

African Literature and Language use: Exploring the complexities of a multilingual continent

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Abstract

African literature is a rich and diverse body of work, reflecting the complex linguistic and cultural landscape of the continent. This study therefore explores the relationship between African literature and language use, examining the ways in which language shapes the literary imagination and the cultural identities of African writers and their communities. Through a critical analysis of key texts and authors, this work demonstrates the significance of language in African literature and highlights the need for a more nuanced understanding of the complex linguistic and cultural dynamics at play.

Keywords: Language and identity, language choice, multilingualism, globalization, language and culture.

Introduction

African literature is characterized by its incredible linguistic diversity, with writers drawing on a wide range of languages and dialects to create complex and nuanced works of literature. As Ngugi wa Thiong'o notes, "language is a crucial element in the struggle for cultural identity and liberation" (1986 :16). This study explores the relationship between African literature and language use, examining the ways in which language shapes the literary imagination and the cultural identities of African writers and their communities.

It is a rich and diverse tapestry of languages, cultures, and experiences, with over 2000 languages spoken across the continent. African literature reflects the complex and dynamic nature of language use in Africa. From the oral traditions of ancient kingdoms to the modern-day novels and poetry of contemporary writers, African literature has always been deeply rooted in the languages and cultures of the continent.

As the Nigerian novelist and critic, Chinua Achebe once noted, "Language is the ultimate determinant of the relationship between a people and their literature"

(1965:22). This statement highlights the crucial role played by language in shaping the literary traditions of Africa. In this study, we will explore the complex dynamics of African literature and language use, examining the historical, cultural, and linguistic contexts that have shaped the continent's literary heritage.

African literature has a long and storied history, dating back to the ancient civilisations of Egypt, Nubia, and Axim, Diop, (1987). The oral traditions of these cultures, which included epic poems, songs, and stories laid the foundation for the literary traditions of Africa. With the advent of colonialism, African languages and literatures were suppressed, and European languages such as English, French, and Portuguese were imposed on the continent, Mazril, (1975).

Despite this historical trauma, African writers continued to produce works of literature, often using European languages to express their experiences and cultures. The Negritude movement of the 1930s, 1940s led by writers like Liopold Sedar Senghor and Aime Cesaire sought to retain African languages and cultures promoting a sense of black pride and identity, Senghor, (1964).

Despite the rich linguistic and cultural diversity of Africa, the continent's languages and literatures are facing enormous challenges. The dominance of European languages in

education, literature, and official contexts is contributing to language shifts and language loss. Threatening the cultural heritage and national identities of African countries.

Furthermore, the lack of literary production in local languages is limiting the development of African languages and literatures, and perpetuating the dominance of European languages.

This study aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of the complex relationships between language use, literary production, and social contexts in Africa. The findings will provide insights into the challenges facing African languages and literatures, and inform language policies and education systems that promote African languages and cultures.

The researcher anchored this study on the following research questions:

- What are the implications of language shift and language loss for African culture and national identity?
- What is the relationship between language use and literary production in Africa?

This study employed a qualitative research approach, analysing existing literature on African languages and literature. The study drew on a range of sources, including academic articles, books, and conference papers. The data were analysed using thematic analysis, identifying key themes and patterns related to language use in African literature.

The findings reveal that African literatures reflect the continent's rich language diversity, with many writers using indigenous languages, European languages and pidgin. Writers are faced with challenges of choosing between indigenous languages and European languages which often lead to disconnection from their cultural heritage and in another way serve as an opportunity for creativity and innovation in African literatures.

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Conceptual Framework

Language and identity in African literature

Language is a fundamental aspect of identity, and African writers have since recognized the importance of language in shaping cultural identity and informing literary expression. As Chinua Achebe notes "language is the ultimate determinant of the relationship between the writer and his audience", (1965:22). In his novel "Things Fall Apart" Achebe uses the Igbo language to create a rich and nuanced portrait of Igbo culture, highlighting the complex relationships between language, culture, and identity.

Identity is a set of essential characteristics unique to an individual or group of individuals, independent of language and unchanging across contexts. Identity in sociolinguistics is a socially-constructed concept and defined by particular individual membership in a range of social groups into which we are born such as gender, social class, religion and or race. In other words, we are born a female or male into a distinct level of income which defines us as poor, average or

wealthy, as catholic, Anglican, Salvationist, Muslim or Traditional religion.

In the words of Thornborrow in Thomas and Wareing, (2000), "How we talk, how we dress and how behave; where we come from, who is our friend says a lot about who we are". The questions: who am I? Who are we? How do I perceive myself? and How do others perceive me? Summarized Thornborrow's view about our identity. They are not simply defined by factors such as where we were born and brought up, who our parents are, and which socio-economic group we belong to.

Social Identity

Social identity encompasses participant roles, positions, relationships, reputations, and other dimensions of social variables which have become associated with particular individual in relation to a group. It involves the historically grounded socially constituted knowledge, skills, beliefs, and attitude comprising of our various social identities predisposing us to act, think, and feel in a particular way and to perceive the involvement of others in certain ways constitute what social theorist Pierre Bourdieu (1977) refers to as our habitus. We approach our activities with the perception and evaluation we have come to associate with both our ascribed and appropriate social identities and those of our interlocutors and we use them to make sense of each other's involvement in our encounters.

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Language choice and literary expression

African writers have often been faced with the challenge of choosing between indigenous languages and colonial languages, like English, French, or Portuguese. As Ngugi Wa Thiong'o notes, "the choice of language is a crucial aspect of the struggle for cultural liberation", (1986:17). In his novel "Devil on the cross" he uses the Gikuyu language to create a powerful and nuanced critique of colonialism and cultural imperialism. Ngugi, (1980).

The use of African language in literature has been a subject of debate among scholars and writers. Some argue that writing in African languages is essential for preserving cultural heritage and promoting cultural linguistic diversity, Ngugi, (1986). Others contend that using European languages provides greater access to global audiences and facilitates exchange of ideas across cultures, (1965).

African literature is characterized by a complex and dynamic use of language, reflecting the continent's rich linguistic diversity. Many African writers have chosen to write in European languages, like: English, French, and Portuguese, which were imposed on the continent during the colonial era. However, others have opted to write in African languages like: Yoruba, Zulu, and Swahili, Obichie, (1975).

Multilingualism and literary innovation

Multilingualism is the natural potential available to every normal human being (literary writers) rather than an unusual exception; "given the appropriate environment, two languages are as normal as two lungs" says Cook,

(2002:23).

It does not even require the ability to speak two unrelated languages; a user of example the 'literary' and a vernacular or dialectal variety of a language is already multicompetent. At the same time, multicompetence does not require perfect fluency in all the languages at one's command; thus setting the boundary would probably be a mission impossible.

Hence, multilingualism can equally be defined as the act of using, or promoting the use of multiple languages, either by an individual speaker a community of speakers. A basic distinction when discussing bilingualism and multilingualism is between the individual and societal level. At the individual level, bilingualism and multilingualism refers to the speaker's competence to use two or more languages. At the societal level the terms refers to the use of two or more languages in a speech community and it does not necessarily imply that all the speakers in that community are competent in more than one language. Furthermore, a multilingual person, in a road definition, is one who can communicate in more one language, be it actively – by speaking, writing or signing or passively- by listening, reading, or perceiving. More specifically, the terms bilingual and trilingual are used to describe comparable situations in which two or three languages are involved. A multilingual person is generally referred to as a polyglot.

In addition, multilingualism could be rigidly defined as native-like in two or more languages. It could also be loosely defined as being less than native-like but still able to communicate in two or more languages. Indeed, multilingual speakers have acquired and maintained at least one language during childhood, the so-called mother tongue-L1. The mother tongue is acquired without formal education by mechanism heavily disputed. Children acquiring two languages in this form are referred to as simultaneous bilinguals. Even in simultaneous case one language usually dominates over the other. This kind of bilingualism is most likely to occur when a child is raised by bilingual parents in a predominantly monolingual environment. It can also occur when the parents are monolingual but have raised their child or children in two different countries.

African literature is known by its incredible linguistic diversity, with many writers drawing on multiple languages and dialects to create complex and innovative works of literature. As the Ghanaian writer Ama Ata Aidoo notes, "the use of multiple languages is a key feature of African literary expression", (1999:12). In her novel, "our sister killjoy", Aidoo uses a combination of English, Fante, and Twi to create a rich and nuanced portrait of Ghanaian culture and identity, (1999).

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Language and Culture

Language is the principal mode by which we conduct our social activities. It is the medium used by individuals to navigate a sense of self in different contexts according to Norton, (2000:20). Language cannot be divorced from culture since it is one of the most essential aspect of culture

and culture is built up through communication over time. As observed Hall, (2012:18) "language is repository of culture and a tool by which culture is created". It is therefore a fundamental aspect of cultural identity. It is through language human transmit and express group values, beliefs, and norms which is passed from one generation to another. Through language people creates a sense of community. Little John and Foss clearly argue that'

People are able to shift contexts, change meanings, and act in a variety of ways because of a history of interaction with many people over time in which they learned numerous ways to interpret and act in different situations. In modern society, a person is part of many systems, each with its own set of meaning and action rules. The rules are learned through interaction in social groups. Overtime, individuals internalize many of these rules and draw on them to guide their actions, (2008:217).

Language is the most important means of communication through which we conduct our life. We communicate in different contexts and these contexts and situations are created by the speakers. These speech communities have their own separate culture and ways of looking at and to live life. Communication context is connected with culture in multiple and complex ways. It seems fruitful for me, for instance, to see language in cultural context and its respective frames of reference which help to understand meaning, the way it is written, the way it is communicated, and the way it is understood by an insider and by an outsider.

Language is culturally embedded and cannot be understood without the context specific to that society that bears that language. "A social group", says Gumperz, "held together by frequency of social interaction patterns and set off from the surrounding areas by weakness in the line of communication"udson, (1980:26). The 'frequency of social interaction patterns' describes at border areas and dilutes to a considerable level when it enters into another neighbouring social group which is distinct in its culture and social patterns are reflected through their language.

Language and culture have a homologous relationship. They are intertwined, evolving together and influencing each other. In this context, Guessabi, (2020:2) states that "culture, then, began when speech was present and from then on, the enrichment of either means the further development of the other". Language in the word of Adegbite is "culturally transmitted. It is an integral part of culture, a reflection of many features of a given culture" (2020:2).

The relationship between language and culture is a complex one. The two are interwined. A particular language usually points out a specific group of people. When one interacts

with another language, it means that you are also interacting with the culture that speaks the language. You cannot understand one's culture without accessing its language directly.

The phrase, language is culture and culture is language is often mentioned when language and culture are discussed. This is because they have a homologous although complex relationship. Language and culture developed together and influenced each other as they evolved. Language and culture carry strong relationship since the birth of communities and societies on the face of earth. Explaining culture is not an easy task. It is because of this unexplainable nature of culture that the relationship between culture and language becomes much more difficult to explain. Culture can never be defined in the objective sense of the term. It is always study and interpret in relation to a society in which we live and have cultural belief, norms, and values that we observe. We see and observe culture from our specific positionality and situateness.

Culture is something that keeps different societies different and distinct from each other because of their cultural situated norms, and belief system, ways of knowing and doing things, ways of communicating and addressing one another, ways of referring to different objects and beings in a culture specific context, ways of carrying propositional and procedural knowledge associated with different cultural specific meanings and interpretation and much more. It is distinction that keeps us separate and gives us identity-identity to make us recognized as an individual and a group too. "Culture is what 'others' have, what makes them and keeps them different, separate from us" says Duranti, (1997:23).

This links culture with language as both are cognitive entities. We describe and interpret culture with the help of language. "To know a culture is like knowing a language. They both are mental realities. Furthermore, to describe a culture is like describing a language" Duranti, (1997:27). Duranti further opines that, "cognitive anthropologists rely then on the knowledge of linguistic categories and their relationships to show that to be part of a culture means to share the propositional knowledge and the rules of inference necessary to understand whether certain propositions are true. "To this propositional knowledge, one might add the procedural knowledge to carry out tasks" Duranti, 1997:28-29). According to Edward Hutchins, there is a strong relation between the human and social material resources available for interpretation and thinking. Knowledge is not always in the individual mind. It is also in the tools that a person uses in the environment that allows for certain solutions to become possible, in the joint activity of several minds and bodies aiming at the same goal, in the institution that regulate individual's functions and their interactions, Duranti, (1997:31).

It is then, not individual alone that is in charge for change but a whole system that is coherent and keeps individuals united to perform their own individual tasks under its umbrella. It is an individual and joint activity of others that

makes change possible and to construct, deconstruct, and reconstruct the existing knowledge but from a different perspective.

The concept of globalization

The concept of globalization means different things to different people. It has also retained its controversial position in academic studies and discourses that have comitantly limited it to the political and economic interaction of countries across transactional borders. Globalisation according to Fredrick Cooper is a term whose meaning is not clear and over which substantial disagreements exist among those who use it. It can also be used so broadly that it embraces everything and therefore means nothing, but for most writers, it carries a powerful set of images, if not a precise definition, (2005:96). The concept seems therefore to derive its significance from the diverse factors, images, representations, and implications of transactional interaction per se, it is trade, politics, the seemingly innocent activities of migrants in search of greener pastures and influence from social media.

Globalisation furthermore, may make the old desire of making the world come to reality, but in so many ways, it is the colonialism of the past that is at work from African point of view with reference to Igbo culture; family and respect, life and care of life, hospitality, brotherhood, marriage system etc are in strong conflict with globalization. According to Oni, (2005:9) globalization when viewed from the cultural point of view, major critic is that it is destructive to African culture and development.

The meaning of globalization cannot be seen as a single concept and be defined within a particular time rather, it involves economic harmonization, the shift of polity beyond borders, knowledge transfer, stability of culture and power, it is a global system, an idea, a revolution and an enterprise of global market that is devoid of socio-political control. In the word of Wilfred, (1997) "present day globalization is but a continuation of a long tradition of over five hundred years, the tradition of imperialism (42-43).

Conclusion

The use of language in African literature is a complex and multifaceted issue. While the choice of language presents challenges, it also offers opportunities for creativity and innovation. As African literature continues to evolve and grow, it is essential that writers, scholars, and readers engage with the complexities of language use in African literary works.

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