

# SOME LINGUISTIC INADEQUACIES AND THEIR PEDAGOGIC IMPLICATION IN THE NIGERIAN NOVEL

Sunday I. Duruoha, Ph.D

## Introduction

This paper addresses the issue of form in the Nigerian novel. Our objective therefore is to evaluate by rigorous analysis, the linguistic elements that make up the novels written by Nigerians in English; and to see how good these texts would be for the study of English in tertiary institutions. Our motivation to discuss this issue is drawn from the popularity of the Nigerian novels and the insistence of their use for study in Nigerian schools (Wilmot 1979:57-72). The definition of the Nigerian novel might lead to serious academic arguments such that had engulfed the definition of the African novel. However we should accept the Nigerian novel as being novels written by Nigerians in English. This definition has its theoretical weakness but in critical circles it is the capable reference (O'Flinn) 1975:34-52). Thus we shall look at the form of a selection of these novels and underscore their pedagogic suitability.

## Form of the Nigerian Novel

When Tutuola's *The Palm Wine Drinkard* (TPD), was published, it received almost excessive positive reviews (Thomas, Moore, 1975:2, 34-42). With his other books, some European reviewers even quickly announced that he was the precursor of a national literature (Collins 1975:46-54).

But his English they said was 'young' or quaint and indeed saw nothing really wrong with it, because that was the kind of English spoken in West Africa. West African users of English might have been quick to say, "No; it is the type of English spoken in Nigeria". Even in Nigeria, users were prompt to point out that Tutuola's English was a "Yoruba English" (Afolayan 1971:49-63). The following extract from Tutuola's first novel could be illuminating:

He took me around his house and his yam garden too, he showed me the skeleton bones of human-beings which he had killed since a century ago and showed me many other things also, but there I saw that he was using skeleton bones of human beings as fuel woods and skull heads of human-beings as his basins, plates and tumblers etc (Tutuola 1952:13)

In this awkward compound sentence, the reader encounters tedious imprecision: "He took me around his house and his yam garden too..." could mean that the subject took the object in the area or neighbourhood of the subject's house and farm. The adverb "around", not appropriately used creates this semantic problem, much as the phrase "yam garden", smacks of impression from faulty collocation Adverbials like "since a century ago" and noun phrase like "skeleton bones" set off what could be described as a semantic riot which crystallizes in a wordy and repetitive style arising from a possible translation from Yoruba which has only one form of the third person singular pronoun into English, as the following sentence illustrates: "This was how I brought out Death to the old man who told me to go and bring him before he (old man) would tell me whereabouts my palm-wine tapster was that I was looking for before I reached that town and went to the old man" (Tutuola 1952:16). That Tutuola writes English with the syntactic rules of Yoruba is obvious.

Then came Achebe's novels, starting with *Things Fall Apart*. From the onset, Achebe showed some control over language: he described his art in the following terms:

"From a natural to a conscious artist: myself, in fact. Allow me to quote a small example, from *Arrow of God* which may give some idea of how I approach the use of English". The Chief Priest in the story is telling one of his sons why it is necessary to send him to church: I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask, dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white men today would be saying had w known tomorrow. Now supposing I had put it another way. Like this for instance:

I am sending you as my representative among these people -just to be on the safe side in

case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight.

"The material is the same. But the form of one is in character and the other is not. It is largely a matter of instinct, but judgment comes into it too" (Achebe 1975:55-62)

However, Achebe has not been very successful:

It had belonged to Ezeulu's first wife Okuata, who died many years ago. Ojiugo hardly knew her; she only remembered she used to give a piece of fish and some locust beans to every child who went to her hut when she was making her soup (Achebe 1964:10).

In the text, the frequency of anaphoric pronoun *she* within one sentence makes comprehension difficult. The reader does not find it easy to link the *She(s)* to their appropriate antecedents which are "Okuata" and "Ojiugo". The first *she*, one discovers with difficulty refers to Ojiugo, when in fact Okuata's name was mentioned first.

In the thematic movement of anaphoric elements (Enkvist 1973:119-120) initial anaphoric pronouns should refer to initial antecedents, this being the norm of discourse grammatically and a prerequisite for clarity.

Flora Nwapa's English is irritably imprecise. Her major problem like that of Chinua Achebe is wrong pronoun References. Though her dominant sentence type is the simple subject + verb + Object (SVO) structure, running into average length compounds with simple and uncomplicated link words, her syntax unbearably dribbles into ambiguity:

When Efuru's mother-in-law came back Efuru went to her and told her what Ajanupu had told her and also the conversation she overheard in the market (Nwapa1966":59).

There is a chaos of pronoun reference in the above passage. The first two her(s) function as personal pronoun replacements for "Efuru's mother-in-law" which is the co-referential noun phrase, in the objective case, but the third *her* poses a problem. Does it replace or refers to the already established noun phrase (Efuru's mother-in-law) or to a new one (Ajanupu)? The same problem is posed in the following passage:

Efuru gave Ogonim a hot bath and put some mentholetum in her anus. She then rubbed kernel oil over her body putting it in every opening of the body. She tried to breast-feed her, but she refused it. Efuru put her on her back and in no time she was asleep. She brought her out again and put her on the bed. 'Now slay with her Ogea, while I go to Ajanupu' (Nwapa I 966:64).

The first sentence of the passage contains a spelling error: "Mentholatium" for Mentholetum. This could not be said to be the printer's devil because the same mistake is made in another sentence immediately preceding the sentence in question: "... so Ogea, you go and get me some mentholetum" In the second sentence of the passage, the noun phrase "Kernel oil" is most imprecise. Perhaps the word "palm" added to "kernel" would have made things clearer. In the same sentence the word "putting" associated with oil that is being rubbed on the body, smacks of imprecision. One gets the impression that a solid stale of the oil is being put 'in every opening of the body'. Perhaps the word "apply" would have been better. In the third sentence the second personal pronoun "she" is ambiguous: in grammar personal pronoun replace proper nouns; so does "She" replace the proper noun "Efuru" or the proper noun 'Ogonim'? In the fourth sentence, 'Efuru' put her on her back. sustains the same puzzle; who does the first 'her' refer to and who does the second "her" refer to? Assuming the first "her" refers to Ogonim and the second "her" also to her (as is the case in the fifth sentence) then what a great physical feat Efuru would have performed to put her on her back". I Idu Nwapa's second novel such passages abound:

The whole town saw Idu and Adiewere's son growing like plantain tree (Nwapa 1969:87).

In this sentence the reader gets confused because the sentence yields several meanings: (1) tK town folks saw Idu; they also saw Adiewere's son growing like a plantain tree. (2) The town folks saw Idu growing like a plantain tree; they also saw Adiewere's son growing like a plantain tree. (3) The town folks saw the son of Idu and Adiewere growing like a plantain tree. This is absurd.

Gabriel Okara's novel *The Voce* poses a more difficulty problem. Primarily that of selectional rule infringement. From the first sentence *the signs are clear*.

Some of the townsmen said Okolo's eyes were not right, his head was not correct. This they said was the result of his knowing too much book, walking too much in the bush and others said it was due to his staying too long alone by the river (Okara 1970:23).

The reader's attention is drawn to certain infringement in selectional rules: the word "right" does not go with "eyes" and "correct" does not go with "head". The second sentence, "... knowing too much book" becomes more problematic, especially at the adjective "much" is normally not used to qualify concrete countable nouns like "book". With these two shocking examples the reader's attention is suddenly focused on the use of language. And gradually as he wades his way into the book, the problem of syntax emerges:

First messenger (spits on the ground); "Hear his creating words - things changeth. Ha, ha, ha... change, change. He always of change speaks. Ha, ha, ha. What is the Whiteman's word, the parable you always say... "The old order changeth"? I forget the rest, you always (Okara 1970:25).

The first three words of (the second sentence: Ma, ha, ha<sup>1</sup>) are supposed to be interjections, which structurally do not form part of a sentence. But here, they seem to form the headwords of a sentence, elliptical though, terminates in the words "change, change", which are either verbs or nouns. The next sentence carries a clause structure of S -I- Adv ! I'f ^ V. This structure is derived, the verbs being placed after the object of the preposition as opposed to its normal position before and after the adverb. This sentence is then followed by a string of three or four sentences with normal syntactic arrangement: "What is the Whiteman's word, the parable you always say... "the old order changeth"? I forget the rest, you always..,<sup>1</sup>

There is also the introduction of known English words in strange and confusing contexts. The word "be" for example appears in strange and awkward context.

Okolo lazy man be (Okara 1970:12) know that you are a witch be (Okara 1970:29) you a new man be in Sologa (Okara 1970:78).

"Be" is a primary auxiliary verb which expresses the state of being; it also acts as a copula verb, linking the subject of a sentence to its various complements. As an auxiliary and a copula verb. "be" can be used in many forms, (which could be tedious to itemize); also "be" can be used as a prefix to express "all over" or "in every direction", when used with certain verbs, and, with adjectives to make intransitive verbs, transitive. "Be" in the preferred form also can function as an intensifier. From all the usage range covered by the verb "be" in English, none can be identified in Okara's strange usage: "Okolo lazy man be" - in this sentence could "be" be functioning as a verb describing a state of being? - that is "Okolo is a lazy man". In that situation the syntactic position of "be" is anomalous. Perhaps "be" should be placed between the subject and the adjective to read "Okolo be lazy man". Yet if this positional change is effected, we are far from having a meaningful or correct sentence: "Okolo be lazy man", sounds pidgin in form. "Okolo is a lazy man" is acceptable. "Okolo a lazy man be" it has been discovered is a semi-prepositional transposition from Ija (Okiwelu 1987:34).

Okolo	lazy	man	be
Okolo	sun	ke	me

From the above analysis, it then becomes clear that "be" is an English translation of the Ijaw morpheme "me" which expresses a state of being, but whose syntactic position in Ijaw is directly transferred and super-imposed on English, thereby giving such a strange functional position as seen above. Okara's language in his novel defies any known grammars in English and Ijaw.

From the above analyses of a sampling of the Nigerian novel, one solid fact could be adduced: the Nigerian

novel is not communicative. Much is left to be desired, but many Nigerian critics after proffering apologies for the poor language proceed to eulogize the same poor language use (Emenyonu 1975:28-33). They argue that the Nigerian novel only helps to portray the culture of the Nigerian peoples and that the language used is emblematic of the Nigerian setting. This argument though patronizing and patriotic might not be truly so. The Nigerian culture cannot be effectively portrayed in an awkward and uncommunicative form. Our critics must know that: We Africans must be sympathetic and encouraging to our writers but we must not allow our patriotic zeal to blind us to their faults. Indeed, it is our duty to point out where they occur. It is only through sensitive and informed criticism that we can establish a healthy tradition of criticism in African Literature (Iyasere, 1975:23).

This indeed is a timely advice. Nigerian critics must not shrink from honest evaluations of their writers, nor eliminate as un-Nigerian those formal aspects of the novel at which a writer may not be successful.

### **Pedagogic Implication**

Learning language through the printed word is a time-honoured skill acquisition strategy. The oral approach can at best help the pupil to learn the language code. But the uses of the code can be mastered only by exercising the particular skill in actual communication situations. Consequently in Nigeria, teachers cannot hope to develop on pupils a native-like competence in listening and speaking. But in reading and writing pupils can always be exposed to written communication situations, where these two skills are used naturally. Thus through reading good English the teacher can develop such feel and insight into the working of the language that they can even hope to surpass the native speaker, as far as these two skills are concerned. But the teacher and the pupils need books written in good English:

In Anglophone Nigeria, students should be made to read good and well-written African novels in English. Such African novels should form some of the major text - requirements for the use of English **Course (Onwueme, 1984:210).**

Nigerian novels are by no means good candidates. Although one can argue that these books could be used at tertiary levels as ungraded reading materials, when pupils have already acquired some proficiency in reading and writing by intensive and extensive reading methods, the fact remains<sup>15</sup>: that the learning, if not the teaching of vocabulary, is a life-long exercise and the tertiary level is a crucial one in language acquisition. In the Nigerian novels we had earlier noted that the structure of the sentences are awkward, and since the meaning of a word is often controlled by the structure it is put in, the misunderstanding of new lexical items is easy. And in fact, one could read through these novels without increasing one's vocabulary: the larger a pupil's passive vocabulary (as opposed to the active), the better equipped he or she is for reading comprehension.

At the level of literature teaching, it is clear that the teaching of literature involves more than the ordinary reading skills at both tertiary and secondary levels, in fact a student could be competent reader and yet unfamiliar with literary convention associated with a particular culture (Culler, 1975:113-130). But language use is a fundamental aspect of learning literature because language use requires some form of recognition of the density of allusions that man or humanity is capable of, and all languages exploit these allusions especially at the level of pragmatics. All users of language thus share this common basis, which is the nodule of literary appreciation. So for a literary pedagogy to be successful the teaching must develop this literary awareness this is impact in learners; ability to use language (Brumfit, 1985: 105-110). [But when the text (or novel) like a Nigerian novel is deficient in the quality that can help a learner acquire this basic language skill, such a text does not qualify to be chosen as a graded or ungraded text.

On a more general and philosophical level, a novelist (especially an African) is supposed to be a teacher. Achebe (1975:42-44) confirms this when he talked about himself.

Most of my readers are young. They are either in school or college or have only recently left. And many of them looked up to me as a kind of teacher... I would be quite satisfied if my novels (especially the ones set in the past) did more than teach my readers .....

And to his colleagues he says:

The writer cannot expect to be excused from the task of re-education and regeneration that must be done.

In this light then, one wonders how much of the teaching the Nigerian novelists put together have done and

how well,

### Conclusion

Thus from a Linguistic levels, we have tried to evaluate the Nigerian novels' form. We have seen that the texts of these novels are grossly faulty: their failure range from awkward syntactic structures to bad mechanics, ambiguity and distorted meanings. Though much is left to be desired visa-vis our novelist's uses of the English language, our indigenous critics seem to patronize them, glossing over their faults with ease. This is not academic. From a pedagogic standpoint, the Nigerian novel's next are not suitable materials for the teaching of English to learners at both secondary and tertiary levels.

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