

## Review

# The English language as an instrument of exploitation in Colonial Nigeria: Instances from *Icheoku*

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**Among the most important and lasting legacies left behind by the British in Nigeria is the English language. While English has been one of the most unifying factors in Nigeria and has been the means of socio-economic upliftment for many individuals, it has also served some selfish and exploitative purposes. This paper studies how the few Nigerians (and Africans) who had acquired English in the early times used it as an avenue of exploiting the populace who were totally ignorant of the language. Besides the general sociolinguistic study, concrete instances are drawn from the Court Clerk in the Nigeria television comedy series “*Icheoku*”, who uses his monopoly of the knowledge of English both to intimidate the local population and to deliberately misinterpret the District Officer’s statements and judgements/rulings to his own advantage. From this study, a statement is made on the value of (exclusive) bilingualism as a tool for survival in a society of unequals.**

**Key words:** English, socio-economic status, exploitation, bilingualism, bombast.

## INTRODUCTION

The English language is well acknowledged to be one of the most important legacies left behind by the British in Anglophone Africa. With specific reference to Nigeria, Ayo Bamgbose declares: “Of all the heritage left behind in Nigeria by the British at the end of the colonial administration, probably none is more important than the English language” (Bamgbose, 1971: 35). The language came through the contacts the English-speaking people had with Africa through different means. These means include exploration where various explorers like Mungo Park, Clapperton, the Lander Brothers (John and Richard Lander), in the course of their business, brought elements of English to this part of the world through interaction with the Africans along the coast. There was also commerce: in which the British, following the Portuguese and the Dutch, dominated trade in the relevant societies, both in terms of trade in commodities, namely agricultural produce in exchange for manufactured goods, and in terms of trade in humans (the Slave Trade).

The Christian religion was a major factor that implanted English in Nigeria. With the roles of the British explorers and traders, English was essentially a “foreign language”, in that it was used mainly for communication with the

visiting foreigners or by the few Africans who travelled to the rest of the Anglophone world. Nevertheless, with the missionaries, the language became a “second language” in that there was now a conscious effort to teach English to the Africans so that it could be used for communication, not just with the Europeans, but with fellow Africans, especially in evangelism. Colonialism brought the implantation of English to a head in that, besides the establishment of government schools, it also evolved policies in terms of grants-in-aid often tied to the quantity and quality of English taught in government and missionary schools. However, there was equally the institutionalization of English as a medium of instruction and other measures aimed at encouraging the learning and use of English.

From that time (of colonialism) up to now, English has risen in profile in terms of the functions it performs in Anglophone Africa and Nigeria in particular. The importance of English in Nigeria includes its roles as an inter-ethnic lingua franca; an instrument of nationalism, nation-building and national cohesion; an official language used in education, politics and governance, the mass media, formal business and the judiciary; the language of diplomacy; the language of employment and

economic fortunes; a status symbol; the primary language of general literacy or documentation (reading and writing), and several other important sociolinguistic and psycholinguistic functions in Nigeria. While the many positive roles of English in Nigeria have been discussed by numerous writers, its negative role has received very little or no attention. However, English was not a blessing to all at all times. It is still not always a blessing, even in present-day Nigeria. It is the purpose of this paper to highlight the negative roles English played in colonial Nigeria, especially for selfish ends. Many of these roles have continued to the present day.

The paper further demonstrates this trend first through a general sociological examination of the feature and secondly through an examination of the fictional presentation of those roles of English in the Nigerian mass media comedy, *‘Icheoku’*. Two dimensions of exploitation with English are identified and discussed, namely the use of English for social domination and coercion and its use for materialistic exploitation.

### **ENGLISH AS A STATUS SYMBOL AND INSTRUMENT OF SOCIAL DOMINATION**

Before considering the more conspicuous case of material exploitation, it is proper to note the use of English as an instrument of social domination. Until recently and even in some environments in Nigeria, English is not just an instrument of communication: it is also a status symbol, conferring on fluent speakers some level of respectability and upward social mobility (James, 1979: 258-64; Odumosu, 1990: 46). Specifically, “among the Igbos, English is associated with sophistication and progress” (Igboanusi, 2002: 30). The lure of a high socio-economic status thus leads to a boost in the demand for competence in English. Nwoga has also noted that the use of bombast is “greatly effective” in Nigeria “where big words do make an impact” (Mazrui, 1975: 151).

Competence in English therefore automatically raised one’s social status by placing one in the middle class. Accordingly, in most social functions, an individual that is recognized to have significant competence in English is invited to the high table. Thus, in Chinua Achebe’s “No Longer at Ease”, the singular quality that gave Obi Okonkwo a place on the rostrum is the fact that he studied English, and in the white man’s land for that matter, and so was expected to have acquired a high command of English, the type they admired. The converse of this is that inability to speak or understand English was inimical to the interest of Nigerians in the societies where it had come to be admired. For example, in the societies where bombastic English was admired, failure to use bloated language raised doubts in the minds of the illiterate audience about one’s learning and thus robbed one of his/her deserved respect. This is the fate of Achebe’s Obi Okonkwo who, even after reading

English in London, makes a speech that is considered “most unimpressive” because it is fraught with “is and was” instead of “the kind of English they admired if not understood: the kind that filled the mouth, like the proverbial dry meat” (Achebe, 1960: 29).

Contrary to Obi Okonkwo, those who knew the additional African value of English exploited their knowledge for selfish ends: it was often used as an instrument of invective and intimidation. Thus, where two persons had any disagreement (and quarreled), the candidate with much or more competence in English had an advantage over his rival as he could readily invoke his mastery of English to intimidate the rival. He could speak English, sometimes challenge the rival to speak English in return, and win the applause of the audience, regardless of how ungrammatical the English would be, especially as few, if any, in the environs would know better. It was best for him if he mastered bombastic English whose high-falutin sound would not only make his rival feel most defeated but would also earn him a lot of acclaim from the audience. If he was a police officer or a soldier, or a retired officer, he could add further impetus to his English by dashing into his room and reappearing in his uniform, even if he was keeping it illegally.

It is to be noted that the use of a language as a social symbol is not peculiar to English in Nigeria or in Africa. Thus, Ali Mazrui tells us that this use of “fluency in a language other than one’s own” as “an attribute of intellectual prestige” had obtained even in the West where, for example, “an English person who is not widely read but has a great command of French, German or Sanskrit is in possession of a status symbol which might outshine the lustre of a more widely read but unilingual compatriot” (Mazrui, 1975: 90).

### **English as an instrument of material exploitation**

More dramatic than its role as a social symbol is the fact that competence in English has been a launch-pad to economic greatness in Nigeria right from the colonial era. English was undoubtedly “the language of opportunity” (Igboanusi, 2002: 22). It was the colonial service that offered good pay more than the indigenous occupations, and some competence in English was a *sine qua non* to such employment. Thus, Herbert Igboanusi considers it pertinent for us to note that the Igbo and Africans in general “were eager to learn the English language primarily because it guaranteed a paid employment for them, which was far preferred to the less rewarding but more tasking farm-work” (Igboanusi, 2002: 19). Even today some mastery of English – through certified formal education – is necessary for one to engage in the white-collar jobs that could place one in the middle class.

Besides the aforementioned, one of the advantages of bilingualism or polyglotism on the part of an individual is that it enables the language user to isolate some

interlocutors at particular stages in a communication situation. In that process, the bilingual can say certain things that are inimical to or are not to the advantage of the other individuals; and he can do so without the offended partner detecting how and where he has been hurt. In the use of English in colonial Nigeria, and even in some societies in present-day Nigeria, English was, and is, the exclusive preserve of a few Nigerians, such that in a village, there may be only one individual that may have some competence in English, however imperfect the quality of English may be. This monopoly of competence automatically conferred on that individual the opportunity of exploiting the other members of the community whenever occasion arose. We present a few scenarios. A memorable trend was in the Trans-Saharan Slave Trade era. As the Africans were raided, captured or bought and taken into the slave ships for transportation to Europe and America, they were forbidden from speaking their local languages. They were compelled either to speak English or keep their mouths shut. A major aim was to prevent the slaves from communicating and plotting revolt against their slave masters. The pressure of communication compelled most to capitulate on the use of English. This led to the gradual atrophy and death of the African languages among the slaves and the evolution of some varieties of English, including Black English, also called Black American English or Black Vernacular English (Fasold and Wolfram, 41-43).

Another typical case is in terms of interaction with the colonial civil service. English was a requirement for working in the colonial civil service, and being a labourer or messenger or policeman for the white man could earn one in a month what a hardworking farmer could not earn in a year. Where one had a case in the white man's court where the "District Officer" (henceforth D.O) or District Commissioner presided, one had the task of getting an interpreter. The interpreter could charge as much as he wanted, having the litigant at his mercy, especially if he had a monopoly of English bilingualism in the vicinity. Even where one needed the services of the colonial police, the situation was the same. Besides the fact that there was the need to write a statement, there was even the cause to state one's case orally. In either situation, an interpreter was needful. Even the complainant or plaintiff had the burden of stating his grievance or injury. For the defendant or accused, it was double jeopardy: first is the need to argue his innocence, and the second is to find an interpreter who could relay his defence to the court or police officer who may be from a linguistic background different from that of the litigant. Indeed, there were cases where, the police officer or civil servant would feign ignorance of the litigant's language even if he was from the same linguistic background or understood him. The interpreter could charge the litigant as much as he wanted.

An even more vicious case existed in terms of literacy, the ability to read and write. One of the consequences of

English in several parts of Nigeria is that English is the sole or main language of literacy: most individuals can only read or write in English. This is because they came in contact with literacy only through English, because the orthographies of their indigenous languages are not developed or because they have a negative attitude towards writing in the native languages. We take the case of a woman in colonial Nigeria whose husband or son works in the city. Where she needed to write a letter to her husband or son, she needed the services of an individual that is literate. The situation was the same if she received a letter from the husband or son and needed to have it read and interpreted to her. This individual had her in his full grip because he could charge her as much as he wanted or as much as he felt she could pay. Where she pleaded for mercy he could boast of his monopoly, tell her how difficult it was to write English and how much it cost him to acquire literacy in English. He could even challenge her to write the letter by herself if she taught it was child's play, or he could "advise" her to look for another person if she could not afford his price or thought he was charging too much. He knew another literate man could be found quite some distance away, and the cost of travelling such a distance was enormous. Of course, there were cases where people travelled long distances and paid exploitative prices to have letters written or read for them. It is known that there were individuals who lived in their communities simply by offering this service of reading and writing letters and providing other interpretation services in English. Some were retired civil servants and some were dismissed from the colonial master's work.

### **The exploitation with English in "*Icheoku*"**

"*Icheoku*" is a television series produced by the Nigerian Television Authority (NTA). Most of the episodes are produced by the Lagos national headquarters and a few by the Enugu zonal station. Therefore, the texts are in the audio-visual medium (videotapes). Copies of these videotapes were obtained from the relevant authorities in Lagos, Enugu and Abuja stations for our research. The relevant episodes were transcribed faithfully for the analysis. Where the indigenous language, Igbo, is spoken, we use the English sub-titles in the videos and some native-speaker informants to aid our transcription and interpretation. Textual/content analysis is the main method of study.

The series is set in the early and middle stages of British colonialism in Nigeria, that is, from about 1842 to 1926 (Omolewa, 1979: 14-26 "Emergence"; Omolewa, 1975: 103-117 "English Language"). Thus, we have an advantage of having a feel of the dynamics of the English language at that time when it was essentially a foreign language, serving an instrumental function between a few native bilinguals and an external audience (the British

nationals in Nigeria). It captures the entire gamut of communication – speaking, comprehending, reading, writing and translating – in a foreign language. Hence, the name '*Icheoku*', meaning Parrot, the bird that is best associated with verbatim, stereotyped reproduction of speech, which is what the Court Clerk (CC) does in parroting, that is, relating the utterances of the District Officer (D.O) and the natives, one to the other.

The main character of the study, the sole English-using bilingual, is the Court Clerk (henceforth "CC"). The CC, according to the District Officer (D.O), is "like the only star in the sky" ("Market"), being the only individual in the entire fictional Igbo society who has acquired the English language. He often claims much knowledge of English, often using bombastic English, although what he produces is essentially non-standard English, specifically Broken English.

The use of English as a status symbol and for intimidation is observed in '*Icheoku*' as the CC often uses the language to intimidate the other local population in the court of law. One way in which the CC does this is to challenge them to speak English themselves. He does this when the litigants give him challenges, especially in the interpretation of idioms and proverbs. He throws the challenge in Igbo, but the English translations {in square brackets below are in the sub-titles in the video cassettes}:

1. CC. [You are now speaking deep language. Will you call your father to come and interpret? How do you want me to interpret? You want me to lose my job] (NTA *Icheoku* "One").

2. C.C. [Can you explain that to the D.O? Can you speak English the way I do? You want me to lose my daily bread... Do not speak in proverbs again, or else I will throw you out and you will be convicted... Shut up! All right, translate it to the D.O by yourself. You people want me to say things I should not say...] NTA *Icheoku* "Bride" In each case, the indigenous people would recoil into their shell and succumb to the superiority of the CC by reason of his mastery of English.

The other strategy the CC adopts is to rain abuses on the Igbo litigants and audience in English.

3. [The Court messenger is hitting his snuff box, distracting the court]

D.O: What's happening there?

CC: Sharrup! Bagotee! Bombastic! – (NTA *Icheoku* "Bride")

The CC's expression "Sharrup" is a corruption of "Shut up!" Bagotee!" and "Bombastic" are supposed to be high falutin expressions of insult and abuse meted by the CC at the local audience whom he considers to be unruly or uncivilized in their conduct. The intended aim is achieved as the people are cowed into quietude.

4. C.C. Imagine the likeness!

Laughing without nobody making laughing. Adjective modigad! Protection without imbedi! – (NTA *Icheoku*

"Hungry").

5. [The audience murmur at the CC's misinterpretation] C.C: Sharrup! Grammatic oil!, without husband! ... Grammatic oil! Mosiquito

head! Placito ball! Gentleman without occur!... [To the Court Messenger]....

Sharrup! Grammatic Oil! A scorpion without a city!. – (NTA *Icheoku* "Inheritance").

In the aforementioned two excerpts, the CC uses "English," in its most ungrammatical but pragmatically most effective form, to quiet the non-English-using spectators, thereby earning or extorting tremendous respect for his "mastery" of English.

From these excerpts in general we see how the CC is able to use "English" to tame or humble the others in the community. It is also readily observable that much of his English is non-standard bombast, but it is no less effective: indeed, the grandiloquent non-standardness adds to its effectiveness since the standard lexical equivalents are not likely to have the bombastic import. As mentioned earlier, among the advantages of bilingualism is the fact that the bilingual can decide to isolate the monolingual interlocutor and have an aside with the speakers of the other tongue to which the monolingual has no access. The CC has such monopoly of Igbo-English bilingualism in the society, whereas the D.O is being completely blank about Igbo and the natives having a smattering of English. He takes undue advantage of this in different ways.

One way is to insult and curse the D.O in Igbo whenever the D.O uses English expressions that confuse him or does any other thing that does not go down well with him. The CC's favourite deity is Amadioha, the god of thunder, whom he invokes to strike the D.O. Where the D.O suspects some foul play, the CC has the wit to wriggle out.

6. CC: *Amadioha nna a magbuokwe gi, onye imi ogwu, n'ala nna k' iga-abia kpojem jie tuo m ikoni maka ihi umu nwanyi ndi.. Chineke kpokwa gi okwu...*[May Amadioha strike your big nose. You want to imprison me in my father's land. God punish you.]

D.O. You say "*Chineke qwaqwakaku.*" What does it mean?

CC. Master, I just build you up, saying you are a good man, sir - - (NTA *Icheoku* "One").

In the foregoing, the CC would have incurred the wrath of the DO had the latter been aware of the abusive words and curses the CC heaps on him, but he cleverly manipulates things by telling the DO that he was praising him when, in fact, the Igbo audience know the truth. Another way in which the CC capitalizes on his monopoly of bilingualism is to perpetuate corruption and gratify himself by exploiting the indigenous population. In one instance, the CC has misinterpreted the idiom "What iron have we got in the fire for today", implying "what case have we got in court today." Using the clue of the word "iron," he interprets the expression to mean an enquiry

about what Okpuzu the blacksmith (who deals with iron) had done with iron that day. Okpuzu is consequently summoned. When the D.O denies ever asking of any blacksmith, the CC exploits this situation and tells Okpuzu in Igbo:

7. [There's nothing the Englishman will not tell me. He says you should bring two goats to my house so that you will not be caught breaking iron] – (NTA *Icheoku* "Son").

A similar case arises in "Bride of War." In a clear case of malapropism, the CC conceives the D.O's reaction signal "O.K." to mean "Okey" a short form for the common Igbo name "Okechukwu." Consequently, he summons Mr Okey through the Court Messenger. When he realizes that he has made a mistake in interpretation, he (rather than repent and admit his error) capitalizes on the situation and tells the innocent Mr. Okey that the D.O has ordered him, Mr. Okey, to bring a goat to his (the CC's) house. The scene is as follows:

8. D.O: O.K., Court Clerk, I will like to hear from the chief.

C.C: [Calling] Okey! *Onwere onye ana-akpo Okey.*

C.M: Okey!

OKEY: [Answering from a back seat in the courtroom] Ooh!

C.C: *Puu ebea* [Who is Okey? Come out].

*Okey advances.*

*Kuru n' ebe ahu.*

D.O: What's wrong? What's it?

C.C: I think you say you want Okey.

D.O: I said what?

C.C: Okey!

D.O: No! No!

C.C: Okey, *nwa bekee si I ga-akputara ya out nne ewu.* I think you say no. *I nula ya n'onu nwa bekee.* [Okey, you will bring one goat to my house. That is the D.O's order]

OKEY: *Nna anyi gini ka m mekwara nu .* [What did I do?] (NTA *Icheoku* "Bride").

In another instance in the episode "Push Me, I Push You," the Court Messenger (henceforth "CM") staggers in court from the bribe of local gin he had shared with the CC. The CC tells the D.O (who asks for an explanation for the CM's staggering) that the CM's wife has "delivered" and he is himself hungry, having become penniless following the expenses on childbirth. When the D.O, in sympathy, gives ten shillings to the CC to hand over to the CM, he (the CC) stealthily slips the money into his own pocket instead and tells the CM to salute the D.O and go home. To get his one-month salary in this cheap manner is indeed a windfall: ten shillings is his monthly salary, as we learn from another episode "Missing Entrail."

A more hideous case is observed in another episode (NTA *Icheoku* "Matter") where a woman has brought her

husband to court for irresponsibility and improvidence: that the husband spends his money on voluptuous and wasteful hedonistic living while not providing the basic necessities of food, clothing and shelter for his family. The husband confesses his sin and pledges to turn a new leaf. In his ruling, the District Commissioner admonishes the man to become more responsible and advises the woman to tolerate her husband, but in his interpretation, the CC interprets the verdict to be the D.O has ordered the husband to be remanded in prison for irresponsibility for three months and ordered the wife (whose beauty the CC has been admiring and gloating at since she has been in the dock) to stay with him (the Court Clerk) until the husband is released. It goes without saying that the CC would take sexual gratification in her; after all, it was the D.O's order!

## CONCLUSION

The discussion in the foregoing has indicated some of the ways the English language served some selfish and exploitative roles in Africa, especially during the colonial times when there were very few users of English. While there are several of such exploitative uses of English in history, we have also demonstrated the parody of this historical truth in a fictional work, the mass media comedy *Icheoku*. These instances confirm the idea that working for the white man, and more specifically having a monopoly of English, automatically not only conferred a high social status but also granted one some economic advantage. From general historical facts and from the fictional presentation in *Icheoku*, we discover that this socio-economic well-being came not only through honest earnings but also through dubious means.

The use of the fictional work serves the purpose of giving us live examples of how this exploitation was done. Since art, including literature (like the drama *Icheoku*), mimics social reality, the literary work makes the presentation more vivid and memorable. The negative roles, with the positive ones, are discussed here with specific reference to Nigeria, but they are obtainable as well in other Anglophone societies both in Africa and in other parts of the world. Again, such ancillary roles have been performed by other languages like Greek, Latin, French, Sanskrit, etc., in societies where they were considered superior because of the level of civilization of their native speakers.

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