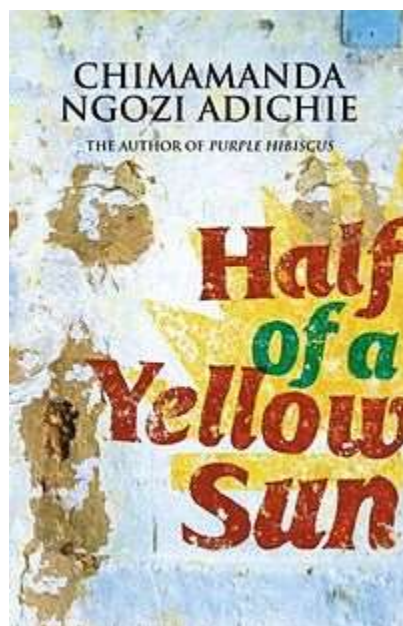


Code-alternation in Strengthening Indigenous Cultures and Languages: A Feminist Reading

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Abstract

It is a known fact that English language was imposed on indigenous language speakers, and because of its world influence, English is dominant over other indigenous languages in Nigeria. However, when English migrates to foreign countries, it adapts and indigenises. The new users absorb and liberate it to embody the energies of their respective sensibilities. This paper identifies a feminist reading of the use of code alternation in strengthening indigenous cultures and languages in literary text. It uses Chimamada Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* as a sample. Few extracts of code switched items; the switch to and from different varieties of Nigerian English, Pidgin or an L1, depending on change in addressee or even the status or age of different addressees, were selected from the novel and analysed using insights from Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai (2001) revised Markedness Model theory of code-switching. It observes that the linguistic, social and cultural contexts of a feminist writer necessitate and propel the growth of code varieties and these serve as acts of identity.

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The paper concludes that the use of code alternation in female writing strengthens indigenous cultures and languages. It submits that such practice portrays the feminist/writer's African experience, creates new English that has close relationship with its ancestral home but transformed to boost its new African environs.

Key words: Indigenous culture, indigenous language, feminist writing, code alternation (mixing/switching).

Introduction



Chimamanda Adichie

Courtesy: <http://lectures.princeton.edu/2010/chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-2/>

The centrality of language in the survival of indigenous cultures is obvious. Language is an essential aspect of the maintenance of ethnic and cultural identity, and is central to current discussion of minority rights (Mey, 2001). The Nigerian writer particularly has a serious challenge in terms of language use. S/he is faced with the problem of choosing audience for his/her work, mainly as the facts s/he reconstructs, concerns, Nigeria. If s/he uses his/her indigenous language, the writing will be limited to an ethnic literature and may not have a natural flow. S/he however, communicates with the greater section of the literate Nigerian population and abroad, if the English language is used. But this does not accommodate the group of illiterate Nigerian population. The realisation that when one is given a language, s/he is given a new culture has continued to disturb African writers and

intellectuals who are bent on breaking away from such linguistic and cultural domination. Achebe, for example, argues:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to different kinds of use. 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 international exchange will not be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience... I feel that English will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings. (Achebe, 1975: 62)

Achebe's argument is revolutionary and since then, the African writer has bent the English language in several ways in order to express and strengthen his/her culture and language (identity). The alteration of English to carry "the weight of African experience" enables the writer to remain universally intelligible and, creates room for the promotion of the writer's culture and the propagation of a new language.

Scholarly studies on code alternation (code-mixing and code-switching) such as Sridhar (1978), Pfaff (1979), Poplack (1982) have concluded that code-mixing and code-switching (henceforth CM and CS) are used in most speech situations among bilinguals as well as among monolinguals in terms of style shifting. Some other studies such as Sridhar & Sridhar (1980) have discussed the fact that if the bilingual speaker is able to use different codes in a given speech situation, then, there must exist what is called "the bilingual's grammar". This means that the grammars of at least two language systems of a bilingual are working simultaneously. These studies have also illustrated that code alternation is manipulated by bilinguals in order to achieve different goals and functions such as emphasis, effective communicative goals, solidarity, sociocultural authenticity, friendliness, warmth, and so on.

Other works on code alternation hinge on Hospital interactions. For example, Odebunmi (2010) studies code alternation in Nigerian Hospital interactions. It samples the interactions between doctors and patients and indicates the code alternation strategies in them. Also, Ezeife (2012) examines lexical borrowing as code alternation strategy in gender

discourse. She uses literary texts with ample gender issues for the analysis. Unlike previous studies, the present study is strikingly different since it looks at code alternation as a veritable resource in female writing for strengthening indigenous cultures and languages using Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*.

In a determined effort to identify, to strengthen his/her language, and to maintain international relevance that in spite of his/her level of mastery of the English language, the Nigerian writer has decided:

To explore new linguistic models which can combine elements of both the indigenous languages and the English language to reach a broader local audience without sacrificing their international listeners. Earlier writers had used similar experiments – local idioms, loan-words from local languages, transliterations, code-mixing and, especially, pidginized expressions but in a rather limited way to portray local colour, socio-economic class of certain characters or to produce humour. But these earlier writers did not use a non-standard English variety in a wide and consistent way as unique mode of expression to reach their chosen audience, till now. (Uzoezie, 2009: 186)

Since indigenous languages “constitute the authentic products of indigenous cultures and identities” (Brutt-Griffler, 2006: 37), they are in special need of protection. The use of code alternation in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, for instance, displays the elaborate way of promoting ones indigenous languages and culture in a literary work.

Methodology and Design

Fifteen (15) code alternated items were randomly selected from the novel. With the goal of gathering a representative sample from the text, the data were limited to those portraying and promoting the strength of indigenous cultures and languages. The samples were a blend of interactions between and among characters and the authorial description of ideas in the text. The transcripts were analysed using insights from the concept of rationality of the revised Markedness Model.

Code Alternation and Female Writing

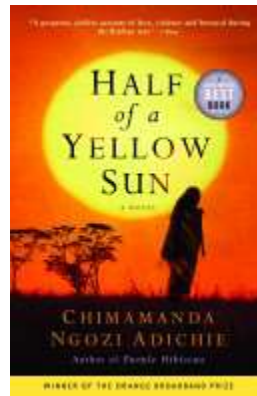
Code is widely regarded in the linguistic field as the synonym for language, and it can be used to refer to any kind of language system. Therefore, English is a code, Igbo is a code just like Hausa, Nigerian pidgin and Yoruba. In this study, the term code mainly refers to the linguistic systems - English and other Nigerian indigenous languages. This linguistic variety or language could be the standard form or could refer to varieties or dialects of the standard code/language. Language scholars in capturing the meaning of code alternation have developed various terms by like: code-switching”, “code-mixing”, “code alternation” and “language mixing” (Gumperz, 1982; Myers-Scotton, 1992, 1993, 1998; Poplack, 1982; Auer, 2009). This paper simply adopts only two terms; code-mixing and code-switching as defined by Myers-Scotton (1993; 1998). She uses "code-switching" as a cover term for both CS and CM. She (1993: 85) defines code-switching as "the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation. It can be intra- or extra-sentential and also intra-word". CM and CS contain elements of at least two languages in a communicative process. They are prominent features of the language of different situations in multilingual countries, Nigeria being a near example. The mixing of codes, Ogunsiyi argues, “can be seen as markers of some sort of familiarity as well as a kind of distancing device”; however, he stresses “the prevailing situation surrounding the use is a determining factor” (2001: 82). CS/CM being a consequence of languages in contact is used by most female Nigerian/bilingual writers to promote their cultures and communicate effectively to their readers.

It is important to stress here that code alternation is an act of linguistic nationalism: the use of language to affirm the culture and prestige of one’s own people. The use of indigenous languages by female novelists is certainly a search of identity and the prevention of the frequently loss of meaning through translation from one language to the other. While most literary scholars may look at linguistic transfer, transliteration, code mixing/switching, etc. as merely stylistic devices employed by creative writers in order to give aesthetic value to their works, it is relevant to point out that in linguistic politics, it is seen as a struggle against the supremacy of one language over another. Thus, the natural inclination to see a person’s mother tongue survive, to grow and do things for him/her will be antagonistic if the language of another is imposed on him (Calvet, 1998). The alternation of codes in any situation by writers when necessary sustains the dynamic nature of human communicative needs.

Since CS and CM are produced simultaneously and unconsciously in most cases; and describe the position of languages in discourses in as organised a way as the contextual uses

of the codes have permitted, this paper does not intend to differentiate between them. The change of codes helps people of different linguistic backgrounds to grasp the major registers that are needed for effective communication in respective situations. It is from this perspective that we locate code alternation using *Half of a Yellow Sun* and its relevance in promoting indigenous cultures and languages.

Half of a Yellow Sun



Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* is one of the most successful novels in this era; it is widely acknowledged both in secondary and tertiary institutions in Nigeria. This novel which was published in 2006 discusses a lot of issues: love; history; African culture; and war. It extensively describes the pain and suffering of a people – the Igbos, during the war. It is this cultural viewpoint of a people, and how language weaves these cultural realities through the use of code alternation that we explore in the present study. The novelist uses characters like Ugwu, the houseboy; Odenigbo, the professor of mathematics at University of Nigeria, Nsukka; Kainene and Olanna, the twin sisters, to portray mostly how the indigenous cultures and languages in Nigeria are strengthened. In essence, it is a story that has universal applications even as it is largely set in Igbo land. The author uses a distinct aspect of language – code alternation to adequately capture the story of political conflict, war, love, hate, betrayal, oppression and culture that is contemporary and resonates with the human condition.

Theoretical Perspective

This paper adopts the revised Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai 2001, Myers-Scotton 2002) as the theoretical framework. Myers-Scotton notes the effectiveness of code-switching in defining social rights and obligations in interactions in East Africa and suggests

that linguistic choices can be explained in terms of speaker motivation. This Rational Choice approach aims at taking into account, the speakers' own 'subjective motivations and their objective opportunities' (Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai, 2001: 5) in their language choice. This model assumes that speakers' choice of one language over another is individual decision which is rationally based (Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai, 2001: 5).

However, this revised Markedness Model (Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai, 2001, Myers-Scotton 2002) centers on one premise (the markedness evaluator), two principles (the negotiation principle and the indexicality principle), and one heart (the rationality). The revised Markedness Model presupposes every speaker has a markedness evaluator (Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai 2001:8) which is an innate capacity of human beings. Myers-Scotton & Bolonyai (2001:9) assumes that the markedness evaluator is a "deductive device" and what it offers is "a process evaluating potential options". Myers-Scotton (1993a) argues that various codes that speakers choose to express themselves also bear indexicality. She thinks any linguistic choice speakers make indexes a desired set of Rights and Obligations. Although the markedness of a Rights and Obligations set depends on the norms and social meanings, it is also self-motivated. This principle of negotiation establishes the goal of conversation in the model (Myers-Scotton 2002: 209). Myers-Scotton (2002: 206) argues "Speakers almost always have multiple identities. A linguistic choice reflects the presentation of one identity rather than another, possibly an identity that is not established, but whose realization is being negotiated by the code choice".

The rationality is the heart of the revised Markedness Model. It suggests that speakers are rational actors when they switch codes. Rationality explains why speakers make choice and at the same time is a mechanism which leads them to make decision. Although a clearly list of steps make decision-making look like more objective, Myers-Scotton (2002: 208) argues it is still subjective, as the decision is made in relation to specific situations and speaker's different understandings of "the best choice".

The use of the above approaches for this study stems from the fact that CM and CS are used by bilingual speakers in context-bound situations and are best interpreted in terms of the socio-cultural context in which they are used.

Analysis and Discussion of the Functions and Rationality in Code-switched Items

This section provides evidence that female writers are rational actors; when they switch codes, they simply calculate from which codes they can benefit more, given the objective (aim) constraints. For several decades, researchers have pointed out a number of different socio-pragmatic functions present in code-switched items. Scholars like Poplack (1982) and Gumperz (1982) provided several classifications of these functions: direct quotations, emphasis, clarification or elaboration, focus/topic, parenthetical comments, tags, contextual switches, lexical need switches, triggered switches, linguistic routines and/or idiomatic expressions, stylistic switches, etc. Along the same lines, Zentella's (1997) distinguishes three main categories of communicative strategies accomplished by code-switching: footing, clarification, and crutch-like mixes. However, one must note that not each and every switch produced will always perform a specific function.

Therefore, the researcher classifies the code alternations in this feminist perception, using five functions: code-alternation for clarification, code-switching for tone-softening, code-alternation for euphemism, code-alternation for humour and code-switching for gap-filling. The examples below portray some expressions that exist in the writer's indigenous language which probably, the English language cannot accommodate. Such expressions are therefore used together with English words and still retain their local meaning, yet examine how rationality works in the sampled data.

Code-alternation for Clarification

There are some circumstances where writers need to clarify some messages to make themselves understood. Code-switching can fully fulfill this function. By creating contrast through the juxtaposition of two codes, usually interlocutors' attention is gained successfully. This view is specified in:

Example 1

“Go well, jee ofuma. Greet Aunty and Uncle and Arinze.” (p. 36)

Example 2

“Socialism would never work for the Igbo. ...Ogbenyealu is a common name for girls and you know what it means? ‘Not to Be Married by a Poor Man.’ To stamp that on a child at birth is capitalism at its best.” (p. 69)

Example 3

“...and then began to search for the sheet where he had written notes for his piece about ogbunigwe, the fantastic, Biafran made land-mines.” (p. 216)

In example 1, the character switches to a dialectal indigenous language which functions as an adverbial clause of manner. By speaking in English first and repeating the same item in Igbo, the speaker twists his idea by allowing strangers to become members of his virtual community. This is probably a way of upholding her language (dialect) and to demonstrate her identity. In example 2, the speaker switches from Igbo to English, repeating the same idea. The code switched noun, not only showcases the Igbo people but also caters for the absence of a word that can adequately express an experience in English. Also, it is a deliberate objective of identifying with her (writer) people and delightfully expresses her thought for a non-indigene to apprehend. ‘Ogbunigwe’ in Example 3 is a noun that refers to machine gun. It is used to express “the fanatic, Biafran-made land-mines” (p. 316) employed during the war. And so, the writer uses it perhaps because no English word can accommodate the meaning, and to express the idea intended. But most importantly, it enables the novelist give a force to her language in a multilingual nation.

The above examples clearly show that code-alternation users are purposive. They employ the function of code-switching to clarify their ideas when necessary, thereby promoting their culture and language.

Code-switching for Tone-softening

A successful communication depends on many factors, and tone-softening is one of them. In some situations, code-alternating to soften the tone of words or sentences is an effective way to save face, commend or criticize other people. Examples are shown below:

Example 4

“It has been nice talking to you, jisie ike.” (p. 152)

Example 5

“Tufiakwa! We have been waiting since dawn! Is it because we don’t talk through our nose like white people?” (p. 263)

Example 6

“He is a Big Man. Ihukwara moto?” (p. 287)

In Igbo language, the phrase ‘jisie ike’ is a way of greeting. This is the reason why the speaker in example 4 resorts to that, so as to soften the tone of his words, to acknowledge and appreciate the other person. It simply means ‘well done’ but may not capture the contextual meaning of the item as portrayed above. Exclamation marks on the other hand, demonstrate how language gives expression to culture. For instance, ‘tufiakwa!’ in example 5 expresses annoyance and condemnation, and the impact of such expression may not be properly represented in English. Therefore, the depth of anger from a woman who has been waiting to see the doctor, only for the nurse to allow an English accent speaking lady who just arrived to enter, is conveyed in the exclamation ‘tufiakwa!’ The woman lamented; ‘is it because we don’t speak through our nose like white people?’ (p. 263). She indirectly gives her suggestion by alternating code. In example 6, the speaker switches from Nigerian English (NE) to an indigenous language. The expression ‘Big Man’ refers to a wealthy man, hence the phrase ‘Ihukwara moto?’ By using this adjectival phrase, the speaker indirectly depicts an indigenous notion of a rich man signifying his commendation on such.

Code-alternation for Euphemism

In every society, there are some words which are culturally unacceptable in certain situations. Writers have the advantage of avoiding these words by code-switching to another language/variety. The following examples illustrate how the use of code-alternation helps writers/people to act vaguely in expressing meaning.

Example 7

“Our anti-aircraft fire was wonderful! O di egwu!” somebody said. (p. 275)

Example 8

“...Odenigbo drank kai kai every day and Ugwu was conscripted and she had sold her wig.” (p. 377)

Example 9

“Bed bugs and kwalikwata crawled; women would untie their wrappers to reveal an ugly rash of reddened bites around their waists, like hives steeped in blood.” (p. 390)

The speaker in example 7 feels the English expression is so plain to capture the concept. He switches to an indigenous language, using an indirect and vague word that euphemistically illustrates his view. In example 8, the writer switches from English to Nigerian English (NE); ‘kai kai’ is a noun which represents a local drink that people believe is highly intoxicating. The writer uses it to describe a man who is drunk without necessarily calling him a drunk. In example 9, ‘Kwalikwata’ which is also a noun, is a kind of ant that lives in dirty environment. It causes a lot of discomfort as its bite results to continuous scratch. The writer uses it to express her meaning clearly and still maintains decency because describing the place with the word, dirty or filthy may sound raw. The above examples prove that writers are rational actors; they switch codes like Adichie and still maintain politeness.

Code-alternation for Humour

Humour plays an important role in female writing because it is a valuable way to gain concentration in the work of art. In this piece, humour simply means the quality or content of something such as story, performance or joke that elicits amusement or laughter. The following examples show the power of humor made by code-switched items in promoting the writer’s indigenous languages and cultures.

Example 10

“Whenever he was ill with fever, or once when he fell from a tree, his mother would rub his body with okwuma, all the while muttering, ‘We shall defeat them, they will not win.’” (p. 14)

Example 11

“Pastor Ambrose held his Bible up, as if some solid miracle would fall on it from the sky and shouted nonsensical words: she baba she baba she baba.” (p. 337)

Example 12

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“Oh, you are the onye ocha who speaks Igbo.” (p. 373)

The illustration, ‘okwuma’ is a word mostly used by the Igbo people in referring to a local medicine. It is simply a kind of local drug that is applied when somebody is ill or on swollen/disjointed joints of the human body. This linguistic item functions as a noun and the writer uses it in example 10 rationally to create humour hence the expression “we shall defeat them, they will not win,” thereby strengthening her language and the cultural value of the drug. Its meaning equivalence in English is ‘balm’ but the writer probably uses “okwuma” to depict its local significance, function and obviously capture the cultural connotation of the word. The alternations from English to Yoruba and Igbo in Examples 11 and 12 respectively are for some special hilarious purpose: “she baba she baba she baba” and “the onye ocha.” The writer describes the pastor’s babbling and the white man who speaks Igbo in humorous ways. She would have portrayed the pastor’s action as “speaking in tongue” and simply used “white man” in place of “onye ocha,” yet she prefers depicting them in comical ways. By the above switches therefore, her identity is self-evident.

Code-switching for Gap-filling

There are many lexical gaps between English and other indigenous languages in Nigeria based on the typological difference. Writers/speakers switch codes partly because there are lexical gaps. The following examples show how speakers make use of code-alternation to fill the gaps between.

Example 13

“His agbada was embroidered with gold thread around the collar.” (p. 33)

Example 14

“Clusters of girls were closer to the road, playing oga and swell, clapping rhythmically as they hopped first on one leg and then the other.” (p. 38)

Example 15

“Perhaps, the woman was a spirit person and had come here to perform rituals with her fellow ogbanje.” (p. 239)

The code alternated item in example 13 illustrates the attire of a rich chief in a cocktail party. The writer switches to the lexical item “agbada” which is a noun to capture Nigeria as a multilingual society with commonly shared linguistic elements. “Agbada” means local embroidery worn mostly by “chiefs” in Nigeria. The code switched noun phrase in example 14 “oga and swell” refers to a type of game by young girls among the Igbos. The writer uses it to sustain the cultural term of the game because there may be no English term to capture the concept vividly. This indicates that the writer’s culture has power over her choice of linguistic items. The novelist captures the traditional Igbo belief in example 15, portraying the power of reincarnation in the spiritual lives of the people. “Ogbanje” is a noun; it simply means “frequent coming”. It is believed that when a woman keeps giving birth to a particular child who dies and comes back again, the child is an “ogbanje”. Sometimes, when an individual possesses a queer character, the person is addressed as an “ogbanje”. The alternation from English to indigenous languages in the above examples shows that Igbo people have a remedial way of upgrading their cultural values.

On the whole, the use of code-alternation process in Adichie’s *Half of a Yellow Sun* arguably, carries the message that the English language, in spite of its global usage, accommodates indigenous languages. It expresses the unique culture of the writer which she reveals through language use. For the multilingual Nigerian writer to narrate her story properly there is propensity that she alternates from the alien to the indigenous languages. In all, Adichie’s code alternated items are classic. They confirm the constant effort of Nigerian elites towards creating a new form of language that embodies the cultural identity of its people. This simply indicates that the linguistic act of code alternation is aimed at resisting linguistic imperialism.

Conclusion

This paper examines the use of code alternation in strengthening indigenous cultures and languages as explicated in a female writing. It demonstrates how a female Nigerian writer uses her writing as an avenue to disentangle the supremacy of English over the indigenous languages. The code-alternations that are used for clarifications make the cultures and languages of the writer clearer to a wider audience. Code alternations for euphemism explain the use of a word or phrase that is less offensive, neutral or indirect to describe something that is offensive. For humour, code alternations are simply for amusement while those for tone-softening are geared towards harmonizing peoples’ minds. One can simply say that the

aim of the inclusion of indigenous linguistic patterns in the novel is to enable it to carry the weight of its culture.

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