

## A Sociolinguistic Description of Language in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*

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**Abstract.** This study is a sociolinguistic description of language in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus*. Through language, writers explore and extend the frontiers of knowledge. The use of English in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* reflect adequately English in a second language environment; Adichie bends the English to her will, and sometimes change its structure to suit the Nigerian environment. William Labov’s variability theory which emphasizes the relationship of language use to social context forms the theoretical foundation of the study. The study reveals that Adichie’s *Purple Hibiscus* deploys the Igbo variety of the Nigerian English; this is evident through the choice of words, names of food, and proverbs in the novel. The study also reflects the stratification of the society that Labov mentioned in the variability theory; variations in terms of sex, social status, education, etc. The study orients Nigerians and the international community about the variation in Nigeria’s linguistic culture.

### 1. Introduction

Nigerian English is that variety used by Nigerians for the purpose of communicating across socio-cultural boundaries. The standard British English is still spoken by a lot of educated Nigerians but this variety of Nigerian English has been embraced by all speakers of English in Nigeria. The problem now lies on what should be adopted as the standard form as

there are many types of English in Nigeria such as the local languages.

Scholars have adopted different approaches in classifying English varieties such as used by Nigerians. Scholars such as: Brosnaham, Bamgbose and Banjo. Each of these scholars’ classification will be looked into one after the other in order to have a clearer understanding of Nigerian English. Brosnaham (1958) like some other scholars uses education as a yardstick in classifying English varieties/types. He recognizes the varieties of English on levels, which is from level 1-IV. Level 1 is seen as the variety called Pidgin English used by illiterates. He places these categories of people on this level as this variety is spoken mostly by the market women, the labourers and the artisans. He is of the opinion that the educated people even will have to express themselves in this variety in informal environment basically for the purpose of communicating across socio-cultural boundary. He grouped the level 11 variety of English as used by high school graduates as is characterized by some level of communicative fluency and a wide range of lexical items. Level 111 is grouped as the primary school English. It is the variety of English spoken by people with primary school education, and it has the greatest number of users. Level IV is the university English. It is the English used by the university graduates and it is characterized by linguistics features close to Standard English. Brosnaham (1958) submits that the university provides the

best example of standard Nigerian English out of the many varieties.

Brosnaham has been able to group these English users into these four varieties because he has studied the motive and the reasons why different people use language at different occasions. As he rightly puts, the illiterate speak the Pidgin version and concludes by saying that the university variety is close to the standard British English. He said this because he has researched reasons for this. Also, if we are to look at the Nigerian society today, one can agree with Brosnaham to some extent, though can't be perfectly right and cannot be generalized.

Another scholar who classified Nigerian English into varieties is Bamgbose. In Bamgbose (1971)'s analysis, Nigerian English is classified into three varieties. He calls the first variety the "Contact English". This variety is the type found in Antera Duke's diary of events in Calabar between 1785 and 1788. Example:

*Soon after I see my men liv with him ti canow com up and tell me Enyong people's tak my canow way for landing, so, I Run and Go Down for landing I find no canow'' etc.*

This kind of English was also found in king Jaja of Opobo (1824) diary and it reads, "Suppose my fader, or my fader fader come up from ground and peak me why English man do that, I no sabby tell why."

In these two passages, one is an example of broken English while Opobo's is an example of Nigerian Pidgin. The two passages are instance of contact English language, though the broken English is less popular of the two. Nevertheless, it was used in a popular television comedy program like the "New Masquerade" by chief Zebrudaya who will always mix bombastic English with such ungrammatical Broken English forms as; "When am I told you? It is suprisation to me. Ask Ovularia to look it."

Bamgbose's second variety is the Victorian English. This variety has a close association with the so called cosmopolitan 19<sup>th</sup> century Lagos Negro English. According to Echeruo (1977), this was the variety spoken by the Lagos doctors, lawyers, missionaries, educators and

other professionals, who just returned from Brazil, America, West India and later Sierra-leone and Liberia. According to Bamgbose (ibid) this kind of English is replete with bookish lexical items, i.e an expression or idea that could have been communicated in simple and understandable way is presented in a convoluted manner to impress rather than to express. Bamgbose's third variety is the school English (SE).

Another scholar's classification of Nigerian English is Banjo's classification. Banjo (1974) made an attempt to describe the varieties of Nigerian English. He based his classification on the criteria of local acceptability in Nigeria and international intelligibility. He therefore came up with four varieties which he labels V1-V-1V. Banjo's variety V1 is the variety of English used by people with an imperfect knowledge of the language. This variety is linguistically called transliteration. This is as a result of the transfer of the linguistic features of the Niger-congo languages into English.

Variety 11 is marked by high social acceptability and it is used by 75 per cent of Nigerian speakers. Linguistically, this variety is syntactically close to the standard British English (SBE) but maximally different from it at the phonological and lexical levels. Examples of this variety as given by Banjo are:

*My change is not complete,*

*Conductor balance me, I want to drop here*

*Take the other road there is go slow on the road*

Banjo's V111 is marked by low social acceptability and high international intelligibility. It is used by only 10 per cent Nigerians. In its lexicons and in the aspect of syntax it is close to Standard British English, but maximally differs phonologically. Banjo describes such variety as having RP deep structure and Nigerian at the surface structure. Example:

*"Our journey was hampered by hold-up"*

The V1X is characterized by low social and high international intelligibility. This variety is used

by a handful Nigerians who are privileged to have English as their L1 either because they were born by the native speakers', parents or were brought up in the native speakers environments. Linguistically, it is equal in a way to SBE. Thus, it is the variety V111 that can be tagged standard while V11 should be regarded as non-standard Nigerian English.

Nigerian English is the variety spoken by many Nigerians; this variety of English has been influenced by the various cultures of the Nigerian people. What this signifies is that the English language has been nativised and domesticated to suit the Nigerian environment. This variety has deviated from the Standard English which is the model that all learners of the language aspire to speak. This standard variety was introduced to Nigerians during the colonization period and it is being spoken today by few Nigerians because there is the Nigerian variety that has been embraced by the majority. The Standard English has a set of rules or conventions which guide its structures and usage. It has no regional confinement either in pronunciation or in grammar. In this paper, attempt will be made to look at the features of this variety called Nigerian English at the grammatical level, discourse level, semantic extension, loan words and coinages. Further, there is a great deviation from the Standard English at the phonological level in Nigerian English, but the phonological features will not be highlighted in this paper because the text under study is written and not spoken.

## **2. Contextualization of Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus***

Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* encompasses both the colonial era and the post-colonial era. This novel explores the existential wrangling of the African identity and history. The novel begins with crisis which continues throughout the novel. The novel discusses the physical and psychological development of the protagonist, Kambili and her brother Jaja. The setting of the novel is in the present South East geo-political zone of Nigeria. The novel showcases the Nigerian situation. In other words, it is a paradox like Nigeria itself. Adichie

gives the reader a picture of Nigeria, her culture, extended family, human desires and the clash of African and Western norms. Some of the themes discussed in the novel include: male domination/discrimination against women, religious fanaticism, autocratic leadership, and cultural clash among others.

## **3. Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework adopted for this study is variability theory. Speakers in the same community do not of necessity speak in the same way; similarly speakers in this same community do not necessarily speak the same language. Labov describes the speech community as a locus in which speakers agree on the social meanings and evaluation of the variants used, and of course it incorporates variability in language use. William Labov (1966) introduced the variable of style. In Labov's analysis, it was discovered that in the most 'relaxed style', certain characteristics were dominant, such as: laughter, prosodic features and speed. Labov's main innovation of 1966 study was to quantify the incidence in different speech sample of variants of significant linguistic variables in order to write variable rules.

To Olorunfoba-Oju (1999), variables in sociolinguistics are aspects of the society that affect the use of language. According to Hudson (1996) variables refer to features of context or a prevailing circumstance. The concept attempts to isolate the various variables affecting language at the level of micro and macro theoretical and functional sociolinguistic analysis of language with pieces of empirical evidence. Variability is all about several kinds of codes found in a speech community. In communication, various situations affect language in a particular way to cause a difference in use.

Variability concept is designed to explain how and in what function languages are stratified that is regional, social and functional language varieties. It studies how speech realizations are evaluated and how they change on the basis of such evaluations. This concept also explains how different languages tend to interfere with

one another on the phonological, syntactic and semantic levels, how they are acquired, conserved and modified on these levels and also, on the basis of what relationships they coexist or come into social conflict. Dittmar (1976) opines that, ‘the aim of research into speech variation is to describe and explain the entire social network of speech practice and the complex competence that speaker have at their disposal for communication in correlation with the social norms and parameters’.

#### 4. The Social Variables

A speech community refers to any human aggregate characterized by means of a shared body of verbal signs and set off from similar aggregates by significant differences in language use Gumperz (1984). This means that every living language has a society of speakers. A speech community is united by similar use and differs from other speech communities by a dissimilar language or by significant differences in language use. These are factors that determine features of linguistic usage in any society. The society is stratified in a way that, different people belong to different social groups within the speech community and this affects their use of language. That is, your use of language reflects your social group. These social variables are: Age, Religion, Sex, Education, Social Status, Religion/ ethnic group.

**Age:** Oloruntoba – Oju (1999) says age is obviously related to the time variable. There are certain linguistic features of language that are exclusively reserved for the elders, such as proverbs. These proverbial sayings are used to educate the young ones, as certain utterances are not expected to be made by these younger ones but rather they are expected to keep their eyes lower or averted from the elders. However, this is against the culture of the Britons. A handshake should be initiated by the elders in Yoruba land as against the Igbo land. Also, the use of slangs and trendy sayings is prominent with youths. This variable simply explains that the level of your age will also determine your use of language. With age, change is experienced at all levels of language.

**Religion:** Different religious groups have various ways of presenting petitions carrying out liturgical worship, expressing thanksgiving.

**Gender:** Gender depicts **masculinism** and feminism in its content, context and form. It is also an important sociolinguistics variable. Scholars have done research in this aspect and have shown several distinctions between the male voice and female voice. It has been observed that females are more euphemistic in their linguistic usage in an attempt to be polite. While the male voice is authoritative, competitive, defensive, independent, rough, lack of affection etc. In short there are phonetic distinctions in their voices (pitch, voice and modulation), semantic distinctions (lexical, choice), rhetorical distinctions (mannerisms, topic of discourse, turn taking attitude).

**Social class/ Status:** The internal division of human society reflects the way language is used. It does not have to be a total change in language but could be changes in some linguistic features in the speech of the different social classes. Two of the ways of stratifying people into social classes are Marxim polarization and the inherent social hierarchy. The Marxim model consists of the working class and the non- working class. The inherent social hierarchy includes the upper class, middle class and the lower class. These social classes are identified by the features of their language.

**Education:** One’s command of language in the society reflects your level of attainment or achievement. Education is the process of giving intellectual, moral or social instructions to those in need of it. This can be informal setting or a formal setting. People who have attained this height belong to the same social group and their command of language will be similar.

#### 5. Methodology

We have employed a close reading of *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Adichie. Adichie, a contemporary writer has consistently identified with cultural myths and attitudes of the Igbo people in Nigeria in her prose. Her novels embody the Igbo culture and aspects of the Nigerian variety of English. The decision to study *Purple Hibiscus* is prompted by the above considerations. There is a fusion of cultures in

the style of Chimamanda Adichie, an integration of his formal educational influence with his traditional influences.

## 6. Data Presentation and Analysis

### 6.1 Grammatical Level

#### 6.1.1 Omission and Usage of Preposition

##### Text 1

I know he will come into my room first because papa was not home. If papa was home, Jaja would go into his room first to change (Pg. 30)

##### Text 2

We had often told Jaja and me that he did not spend so much money on Daughters of the immaculate Heart and St. Nicholas to have... (pg. 47)

In the Standard British English, the preposition 'at' has been omitted. It should have been "I know he will come into my room first because papa was not at home. If papa was at home, Jaja would go into his room first to change. In the Nigerian English, the preposition 'at' omitted in the BE is not seen as necessary and therefore omitted. It is believed that inasmuch as the information is passed across and understood by the hearer then communication has been made.

In Text 2, there is the wrong use of the preposition "on". Money cannot be spent on a school but on a person. In the Standard British English, it will be ... that he did not spend so **much money on their education or in Daughters of the Immaculate Heart and St. Nicholas to have...**

#### 6.1.2 Sentence Structures in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

##### Text 3

I feel like vomit in my throat. (pg. 37)

##### Text 4

My body does not feel right (pg. 38)

##### Text 5

... a woman with yellow-skin and rows and rows of jewelleries (pg. 102)

##### Text 6

We repeated him in a chorus (pg. 106).

In Text 3, Mama's educational qualification reflects her type of Nigerian English. In the Standard British English, the expression, "I feel like vomit in my throat" would be rendered as "I feel like throwing up. Further, in Text 4, Mama is still speaking, trying to describe how she feels. "My body does not feel right" in Text 4 means that Mama is indisposed or sick. In BE, the body is not said to feel, but the person himself or herself does. Mama here transfers African world-view into English. In addition, the expression, "a woman with yellow-skin and rows and rows of jewelleries" in Text 5, is a typical example of Nigerian English. When a person is fair, she/he is described as a yellow-skin just because the skin is fair. The Standard expression in BE would be: ... a fair complexion woman and rows... In African world-view, the light complexion is termed yellow (or red), and not even white. The sentence structure in Text 6 is a common Nigerian English variety. In BE, it would be: "We repeated after him in a chorus". This is because one cannot repeat a person in a chorus but one can repeat a song after a person. In Nigerian English, as exemplified in Text 6, the word 'after' has been omitted.

#### 6.2 Use of Phrasal Verb

##### Text 7

They even said somebody had **tied up** my womb (pg. 28)

*Tied up* in British English means to hang something or someone with the aid of a rope, but in the Nigerian context, a barren woman's womb is said to be *tied up*. It is in this sense that the speaker uses the expression. Thus, it is a feature of the Nigerian English as it reflects the African world-view.

#### 6.3 Discourse Level

### 6.3.1 Loan words

Loan words are the lexical items transferred or borrowed from one language into another, for example from the various indigenous languages in Nigeria into the English language. Examples include the following words in the novel.

#### Text 8

Papa ate most of the **Ogwo-ngwo**, his spoon swooping through the spicy broth in the glass bowl; Lunch was jollof rice, fist-size chunks of **azu** fried until the bones were crisp, and ngwo-ngwo ... (pg. 40). I followed him, as he climbed the stairs in his red silk pyjamas, his buttocks quivered and shook like **akamu**, properly made **akamu**, jellylike... (pg. 49). The hairstyles were usually exact copies of hers-black, thread covered sticks.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, these loan-words reflect peculiar meals of the Igbos.

### 6.4 The Use of Proverbs

Proverb is concentrated wisdom of a people. In proverb, objects and situations familiar to a people are exploited to give strong pictorial impression of the ideas being conveyed. Thus, proverb is culture-based, as seen in the following examples.

#### Text 9

I will not ask my brother to bend over so that I can lick his buttocks to get these things (pg. 103)

#### Text 10

Will you pinch the finger of the hand that feeds you (pg. 104)

In Text 9, there is an instance of a Nigerian proverb; here, Auntie Ifeoma is talking to Mama, telling Mama why she should not be rude to her husband who is Mama's elder brother. Auntie Ifeoma deploys a communicative strategy, 'avoidance of direct confrontation'. This she does to save face. It is a common phenomenon among Nigerians to use proverbs when passing

across some information to save face. Further, the BE rendering of the proverb in Text 10 is 'Will you bite the fingers that feed you? It is only in Nigerian English that speakers say 'the finger of the hand'. Fingers can only be on the hand not in any other place, so it is a proverb situated strictly within the ambit of Nigerian English.

### 6.5 Code-Mixing in Adichie's Purple Hibiscus

Nigeria is a multilingual society. As a result of this Nigerians often code-switch and code-mix especially while conversing in informal situations. Examples are presented below in Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*.

#### Text 11

- **Nne, ngwa.** Go and change (pg. 16)
- **Ke kwanu?** (pg. 19)
- Have you nothing to say, **gbo** Jaja (pg. 21)
- **Mba**, there are no words in my mouth (pg. 21)
- Let me stay indoor and wait, **biko** (pg. 37)
- **Nne**, this is your study time (pg. 43)
- Good evening, Papa, **nno** (pg. 48)
- They will receive their due, but not on this earth, **mba**, Mama said (pg. 50)
- How many heads do you have, **gbo?**
- Me? O di **egwu** (pg. 54)
- **Nno nu! Nno nu!** Have you come back? (pg. 63)
- **Kedu nu?**, Greet your parents, make sure you show them this money (pg. 63)
- **Nke! Nnke! Nnke!** Kambili and Jaja have to come greet their old father (pg. 72)
- **Ezi okwu?** I know your father will not let you eat here because I offer my food to our ancestors but soft drinks also? (Pg. 74)
- Heathen festival, **Kwa** (pg. 77)
- **Ifukwa gi!** You are like a fly blindly following a corpse into the grave! (pg. 78)
- Kambili, **kedu?** (pg. 81)
- **Nwunyem**, who are those for? (pg. 80)

- **Nna anyi**, are you not tired of predicting your death? (pg 90)
- Let your spirit ask **Chukwu** to hasten my promotion to a senior lecturer, that is all I ask (pg. 91)
- **Tufia!** Do you not see? (PG. 92)
- **Nkene**, see the boy that will inherit his father's riches! (pg. 99)
- The girl is a ripe **agbogho!** (pg. 99)
- The **Igwe's** palace was a few minutes away from our house (pg. 101)
- He is an old man, how much longer does he have, **gbo?** (pg. 103)
- O joka! Eugene has to stop doing God's job (pg. 104)
- **Ngwu anu**, we will see, Papa said (pg. 105)

Adichie's novel has many vernacular (Igbo) loan words and expressions. *Purple Hibiscus* is like a text deliberately constructed to teach its readers the Igbo language. Many expressions are boldly written in their vernacular forms; some come as meaning-translations. Adichie's main procedure of language use in *Purple Hibiscus* is code-mixing, which comes in form of translations – Igbo expressions translated into English and English expressions translated into Igbo.

One of the deficiencies of this device is that it causes redundancy. Meanings appear to be repeated (especially to the bilingual). However, the text's major object of acculturating the Nigerian tradition into the English language appears to be achieved. Therefore, apart from exhibiting the Igbo language/ culture to the wider world, the text is a source of encouragement to many Nigerian writers/scholars researching on 'Nigerian English'.

In *Purple Hibiscus*, the uniqueness of Igbo English that writers, such as Igboanusi (2001), avow manifests itself in experimentation in language, in recreating different Igbo discourse in English. Adichie deploys the native language of the characters (generally Igbo) to reflect some of their socio-cultural habits – conversations, greetings, and exchanges. As stated before, the major method engaged by Adichie to express this Igbo tradition in the text is code-mixing,

where the speaker alternates between English and Igbo languages within sentences.

## 7. Conclusion

The English language has developed over the years in countries where English is not the mother tongue of the majority of the citizens. The object of this study is to see how the English language has undergone some linguistic changes as a result of its new environment. From the analysis of data, it was observed that the English language has assumed a new structure in its grammar, lexis and discourse. Every society is stratified; thus there are variations in terms of age, social status, education, etc and these factors affect the use of language. Since the English language is imposed on Nigerian indigenous languages, the English language has to diffuse, be nativised and domesticated to suit its new environment.

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