

Full Length Research Paper

Cultural influences on the fictional expressions of Nigerian Igbo speaking writers

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The study examined the fictional expression of Igbo writers in English to determine its underlying influences and to evaluate the effects which it has on its non-Igbo audience. It specifically examined selected works of Elechi Amadi and John Munonye who adopted an indigenized form of English in which features of Igbo language, culture and world-view were either wholly or partially imported into standard British English. The study revealed that this approach accommodated the peculiar circumstances of the writers and enabled them to effectively reflect their thoughts. A comprehension-interpretation test, of the features of Igbo language and culture in the texts, which was conducted on people from other ethnic groups and who are non-speakers of Igbo showed that the losses in intelligibility were few in each novel. The study therefore concluded that the impact of the Igbo features in the novels did not hinder their comprehension and accessibility to non-Igbo speakers. It then recommends a shift of focus from the search for the appropriate medium for Nigerian fiction to the assessment of particular forms of expression to determine their reception and effectiveness.

Key words: Fictional expression, Igbo language, culture and intelligibility loss.

INTRODUCTION

Igbo is one of the major indigenous languages in Nigeria. Through contact with Igbo and other multiple local languages in Nigeria, the English language in Nigeria has metamorphosed into a distinct variety peculiar only to Nigeria. This is not a surprise because language change in contact situation is an established socio-linguistic phenomenon. Uzoezie (1992) buttresses this point when he said that the English language is interacting with every indigenous language in Nigeria and with all of them at the same time. In effect, the aftermath of these interactions is a 'new' English that is reflective of the influences of these languages with which English has interacted and continues to interact. 'Nigerian English', as the resulting variety is often called, combines the characteristic features of the cultures and environments that make up the nation, Nigeria. Thus, the English language appears to be in the process of domestication, naturalization and acculturation in Nigeria. But considering the diverse cultures and size of Nigeria, the questions arise as to whether there is indeed a Nigerian variety of English which has a wide enough scope to qualify for a cover

term - Nigerian, and further still, what is the input of the individual indigenous Nigerian languages to this variety of English? This study examines the last question from the perspective of Igbo features in the English novels of selected speakers of the language.

The union of English and Igbo is likely to be apparent in the language of fiction written by speakers of the language. In the pages of the literary works of Igbo speaking writers, we see the Igbo world-view expressed wholly or partially in the English medium to portray the thought processes, concepts and cultures of the Igbo peoples. This is indeed a difficult task for as Achebe quoted in Okonkwo (1975) observes, one does not understand another whose language one cannot speak. So in order to portray the Igbo culture, its writers need an English that is not totally British or fully Nigerian, an English medium which is in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new Nigerian surrounding.

This work is a study of such situation as it examines the linguistic and cultural influence of Igbo on the English used in selected works of Elechi Amadi and John

Munonye; it therefore evaluates this approach in order to assess the content of Igbo language and culture in them and to determine how easily non-Igbo speakers can comprehend their content. The choice of the writers is premised on the fact that though they have written widely on the Igbo culture their works have not received as much attention as those of Chinua Achebe, Cyprian Ekwensi, Flora Nwapa, Buchi Emecheta and the like. It would therefore be interesting to see how other Igbo speaking writers present the Igbo culture in fiction.

THE METHOD

The data for this study were collected from two main sources; the texts under study and the results of a comprehension-interpretation test (CIT). The texts are Elechi Amadi's *The Concubine* and *Estrangement* and John Munonye's *The Only Son* and *Bridge to a Wedding*. A list of the Igbo features found in these works was made and the features were classified as lexical, idiomatic and proverbial Igbo features. The identification and classification necessitated the extraction of key sentences, phrases and words from the novels. The researcher assessed the Igbo content of the individual works of the authors by defining the extent of introduction of Igbo word forms and world-view in the works. Using simple percentages, the frequency distribution of the peculiar expressions that typify Igbo concepts and thought processes were calculated. This assessment paved the way for the evaluation of the effect of the transfers of the Igbo linguistic and cultural features into the novels. The comprehension-interpretation test (CIT) was used to verify the effects of the identified features. The test involved a sample of twenty (20) persons, male and female. These were made up of people from ethnic groups other than Igbo and who are non-speakers of Igbo. All the twenty people were exposed to the same words and expressions/sentences and their interpretations were recorded and presented alongside the contextual meanings intended by the writers. This enabled the assessment of their degree of intelligibility of the features. In order to validate the result of the CIT, a two-tailed test of proportion was conducted to determine the level of significance of the losses in intelligibility. The rating of the interpretations was based on the researcher's proficiency in the language as a native speaker of Igbo.

It is desirable, at this point, to examine extant work on fictional expressions in Nigeria so as to position this present one to make its own contribution.

FORMS OF FICTIONAL EXPRESSION IN NIGERIA

Fictional expression in Nigeria reveals the acts of translation and transliteration of native language or culture into English. While translation refers to expressing in a simplified form the thought processes of one language in another, transliteration is the writing of the words of a language in or as the word of a different language. It is this feature that marks off the English expression in most Nigerian fiction as distinct. Palmer (1972) comments on the unique nature of fictional expression in Africa (Nigeria), noting that beyond message, African writers should have some concern for the appropriate style and show signs of technical competence. To this effect, a number of fictional

expressions have been advocated by literary artists in Africa. One school of thought advocates the use of indigenous languages. In this school are writers like Ngugi Wa Thiongo, Sembene Ousmane and Obi Wali. According to Ousmane in Moore (1975), we must make the African language part of our educational system, in the primary schools and elsewhere, to prevent our literature from being subject to the control of other powers or other people's good intentions. Wali, in Moore (1975), took a more rigid stand when he prophesied the death of African creativity if African writers continued to write in foreign languages.

It is however noteworthy that to the present day, African literature in English is yet to reach a 'dead end' and may not in the distant future. After all, English has become an African language since it is our heritage (Bamgbose, 1971). Ohaegbu (2000) reiterates this point when he said that the young generation of Africans will continue to use English side by side with indigenous African languages. And he says that the African writer should have no apology using them in his literary creation.

Another school of thought is the New English strategy propounded by Achebe (1975) who advocates 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 values as an international language will be lost. In his works, therefore, Achebe reflects the speech patterns and thought processes of his Igbo characters. Many Nigerian writers have toed Achebe's line in this regard. An extreme experimentation with a New English is that of Gabriel Okara in *The Voice*, which has been criticized adversely, and none has attempted to emulate it. It however shows the logical limits of altering the English language. Nwachukwu-Agbada (in Ohaegbu and Opat, 2000) sums up the burden of literary expression upon the African/Nigerian writer by saying that the Nigerian writer enjoys a double heritage of cultures, one by ordination and the other by formal education, but by using a foreign language in his writings, he writes essentially for an outside audience, yet, for him to survive as a writer, he must be published in English language for wider readership.

These burdens will remain on the African writer as long as he writes in a foreign tongue. Even though the African writer in English is said to possess two cultures, the second culture is but a shallow one because most writers are not sociological and psychological immersed in the English culture, so the claim to cultural and linguistic ambiguity is but a weak one. The issue of language of expression in African literature raises the question – to whom does he write? In the long run even though the African writer writes for his people, he is least read by his people and most read by the outsiders. In summary, to write in an African language is the ideal, however, that ideal is impracticable at the moment because of its many

Table 1. Number of lexical Items in the works.

	Number of lexical items	Number of occurrence	Number of words	% occurrence
The concubine	17	103	64500	0.16
Estrangement	10	30	73200	0.04
The only son	21	93	45600	0.22
Bridge to a wedding	5	23	74400	0.03
Total	53	249	257700	0.45

Table 2. Some of the lexical items found in the works.

The concubine	Estrangement	The only son	Bride to a wedding
Dede, Okorobia, Ofo, Dimpka, Ogu Dibia, mini-wekwu, Opopo, Ojukwu	Ofogori, Nkwo, Omirinya, Isusu, Ogbunigwe, Dede, Dibia	Osikapa, Ezedibia, Dimgba, Obidia, Nkwo, Afo, Oye, Ojukwu	Obi, Ama, Aku, Dede, Katagwom

impediments.

The question remains, what is the most suitable medium for Nigerian fiction? This study does not attempt to answer this question because it is not its focus. But its immediate concern is those writers who translate one culture into another, as is the case with Elechi Amadi and John Munoye in the works under study. In this regard, the study shall determine if Igbo word-forms, concepts and traditions were effectively translated into English in the conveyance of the message of the texts. This was the point of Attah (2000) when he says that the adaptation of English for the purpose of creative writing should aim at a point where it acquires sufficient local colour while still sharing some basic features with the British standard dialect. In this vein, the assessment of the influence of indigenous languages and cultures in the expression of Nigerian fiction is worthy of research in order to determine the extent of transfer and evaluate the effects therefrom. Hence the significance of this study is underscored.

In the study which follows, the data collected from the works under study are discussed and inferences made.

Igbo linguistic items in the works

The first objective was to identify the Igbo linguistic items. The language data came in two forms: lexical and structural. The lexical consists of words borrowed directly from Igbo language and those translated directly from the language. The structural was made up of Igbo idiomatic expressions translated into English in the works. The lexical features were analyzed under two heading: lexical features borrowed directly from Igbo and lexical features translated directly from Igbo into English, and these were immediately followed by the analysis of the structural items under the heading of Igbo idiomatic expressions.

Lexical items borrowed directly from Igbo in the works

The number of borrowed items and their percentage occurrences in each novel are summarized in Table 1.

The table shows that Igbo lexical items in the writers' earliest works (The Concubine and The Only Son) were much higher in number than in their latest works (Estrangement and Bridge to a Wedding). The study therefore established that Igbo lexical items occurred in the texts in varying degrees but, the extent of the introduction of these items in the works as shown by their total percentage occurrence of 0.45% is also quite minimal and therefore insignificant. In Table 2, examples of Igbo lexical items found in the texts are presented.

Table 2 shows that some of the lexical items which are in the works of Elechi Amadi, occurred in the works of John Munonye. Such lexical items are "Dede", "Dibia", "Ojukwu", "Ofo", and "Nkwo". This suggests that both writers were influenced by the same language. The lexical items have the same meanings in the works and reflect the same beliefs. Most of the lexical items identified represented general Igbo concepts irrespective of dialectal differences. However, a few items reflected restricted senses, which indicated dialectal variations in the language (for example; Mini-wekwu; "Ofogori"; and "Omirinya").

Direct translations found in the works

The number of direct translations and the percentage occurrences in each novel were as summarized in Table 3a and b.

Forty-one direct translations were found in all the works under study. It means that, indeed, translation from Igbo

Tables 3a. Number of direct translations in the works.

	Number of trans items	Number of occurrence	Number of words	% occurrence
The concubine	10	48	64500	0.07
Estrangement	10	24	73200	0.03
The only son	11	18	45600	0.04
Bridge to a wedding	10	21	74400	0.03
Total:	41	111	257700	0.17

Table 3b. Examples of direct translations found in the works.

The concubine	Estrangement	The only son	Bridge to a wedding
The brave (2)	A bag of naira (2)	Great to do (1)	Mad one (5)
Take comfort (2)	Up and down dress (2)	Fore house (4)	Ten villages and two (4)
Second burial (6)	Corner of her Wrapper(4)	Heart of the Mother (1)	Open yard (1)
Lost flesh (3)	A child of a child (1)	Six moons (3)	Deaf ear (2)
Put out food (2)	It become her well (5)	Images of him (2)	Deepest heart (1)

Table 4. Number of idioms in the works.

	Number of idioms	Number of occurrence	Number of words	%occurrences
The concubine	10	18	64500	0.03
Estrangement	7	8	73200	0.009
The only son	10	16	45600	0.03
Bridge to a wedding	7	11	74400	0.02
Total:	34	53	257700	0.09

into English was a major device in the texts. But as we can see, the percentage occurrence of all the forty-one translations is less than one percent (>1%). Hence their impact in the works was insignificant. The researcher observed that most of the translations were appropriately used in denoting general Igbo concepts and ways of life. However, there were a few exceptions, of expressions that do not fit into general Igbo usage. Such expressions as; "it become her well", "great to do", "images of him", and "fore-house".

Igbo idiomatic expressions identified in the works

The summary and examples of the idiomatic expressions in each work have been presented in Tables 4 and 5.

We can see from the tables that Igbo idioms occurred in all the four works studied. This proves that Igbo idiomatic expressions were employed in these novels, although to a negligible extent of 0.09%. Again, the study showed that while some of the idioms were used in agreement with the general Igbo usage, some were used restrictively. This pointed to the existence of other minor

forms of the Igbo language beside the general or central Igbo language. Examples of such restrictive Igbo idioms were "the family is Obi" and "he gave her a coconut" which embody two important Igbo customs, of marriage proposal and nobility respectively. The Igbo language is not just a means of communication but also a label of ethnic and cultural identity. This is confirmed in the uses of idioms which portray the interests and customs of the people, and also in their use of proverbs as the study confirms.

Igbo cultural features found in the works

The second objective of this study was the identification of Igbo cultural features in the works selected for the study. The data show that Igbo cultural features occurred in the form of proverbs and their occurrences in each of the novels is shown in Table 6.

As the summary table shows, a total of forty-two (42) proverbs were employed in the four novels used for this study. However, their percentage occurrence of 0.10% made their impact less felt in the entire work.

Table 5. Examples of idiomatic expressions found in the works.

The concubine	Estrangement	The only son	Bridge to wedding
Emenike rounded a bend (2)	A dry heart (1)	... Before the moon sank (1)	The rains had impregnated the earth (1)
You have survived the night? (1)	I know my own mind (1)	Big name that kills the puppy (3)	A man old enough to shoot down a woman (3)
His heart jumped into his mouth (2)	My hut is standing (1)	The family is Obi (2)	When the sun and the moon would start exchanging place (1)
The sun just was starting its journey to Chiolu (5)	To ride the clouds (1)	He gave her a coconut (2)	Your mouth has gone astray (1)

Table 6. Number of proverbs in the works.

	Number of proverbs	Number of occurrence	Number of words	%occurrences
The concubine	14	25	64500	0.05
Estrangement	3	3	73200	0.003
The only son.	15	17	45600	0.02
Bridge to a wedding	10	12	74400	0.03
Total:	42	57	257700	0.10

Table 7. Examples of proverbs derived from animals in "the concubine".

Serial number	Proverbs	Interpretation
1	The hunter who is never satisfied with antelopes might be obliged to carry home an elephant and collapse under the weight. (2)	Greed is destructive
2	One cannot eat a crab in secret. (1)	Some things cannot be hidden.
3	You must not be like the caterpillar that holds fast to true branches when small but loses grip and falls to its death when much older. (2)	One who started well but fails in the end due to impatience.

Nevertheless, some of the proverbs used in the selected works were examined in order to portray their cultural implications in the Igbo society. By so doing the researcher hoped to establish the purpose for the introduction of Igbo proverbs into the works.

Proverbs depicting Igbo culture in the selected works

Among the Igbo, the use of proverbs is very fundamental in both speech and writing. The place of proverbs in the Igbo society is summed up by Achebe (1975) who notes that they serve two important ends: they enable the speaker to give universal status to a special and particular incident and they are used to soften the

hardness of words and make them more palatable. Indeed, African writers and Igbo speaking writers in particular employ proverbs to enhance the communication of the messages of their works as this study has illustrated. Beyond the enhancement of general communication, Igbo proverbs in the works served the particular function of portraying the beliefs and ways of life of its people. They also served aesthetic functions as the analysis of the following proverbs would show.

In *The Concubine*, for example, Elechi Amadi used a total of fourteen (14) proverbs. The researcher, for ease of analysis, grouped the proverbs into two: proverbs derived from the characteristics of animals and proverbs based on human attributes as shown in Table 7. In all the proverbs, there was powerful projection of images by the

Table 8. Human based proverbs in “the concubine”.

Serial number	Proverbs	Interpretation
1	A man’s god may be away on the day of an important fight. (3)	One should be alert at all times.
2	Death is a bad reaper’ it is not always after the ripe fruit. (3)	Death is not by age.
3	Every mother thinks her child is a leopard for strength. (1)	Mothers value their children above other people’s children.
4	The slow-footed always fail in battle. (1)	A lazy person cannot survive pressure.

Table 9. Examples of proverbs in “estrangement”

Serial number	Proverbs	Interpretations
1.	Behave like one who sucked a woman’s breast.(1)	Behave decently and responsibly
2.	When you perch your words do not sit well, they also perch. (1)	When one is not settled, one finds it difficult to talk reasonably.
3	It was like thrusting one’s head into a nest of wasps. (1)	It was like putting oneself into an inextricable situation.

writer’s choice of animals around whose characteristics the proverbs were based. In the first proverb, there was a contrast of the sizes of an antelope and an elephant. The second proverb in which a crab was used to convey a message painted an immediate picture and created an anticipation of the sound made in the consumption of crab. In the third proverb, the use of the caterpillar to illustrate a firm hold was remarkably picturesque because by nature a caterpillar uses its entire body to make a grip.

Despite the aesthetic functions, which the proverbs performed, they also performed communicative functions. For instance, the first proverb communicated the virtue of contentment, the second openness, and the third stability. So the proverbs achieved portraiture of the acceptable code of conduct, the ways of life, of the typical Igbo. In other words, they portrayed the Igbo social values.

The researcher observed that these proverbs, like the first group contained some choice of words that created images in the minds of the reader. This quality added beauty to the expressions used in the proverbs. Some examples of such diction are “death is a bad reaper” (Proverb 2), “a leopard for strength” (Proverb number three) and “slow footed” (Proverb 4) (Table 8). The study showed that, through some of the proverbs, the writers fore-grounded the cultures beneath the Igbo language. In proverb number one, for instance, the author exposed the religious belief of the Igbo. The proverb brings to the fore the Igbo traditional religious belief that every man has his god (personal god) that directs and protects him. Hence the Igbo cultural belief in the duality of the Supreme Being; the creator (Chineke) and one’s personal god (Chi) was established via the proverb.

In Estrangement, The Only Son and Bridge to a wedding, similar observations were also made: animal and human based proverbs were found; performing aesthetic and social functions; the proverbs encapsulated Igbo traditions and cultures; and their discursal functions were to teach acceptable conducts in society; to praise a virtue; to condemn a vice; or to extoll the norms of the Igbo society. Examples of these are shown in Tables 9, 10 and 11.

The study has shown that at the contextual levels of each of the proverbs used; there is a reason for its use because each is an embodiment of a message. The cultural implications of the proverbs are therefore revealed through their contents as their analyses indicated.

Effects of Igbo features on non-Igbo speaking readers of the works

The third objective was the evaluation of the effects of the introduction of Igbo linguistic and cultural features on the non-Igbo readers of the selected works. For this purpose, a total of twenty non speakers of Igbo were selected for a comprehension-interpretation test (CIT). They were exposed to all the peculiar words and expressions identified in the study and their interpretations were recorded. The aim of the test was to assess the intelligibility of cultural features which the study revealed as direct borrowings from Igbo, direct translation from Igbo, Igbo idioms and Igbo proverbs. The data obtained from the intelligibility assessments are presented in Table 12. The assessment yielded various interpretations,

Table 10. Examples of proverbs in “the only son”

Serial number	Proverbs	Interpretations
1.	Their stomachs are like the earth which is always hungry in spite of all it consumes. (1)	They are insatiable
2.	A child who has run into her father’s lap should consider herself safe. (1)	One’s father is a shield to one.
3.	A child who carries an elder’s bag has a very good chance of being a wise man in his life. (1)	A young person who keeps company with the elderly acquires wisdom.

Table 11. Examples of proverbs in “bridge to a wedding”.

Serial number	Proverbs	Interpretations
1.	How big is a tortoise that it should be made to carry an ache in its head (1)	One should not be saddled with a problem that is beyond one
2.	It was like a hot soup which should be eaten slowly and with cunning. (1)	Some issues require caution in their handling.
3.	He who bore the mantle of line must also bear the chastisement due to it. (1)	A leader must be prepared to make sacrifices.

which the researcher has harmonized and presented (a maximum of four interpretations per tested material). The interpretations that reflected the right senses of the test materials were judged correct based on the competence of the researcher as a native speaker of Igbo. Those interpretations that were contrary to the right senses of the words or expressions, and those words or expressions which the interpreters could not interpret correctly were classified as intelligibility losses. The interpretation failures (intelligibility losses) in each of the novels are as summarized and presented in Table 12. In order to validate the result of the test, a two-tailed test was applied to determine the significance of the results which we now present.

In *The Concubine*, the total intelligibility losses represented 8.9% of all the linguistic and cultural items contained in the text. It therefore means that non-Igbo speakers understood 91% of the identified Igbo features in the text. This showed that the Igbo language will not make a significant impact on the overall understanding of the message of the text.

In *Estrangement*, 5.5% intelligibility losses occurred. The study therefore established that if the remaining 94.5% of the Igbo features found in the book were understood by its non-Igbo audience, then the introduction of the Igbo language and culture cannot hinder the conveyance of the message of the text.

In *The Only Son*, the study revealed 12.3% intelligibility

losses. If only 12.3% of the peculiar features were problematic to its non-Igbo readers, it follows that the other 87.7% of the Igbo features in the text were understood by them. Then, the features of Igbo in the text are unlikely to impact negatively on its intelligibility.

In *Bridge to a Wedding*, the study shows that non-Igbo speakers will have problems understanding 12.7% of the Igbo features which is still an insignificant influence.

Therefore, the test results demonstrate that while Igbo features affected the language of the works, the influence is not a negative one because their extent of introduction is insignificant and thus negligible.

Conclusion

This study suggests that in writing Igbo fiction in English, its writers have two preoccupations: the communication of the theme of their writings, and the portrayal of the cultures or ways of life of the Igbo people. This duality of purpose if found to be typical, proves the unfeasibility of divorcing culture from language and the difficulty of Igbo writers in English to think completely in English.

The study concludes that the degree of intelligibility loss caused by the introduction of Igbo linguistic and cultural features in the works was insufficient to make a meaningful impact on their messages. Some of the reasons for the insignificant effect on comprehension, the

Table 12. Results of the CIT test.

Novels	Total interpretations	Total interpretation losses	Overall % losses
The concubine			
Direct borrowings	340	53	5.2
Direct interpretations	200	4	0.4
Idioms	200	8	0.8
Proverbs	280	24	2.45
Total	1020	89	8.85
Estrangement			
Direct borrowings	200	12	2
Direct interpretations	200	9	1.5
Idioms	140	8	1.3
Proverbs	60	4	0.7
Total	600	33	5.5
The only son			
Direct borrowings	420	47	4.1
Direct interpretations	220	28	2.5
Idioms	200	13	1.1
Proverbs	300	53	4.6
Total	1140	141	12.3
Bridge to a wedding			
Direct borrowings	100	11	1.7
Direct interpretations	200	10	1.6
Idioms	140	18	2.8
Proverbs	200	42	6.6
Total	640	81	12.7

study showed were their limited use and the provision of sufficient backgrounds for their understanding. Hence intelligibility by the non-Igbo readers of the texts was not jeopardized. Rather the study identifies that the Igbo features served to preserve Igbo ways of life, beautify the fictional expression of the works and finally enhance rather than impede their comprehensibility by giving universal status to particular incidents as illustrated in the use of Igbo idioms/proverbs. Therefore, the study recommends a shift of focus from the search for the appropriate form of fictional expression to the evaluation of the various approaches which the debate has produced. This will enable the determination of the effects of each of the approaches on the readers so as to evaluate their suitability, reception and effectiveness.

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