

A Linguistic Study of the Anti-colonial Statement in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*

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Abstract

Chinua Achebe's debut novel *Things Fall Apart* is an account of the immediate aftermaths of colonization in the African continent, particularly within the Igbo tribal culture. This paper analyses how language plays a major role in the novel, both as a theme and as a tool. It looks at the nuances of the Igbo-based English Achebe has used throughout the novel to represent the cultural dislocation that the community experienced as a result of the Imperialist rule and how it works as a means of cultural retrieval. It is observed that the main narrative consists of other separate narratives including folk tales, mythic stories, anecdotes and pseudo-history and such an embedding makes the articulation a profound statement against colonialism.

Keywords: Postcolonialism, language, culture, identity, oral culture, narrative embedding

Chinua Achebe's debut novel *Things Fall Apart* is an account of the immediate aftermaths of colonization in the African continent, particularly within the Igbo tribal culture. Language and culture are conceived as two ends of a cord with which Chinua Achebe ties the different elements of *Things Fall Apart* together to form a coherent whole of fictional work. Though both are almost inseparable and indistinguishable to a great extent, it can be observed that language *per se* occupies a major role in the novel, both as a theme and as a tool as well. It is this aspect of the novel that I would like to comprehend through this paper.

Like many other African groups, the key experiences that the Igbos came to associate with colonial rule were the violence, paternalism and repression that attended the European ‘civilizing mission’. The attempt by the colonialists to turn Igbos into imitation of Whites resulted in degradation of values and cultural disillusionment. Combining both the traditional/ the native and the modern/ the alien forces of authority, colonialism brought about drastic change in all the existing systems.

Therefore, Achebe, for writing such a novel, chose or probably created a domesticated, Igbo-based English as his expressive mode. In this sense, *Things Fall Apart* becomes an act of cultural retrieval, of resurrecting the subsumed culture, which is a response to the misinterpretation of the African culture by the Imperialists. It is also, needless to say, an outburst of the sense of dislocation the whole African community felt.

While discussing the use of language in the novel, be it as a theme or as a technique, the oral nature (and culture as well) of the work becomes the primary concern. Representing an oral culture in written form in itself is a challenging task, but Achebe has very successfully managed to accomplish it. First of all, *Things Fall Apart* is constructed in the form a story told by some unknown teller. This relates to the oral story telling traditions of Nigeria, his native country. The whole novel appears to be, at least in the first reading, one such story or tale with no “authorship” as far as its narrative voice is concerned. This is a typical example of the reproduction of a social linguistic reality and a distinct mode of perception as well.

The novel is written in a Creole, that is, a form of language in which the inflectional morphology and grammar from one language is used with lexicon from another. Within the construction of an English sentence (perfect from its word ordering down to its use of pronouns and verb constructions) Achebe purposefully embeds the seemingly random Igbo word. The use of *obi* for *hut*, *achi* for *tree*, or *ike* for the word *power* allows the pages to come alive with African life and culture. Achebe captures the life of his people with the implementation of Igbo and pidgin words, cementing the languages in the written word to be preserved, not just as languages, but as representatives of a pre-colonial way of life, a pillar of remembrance for the way language was before the Creoles and Englishes of the world came into the picture. Achebe

infuses the novel with Igbo nouns, many created by him for use in the novel. There are over sixty proper nouns that Achebe creates or pulls from the Igbo culture. Names for oracles, villages, compounds, and feasts are just a few that he places throughout the chapters to bring life and meaning to the African lifestyle. The Igbo members are given names like *Akueke*, meaning “Pride of the Python”, or Okonkwo’s daughter *Nneka*, whose name means “Mother is Supreme”. These names are a deliberate construction of social meaning.

As Ode Ogede has observed once, the narrative of *Things Fall Apart* replicates, evokes and simulates oral events in a raw form with full of Igbo proverbs, idioms, thought patterns and so on. The narrator of the novel is a non-participant in the plot part and nowhere in the book is he identified in any way. In addition to bringing the effect of the oral tradition, this performs the function of creating what can be called a(n) (aesthetic) distance, thereby providing the text with some sort of an objectivity. Similarly the construction of the protagonist is also very important. It is not clear from whose point view Okonkwo’s character has been presented. Also, in this post-colonial discourse, we can view in it the lines between the indoctrination and language adoption getting blurred. Achebe uses a new form of language to present Africa through a mediated lens.

We see a linguistic phenomenon that occurs when two languages collide. For instance, the Igbo people who are unfamiliar with English find it difficult to say “court messenger” so they shorten it to make it easier and to fit their own lexicon. However, the word *kotma* doesn’t convey their intense hatred, so they choose a particularly unique and shameful trait of the *kotma* – their khaki shorts – and build a mocking nickname. Even among the tribals themselves, language is used to assert the superiority of one group over the other.

[Tortoise in Ekwefi’s story]: “‘There is one important thing which we must not forget,’ he said as they flew on their way. ‘When people are invited to a great feast like this, they take new names for the occasion. Our hosts in the sky will expect us to honor this age-old custom.’”

‘None of the birds had heard of this custom but they knew that Tortoise... was a widely-traveled man who knew the customs of different peoples. And so they

each took a new name. When they had all taken, Tortoise also took one. He was to be called *All of you.*” (92)

The act of changing one’s name is essentially changing one’s identity. In this case, the act of renaming changes Tortoise and the birds into new beings, ridding themselves of old sins, and making them worthy to sit among the heavenly people of the sky. This is the argument Tortoise uses to convince the birds to take new names, but in reality, he is using language for a much more devious purpose. In another context, “The priestess suddenly screamed. ‘Beware, Okonkwo!’ she warned. ‘Beware of exchanging words with Agbala. Does a man speak when a god speaks? Beware!’” (95) The very act of speaking here is equated with having authority; thus it is considered disrespectful and insolent for a lowly man to speak when a god speaks under which lies the idea that the subaltern should not speak, to rephrase Gayatri Spivak. In the end of *Things Fall Apart*, the reader gets a clear picture of how the West presents the “reality” of the colonies.

The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. (197)

The Commissioner reduces Okonkwo’s life, about which Achebe’s whole book has been written, to a paragraph. By recording what little he knows about Okonkwo as a man, he is essentially freezing Okonkwo in a limited and woefully misunderstood way. It is these words, not Okonkwo’s honor that will be passed on to posterity. Since the Commissioner has decided to “cut out the details”, Okonkwo will be remembered only as a savage.

He [the Commissioner] had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger.* (197)

The Commissioner reduces much of the story told by Achebe to a cold and biased imperialist report.

One of the unmatched skills of Achebe is the harmonious fusion of the English and Igbo thought patterns. Thus Achebe overcomes the untranslatability of culture. As good an example as

any of this linguistic harmony is Ekwefi's reprimanding comments to her daughter Ezinma while the two help in getting the food ready for the bride-pricing reception of Akueke, Obierika's daughter:

'Remove your jigida first,' her mother warned as she moved near the fireplace to bring the pestle resting against the wall. 'Every day I tell you that jigida and fire are not friends. But you will never hear. You grew ears for decoration, not for hearing. One of these days your jigida will catch fire on your waist, and then you will know.' (35)

Okonkwo's use of language is also very special and significant in the novel. He has no talent with words; in fact, they are something of a handicap to him. He stammers when he speaks, compromising his ability to express himself well in language, and loses his capacity to talk completely when angered. Fighting, to him, is a good substitute for words. "He [Okonkwo] had a slight stammer and whenever he was angry and could not get his words out quickly enough, he would use his fists." (4) The contrast between Unoka and Okonkwo as far as their language and communication are concerned points to another thematic conflict in the novel.

The novel is also famous for its ethno-linguistic consciousness. Along with choosing English as the medium of expression, Achebe carefully fills the text with shades of "local colour". Its language is enriched with Igbo idioms, proverbs, beliefs and thought patterns and so on. Language is a very important part of Igbo culture and is highly stylized. Instead of just saying, "Unoka, give me my damn money back," Okoye must steep his message in fanciful and well-known proverbs, only slowly getting to his point. Correct speech is a symbol of respectability among these people. Unoka reveals his lack of respectability by later responding by laughing and with the terse, straightforward information that Okoye won't be getting his money back any time soon.

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker

and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally.(7)

As it is commonly understood, a successful proverb represents an amazing use of dialect to convey wisdom based on understanding of the observed natural world of the speaker as well as the cultural habits of the group as a whole. The very first one in *Things Fall Apart*, ‘He who brings kola brings life (5), exhibits this property of the proverb as an absorbing utterance and its ability to succinctly express a social outlook is really commendable. There is another proverb in the novel which illustrates one of the Igbo’s highest values – personal responsibility: “As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings. Okonkwo had clearly washed his hands and so he ate with kings and elders”. (1.16). It means that if a man “washes his hands” or pays off all his debts and is able to stand on his own, he may mingle with the most respected elders. Besides their utilitarian function, these proverbs also act as little vignettes of art that enhances the aesthetic quality of the text.

In Igbo culture, the language of presenting gifts and asking favors of someone is very formal and stylized. It includes the show of much respect by wishing luck and happiness on one’s host and linguistically making him part of one’s family. They also believe in the power of words and names. These are very significant in their ceremonies and rituals. For example,

[Obierika]: ‘We are giving you our daughter today. She will be a good wife to you. She will bear you nine sons like the mother of our town.’

[The crowd]: ‘Ee-e-e!’

The oldest man in the camp of the visitors replied: ‘It will be good for you and it will be good for us.’

‘Ee-e-e!’

‘This is not the first time my people have come to marry your daughter. My mother was one of you.’

‘Ee-e-e!’

‘Prosperous men and great warriors.’ He looked in the direction of Okonkwo.

‘Your daughter will bear us sons like you.’

‘Ee-e-e!’ (110-111)

This exchange of words at a wedding ceremony seems to have ritual significance. The words Obierika says have the weight of promises which, by vocalizing them, he hopes to make come true. The “Ee-e-e!” response of the crowd seems to be some sort of collective affirmation or approval of the ceremony that lends credence to Obierika’s words.

Words, especially names, hold a special power in Igbo belief. Evil spirits or animals are never referred to by name for fear of summoning them and bringing disaster upon the clan. A “string” here is a euphemism for the evil word “snake.”

Another popular belief in their tradition is that there is something ominous about a man who is silent. Uchendu associates danger and even death with a silent man. Silence, especially in the face of death, indicates something fundamentally wrong with the individual’s humanity. This can be interpreted as a wake-up call for the Africans to put an end to the silent acceptance of Western domination and to voice their resistance powerfully.

In addition to the representation of the Igbo’s belief in the power of language, Chinua Achebe has successfully explored and exploited the power of language which most of us believe in:

‘Uzowulu’s body, I salute you,’ he said. Spirits always addressed humans as ‘bodies’. Uzowulu bent down and touched the earth with his right hand as a sign of submission. (86)

It is to emphasize their superiority and true spirituality that the *egwugwu* address humans with the inferior term “bodies,” implying that their spirits are not really strong, perhaps because they are trapped inside mortal vessels.

Language is also used in its most simple and traditional way as a barrier between cultures. It is explicit in the context in which the Umuofia speak a different language than the white men and neither side really tries to understand the other. Not understanding is akin to saying “nothing,” as Obierika’s friend points out. Obierika is more compassionate towards the foreigner. He realizes that he said something but the white man could not understand it.

‘What did the white man say before they killed him?’ asked Uchendu.

‘He said nothing,’ answered one of Obierika’s companions.

‘He said something, only they did not understand him,’ said Obierika. ‘He seemed to speak through his nose.’ (130)

There is another similar incident happening in the novel which also exemplifies how language becomes a barrier or a mark of difference. It is when Ajofia, one of the egwugwu, uses the language typically used by gods to greet mortals. He calls Mr. Smith and his translator “bodies” but neither man understands Ajofia’s words or their significance. The two groups’ inability to comprehend each other is the root of their problems and it foreshadows greater misunderstandings.

‘The body of the white man, I salute you,’ he said, using the language in which immortals spoke to men.

‘The body of the white man, do you know me?’ he asked.

Mr. Smith looked at his interpreter, but Okeke, who was a native of distant Umuru, was also at a loss.

Ajofia laughed in his guttural voice. It was like the laugh of rusty metal. ‘They are strangers,’ he said, ‘and they are ignorant.’ (179)

Achebe remarks on how the different dialect of an interpreter can alter the speaker’s meaning or completely change the tone of a message. A humorous word substitution here means the people of Mbanta do not take the white man seriously – at least not at first.

He [the white man] spoke through an interpreter who was an Ibo man, though his dialect was different and harsh to the ears of Mbanta. Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying ‘myself’ he always said ‘my buttocks’. (136)

Then Achebe raises the question of translation and interpretation. For instance, while interpreting Mr. Smith’s message, Okeke changes not only the content of his message, but his tone as well. The author uses the words “interpreted wisely,” not “lied”. This implies that

Achebe knows there is always some degree of meaning or truth lost when translating from one language to another:

Mr. Smith said to his interpreter: 'Tell them to go away from here. This is the house of God and I will not live to see it desecrated.'

Okeke interpreted wisely to the spirits and leaders of Umuofia: 'The white man says he is happy you have come to him with your grievances, like friends. He will be happy if you leave the matter in his hands.' (180)

The Commissioner's sense and use of language are, in a sense, extremely peculiar. He too, like Okonkwo, doesn't put much stock in words. Instead, he finds them rather annoying. Because he does not understand "what Obierika meant when he said 'Perhaps your men will help us.'"(195), he immediately dismisses the man's words as "superfluous" and "infuriating" – when they're actually pretty straightforward from Obierika's standpoint.

When analyzing the novel in terms of narrative, which is often an "applied level" of linguistic considerations, some more findings seem to be possible and relevant in its post-colonial debates. It is observed that there is a pervasive use of 'narrative embedding' in African fiction. Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* appears to be nothing less than an epitome of such literary works. Nine separate narratives including folk tales, mythic stories, anecdotes and pseudo-history are embedded in the novel. All of these go along well with authority and association, the two main principles of African oral tradition. This technique can also be viewed as a lamentation about the demise of storytelling in the wake of writing. As Uchendu recognizes in the novel, all stories – however fantastic – have some grounding in real-life events or truth. Moreover, each and every part of the text can be analysed in relation to language either as a theme or as a technique. Therefore, it seems appropriate to conclude that Chinua Achebe, through this unparalleled work of literature, has strongly resisted the Imperialist enterprises using the same weapon of language that they had used earlier. He wrote to the Africans in English, the language of the colonizers, so that the whole world could experience it without losing the poetry of the African narrative.

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