

Language and Power for Postcolonial Authors

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In this paper the author explores the differences in language and power as presented in Postcolonial writings by Nigerian authors. The author also explores the pros and cons of writing in a native language versus writing in English, as a means of reaching a greater audience or preserving a culture.

Nigerian author Chinua Achebe draws attention to the segregation of language in his novel *A Man of the People* by employing the use of various forms of English, differing local languages, and pidgin English. The languages are used in situations to communicate control and power in the novel. A hierarchy of language is established in Achebe's text, demonstrating the inclusive and exclusive powers of language. For example, in Chief Nanga's political speech, language is used selectively to involve only the European educated villagers, thus privileging English over local languages. Language is used to control situations, presenting a language ladder that translates to a social hierarchy in *A Man of the People*. English conversations include European educated listeners, but exclude older generations, uneducated, and underprivileged listeners. Pidgin is used in more casual conversations, but is not appropriate for all discussions. Mastering the language pecking order provides social power, granting control to those who can speak both English and the vernacular tongue. This linguistic exploitation and corruption reflects the shattered and corrupted people in the novel. Language in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* also functions to communicate a biased hierarchy of language that still applies to postcolonial African authors today.

Conversations in varying social situations in *A Man of the People* present the hierarchy of language. This hierarchy is evident in the conversation between Chief Nanga and the prosperous Agnes Akilo before a dinner party. As they converse in English, Odili's narration points out how Chief Nanga's "phonetics had already moved up two rungs to get closer to hers" (Achebe, *The Man*, 49). Earlier in the paragraph, Odili informs the reader how Akilo's English speech hints at her childhood in England, demonstrating that Nanga has altered his English in order to match her British educated speech. Used to impress, English is portrayed in the novel as being at the peak of the language hierarchy; the lower ranking of other languages in comparison to English is evident throughout the text.

In a conversation between Odili and Mrs. Nanga, language hierarchy is noticeable, as Mrs. Nanga replies in pidgin English, while Odili responds in "our language, refusing to be drawn into the levity of pidgin" (Achebe, *The Man*, 89). This quote demonstrates that Odili feels that pidgin isn't an appropriate language to

discuss certain matters. In this case, he prefers to speak in the vernacular. However, when conversing with his good friend Andrew, Odili jokes lightly in pidgin, but switches out of it as his housekeeper, Peter, comes into the room. In response to Odili's pidgin, "Government done pass new law say na only two times a day person go de chop now", Peter, who is said to like "his words long", answers with, "[t]hat is next to impossibility" (Achebe, *The Man*, 21). The conversation continues, though not in pidgin. Comparing Odili's conversations with Andrew, Peter, and Mrs. Nanga exemplifies how different languages are used in certain contexts. These examples demonstrate the language hierarchy: pidgin is used in casual, friendly conversations; local language demonstrates seriousness; English is used to impress.

This language pecking order reflects a social hierarchy: a disconnected population fractured by political power. When there was no election at hand, Chief Nanga stated that he would have preferred to not speak in English, however, "speeches made in the vernacular were liable to be distorted" (Achebe, *The Man*, 13). Though he is conscious that there are those in attendance who won't understand what he is saying, Nanga utilizes English for politics. This makes the target audience of the speech very small, even by European standards. This example shows a social preference toward the educated English speakers, rather than the population as a whole. English is used to exclude certain people in various situations, such as when Odili speaks with Edna while her father is present. Odili flatters Edna by saying that she has a good memory and that she is a beauty, but he says so in "English so [her] father would not understand" (Achebe, *The Man*, 92). Both Nanga and Odili utilize English to exclude others, which extends into the social sphere of the novel. Nanga and Odili use English consciously to exclude those who don't speak it. The inability to speak certain languages excludes people from receiving certain information, creating disunity in the social scene. The various languages Achebe exhibits in *A Man of the People* reiterate the idea of a disconnected society where language is used to exclude and segregate the population.

While language fractures and separates the people, it is further complicated as the narrator points out a community formed from those who speak "our" language. By using the collective "our", the narrator denotes a sense of community, but only with those

that speak a certain language. This collective use of “our” is seen in a conversation between Edna and Odili as Edna comments in English, then explains “in our language” that she has other tasks to accomplish (Achebe, *The Man*, 93). Juxtaposed with an English remark, Odili’s linguistic switch builds tension between English and the communal “our” language in that quote. Language within *A Man of the People* presents complicated themes that contribute to the disunion of Odili’s people. Politics are presented in English, holding information from the educated, while the vernacular creates a community, leaving pidgin only for certain situations. The complications brought up in Achebe’s texts are evident in the varying languages used in the work.

While fragmented languages create a symbol for social division in *A Man of the People*, the division extends past a symbol grounded in a text. Just as characters maneuver the linguistic split in *A Man of the People*, African authors navigate writing in colonized, or local languages. Chinua Achebe’s utilization of language extends past the purposes of *A Man of the People* and acts as an agent to promote Achebe’s opinion on the importance of language in literature. An issue facing postcolonial authors is the scholastic appreciation of English works over local language literature. Whether an author should write in his or her mother tongue or the colonized language is a heavily debated topic right now. For some, writing in imperialist-imposed language represents a loss of African culture, which can be maintained if indigenous African languages are published. Others believe in communicating African ideals to a wider audience through colonized languages.

Writing in English for Nigerians, Chinua Achebe demonstrates that English can be utilized to depict African experiences, despite its colonizing roots. African authors who choose to write in English aren’t unpatriotic, but are including English as a part of their nation’s history. Achebe doesn’t believe that writing in English betrays Nigeria, but instead allows for a new voice of Africa to be heard (Achebe, “English”, 29). Achebe’s opinion 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 value as a medium of international exchange will be lost” is seen through his texts (Achebe, “English”, 29).

English as a universal language has a wide readership, which can communicate the identity of Africa to a larger audience. Achebe accomplishes just that in his work, *A Man of the People*. Though written in English, it communicates issues of social manipulation present both in the text and in Africa. In his novel, Achebe communicates the social ills that language hierarchy creates within his text, but allows that parallel to extend past the work to discuss the connotations of language in postcolonial works. Achebe writes in English to represent some of the struggles in Africa through the split languages in *A Man of the People*. English is Africanized to communicate African identity, allowing the scope of English to provide a wider audience than a mother tongue would. Writing in such a way makes it a new English, remembering the past, but moving forward to vocalize Africa's new voice.

Chinua Achebe is not the only author currently engaged in this discussion. Another prominent spokesperson on the struggles of postcolonial languages is Kenyan author Ngugi wa Thiong'o. His stance on language and Africa provides a rebuttal to Achebe's opinions in this language debate. Although Ngugi initially published in English, he now writes exclusively in his mother tongue, Gikuyu. His switch is purposed to prevent the obliteration of African culture through "linguicide." In his text, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature*, Ngugi retaliates against Achebe's assertion, asking why an African writer should "become so obsessed by taking from his mother-tongue to enrich other tongues" (Ngugi, *Decolonising*, 8). Ngugi believes in the importance of representing culture through language and preserving Africa through African languages.

Ngugi discusses how language is central to culture and asserts that an "oppressor language inevitably carries racist and negative images of the conquered nation, particularly in its literature, and English is no exception" (Ngugi, *Moving*, 35). Ngugi believes in maintaining African culture through African languages, something that can't be done through imperialistic European languages due to the erasable negativity and racism it houses. Ngugi writes for Africa, asserting that for postcolonial African writers, "the language he has chosen already has chosen his audience" (Ngugi, *Moving*, 73). While Achebe has accepted an Africanized English to represent African concerns to a wider audience, Ngugi prefers to write in

Gikuyu to speak to Africa. Ngugi's publications still reach different languages, but "through the medium of interpretation and translation" (Ngugi, *Moving*, 39). Achebe has taken a different approach, believing that English can be altered to reflect African ideals, while still communicating on a global scale. This debate extends beyond Ngugi and Achebe, but their viewpoints represent prominent opinions about this expansive topic.

Demonstrating the hierarchy of language in a current event, the issue of language in Africa made a recent debut in a radio interview between U.S. Ambassador to Nigeria, James F. Entwistle and Wazombia FM. Nigerians were delighted to hear the interview conducted in pidgin, especially because of the political significance of the interview. Omotunde "Lolo" Davide, the host, said "no one would believe that an ambassador would bring himself to speak pidgin" because pidgin isn't thought to be "the language of diplomacy" (Entwistle). Entwistle's approach of using pidgin was to reach the people at the "grassroots level." The article ends by stating that by using pidgin, Entwistle "sold himself into the hearts of many Nigerians." The power of language in politics is reiterated in this example. While Chief Nanga used English to include educated villagers in *A Man of the People*, Entwistle could be using pidgin to gain support from the grassroots level. By speaking pidgin, Entwistle gives the appearance of wanting to familiarize with local culture and people. This could be a pure intention, or it could be to win votes from a certain class, as Nanga did in Achebe's text. This current event demonstrates the prevalent issue of language and the issues surrounding the present language hierarchy.

Indian-born, British writer Salman Rushdie's opinion on language in Imaginary Homelands provides a possible way to reconcile various viewpoints on the topic. Both Achebe and Ngugi are trying to reconnect with their homeland, but through separate methods. Rushdie grapples with this as well, but brings a different approach. Achebe's English has reflected on African ideals, troubling African politics and social limitations as seen in *A Man of the People*. Ngugi has likewise been successful in articulating his vision of Africa, but through Gikuyu publications. For Rushdie, we utilize English "because we can find in that linguistic struggle a reflection of other struggles taking place in the real world, struggles between the cultures within ourselves and the influences at work

upon our societies” (Rushdie, 17). Rushdie’s statement on employing English displays the struggle inherent to postcolonial authors, but could also be read as an appreciation of the struggles within the usage of English. Achebe’s novel embodies this idea, utilizing English’s connotations of power to display control not only within the text, but also to the fracturing of Africa through language.

While this hierarchy of language elicits strong opinions on both sides, this divergence in opinion has provided an additional method of communicating personal opinions in publications. Because English is seen as a higher language, the power dynamic in *A Man of the People* is successful. If English didn’t privilege the educated, the book’s message about power and control wouldn’t have been successfully exhibited through language. Language hierarchy provides a subversive reading to novels and politics, as seen with the Entwistle interview. Because the English language is attributed to power, it is utilized to demonstrate the incorrect power dynamic of language. It can be used to reject political control, demonstrating a different power as demonstrated by Ngugi’s writings and authorial decisions. Though an abolition of the hierarchy would allow an equal appreciation of literature no matter the language rendered, it would eliminate some techniques to display power and control in other ways. It is wrong that English is looked at as being superior; however, while it is instated authors can utilize the power to communicate their view on the topics. Both accepting and rejecting English demonstrates different forms of power. By choosing to write in the imperialistic language, a way for a new voice to emerge is provided, redefining imperialistic ties to reflect the culture of the former colonized people. Rejecting imperialized languages communicates a full-bodied embracing of roots, appreciating culture without the shadow of imperialistic powers. The power attributed to some languages isn’t justified, though it does provide an alternative method of communicating power dynamics because it does hold control.

The issue of representing Africa through imperialistic language or mother tongues is a relevant and difficult task that authors encounter. In a lecture at Brigham Young University titled “European Metaphysical Empires: The Struggle for Language,” Ngugi discussed the current struggle of working with language. Ngugi asserted that English isn’t inherently better, but a power

relation has placed it in a position of superiority. Ngugi proposed replacing this hierarchy with a network. This language network would build connections between cultures that would exhibit a continuous give-and-take. Though it would be difficult to eliminate the engrained dominance of language present today, Ngugi's proposition could solve this concern. Though no clear-cut solution is at hand, awareness of the issue is generating ideas that could potentially solve the power dynamic of language. While the struggle to eliminate language hierarchy continues, Achebe's *A Man of the People* demonstrates the control English exhibits over individuals while also reflecting on the linguistic concerns that permeate postcolonial authors.

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