

The Linguistic Debate of Nigerian Literary Writers

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Abstract

Literary work has become an inevitable tool in the human society. A culture will not be complete without taking into cognizance the creative works that serve different functions for the inhabitants of such a society. Language comes in here because it is the vehicle through which a society evolves and progresses. Language helps to shape and manipulate the community so as to evolve the type of society needed. Because of the educational development in our society today, the English language has taken over virtually every substance of the creative ingenuity of our literary writers. This is not to say that our indigenous languages have not been playing some roles too. The fact is that our local languages have been limited to a reasonable extent in the writing, reading and speaking culture. This paper looks into the way we can salvage our creative culture. If we find it difficult to move back into our local languages in our literary writings, it is then logical to blend the English language in such a way that it will suit our environment, culture and existence such that the forces and acts imbued will have positive implications for the society.

Keywords: language, speech act, creativity, Africanization, Nigerianization.

1.0 Introduction.

In any literary world, language is always the primary focus. This is because it is the vehicle that will help in portraying the message and other stylistic beauties that will help in propagating and promoting the desired message of the writer. Language is used for many purposes and as far as it is concerned, it has a functional theory which is the one which defines language as a form of communication. A functional theory will show us how language works within the larger system of human society. In discussing the properties of language, it is better to use the term “function” because it leaves open how far the attainment of goals is due to conscious states of the individual, the community or species (Priebe 1988).

In literature therefore, language can be used to perform different roles and if we look at it from the point of view of its pragmatic function, it will be discovered that language can be used to do many things which can be tantamount to what can now be known in the language circle as speech acts. This approach can be properly linked with the production of literary work such that meaning can be implied from the work. This is because literary work is dominantly creative and if one looks at it from the point of view of the environment where the work is created as well as the subjects the work will feed, then, there is the need to ensure that the contextual variables surrounding the work are to the immediate benefit of the people the work is meant for.

2.0 The perspectives of speech act in literature

Language is a vocal human vocal noises or its graphic representation. Austin (1962) has made us to understand that in every human utterance, a person performs an act. Such acts include stating an opinion, informing or denying something, making a prediction or a request, asking a question giving an order, giving a permission or a piece of advice, making an offer or a promise, thanking somebody or condoling somebody and so forth. When any of these act is implied in a text, an act is said to have been performed (Osisanwo 2003).

From the point of view of language, speech act can be broadly divided into two: performative and constative acts which are easily made by the use of performative or constative verbs. Performative acts make use of performative verbs i.e .verbs that perform acts. For example, ‘I donate this book to you’. The clause ‘I donate’ has made use of a verb that has performed the act of ‘donating’. Other examples of performative verbs include such like suggest, predict, announce, promise, thank, order, propose, express, beg, command, name, authorize and so on. So, we can have performative utterances like the following:

I name this place a palace.

I order you to report immediately.

I declare the convocation open.

I hereby authorize you to attend the programme.

I promise to visit you daily.

In each of these assertions, there is a performative verb which effectively spells out the illocutionary force of the sentence. According to Leech (1983), making reference to the earlier work of Austin (1962), an illocutionary act has to do with the performance of an act *in* saying something. It can further be subdivided into the performance of the following actions:

assertive e.g. state; directive e.g. request; commissive e.g. promise; expressive e.g. thank; rogative e.g. query. In essence, when we talk of speech act, we are referring to locutionary act, illocutionary act and perlocutionary act. A locutionary act has to do with the saying or producing meaningful sounds which Austin divides into three: phonetic component (philosophical act), phatic component (syntactic), and

rhetic component (meaningful in all sense and denotation). Osisanwo (2003) further explains locutionary act to refer to the formal and literal meaning of an utterance the study of which belongs to the domain of descriptive linguistics which comprises phonetics and philosophy, lexis, syntax and linguistic semantics.

Illocutionary act can be said to be a non-linguistic act that is performed through a linguistic or locutionary act. In this case, a hearer listens to an utterance of a speaker and therefore perceives the speaker to be doing certain thing with his utterances. What the speaker is perceived doing might be commanding, asking, promising, greeting and so on. So, when this type of speech is made, a speaker is performing an act known as illocutionary act which is accompanied by an illocutionary force. This force is added through the use of examples of performative verbs highlighted earlier.

Performative act occurs when we are referring to the effect of an utterance on the hearer. Osisanwo (2003) gives the following examples: 'See a snake behind you'. When a hearer listens to this utterance, it brings about fright to the hearer and when this is done, a perlocutory act is established in the hearer. Therefore, a perlocutory act results from a language user's utterance and a product of the hearer's interpretation. This may be an intended or unintended consequence of a reaction to what is said.

The speech act theory discussed above has drawn examples from a purely language point of view. If this is linked with literature, the implications are many. The series of acts performed in utterances, as well as the illocutionary forces that accompany them, must bring to bear, the African essence. While English is recognized an effective link in the rich linguistic economy of Nigeria; while English is said to be a language of mutual communication in a multilingual setting like Nigeria, it might be to attribute any inherent ideological value to the language. No doubt, primarily, English has the utilitarian purposes but the language must adapt to the environment where it is used. Achebe (1966:18) asserts that African writers should not attempt to write English as a native speaker might. He observed that it is "neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so". The English language, and not the African writer, should be the one to bend and be made to serve the unique needs of the African author without sacrificing the mutual intelligibility of the language. At the pragmatic level, language has to be used in a way that will meet the immediate needs of the speaker/writer and the hearer/reader. There is the need to examine ones cultural essence and environment and bring everything to bear with what the audience will enjoy and learn from optimally.

Ngugi (1986) has talked extensively on the use of English and indigenous languages. He observes that while in schools, literary education was determined by the dominant language. In schools, works of Dickens, Strevenson, Rider Haggard, Jim Hawkins, Oliver Twists, Tom Brown, Scot, Shaw, Buchan, Chaucer, Eliot and so on were read leaving aside any literary work that is indigenous. Ngugi has proclaimed that he will decolonize his minds and say farewell to English as a vehicle for any of his writing. Wali (1963) also talks in this direction. Adejumobi (2004), in his work, looks into the imagination of the local and non-native languages in West Africa. The abandonment of English in literary writing is highly debatable and some critics have pitched tents with the deconstructionist view of language. Here, works like Amos Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard* is heavily influenced by the writer's mother tongue, Yoruba, and its oral tradition. One can say that the English used in the work is a 'yorubaised' one. Quite a good number of Gabriel Okara's works is also highly hybridized. *The Forest of a Thousand Deamons*, Soyinka's interpretation of Fagunwa's *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmole* is another notable example where Soyinka deliberately transliterates.

One can not lose sight of the mixing and switching of codes in literary works. Examples abound in many of the works of African, as well as Nigerian literary writers. The major essence is to ensure that the right acts are performed by the right characters or actors so as to be commensurate with the society where such acts are performed.

3.0 The Linguistic Debate

No doubt, when considering the Anglophone Nigerian literary works, there is always the tendency to abandon the debate as to whether or not English is a viable language of expression for the Nigerian writer who is not interested in reinforcing imperialistic discourse. Walters (2007) has dealt extensively into this by observing that in African literature, and of course in the Nigerian fiction to be precise, larger issues of cultural translatability tend to be more heavily foregrounded. By this we mean that scholars do not only consider how Nigerian writers do translate or how the items of indigenous languages are symbolized into the context of the work written in English but also whether translatability is at all possible. The question raised by many critics has to do with the commensurability of the African art forms and the English language.

Regarding the commensurability between the English language and African art form, one begins to look into whether or not English can be an African language or the language of the colonized African. On this Adegbija (1998) has argued that Nigerian literature ought to be evaluated in term of its linguistic properties rather than its form. He suggested a linguistic, rather than a structuralist- critical approach. The linguistic approach solicited for is the “speech act” approach. The argument is that, since literary texts cannot exist outside of their language, and that the status of deployed language in Nigerian texts ought to be the primary consideration if a literary work, speech act approach will illuminate literary texts from the perspective of actual language use and increase attention to interpersonal and discursive, rather than merely formal aspects of literature.

The echo of this approach can also be noted in Igboanusi (2001) where he foregrounds the issue of language use in Nigerian fiction. According to him, the speech act approach in Nigerian fiction has focused on the fact that African texts be evaluated bearing in mind the particular quality and nature of deployed Africanized language. Also, this approach is not according to the supposedly universal structures or themes. In a speech act approach, English must be further Africanized because critics increasingly read Nigerian literature in terms of its particular and not because of its allegedly fundamental forms or themes.

In Achebe’s popular novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Booth (1981) has considered the linguistic responses underwritten in the work of a speech act methodology. This was corroborated by Igboanusi (2003). Booth has attempted to counter the belief that African writings should be held to strictly western aesthetic standard. However, he observes that given the world dominance of the ‘developed nations’, African writers must define national identity within the arbitrary boundaries left by the colonial masters. The ‘arbitrary boundaries’ had been challenged by Achebe in *Things Fall Apart* which in spite of the heightened emotion that it describes, is called “relatively colourless”:

As the man had cleared his throat drew up and raised his matchet,
Okonkwo looked away. He heard the blow. The pot fell and broke
in the sand. He heard Ikemefuna cry, ‘My father, they have killed me!’

as he ran towards him. Dazed with fear, Okonkwo drew his machet and cut him down. He was afraid of being taught weak

From this example, Booth is of the belief that the 'starkness' and 'undemonstrativeness' shown in this passage is not entirely due to Achebe's aesthetic of restraint, but it is more indebted to the distinctive colour of Ibo proverbs which has shown the complex nature of Ibo tradition and philosophy for which the novel is famous. This passage has reflected the very nature of English as used in Nigeria. It is the type of English that lacks nuances of class as well as social register.

Apart from Achebe's work used as an example above, Soyinka's *The Trial of Brother Jero* could also be said to have employed a speech act approach since it can be argued that his specific deployment of Nigerian English is integral to deciphering the primary targets of his cultural satire.

No doubt, the series of examples and observations made in this respect are subject to critical debates but what the speech act approach is aiming at is African (and Nigerian) literature is to self consciously address Achebe's earlier assertion that the African writer should not aim at learning to use English as a native speaker. This theory, at the literary level, is in line with this assumption and argues further that the African writers must be critically and linguistically evaluated in different ways from the native speaker of English. The context plays a very vital role in the understanding of a work and in the same vein, the Nigerian context as well as her linguistic richness must be taken into consideration.

In literary works, different acts are performed to realize the message and themes of the works. Therefore, the series of acts to be performed must be the one that suits the Nigerian environment such that the language use must easily accommodate them. This touches on the Africanization or to be specific, Nigerianization of English in such a way that intelligibility will not, in any way, be hampered.

4.0 Conclusion

The linguistic debate among literary scholars has made us to understand that the Anglophone Nigerian literature ought to be considered in terms of its distinctly African features. This particularistic approach to Nigerian literature may also be said to underscore the claim that English, because of its long standing historical origin in Nigeria and its present day richness, should be considered to be a language that *is* and has long *been* African. As such, English tends to have gained the popularity such that series of creative ingenuities had been added to it such that it has been polarized. However, the polarization has created a good number of varieties to the extent that the native users of English may find it difficult to easily understand such varieties of the same language. The linguistic and cultural environment of Nigerian writers should be brought to bear with series of our writings in a way that when a Nigerian reads a work of another Nigerian writer in English, the understanding will not, in any way, be impeded. The English language has spread across the globe and there is therefore the need to hybridize the language to suit our creative purpose. If this is done, any literary work created with this variety will suit the environment well and intelligibility will be achieved (Gaurav 1993; Ogunsiji 2005).

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Bioprofile

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