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THE USE OF PIDGIN ENGLISH IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *A MAN OF THE PEOPLE* IN THE CONTEXT OF A PRAGMATIC ADAPTATION READING

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Résumé

La langue anglaise est l'un des héritages coloniaux britanniques en Afrique. Son contact avec les langues indigènes du Nigeria a donné naissance à l'anglais pidgin nigérian, que de nombreux Nigériens utilisent pour atteindre des objectifs de communication au sein de la population ethniquement diverse. Bien que certains chercheurs considèrent le pidgin comme une menace pour l'anglais, cet article montre comment des écrivains comme Chinua Achebe (1966) l'ont utilisé pour construire des dialogues entre des personnages afin de saisir de manière adéquate les réalités socioculturelles que la langue anglaise ne parvient pas à traduire. Grâce à une lecture d'adaptation pragmatique, l'article identifie et analyse les facteurs et les conditions qui permettent l'utilisation du pidgin, et comment il contribue à la médiation pragmatique des défis de communication entre les différentes communautés de locuteurs dans *A Man of the People*. L'analyse a révélé que la banalisation et la marginalisation du pidgin par les intellectuels et les dirigeants politiques sont en corrélation avec leur incapacité à décoloniser leur perception du pidgin comme un produit de l'ingéniosité indigène. Par conséquent, le déséquilibre et le complexe d'infériorité développés par les moins instruits ou les analphabètes ont ajouté plus d'entraves à l'expansion du pidgin comme lingua franca.

Mot clés : Communication, anglais, pidgin, lecture pragmatique.

Abstract

The English language is one of the British colonial legacies in Africa. Its contact with indigenous languages in Nigeria gave birth to Nigerian Pidgin English, which many Nigerians use to achieve communication goals among the ethnically diverse population. Though some scholars view Pidgin as a threat to English, this paper, however, shows how writers like Chinua Achebe (1966) used it to construct dialogues among characters to adequately capture the socio-cultural realities that the English language fails to translate. Through a pragmatic adaptation reading, the paper identifies and analyzes factors and conditions that allow the use of Pidgin, and how it contributes to pragmatically mediate communication challenges among different communities of speakers in *A Man of the People*. The analysis has revealed that intellectuals and political leaders' trivialization and marginalization of Pidgin correlate with their failure to decolonize their perception of Pidgin as a product of indigenous ingenuity. Consequently, the imbalance and inferiority complex developed by less educated or illiterate people have added more drawbacks against the expansion of Pidgin as a lingua franca.

Keywords: Communication, English, Pidgin, Pragmatic Reading.

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Introduction

The English language spread throughout the world thanks to British imperialism and colonization. Its influence on other languages is significant and has become a concern worth debating within academia (Majidi, 2013; Li, 2017; Vakunta, 2018). This dominion or influence led to pidginization and creolization, which are linguistic effects observed in a multilingual context (Todd, 1980). For Li (2021), "Multilingualism is a natural way of life for millions of people around the world due to a deluge of factors like migration, politics, colonialism, religion, culture contact, education, economy, and mixed marriage" (p.568). In the Nigerian context, it is noted that Pidgin is the product of the hybridization between the English language and indigenous languages (Jourdan & Tuite, 2006; Ahmed, 2019; Alexander, 2016).

Hybridization is a phenomenon that occurs when different entities meet in a power relation. Hybridity is then linked to the formation of identity in many aspects of human life (Denis et al., 2015), especially in

migrations and encounters. For Hutnyk (2005), the concept of hybridity moved from its origins in biology and botany to social and cultural conceptualizations thanks to the works of Paul Gilroy, Stuart Hall, Iain Chambers, Homi Bhabha, and James Clifford. With the notion of hybridity in its extended form, Homi K. Bhabha became one of the most important contemporary figures in postcolonial studies (Drichel, 2008; Devarenne, 2010; Dehdari et al., 2013; Mostafaei, 2016). For him, "Hybridity is the sign of the productivity of colonial power, its shifting forces and fixities; it is the name for the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority)" (Bhabha, 1994, p.159). Pidgin can be considered as that which is not pure as it draws on different languages. So, for some people, "The idea of borrowing is sometimes taken to imply a weakening of culture, and it is exactly this that belongs to the essentialist nationalisms and chauvinisms that are arraigned against the hybrid, diasporic and the migrant (Hutnyk, 2005, p 81).

Though some scholars view Pidgin as a threat to English, this paper uses a pragmatic adaptation reading to identify and analyze factors and conditions that allow the use of Pidgin, and how the latter contributes to pragmatically mediate communication challenges among different communities of speakers in *A Man of the People*. The analysis shows that intellectuals and political leaders' trivialization and marginalization of Pidgin correlate with their failure to decolonize their perception of it as a product of indigenous ingenuity. Consequently, it argues that the imbalance and inferiority complex developed by less educated or illiterate people add more drawbacks against the expansion of Pidgin as a lingua franca.

Pragmatic adaptation theorists are concerned about using language to get things done. In other words, they are mindful of all the strategies employed by speakers to achieve communication goals (Duan & Ren, 2013; Huang, 2010). Therefore, Pragmatic Adaptation Theory "concentrates on how different speakers choose various linguistic elements and adapt to various contextual factors to meet the communicative needs and achieve the ideal effects" (Zou, 2010, p.160). In the world created by Chinua Achebe, characters use code-mixing and code-switching for the sake of adapting to the context and achieving communicative goals since "Adaptability is the property which

enables human beings to make negotiable linguistic choices from a variable range of possibilities in such a way as to approach points of satisfaction for communicative needs" (Tao, 2013, p.1176). As such, a pragmatic analysis in *A Man of the People* examines these possibilities speakers use to negotiate meaning to satisfy communication needs.

1. Socio-linguistic Factors in *A Man of the People*

Characters' interactions in a novel are discourses that engage and control the world in which they operate, and these "different discourses are different perspectives on the world, and they are associated with the different relations people have to the world, which in turn depends on their positions in the world, their social and personal identities, and the social relationships in which they stand to other people" (Fairclough, 2003, p.124). In other words, to make a discourse effective, the speaker needs to have recourse to pragmatic strategies and other social factors to fit the context of interaction "to make communications go smoothly and effectively" (Wang, 2012, p1533). Besides, characters' actions are, to a great extent, reconfigurations of socio-linguistic realities as can be read in the following statement:

In fictional conversation, language users or characters in fiction, like people in daily life, also have different personalities, thoughts, and

psychological activities. They live in the literary world, hold various professions, have their social interactions, and are frequently affected by their surroundings when they are engaged in verbal communication with one another (Zou, 2010, p.160).

From the passage above, it can be noted that the socio-linguistic context influences characters' interactions, which mirrors social realities in the physical world. In *A Man of the People*, there is a correlation between the use of Pidgin English and the characters' education level, topics of conversations, age and friendship factors, and the need for pragmatic convergence.

1.1. Characters' Level of Literacy

In *A Man of the People*, characters who do not speak English use pidgin as their means of communication regardless of the context. Pidgin becomes their official language when they engage in conversations with English speakers. Chief Nanga's home guard is one representative of this category of pidgin users when he receives Odili at the gate: "Make you park for outside. I go go haskam if he want see you. Wetin be your name?" (Achebe, 1966, p.32). Unlike illiterate characters, intellectuals like Odili Samalu (a school teacher and the son of a former district interpreter), Chief Nanga (the minister and former school teacher), Maxwell Kulamo (a lawyer and Odili's friend from university), and Eunice (a lawyer and Maxwell's fiancée)

are "the ownership of the white man's language" (Achebe, 1966, p.12). They use standard English in most part of their interactions but employ code-switching to express jokes and love conquests.

One joking scenario involves Chief Nanga (Minister) and Chief Koko (Minister) as the latter claims the coffee he has taken has been poisoned, which gives him a serious stomach-ache. The claim is revealed to be false, leading to the following interaction: "Why I no go fear?" asked Chief Koko laughing foolishly. 'If na you you no go piss for inside your trouser?'

Nonsense! Why I go fear? I kill person?" (Achebe, 1966, p.35).

The use of pidgin by both ministers can be explained by the fact that they can speak English and pidgin. With a non-pidgin user, the conversation would have been in English despite the prevailing joking atmosphere. Chief Koko and Chief Nanga use code-switching because, for Ifechelobi & Ifechelobi (2016), "Code-switching is one of the inevitable results of bilingualism/multilingualism. Every bilingual individual is faced with the choice of code to use according to the situation at hand, especially in a situation where all interlocutors speak the same languages" (p.3). In short, the characters' literacy or illiteracy can invite the use of pidgin: it can be used among illiterates, or illiterates and bilingual intellectuals, or

intellectuals whereby the topic of the conversation plays a crucial role.

1.2. Topics of Characters' Conversations

A topic is the central organizing principle of a discussion, either verbal or written. It offers an occasion for speaking or writing, and a focus that governs what is said. A topic is also known as a subject matter of a conversation. It is an avenue by which participants arrive at other subjects as a conversation or dialogue unfolds. In *A Man of the People*, topics of conversations have led to the use of Pidgin, especially among bilingual intellectuals. For instance, a dialogue between Odili Samalu and James (the journalist) runs:

'Who is the young lady?'
'Ah,' he said, leaving his mouth wide open for a while as a danger signal. 'Make you no go near am-o. My hand no de for inside.'

I told him I wasn't going near am-o; I merely asked who she was (Achebe, 1966, pp.15-16).

In this interaction, Odili and the journalist can speak English fluently as intellectuals. Yet, though Odili puts his question in English, James decides to answer in Pidgin because Chief Nanga's love conquest is the central point Odili wants to discuss with James. The latter finds pidgin as the appropriate means of communication to talk about "the young lady". So, irrespective of his intellectual sophistication, the journalist switches from

English to pidgin since the information he wants to deliver is itself a code. With bilinguals like Odili and James, it can be said that "one person may use one language while others respond with other languages. An individual can also use one language first and then jump into another in continuous utterances (Li, 2021, p.568). This explains the fact that Odili, in the dialogue above, starts with English and switch to Pidgin within a single sentence: "I told him I wasn't going near am-o; I merely asked who she was" (Achebe, 1966, p.16).

1.3. Age and Friendship Factors

Age and friendship contribute to the use of Pidgin in *A Man of the People*. The interaction between Max (Maxwell) and Odili, two friends and intellectuals of the same generation, shows their predilection for English when they discuss serious political topics. However, when they meet as friends, they opt for Pidgin as shown in this dialogue:

'Good gracious!' Max shouted, shaking my hand violently. 'Diligent! Na your eye be this?' Diligent was a version of Odili I had borne at school. 'Cool Max!' I greeted him in return. 'The writer of these lines!' We laughed and laughed and the tears I had not shed last night came to my eyes (Achebe, 1966, p.75).

As former university students and friends, Max and Odili choose Pidgin to express their connectedness. Though Chief Nanga and Odili are from the same village, the latter does not interact with the former as he does with

Max, who is of Odili's generation. In a sense, age and other social dimensions can create contexts for the use of Pidgin among intellectuals. Otherwise, after the greetings that are part of friendly jokes, they would have reverted to English since Odili is not so fond of Pidgin as he often refuses "to be drawn into the levity of pidgin" (Achebe, 1996, p.89). Odili and Max have continued their discussion in Pidgin because age "impacts considerably on how we are perceived and how we are treated. Likewise, it affects how we perceive and treat others, all of which is mediated through language (Llamas, 2006, p.69). Besides, youth are more interested in Pidgin because it helps them communicate with their mates no matter their level of education.

Due to its simplified grammar, the younger generation finds Pidgin as a way to escape the prescribed English they teach them in schools and universities, which, for some critics, affects negatively the mastery of academic English (Unachukwu et al., 2020). For students, Pidgin is adaptive and creates bridges among social classes (Bhardwaj, 2020) as it helps them project their identity and engage in "the social practice of negotiating between different communities" (Rupp, 2013, p.13). Therefore, it can be said that the future of Pidgin heavily depends on young people's perception of it. Pidgin can have less impact on them as professionals and

intellectuals if they consider it as a transitory language.

1.4. The Need for Convergence

Convergence is another need that compels characters to use Pidgin. It is mainly used by intellectuals when they have to converse with people who speak only Pidgin. They are likely to use it to secure effective communication. Chief Nanga, James (the journalist), and Eleanor (Mrs John) use pidgin in the following dialogue because Eleanor is unable speak English fluently:

'If you come as soon as you close,' he said, 'you can stay in my guest-room with everything complete...'
 'Make you no min' am, sha-a,' said Mrs John to me. 'I kin see say you na good boy. 'Make you no gree am spoil you. Me I no de for dis bed-room and bath-room business-o. As you see dis man so, na wicked soul. If he tell you stand make you run.'
 Everybody laughed.
 'Eleanor, why you wan disgrace me and spoil my name so for public for nothing sake. Wetin I do you? Everybody here sabi say me na good Christian. No be so, James?'
 'Ah, na so, sir,' replied the journalist happily (Achebe, 1966, p.18).

In the passage above, Nanga and James are forced through convergence to use Pidgin because of Eleanor. To make themselves more straightforward and keep the joking mood brought in by Eleanor, both Nanga and James drop their English and converge toward Pidgin through code-switching.

Convergence is significant in a multilingual context as described in *A Man of*

the People. It helps negotiate communication during interactions:

To achieve the communicative goal, a speaker has to choose one proper utterance which is understandable to a hearer. Therefore, subjects (utterer and interpreter) are the most important elements in communication. If the two parties speak the same language, it would be less likely to switch codes. When at least one of the two speakers can speak a different language, one of them has to negotiate to the other in order not to fail in the communication (Li, 2021, p.571)

The statement above applies to Eleanor's situation since Chief Nanga and James can speak a different language. Convergence becomes one of the most powerful and pragmatic strategies both Chief Nanga and James use to achieve effective communication. It makes Pidgin a *lingua franca* in the novel, which mirrors the socio-linguistic realities in Nigeria (Tao, 2013; Wang, 2012).

In the interaction below, Chief Nanga switches to Pidgin out of convergence and pragmatic adaptation in order to pay the fare to the taxi driver who has dropped Odili at Nanga's house. Nanga also expects the driver to charge him less:

'Come right inside', said the Minister.
'We have been waiting for you all morning. The house is yours.'
I hung back to pay the taxi driver.
'No, no, no!' cried my host. 'Go inside. I will settle with the driver.
He na my very good friend, no be so, driver?'

'Yes, sir, master,' said the driver
(Achebe, 1966, p.31).

In the conversation above, Nanga uses Pidgin to create kinship and connectedness with the driver to have a fair bargain on the transport fare. Pidgin, therefore, reduces the social distance between the minister and the driver, making the latter a 'good friend' to the former. Convergence, in *A Man of the People*, calls for a pragmatic usage of Pidgin when intellectuals or politicians have to engage in formal and informal conversations with the ethnically diverse people who mainly rely on Pidgin to negotiate effective communication.

2. Drawbacks in the Use of Pidgin in *A Man of the People*

The significant role of Pidgin in Nigeria is undeniable since it "has so permeated the various social strata of the Nigerian society that it is today viewed as one of the most convenient forms of communication in reaching heterogeneous target audiences" (Calvain, 2015, p.1). In a sense, the users of Pidgin are more numerous than those using English. Pidgin, therefore, serves different ethnic groups in their daily interactions (Danladi, 2013; Atechi, 2011).

However, drawbacks refer to the damage to reputation or unfavorable, inferior or prejudicial condition that Pidgin experiences as an emerging language (Ghani et al., 2012). Critics noted a linguistic discrimination between English and Pidgin,

which maintains Pidgin in its marginal condition in Nigeria (Tanda, 2015; Sala, 2009). All users of Pidgin do not assign vital objectives to it within formal and informal contexts. According to Ifechelobi & Ifechelobi (2016, p.5), “Achebe's adoption of Nigerian Pidgin in his novel at a time it was called a hybrid language may be seen as an attempt to reverse the prejudice against it and to prove that, that which was given a low status can be used positively by post-colonial writers to add aesthetic value and cultural relevance to their writings”. It can be underscored that Achebe did not only promote artistic representation of the use of Pidgin, but also exposed the prejudice against it. Intellectual characters like Odili, Max and Eunice, and decisions makers like Chief Nanga and Chief Koko hardly use Pidgin to deal with serious political or administrative topics. Through trivialization, they treat Pidgin with contempt the same way imperialists and colonizers dealt with indigenous languages in order to give privileged and dominant positions to their languages (English, French, Portuguese and Spanish) in Africa.

2.1. Trivialization of Pidgin

In *A Man of the People*, Pidgin is used to handle unimportant matters. Whenever characters who can use English switch to Pidgin, it is noted that the topic of the interaction does not evoke serious concerns

like political governance and management, administration, and business involving national and international partners. The following interaction between Odili and his friend Max Andrew is in Pidgin, not because both former university students want to give credit to the language but because of the topic they discuss as they meet:

‘How the go de go?’ I asked.
 ‘Bo, son of man done tire.’
 ‘Did you find out about that girl?’ I asked.
 ‘Why na so so girl, girl, girl, girl, been full your mouth. Wetin? So person no fit talk any serious talk with you. I never see’ (Achebe, 1966, p.20).

From the excerpt above, Odili who is not found of Pidgin, welcomes his friend Max in Pidgin by asking how the latter feels. The intention behind Odili’s choice is revealed when he introduces the issue of a girl about whom he wants more information. His friend Max then recognizes that the topic is trivial and does not deserve “serious talk”. Such lack of seriousness is also shown in another conversation between Chief Nanga and Odili when the latter volunteers to help the former draft his political speech. Nanga answers Odili in these terms: “‘Oh! that speech,’ he said wearily. ‘I shall finish in ten minutes; it is not important’ (...). Talking is now in my blood – from teaching into politics - ‘all na so so talk talk’ (Achebe, 1966, 60). After saying in English that his speech is not about a serious topic, that is, an ordinary demagogic political talk, Nanga ends the rest of his

statement in Pidgin to confirm the triviality of the matter. It also confirms the marginal and derogatory role assigned to Pidgin in a context where English receives prestige and privileges. The attitude of Chief Nanga and Odili concurs with Asiegbor and Susuawu's (2020) point of view that Pidgin is mostly used by bilingual intellectuals to talk about casual love conquests, casual sexual intercourse, joking and gossips, or politics in a joking manner. For them, English has a respectability and reputation, which need not to be affected by triviality. The dominant position of English can be explained by the fact that "In multilingual societies like Nigeria, language which can be used as an effective instrument for national development and the promotion of national consciousness and unity can also be used as a weapon for marginalization and or exclusion" (Yusuf, 2012, p.898). Unfortunately, in *A Man of the People*, intellectuals are those who participate in reinforcing the marginalization of Pidgin.

The trivialization of Pidgin in the novel is dominant in conversations around sex. For example, after having sex with a girl Odili is planning to conquer, Chief Nanga apologizes in the following terms: "But anyway I am sorry if you are offended; the mistake is mine. I tender unreserved apology. If you like I can bring you six girls this evening. You go do the thing sotay you go beg say no want again. Ha, ha, ha, ha!" (Achebe,

1966, p.72). In a paragraph of three sentences, Nanga tries to express his apology in the first two sentences because he wants Odili to believe he is serious. The joking mood Nanga introduces to diminish the moral gravity of his action is fully expressed in the last sentence which is in Pidgin. It shows the derogatory role the minister, Chief Nanga, assigns to Pidgin.

2.2. Inferiority Complex

Inferiority complex in *A Man of the People* is found in the attitude of some characters who cannot speak English fluently. The feeling of inadequacy of those characters has a correlation with a superiority complex intellectuals demonstrate when they use English to impress the majority who relies exclusively on Pidgin. To operate in such an environment, Peter, Odili's servant, tries to use sophisticated words to sound knowledgeable when he talks with his Master:

'You no hear the news for three o'clock?' I asked, feigning great seriousness.

'Sir?'

'Government done pass new law say na only two times a day person go do chop now. For morning and for afternoon. Finish.'

He laughed.

'That is next to impossibility,' he said. Peter liked his words long (Achebe, 1966, p.20).

In this interaction, Peter does not show any sign of illiteracy. His utterance is grammatically correct and thereby denotes a mastery of English. Peter cannot, therefore, be

classified as illiterate, which is his goal when using “long words”. He avoids speaking Pidgin because of the contemptuous perception of it. Peter’s attitude is valid to a great extent since, as Adler (1956) noted, inferiority complex arises when a person finds himself in a situation where his abilities and attitudes are denigrated or rejected by other people.

The complex of inferiority caused by the privileged position that English occupies in *A Man of the People* increases the number of those whose attitudes constitutes drawbacks to the use of Pidgin. Their actions challenge studies on the future of Pidgin that argue that the attitude of Nigerian undergraduate and graduate students toward the use of Pidgin is positive and that in the next few years, it will be used in all situations of communication in the same way as the English language (Buba et al., 2016). By bringing the ambivalence of Peter and intellectuals’ derogatory use of Pidgin, Achebe exposes both the suffering of inadequacy of the majority of people that speak Pidgin and the hypocritical political discourse whereby politicians and intellectuals tend to be concerned about the promotion of hybrid language like Pidgin in Nigeria. The denigration of Pidgin reveals the mismatch between the government’s linguistic policy and the reality surrounding the use of Pidgin in administration and other

official spheres. Achebe ironizes and ridicules the attitudes of politicians like Chief Nanga who are proud to be called “men of the people” as they claim to speak Pidgin (the language of the people).

Conclusion

This paper has identified and analyzed factors which can invite the use of Pidgin in Chinua Achebe’s *A Man of the People*. It has been revealed that intellectuals like Odili Samalu, Maxwell Kulamo and Chief Nanga are perfect bilinguals, who do not have any pressure to use Pidgin on a daily basis. Other characters like Peter (Odili’s house-boy) and Chief Nanga’s house guard represent the majority of the ethnically diverse Nigerians who use Pidgin in both formal and informal contexts. It is noted that the topic of the conversation, age and friendship factors, and the need for convergence have created conditions for characters to speak Pidgin. All these factors contribute to the visibility and expansion of Pidgin in the novel.

However, the paper has revealed that intellectual characters like Odili, Nanga and Maxwell use Pidgin when the topic of their conversation is about love, jokes and political putrefaction or corruption. They trivialize Pidgin and contribute to its marginalization and loss of reputation, and this, to the benefit of English. These characters have failed to decolonize their perception of Pidgin as a product of indigenous ingenuity. By doing

so, less educated characters like Peter prefer speaking poor English to fluent Pidgin. It has been established that trivialization, marginalization and inferiority complex have become drawbacks, which weaken the already fragile political will to financially invest in the teaching and promotion of Pidgin. In the final analysis, it has been observed that the fate and future of Pidgin as portrayed by Chinua Achebe in *A Man of the People* heavily depends on intellectuals and political leaders who have not, so far, allowed it to enjoy the same privileges as English.

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