study attempts to show the intricate relationship between literature and language. Since they both “demonstrate how language, and literature in particular, offer a way of reconciling the very otherness it constructs” (Luu, 243). This fact is further alluded to by Jeyifo, when he said:

... the Romantic theory of language and literature; with its emphasis on fiction as an unvarnished, unembellished approximation of reality, it could have come from the realist, with their deep investment in the belief that language and literature can be made to truthfully and providentially reflect the world in which we live ... (3).

The above statement by Jeyifo, strengthens the argument that literature and language have a paradigmatic relationship that will continue to attract the interest of both linguists and literary scholars.

Statement of the Problem

The literary art is one of the arts that has placed the attributes of creativity in any individual that is willing to create and recreate the world around him. This is because of the manipulative tool that any of the genres the arts offer, whether in prose, drama or poetry. Achebe himself, attests to this when he said:

It is in the very nature of creativity, in its prodigious complexity and richness, that it will accommodate paradoxes and ambiguities. But this, it seems, will always elude and pose a problem for the uncreative, literal mind (which I hasten to add is not the same as the literary mind, nor even the merely literate mind). The literal mind is the one-track mind, the simplistic mind, the mind that cannot comprehend that where one thing stands, another will stand beside it, the mind which (finally, and alas!) appears to dominate our current thinking ... (5).

In the above analogy, Achebe presents two major characters in the court of his readers; the literal mind, which is docile, unimaginative and uncreative, while the literary mind is creative, imaginative and skilled. It is these qualities of a literary mind that Achebe brings to bear in *Things Fall Apart*. In *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe brings to the notice of his readers the folklore, the unrecorded traditions of a people as they appear in their popular fiction, customs, beliefs, magic, ritual, superstition and proverbial sayings. Folklore also includes myths, legends, stories, omens, charms, spells found among homogenous group of people. The most inclusive part of folklore is the folktale, a popular tale handed down by oral tradition from a more or less remote antiquity and usually told either about animals or the common folk, to draw attention to their plight and to teach a lesson (Nnolim, 1).

To bring these themes to the domain of his readers, Achebe had to fashion a linguistic application that accurately expresses his African ideas and concepts. “Aside from being one of the first notable African Literary texts in English, Achebe *Things Fall Apart* also pioneered the domestication of the English language in Nigeria through his innovative and daring use of the language to express African ideas and concepts” (Ayoola, 194). The domestication of the English language in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* is the interest of this study. This study will attempt to unravel how Achebe has used the English language in *Things Fall Apart* to syncretize his message. According to Soyinka:

And when we borrow an alien language to script or print in, we must begin by co-opting the entire properties in our matrix of thought and expression. We must stress such a language-stretch it, impact and compact it, fragment and resemble it with no apology required to bear the burden of experiencing and of experiences, be such experiences formulated or not in the conceptual idioms of the language (26).

Objective

The objective of this study is to attempt to explore the language devices Achebe employs in *Things Fall Apart*. With emphasis on how Achebe’s linguistic devices help our understanding of the story.

Outline of *Things Fall Apart*

Things Fall Apart is the story of the life and times of the hero, Okonkwo. He is challenged by his father’s reputation, (Unoka), the grown up, was a failure. He was poor and his wife and children had barely enough to eat (4). Any wonder then that his son Okonkwo was ashamed of him (7)? These excerpts explain why Okonkwo never wanted to be like his father, Unoka. Yet,

in a culture where men are measured by their attainments, and the standards of manliness, and the other cultural practices of his clan (Umuofia), all reflect the struggles and eventual destruction of his clan and himself, (Okonkwo). *Things Fall Apart* author, Chinua Achebe, provides a broad view of the Igbo culture through the lens of the hero, Okonkwo, in the novel.

Literature Review

Achebe's Linguistic Style

Since the inception of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, Achebe's use of English in the novel and other of his works has continued to generate different talk. This is simply because of Achebe's literary style, that is usually woven around his Igbo traditional folklore. Achebe is a conscious craft man, because he uniquely crafts his language to suit his folkloric device. "What gives each of Achebe's novels an air of historical authenticity is his use of the English language. He has developed not one prose style but several, and in each novel, he is careful to select the style or styles that will best suit his subject ... Achebe has devised an African vernacular style which simulates the idiom of Ibo, his native tongue" (Lindfors, 3-4). Achebe's linguistic style is quite teasing, with a lot of literary intensity that makes his style a continuous spark for both literary and linguistic investigations. Achebe himself attest to this when he argued that:

The African writer should aim to use English 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 an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience (Achebe,61).

Achebe succinctly captures his linguistic style in the above statement, by referring to his linguistic method as that which shapes his peculiar experience. An 'Igboti' experience that is reflected in an indigenized English.

Literature and Culture

What Achebe has done in *Things Fall Apart* is to use his linguistic style; his indigenized English to ferry his Igbo-Nigerian culture into the domain of the world. Through this technique, Achebe seamlessly reports the norms, values, ethos, beliefs and traditions of the Igbo-Nigerian culture. "*Things Fall Apart* was not written in the English of the native speaker. It also contains quite a number of Igbo words and expressions" (Anyadike and Ayoola, xv). Achebe sums up this fact when he said:

Literature, whether handed down by word of mouth or in print, gives us a second handle on reality; enabling us to encounter in the safe manageable dimensions of make-believe the very same threats of integrity that may assail the psyche in real life, and at the same time providing through the self-discovery which it imports, a veritable weapon for coping with these threats whether they are within our problematic and incoherent selves or in the world around us (9). Within the context of Achebe's literary skills, as shown in *Things Fall Apart*, we encounter a creative artist who perfectly manipulates his use of the English language to depict his Igbo cultural milieu.

Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Structural-Functionalism. The theory focuses on comparisons between societies rather than the empirical description of a total system that was the object of enquiry in functionalism. Although structures were abstracted from social relations and behavioural data, there is little room analytically for the individual or for any discussion of how culture or society affected individual behaviour. The analysis was more firmly settled at the level of group. It is true that structural-functionalists were interested in beliefs and values, but primarily in terms of how they functioned as social systems (the elements of which were systematically interested) and the degree to which they could be linked to social relations. It is the idea of the logic behind the system, the underlying structures from which systems are generated, and the rules of transformation which govern how elements will change in relation to each other that links structural-functionalism to structuralism proper in anthropology. Thus, Levi-Strauss' notion of structure had both continuities and discontinuities with the older concept, and these are in large part due to the influence of Durkheim and Boas on his work (Levi-Strauss, 13). If the relationship between norms and actions, between social structures and social relations had been at the heart of structural-functionalism, the idea of structural analysis that Levi-Strauss introduced was concerned with modes of thought, classification, and symbolic logic. It drew on particular aspects of Durkheim's work, especially on the idea that social facts determine individuals' behaviours and the collective consciousness, and on the axiomatic principle that social facts must be treated as systems where the meaning and purpose of individual elements can only be understood with reference to the total set of relevant social facts. Durkheim used his interest in classification to put forward the view that societies should be studied as moral systems, as systems of thought.

Methodology

The methodology that is used in this study is purposive sampling technique. This technique uses a non-probability sampling technique, where the researcher hand picks data for his/her research. Researchers use this method because, the data that are needed for the research have characteristics that a researcher needs in a given sample. In other words, units are selected “on purpose” in purposive sampling. This technique is also called judgmental sampling by researchers because, its sampling method relies on the researcher’s opinion when identifying and selecting the individuals’ events or cases that can provide the best information that could assists the set objective of a researcher.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The Use of Glossing Style

Through this style Achebe adds English comments by the sides of Igbo words to explain their meanings to his readers. The pages where this style is applicable is indicated by the sides of the words:

agadi-nwayi ----- old woman (10), the elders ----- ndichie (10), agbala ----- woman (11), agbala ----- a man who had taken no title (11), hut ----- obi (11-12), chi ----- personal god (14), a corn-cob with only a few scattered grains ----- eze—agadi—nwayi or the teeth of an old woman (28), ilo ---- playground (34), agbala ----- the oracle of the hills and the caves (39), jigida ----- waist-beads (56), ogbanje ----- wicked children who, when they died, entered their mothers’ wombs to be born again (62), kinsmen ---- Umunna (88), efulefu ---- worthless, empty men (115), the white man’s horse ---- meant bicycle (116), outcast ---- osu (125). This device according to Luu (252), for the foreign reader, to treat the second term as a substitute for the first is to replace, for the foreign reader, an English sign with an Igbo pure signifier absents of any signified; it is to replace a signifying word with a signifying absence—both in the sense of an absence of signification and in the sense of an absence that signifies. By this reversal, Achebe suggests that glossing is not the conjunction of “two equivalent notions” that “inscribe a common field of vision”, but the juxtaposition of a sign from one language and a pure signifier from another that foregrounds their differences.

Reversal Strategies or Achebe’s Use of Transliteration

This style enables Achebe to invoke local referents, local colours and experiences that are connected to his world view. According to Luu (229), this technique or style is “like similes

that invoke local referents and experiences.” For examples, “a toad does not run in the day time for nothing” (15) rather than “there is no smoke without a fire.” “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch also” (14) rather than “live and let live.” According to Bandi (144), this device helps the integration of Igbo linguistic structures and forms within the English text, serves the pragmalinguistic function of “identity”: it affirms solidarity, kinship, and affiliation between members of the same group while also “establishing the authority of the minority language and the power of the linguistic group.”

Lexical Words Depicting Nigerian Geographical and Cultural Context

With this technique Achebe uses words that are relevant to the Igbo-Nigerian cultural context. Ancestors (4), barn (4), break (5), clan (64), cowries (4), earth (3), elders (6), harmattan (3), market (4), medicine (8), moon (4) salute (143)

There is a sense in which lexical items such as ‘ancestors’, ‘earth’, ‘medicine’, and ‘cowries’ are perceived in the rural African setting of *Things Fall Apart*. In addition to the regular meanings of the items, all four examples mentioned above have embedded meanings (+supernatural attributes), which often have sobering effects on members of the community and others who share identical cultural values. The ‘autumn’ season in British English has the same referent as ‘fall’ in American English. The nearest equivalent to these two words in Nigeria is ‘harmattan’. In parts of southern Nigeria, weeks are marked by ‘market days’; five-day weeks are common than seven-day weeks which coincides with the Western notion. In addition to referring to a time and place where buying and selling takes place ‘market-day’ is a significant day on the local calendar and it serves as a book mark for important dates in individual, family and communities diaries. The ‘earth’ is often venerated and personified in *Things Fall Apart*; hence the remains of a dead person are buried in ‘her bowels’. The word has religious and supernatural connotations, the understanding of which enhances the reader’s interpretation of the novel. In *Things Fall Apart*, people do not ‘greet’ at formal gathering, they ‘salute’. Although this usage is appropriate, it sounds archaic or out of fashion in British and American English, for instance, the above description illustrates the evidence of semantic broadening and diminution in Chinua Achebe’s choice of cultural bound words in the novel.

Compounding

This is another device that Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart*. Compounding is a process of word formation that involves combining two or more separate word forms into a single compound form. Compounds are generally viewed as words made up of two or more bases that

originally occur as independent lexical items. The following are some examples in *Things Fall Apart*:

ancestral spirits (63), bride price (50), bright-red earth (43), cooking fire (24), earthenware-pots (43), evil forest (105), fireplace (4), goat-skin (4), market-day (79), medicine house (10), medicine-men mud-bed (4), share-cropping (16), snuff-bottle (67), sun-dried earth (78), womanish wisdom (142).

Most of the compound words cited above are culture bound lexical items that have special or extended meanings in the Igbo Nigerian situational context in which they are used. The reader encountering these words for the first time can often decipher their meanings and flow smoothly with the words of the novel. Notwithstanding, most of the words have extra nuances of meaning that may be lost on the uninitiated reader. For instance, 'bright-red earth' refers to a type of clay used for beautifying the floor like paint; 'palm-oil' serves the multipurpose of cooking, fuel for lamps, medication and measure of wealth; 'proper burial' accompanies the death of a beloved one; while 'womanish wisdom' smirks of male chauvinism.

Achebe's decides to use 'bride-price' instead of 'dowry' because the former more accurately describes the symbolic negation that takes place when bride is given to the family of the bridegroom in the Igbo culture. Besides, while 'bride price' is received by the family of the bride in the Igbo culture, 'dowry' is received by the family of the groom in some Asian and Western cultures. Likewise, in addition to the interpretation given to 'medicine' earlier, 'medicine' often refers to 'charm', which may be protective or harmful and it is not always a drug that could be disposed in the form of pills and syrup like western medicine. In addition to the assumed [+ healing] which 'medicine man', 'medicine house', or 'war medicine' denote the compound words often connote [+ or – poison], [+ or – malevolence], [+ or – protection], [+ or – (worldly) success] and [+ or – visibility], among others, in the world of *Things Fall Apart*.

This style which Achebe employs above is derived mainly from the Igbo language, a language that Achebe share with Umuofia, Achebe's fictional community of *Things Fall Apart*. Many of these expressions used have straight-forward situational interpretation, while others have religious or spiritual interpretations. For instance, 'three wives' points to a man's good social standing; 'three horns' is synonymous with three cups. On the other hand, 'kindred meeting', 'personal god', and 'ancestral feast' have religious or spiritual connotations in the novel's Igbo community

Discourse Markers or Rhetorical Devices

This is another device that Achebe craftly employs in the novel. They are quite unique because they are not the same with what a western novelist like Daniel Defoe's characters will deploy in Robinson Crusoe or Henry Fielding in Joseph Andrews will use in their dialogues Such expressions are uniquely Igbo Nigerian expressions:

Our elders say (8), As the Ibo say (10), As the saying goes (21), As our fathers said (22).

These expressions show the adaptability of English and the extent to which it can succumb to domestication and indigenization in a completely new situational and cultural context.

Possible Interpretation of Some Igbo Nigerian Expressions

	Expressions	Possible Interpretations
1.	...they have not found the mouth which to tell their suffering (125)	(hyperbole) the suffering is beyond description
2.	... who spoke his tongue (26)	speak the same language
3.	Committed to earth (26)	bury a person's remains
4.	For three moons the sun has been gathering strength (91)	It has been very sunny and dry for three months
5.	He did not inherit a barn from his father (12)	He came from a poor background
6.	He is full of sorrow (94)	He is very sad
7.	His throat began to itch at the very thought (68)	(humour) he began to salivate
8.	Know where one's mouth was in the darkness of that night (67)	(humour) it was very dark
9.	... that Ndulue and Ozoemena had one mind (54)	They had soul tie
10.	... they came from a village that is known for being close-fisted (93)	They came from a village that is stingy
11.	The moons and the seasons passed (38)	After many years
12.	Your words are good (64)	You sound reasonable
13.	She was very heavy with child (121)	She was pregnant
14.	Whose arm was strong (26)	Have a bountiful harvest
15.	Were going into their wives (15)	(vulgar in British English) were trying to have children
16.	We shall be going (78)	We want to leave now

17.	When most people still suck at their mothers' breast	(vulgar in British English) at a very young age
18.	They were not all young, these young people who came to learn. (128)	(Emphatic) they were middle age
19.	Who killed the banana tree? (27)	(hyperbole) who tampered with this banana tree or who destroyed this banana tree?

Achebe also uses nominal and prepositional groups as part of his creative indigenized style to further highlight his Igbo Nigerian peculiarities which defines his environment. Here are some of the examples: a job in hand (15), ----- has a new wife, a neighbour called Okoye (4), ---- his name is, a plot of ground (91), ---- a plot of land, become soft like women (129) ---- domesticated men, behaving like men (81) ---- hosting lavishly, fight of blame (9) ---- fight wrongly, ill-fated man (13) ---- superstitious perception... , twice four hundred yams (68) ---- 800 tubers, weakness of your machete and hoe (13) ---- laziness, for two moons (68) ---- for two months, from cock-crow until the chicken went roost (10) ---- the whole day, with a heavy hand (9) ---- harshly.

What Achebe has done, in his use of words is to ensure that the situational contexts of his story determine how his words are crafted. Basically, because among the Igbos words are like jewels because they are treasured, hence, his careful handling of exchange between his characters when important matters are discussed. What he simply does, is to use his Igbo values and ideas, and translate them into English, since these nuances are not readily available in standard English. These transfers of his local colour into *Things Fall Apart* is one of the unique attributes that has given the novel its universal appeal.

Conclusion

In this study, we have examined those linguistic tools which Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart*. From glossing and reversal or transliteration, lexical words, compounding, discourse markers or rhetorical devices, interpretations of some Igbo-Nigerian expressions and nominal prepositional groups and through these linguistic styles, Achebe's readers are in no doubt, that he is a master craftsman. These linguistic techniques are strategically used to move the story forward. But most importantly, Achebe uses these indigenized or domesticated English to portray his Igbo cultural nuances, that ordinarily standard English would have found difficult to handle. What Achebe has achieved, is to convince his readers through his domesticated and

indigenized English that the Umuofia in *Things Fall Apart* is a realistic Igbo-nation that is marked by cultural norms and values that can be transplanted to any other part of the Nigerian nation. Secondly, we have also established in this study that the English that Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart* can also be considered as Nigerian English or indigenized English because of its resemblance to the Nigerian societal emblem; that is nursed and nurtured by the Nigerian people and society.

Notes

For Lexical words Depicting Nigerian Geographical and Cultural Context, Compounding, Discourse Markers or Rhetorical Devices, Possible Interpretation of some Igbo Nigerian Expressions and Nominal and Prepositional Groups, please, refer to Ayoola, A. Kehinde. “*Things Fall Apart* as the Avant-courier of the Nigerian Variety of English” in Anyadike, Chima. & Ayoola, A. Kehinde. eds. *Blazing the Path: Fifty Years of Things Fall Apart*. Ibadan: Heinemann PLC, 2008. pp.192-207. Print.

For the use of Glossing and the Reversal of Strategies or Transliteration, please refer to Luu, Helen. “The Difference Language “Makes”: Constructing and Reconciling Otherness through Linguistic Form in *Things Fall Apart*” in Anyadike, Chima. & Ayoola, K. Ayoola. eds. *Blazing the Path: Fifty Years of Things Fall Apart*. Ibadan: Heinemann Plc, 2008. pp. 241-266. Print.

For theoretical framework (Structuralism and functionalism) please, Refer to Moore, L. Henrietta. & Sanders, Todd. “Anthropology and Epistemology” in Moore, L. Henrietta. & Sanders, Todd. eds. *Anthropology in Theory Issues in Epistemology*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishing Ltd, 2006. pp1-21. Print. Note that Boas, Malinowski, Levi-Strauss and Durkheim included in this note.

Follow Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin here in distinguishing between “English” and “English”: the latter is the British ‘standard’ inherited from the empire; the former is “the english which the language has become in post-colonial countries,” the linguistic code “which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world” (8).

For instance, Charlie Sugnet similarly argues that Achebe’s decision to write in English constructs “a secure, intelligible position for a Western reader to occupy” (74), and he offers a critique of the dangers of that position: viz. the temptation to transform that space into an ethnographic one by viewing the Igbo society portrayed as an example of “pure, precontact Africanness” (74). Helen Luu, essay explores instead not the dangers but the possibilities of that position: the way in which the hypothesis of a Western reader achieves Achebe’s political

aims by reversing the effect of his linguistic strategies. By further contrast, Sugnet construes the Western readership to be one part of Achebe's "intended audience," where she argues that Achebe's intended readership was entirely an African one.

For an explanation of the distinction between transliteration in modern translation theory and transliteration in African literary theory, see Onwuemene, pp. 1057-58. Briefly, the former denotes "the rendering of the letters or characters of one alphabet in those of another" (OED), while the latter denotes a literal translation of tropes and idioms from an African ethnic language into English without translating the "sense" of the trope or idiom. The "words are translated, but the idiom is only transferred" (1058).

As Onwuemene explains, the former type of translation is known as "communicative translation" in modern translation theory, in contradistinction to the "semantic" translation of the latter (i.e. transliteration) (1058).

For an alternative reading of the function of repetition in the novel, see Watts, who argues that "the repetitive phrases serve simply to highlight the difference between the spoken and printed sphere, the African oral rather than the English 'literary' tradition." (68)

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