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Language Contact, its Pros and Cons in the Learning of English as a Second Language: A Study of *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Adichie

by

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Abstract

In the teaching and learning of a second language, the issue of language transfer from the first language arises. The linguistic effects of this transfer bifurcate into a negative or positive impact on the learning of the second language. Whilst the negative is termed linguistic interference and has remained a serious problem which the bilingual has to contend with, very little attention has been given to the positive implications of language contact in the second language learning situation. This paper seeks to explore the negative and the positive aspects of language contact (linguistic interference) in learning English as a second language, their causes with regards to code switching and mixing, especially in the written discourse. For this purpose, personal observations on verbal discourse by the writer and the text, Half of the Yellow Sun by Chimamanda Adichie has been selected for data analysis. The paper goes further to proffer solutions for linguistic interference in the use of English language in Nigeria and to promote the positive effects of language contact in learning English as a second language.

Introduction

Despite the significant position occupied by the English Language in the Nigerian society and the benefits of its use as the language of education, inter –ethnic communication ,official and administrative functions ,there are a number of problems facing the user of English as a second language, which arise from the conflict between the learner's mother tongue and the second language .Though the use of the English language has become a popular phenomenon amongst Nigerians, its importance has always been over emphasized. Jowitt observed that Nigerians in

both the urban and rural areas seem to be untouched by its alleged communicative role and that in the decades ahead, the variety of Nigerian English will be less subject to 'external' influences (17). This implies that the native language of Nigerians still plays a dominant role in the acquisition of English as a second language. The effect of this language contact between the mother tongue or the first language and English language could have either a positive or negative effect on second language learning. The result of positive contact can aid correct language production, when the mother tongue and the second language share many linguistic features, but when the resultant effect of the contact is negative, there is a problem of interference which can manifest in different grammatical levels of the target (second) language. For a better understanding of the paper, the following relevant concepts are examined:

English as a second language in Nigeria

According to J.C Ogbodo et al 'English occurs as a second language in bilingual and multilingual situations where the users have their indigenous languages but use English for inter-ethnic communication, for education ,and other official and administrative matters'' (41) . In Nigeria, English is used as a second language for communication amongst Nigerians with diverse indigenous languages and cultures. Prior to the advent of the Europeans in Nigeria in the nineteenth century, the inhabitants of Nigeria spoke over 250 indigenous languages. English was introduced to Nigeria through the activities of the Portuguese and the British people who came into Nigeria for the purpose of trade and evangelism. Given the multiplicity of Nigerian indigenous languages, there was a dire need for a unifying language for mutual communication and understanding between the Europeans and the natives and for inter -ethnic relations. This led to the evolution of the English language and its other varieties like the Pidgin English (Jowitt 13).

For the purpose of this study, English is therefore referred to as the second language acquired by Nigerians for the purposes of communication, in addition to their native or first language already acquired at birth. Whenever a group of Nigerians meet and observe that they do not share a common native language, such as Igbo, Yoruba, Hausa etc; they invariably interact in English .Thus English serves as the Lingua franca,a unifying force amongst the various ethnic groups in

Nigeria, the medium of instruction in schools and indeed a means of communication with the international communities.

Objectives

The purpose of this study is as follows:

1. To sensitize second language learners on the benefits of being bilingual and multilingual
2. To promote the advantages prevalent in contact between languages.
3. To assist second language learners in overcoming interferences from their first languages by creating awareness on likely areas of interference.
4. To motivate learners to strive in attaining a reasonably high level of proficiency in at least two languages, the English language inclusive.
5. To give an insight on how some aspects of language contact can aid in the projection of literary works.
6. To inculcate a new area of research interest different from the focus on the negative effects of language contact (interference) as against the positive.

Language Contact:

Language contact is the synergy, between two or more languages in communication within a given linguistic community. According to Weinreich, in Anidi 'two or more languages can be said to be in contact if they are used alternatively by the same person' (8).

In second language learning, it is assumed that the learner consciously or unconsciously, brings influences of the first language to bear on the second language, positively or negatively. When the influence is positive, learning is promoted and enhanced, but when the influence is negative, it hinders the effective learning of the second language, by what is called linguistic interference.

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NEGATIVE EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE CONTACT

There are many negative effects of language transfer, but for the purpose of this research, one of the effects will be discussed namely:

Problem of linguistic interference

Dulay et al in (en.wikipedia .org) defines linguistic interference as 'the automatic transfer, due to habit, of the surface structure of the first language to the surface of the target language which impacts negatively on the acquisition of the target language'. Generally, Linguistic interference can be viewed as the transfer of elements of one language to another at various grammatical levels which negatively interferes in the language learning situations of the second language. In this case, the learner of English as a second language consciously or unconsciously transfers the linguistic features of his indigenous or first language to the learning of English. The conflict that arises from the interference of the first language on the second language is referred to as Linguistic Interference.

According to J.C Ogbodo et al Linguistic interference occurs at four levels namely:

- *Phonological level*
- *Grammatical interference*
- *Morphological Interference*
- *Semantic Interference.*

Phonological interference occurs when the speech sounds /patterns of the first language hinder the effective pronunciation of the second language (43).

Illustrations from the three major indigenous Nigerian Languages (Igbo, Yoruba and Hausa) are as follows:

> Some Igbo speakers have problems with the pronunciation of the English sounds like /l / / r/ /0 / anf final vowel sounds. Hence instead of saying **/lu:k/**, they say **/ru:k/**, instead of **ball** ,they say **ballu**.Some Igbo speakers of Nsukka dialects have greater difficulty in

pronouncing some English words like **love** and **law** which they pronounce as **nove** and **naw** respectively.

The Yoruba learner of English also have similar problems of phonological interference .Instead of saying **hausa**, he says **ausa**; and **tink** for **think**.

Similarly, the Hausa speaker of English is not left out of the problem of interference. The Hausa speaker pronounces **very** as **beri**, go as **gwo** ; **driver** as **draiba** and **people** as **fifle.**

Morphological interference results from problems in the formation of words and the use of tenses because of the differences in the pattern of word formation of the first and second languages. Most Nigerian languages are tonal languages unlike the English language which is an intonational language. At this level therefore, we hear errors like **I didn't hears it instead** of I didn't hear it.

Semantic interference is associated with difficulty experienced by the Nigerian learners in interpreting the meaning of words, for example, the idiomatic expressions like he kicked the bucket,(he died), which are not found in their indigenous languages.

Grammatical interference: This type of interference results from the grammatical structure of the first language which hinders the set of language rules (grammar) of the target language. This language transfer at this level is given priority in this paper because interference distorts the acceptable norms or rules of the target language which grammar is basically concerned with. The second language learner fails to understand that what is acceptable in one language may not apply to another.

At this level we have expressions like

Ibo	**English translation**
Ha na ese okwu kemgbe	They have been quarrelling for a long time
Yoruba	
Ba mi pe asobata	Assist me with the shoe maker
Hausa	
Mama na taya winki	My mother is a washer woman

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Causes of linguistic interference:

1. Lack of language practice
2. Low level of language proficiency
3. Bias or disloyalty to the target language.
4. Over assumptions from the first language.
5. Direct translations from the mother tongue.

Remedies for linguistic Interference:

1. Effective use of English dictionary
2. Early language development in children
3. Use of authentic textbooks in the language
4. Proper understanding of the rules of word formation in the target language.
5. Constant language practice .This entails improving in the target language day by day(Wright J., 4).

POSITIVE EFFECTS OF LANGUAGE CONTACT

The phenomenon of language contact has some positive effects which include: code switching, code –mixing, borrowing, sequential relations etc. This paper attempts to discuss one, out of these positive effects, using data from the instances of code switching from Chimamanda's *Half of a Yellow Sun* .

What is Code Switching?

Crystal, in Ellis (53)opines that ' code or language switching occurs when an individual who is bilingual,(a speaker of two different languages)alternates between two languages during his or her speech with another bilingual person'.

Generally speaking, Code switching is the use of more than one language in speech or writing. In linguistics, code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two languages or language varieties in the context of a single conversation. Thus code-switching is the use of more than one linguistic variety in a manner consistent with the syntax and phonology of each variety. This is

distinct from other language contact phenomena such as borrowing, pidgin and creole, language translation (calque) and language interference. Speakers practice code-switching when they are fluent in both languages. In the early nineties, between 1940- 1950, many scholars considered code-switching to be a substandard use of language, but in recent times, scholars have come to regard it as a natural product of bilingual and multilingual language use. The essence of code switching is to establish contact between two languages of which the user has a certain level of fluency. It juxtaposes the grammatical elements of the two languages and denotes the actual spoken usages of multilingual persons.

Types of Code switching:

1. ***Inter-sentential switching***- This type of code switching occurs outside the sentence or the clause, that is at the sentence or clause boundaries. It is also called extra sentential switching. For example- in Igbo to English switching, one could say: Kedu afa gi,? What is your name?
2. ***Intra-sentential switching***. This switching occurs within a sentence or a clause. It is also referred to as code mixing. For example in Spanish to English, one could say: La ound is to fight y jamba, which means - the in thing is to fight and steal.
3. ***Tag switching***: This is the switching of either a tag phrase or a word, or both, from one language to another. O tii kpoju, you know? Yoruba- English), meaning - it is plenty, you know?
4. ***Intra –word switching:*** occurs within a word itself as a morpheme boundary. For example, Nwanyi ahu bu ajo mmadu, please in Igbo-English which means that woman is a bad person , please .

   Generally, most studies on Code switching focus on intra sentential switching because it creates many hybrid grammatical structures that require explanation but for the purpose of this study, the analysis will be based on inter- sentential code switching as employed by Chimamanda in her book, *Half of a yellow sun*. The choice of this type of switching is to investigate this relatively new area and ascertain how this literary device has facilitated the successful conveyance of the writer's theme.

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Advantages of code switching:

1. Code switching is a means of structuring speech in interaction.
2. It helps to reflect and create social situations.
3. Speakers practice code switching to explore possible language choices.
4. Code switching promotes bilingualism and multilingualism (Anidi,
5. It encourages fluency in different languages amongst speakers since code switching requires the speaker to attain a level of proficiency in these languages.

Analysis of Code switching in Chimamanda Adichie's Half of a Yellow Sun

The Novel:

The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* by Chimamanda Adichie was written by an Ibo female writer with the theme of the damages of the Nigeria-Biafran war and was published in 2006.The novel is a narrative fiction, centred on the Igbo people of the eastern Nigeria, and a gripping story of the brutal experience of peasants during the Biafran war, with characters like Ugwu, peasant houseboy who survived conscription into the Biafran army. Adichie juxtaposes this experience of the peasants with the immoral escapades of two wealthy ladies, Olanna and Kainene who were twin sisters. Olanna became the mistress of Odenigbo, a University professor whereas Kainene takes on Richard, a British expatriate as her lover. The love story ends on a tragic note as Adichie tends to depict the impact of war's brutalities on peasants and intellectuals alike, while indicting the outside world for its indifference. The novel was best summarised in *Chicago Times* in these words 'A novel that uses fiction to its best advantage, telling the story of ordinary people---loving, fallible ,passionate and vulnerable----ineluctably caught in savage circumstance of chaos, breakdown and violence.....Written with unflinching clarity, what Adichie 's novel s offers is a compassionate, compelling look at the unfathomable immediacy of war effects on people'.(Google search on Praise comments on Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*,2015).

The Diction of the Novel:

With reference to the praise comments on the novel, *The Times* (London) wrote that 'Adichie uses layers of history, symbol and myth.....and uses language with relish. She infuses her English with

robust poetry, and the narrative is cross-woven with Igbo idioms and language'. One could easily deduce from the novel, that the novelist is very much at home with the knowledge of Igbo language and philosophies which she tries to incorporate in the novel, using the English language as the medium of communication. Adichie employs code switching to create a desired effect in the novel, which encourages the reader to keep in tune with the least proficiency in Igbo language, thereby encouraging bilingualism.

Illustrations on **code switching** in the novel include:

1. *Itetago*? Are you awake? Pg 143
2. Yes my broda. *Dalu*. Thank you. P.143
3. Do you want bread?.....*I choro bread? Pg 145*
4. Our eyes have seen plenty, *anyi afujugo anya*, Obiozo said. Pg 144
5. How are things? *A na –emekwa*? Pg 173
6. *Anugo m*, I have heard you. Pg 219
7. I said you will give me my money, today! *Tata*! Pg 225
8. *Bia nwanyi*! Come back, woman! Pg 270
9. *Anyi ga achota ya*, we will find her. Pg 431
10. *'O mu nwanyi'*, he said quietly. She had a girl yesterday. Pg 247
11. *Onye ocha*, white man..... *Kedu*, Hello, what's your name? Pg 211
12. What am I to say to him? *Gwa ya gini*? Pg 217
13. *Nkem*, please open, biko, please open. Pg 225
14. *Unu anokwa ofuma*? Did you stay well? Pg 222

    a. s

15. *Na gode*. Thank you, Hajia. Olanna said. Pg 46.

16. Other instances of intra sentential English in the book are as follows:

17. *Ngwa*, go to the kitchen, there can be something you can eat in the fridge. Pg 5

18. .....his mother will rub his body with *okwuma. Pg14*

19. You can go and rest, *i nu go*. Pg 212

20. *Abum onye* Biafra, Richard said. Pg181

21. Do you cook *ofe nsala* well? Pg 212.

Adichie in this novel x-rays the beauty of language contact. Notwithstanding the fact that she borrows extensively from the Igbo language, she has also demonstrated a good grasp of the English language, and evidently a mastery of the English lexicon.

The italicised words in the above extracts show how the writer was able to beautifully blend the two languages (Igbo and English) in the presentation of her literary work. We also find an instance of Hausa switching to English in the text on pg 46.Here, the writer attempts to capture the different languages and dialects in Nigeria in order to give a holistic outlook to the novel.

The novel *Half of a Yellow Sun* is known for its sophistry in diction which the writer was able to achieve with her exploration of possible choices of diction, using her bilingual and multilingual acumen.

Moreover, the exploration of language choices gives a human face to this sobering story, considering the war orientation of the novel. The use of code switching from Igbo language to English compels the not too proficient Igbo reader, to go the extra mile to unravel some 'strange' words in order to fully appreciate the novel. This is a positive trend towards bilingualism and this is also what the writer aims to achieve in a subtle manner.

CONCLUSION

From the above analysis, it is evidently clear that language contact can have positive effects in language communication. In recent times, Nigerian writers have increasingly come to appreciate the beauty in the synergy of language and have explored various possibilities of stylistically incorporating this trend in their various creative works.

Emeka Otagburuagu in his book *Echoes of Violence* and many other African writers have artistically blended the Nigerian languages with English Language to produce literary masterpieces.

Part of this synergy of language is the use of Ibo proverbs by some writers to drive home some major ideas in their works. For the African, particularly, the Ibos, Ene in Anidi opines that 'proverbs are not only central to the propagation of their culture in all its ramifications, they are the foremost factor in formal and familiar speeches in other form of popular communications'16).

Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* observed that 'Among the Igbo. The art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (3).

Generally, proverbs are devised are devised to enliven and enchant.

Conclusively, the use of such literary devices like code switching ,and proverbs that show synergy of language are indigenous techniques that African writers use to bring their themes closer to their African readers and to make the world in general, appreciate and learn from the African worldview.

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