Discourse Values of Names in Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah

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Abstract

Majority of the earlier studies on Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah seem not to have taken cognisance the importance of the different name forms in the text. Thus, this study explores the discourse values of names in Chinua Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah. Names in the text are studied and analysed using the register theory which relies heavily on the contextual models. The study identifies three discourse values of names: names as identity markers, names as markers of social class and names as expressive and stylistic markers. It shows that the variations of name forms indicate changing notions of a character's notions of her/himself. The study also reveals that names in the text have expressive, stylistic and ideological values. The study concludes that names in the Anthills of the Savannah are deployed strategically for their ideological and narrative purposes.

Keywords: Chinua Achebe, discourse, identity markers, names, values,

Introduction and literature review

The question of what constitutes a name and a nickname is often debated in onomastics (Dickson 1996, Dunkling 1995, Holland 1990, Shook 1994). Names are symbols of identity, and variation in naming presumably indicates, however crudely, a matching variation in the perception of personal identity and in the social context in which the naming occurs. The relationship between the choice of name or name-form and the context in which it is used is not fixed by an immutable law. Nevertheless, changes in social expectations are frequently accompanied by changes in styles of naming, which can respond to shifts in the attitudes of society at large, as well as to more local variation in social setting and social role. The present study examines names in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* with a view to revealing their discourse values.

Anthills of the Savannah, the novel chosen for this study, tells the story of a military government that pretends to correct the abnormalities committed by a past civilian regime in Kangan a fictitious name for Nigeria. However, this military government ends up worse than the government it claims to want to correct. It surpasses the civilian government in corruption and abuse of power. In the novel, an elitist government headed by a soldier simply described as Sam is painstakingly described. Sam brings into his government his friends and school mates, Chris and Ikem, together with academics such as Professor Okon, respected members of the public and his military colleagues. The government begins on a progressive and optimistic note, with a democratic goal. Before long, the government, by degrees, sinks into distrust, violence, tyranny, witch-hunting and gagging of the press. The atrocities of the government climax in the execution of the radical journalist Ikem and the forceful hunt for Christopher Oriko, the information commissioner, who ultimately dies by the gun of a drunken soldier while on the run for his life. The novel ends with a coup in which Sam is overthrown and eventually killed.

That Achebe is "Africa's best known and most widely read author" (Cambridge University Press 2007:1 cited in Odebunmi 2008) is beyond questioning. Little wonder, his works have evoked volume of criticisms across the globe. Also, the quality of his works and his encompassing accomplishments help to establish the fact that he is a frontline writer in Africa. He wrote six novels, namely *Things Fall Apart* (1958), *No Longer at Ease* (1963*), Arrow of God* (1964*), A Man of the People (*1966*), Anthills of the Savannah* (1988) and There Was a Country (1971). He also wrote short stories and children's books and Beware Soul Brother, a book of his poetry. A collection of essays and literary criticisms, *Hopes and Impediments*, was published in 1988 by Heinemann. Nevertheless, the bulk of the studies on this foremost African writer focus on the literary and thematic features, thereby neglecting the linguistic aspects. There has been has been few linguistic studies on Achebe's works in general and on his novel- *Anthills of the Savannah* in particular. Linguistic studies on Achebe include (Oyeleye 1997; Odebunmi 2008; Odebunmi and Okunoye 2003; Odebunmi and Ogunleye 2003). Despite much excellent work on both the linguistic and non linguistic aspects of Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*, scholars examining this prose work have not addressed the discourse values of names as a way of better understanding the thematic preoccupation and the vision of Achebe in the novel. Yet, without such an understanding, we are left with an inadequate analysis that creates the condition for ill informed interpretation of the novels. This study will remedy this gap in the literature in order to explicate the heretofore unrecognised relationships between the discourse values of names in the novel and Achebe's vision and thematic preoccupation of the *Anthills of the Savannah*.

An Overview of Names in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

Although names in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* have not been studied in the way the present study

proposes, Odebunmi (2008) who gives detailed attention to the formation patterns and functions of names in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* is considered very relevant and enriches the present study. Discussing the types and dimensions of names in the novel Odebunmi (2008:53) states the following:

> Five operational (and ad hoc) types of personal names are found in *Anthills*; namely, official names, nicknames, first names and institutional/titular names. Official names are conceived here as names, which, of necessity, involve surnames, and which are used in formal or formalized interactions; first names are individuals' personal names which do not include surnames; nicknames are names evolved from traits or attributes of characters in the text. Unlike surnames and first names which extend to all the names in the text, nicknames strictly apply to only names of characters; institutional/titular names are those associated with particular religious or social organizations and those related to traditional titles.

Odebunmi (2008) went further to identify branching, non-branching and active-mentioned as the three dimensions of names in the novel- Anthills of the Savannah. According to him, **"**the branching dimension defines names that either occur across more than one category or type of names or occur in more than one form. He identifies the following examples in the novel:

(1) Mr. Christopher Oriko – Chris, Mr. Oriko, Christopher Oriko.
(2) Mr. Ikem Osodi - Ikem, Mr. Osodi, Osodi.
(3) Major Samson Ossai – Colonel Johnson Ossai, Major Johnson Ossai, Johnson.
(4) John Kent – MM, Mad Medico, John, Uncle John.
(5) Miss Beatrice Okoh – B, BB, Beatrice, Miss Okoh, Goddessy Nwayibuife, Buife. (Odebunmi, 2008: 54).

Mr Christopher Oriko in the first example branches to other official names (Mr. Oriko and Christopher Oriko) and to the first name (Chris). In example 2 above, whereas Ikem is a first name, Mr. Ikem Osodi, Mr. Osodi and Osodi are official names. In example 3, Major Samson Ossai, Colonel Johnson Ossai, and Major Johnson Ossai are official names while Johnson is a first name. In example 4, John Kent is an official name; MM, and Mad Medico are nicknames while John and Uncle John are first names. In example 5, Miss Okon is an official name; Beatrice, Nwayibuife and Buife are first names; whereas B, BB, and Godessy are nicknames. The non-branching category features single names, which do not vary, no matter the context. Names in this category are either official or first names; for example, Agatha, Guy, Braimoh, Nkrumah, Walt Whitman and Idi-Amin. The active-mentioned category, according to Odebunmi (2008) concerns the kind of appearances given the persons named in the text. The active names are those associated with the major characters and other characters whose actions have direct relevance to the plot of the story, for example Chris, Ikem, Beatrice, Braimoh, etc.. The mentioned are names that are alluded to or used to support the plot or ideology projected through the main characters. Examples of these names are Mazrui, Sembene Ousmene, Kunene, Nwakibe, Christ, etc.

Theoretical Orientations
Register theory
The theoretical model considered here, namely a model about language use, corresponds to the sociosemiotic model of language developed by Halliday (1978, 1994), and Halliday and Matthiessen (2004). This model will be outlined in this section, after which the results of the analysis will be presented together with the conclusions about them.

Genre, as a realization of the context of culture, refers to the overall purpose of a social interaction. Martin (1984: 25) describes genre as "a staged, goal-oriented, purposeful activity in which speakers engage as members of our culture". Genres have specific schematic and linguistic realizations, which are mediated through different text types or registers.

The context of situation or register refers to the immediate interactive situation and is therefore less abstract than the notion of genre. According to Halliday, the notion of context of situation can be interpreted by means of a conceptual framework using the terms field, tenor and mode of discourse, as the immediate environment in which a text is actually functioning. Halliday suggests that these three aspects of context show how we use language. In fact, it is here that we target the relationship between particular language choice and the specific context of situation in which it occurs. Field, tenor and mode are called register variables and a description of the values for each of these variables at a given time of language use is a register description of a text. As Halliday explains (1978: 111), although the register is intuitively recognizable as a specific lexico grammatical configuration, it is defined in terms of meanings in such a way that "it is the selection of meanings that constitutes the variety to which a text belongs".

The field of discourse has to do with the focus of the activity in which we are engaged as recognized in the culture. It refers to what is happening, to the nature of the social action that is taking place, what the participants are engaged in, in which the language figures as some essential component (Halliday, 1989).

Similarly, Gregory and Carroll (1978: 7) state that the field of discourse is the consequence of the user's purposive role, what his language is about, what experience he is verbalizing, what is going on through language. Sometimes field can be glossed as the topic of the situation but Martin's (1984: 23,1992: 536) broader definition in terms of institutional focus, or social activity type is more useful to capture the field in situations where language is accompanying action.

The tenor of discourse is defined in terms of the players, the actors or rafher the interacting roles that are involved in the creation of the text. It refers to who is taking part, to the nature of the participants, their status and role: what kinds of role relationship obtain among the participants, including permanent and temporary relationships of one kind or another, both the types of speech role that they are taking on in the dialogue and the whole cluster of socially significant relationships in which they are involved. This relationship that the speaker establishes with the audience in relation to the tenor of discourse has been emphasized by Gregory and Carroll (1978: 8) as well.

The general definition of mode refers simply to the role language is playing in the interaction. What it is that the participants are expecting the language to do for them in that situation: the symbolic organization of the text, the status that it has, and its function in the context, including the channel (if it is spoken, written or some combination of the two) and also the rhetorical mode, what is being achieved by the text in terms of such categories as persuasive, expository, didactic, and the like.

This model is functional and Halliday suggests that these components can be associated with three functional components or metafunctions: the *experiential,* the *interpersonal* and the *textual,* which are "the modes of meaning that are present in every use of language in every social context" (Halliday, 1978:112).

Textual Analysis
Names as Identity Markers in the Anthills of the Savannah
The variations of name forms also indicate changing notions of the character's notions of her/himself. Changing the name enables the development of a new identity; when a character enters into another world, her or his name may change, which symbolises that the character takes on a new identity. The name sometimes changes into a completely new name. This is evident in Achebe's Anthills of the Savannah. An example is seen in the character- John Kent. He was born as John Kent but known and described mainly by the other characters and Achebe as Mad Medico.
Text 1

> **Mad Medico**'s proper name is **John Kent** but nobody here calls him by that any more. He enjoys his bizarre title; his familiar friends always abbreviate it to MM. He is of course neither a doctor nor quite exactly mad. Ikem once described him as an aborted poet which I think is as close as anyone has got to explaining the phenomenon that is John Kent. And the two of them poet and aborted poet, get on very well together. MM got on very well too with His Excellency, as everybody knows. It was their friendship which brought him here in the first place, made him hospital administrator and saved him a year ago from sudden deportation. P. 55

In **the excerpt**, it is clear that John Kent takes on quite a new identity when becoming Mad Medico in the Republic of Kangan. Here, the English proper name John Kent is changed into a nickname – Mad Medico because of some personality traits noticed in him. This means that some names are associated with ideas and feelings expressed by the characters.
The feelings that the character has of her/his name are often directly expressed in the semantic content of the name, for example Beatrice as Miss Goat, in which Miss Goat refers to her distaste for getting wet.
Text 2

> Finally exhausted she would come indoors shivering, eyes red and popping out, teeth clattering away and make for the kitchen fire. As for me whom she nicknamed salt, or less kindly **Miss Goat**, on account of my distaste for getting wet, my preference was to roll myself in a mat on the floor and inside my dark, cylindrical capsule play my silent game of modulating the storm's song by pressing my palms against my ears and taking them off, rhythmically. There was for me no greater luxury in those days than to sleep through night-rain on a Friday knowing there was neither school nor church in the morning to worry about. P. 95

Yet, the influence of the name is not unconditional. In realistic genre, literary characters seem to be given more freedom to act upon their names, and they even behave in a way not suggested or allowed by the name; they are able to change their behaviour to become more the selves they wish.

Another variation of the name form, but which also reflects a shift in identity, is found again in for example the character Beatrice, nicknamed **Goddessy** as a result of her **visionary qualities**.

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Text 3

> Chris had noticed it from the very moment she had walked in that evening that she carried with her a strong aura of that other Beatrice who he always described in fearful jest as **Goddessy**. P. 199

When one name form changes into others, the relationship between the name and the surrounding world is also actualized. Clearly, names forms are influenced by the surrounding world. The functions of these kinds of name changes also differ from name variations within one and the same surrounding.

Characters called by ordinary names, for example in a literary text, are more freely to modify the apprehension of the name; conventional names are more open with regard to what traits the readers supply to them. On the other hand, semantically loaded names are again more closed because they are clearly limited by the semantic content expressed in the name. That is, if the name transparently expresses the type of character, it is not easy to supply new notions to the name because it automatically expresses certain characteristics. For instance, the reader is bound to supply more specific characteristics to referents called, Salt, Miss Goat, Greedy mouth, Mad Medico than to referents called John and Beatrice.

Names as Markers of Social Class in Anthills of the Savannah

Social equality and inequality are more often than not, marked by the use of first names in the Anthills of the Savannah. Dynamic characters through whose mouths the plot of the text is narrated mainly relate in first name terms. This evidently shows power symmetry and high affective involvement. In the Anthills of the Savannah, friends generally address one another using their first names. Little wonder characters including Sam, Chris, Ikem, John, and Beatrice deploy their first names when referring to one another. Examples include the following:

Text 4

> Chris called Ikem on the telephone and asked him to send a photographer to the reception room of the Presidential Palace to cover a goodwill delegation from Abazon. P. 26

Text 5

> Quite clearly, Your Excellency.' Okong was beginning to get the hang of his summons here, and with it his confidence was returning. P. 17

Here, whether official and unofficial settings, some of these characters use the first names to show that they belong on the same social standing. As the relationship between some of these characters deteriorate, some of these referencing and understanding stop. This is seen in the text for example, among His Excellency (Sam), Chris and Ikem. These three characters later revert to using official name terms in addressing one another. Little wonder Chris could say that only Mad Medico (John Kent) who is a white man could still relate in first name terms with the president.

Text 6

> You know MM… you are the only person in this country – perhaps in the whole wide world who calls him *Sam* still.

Chris's statements here to MM reveal that the more power conscious Sam becomes the more difficult other friends find it to address him as Sam. The implication of this is that the gap between them becomes more widened and the affective relation between them is also affected.

Less-intimate relationships are also marked with the use of first names. This is seen, for example in the text under study thus:

> How long has Ikem known that Joy girl? I asked. I can't tell you. I had only seen her a couple of times before this afternoon. P 65

Joy, Ikem's former girl friend is referred to in the excerpt above as "that Joy girl" by Chris. The phrase "that Joy girl" conveys the repugnancy in Chris's tone; it establishes a grand distance and disconnection with the girl and whatever she represents. Chris's position becomes more evident in the exchange that follows between Chris and Beatrice.

Text 7

> (Chris): She seems so young. And so illiterate. What can he possibly be saying to her? (Beatrice): "Ikem doesn't think they have enough brains" p.65.

The adjectival phrases "so young", "so illiterate", "(don't) have enough brains" give credence to Chris's evaluation of Joy as being inferior and being in their social class.

Further, in the text, boss-subordinate relationship manifests in the use of the first name in certain contexts.

Text 8

> 'No Sylvanus,' said Beatrice trying to mollify him, 'we no de go anywhere. We jus wan sidon for house. Make you take evening off. If at all oga wan anything I fit get am for am.' I knew at once and she soon realized she had committed a blunder.

> Sylvanus did not exactly storm out but his resentment was very clear on his face and
> in the tone of his goodnights (P. 64).

Beatrice's choice of the first name "Sylvanus" devoid of the title "Mr." shows a boss - subordinate relationship. Further, the choice of "Oga" (The Pidgin English word for boss) clearly reveals the relationship between Sylvanus and Chris and between Beatrice (Beatrice a secretary in one of the ministries) and Chris (a commissioner). Chris is Sylvanus's boss, and Beatrice's superior with regards to their official positions and marriage- which their relationship might result to.

The boss-subordinate relationship is also seen in the way His Excellency addresses members of his cabinet and his functionaries. More often than not, they are addressed as His Excellency pleases, sometimes in an official way and other times in an unofficial manner. However, due to the enormous powers he now controls, His Excellency can only be addressed formally. Some instances are shown below:

Text 9

> 'Long time no see, Beatrice. How's my friend <u>Chris</u>? To which I replied with my
> own feeble effort at joke-making: But I should ask you. You see him more often
> than I do. He is always at one or other of your meetings.' P 75

This conversation between Beatrice and His Excellency took place when His Excellency invites Beatrice to a presidential reception for Lou, a visiting American lady. Despite Chris being a high ranking official in the government, His Excellency has no qualms referring to him as Chris without a title that should have preceded the name. This reflects power relations and a boss-subordinate relationship.

Text 10

> Then Suddenly I heard my name. 'Beatrice, come and sit here by me,' he ordered
> patting the sofa on the other side of him.

Text also reveals the boss-subordinate relationship. His Excellency does not just address Beatrice by her first name; he orders her to come and sit by him. However as mentioned earlier none of the other characters has the freedom to address His Excellency by his first name. Little wonder then, Chris could say that John Kent (Mad Medico) relates with His Excellency in first name terms.

Names as Expressive and Stylistic Markers

Some nicknames use forms of personal names, which help to create a special attitude towards the named person. Expressive value of nicknames differs according to the form of a personal name used in it. It is based on the possibility of personal names to have different expressive value (Wierzbicka 1992:229). The expressive values of names are common with nicknames. Apart from coinages and abbronyms identified by Odebunmi (2008) as two of the ways through which nicknames can be formed, nicknames also refer chiefly to epithets and lexical perversions of first names and surnames -it would be unusual for the bearer of the name to have any say in the matter at all. Examples of nicknames in Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah* include: "Mr. So Therefore", "Mad Medico", "Goddessy", "Greedy mouth"

Text 11

> There is a car coming into the driveway and I go back to the window to see. No, it's
> only one of the people in the flats, but I stay at the window all the same and watch
> the car creep towards the common garage building on the right. One of the brake
> lights shows a naked white bulb in a broken red casing. So it was Mr So Therefore,
> the Post and Telegraphs man in the next flat.

Text 12

> Later I hear how a concerned neighbor once called the police station- this was
> before I came to live here- and reported that a man was battering his wife and Desk
> Sergent asked sleepily: 'So Therefore?' So, behind his back, we call him Mr 'So
> Therefore'. I can never remember his real name. p. 35

Text 13

> Dick, it turns out, is the founding editor of a new poetry magazine in Soho called
> *Reject*. Prompted by Mad Medico he tells the story, at first reluctantly and in
> instalments of one sentence or two a piece. P. 58

Text 14

> The group gradually splits in two: Ikem and the editor at one end of the bar with
> Elewa sticking to them, understanding little; and Mad Medico joining Beatrice and
> me. P. 59

Text 15

> Silence descended as completely on the party in doors as had darkness outside. Ama
> whom Beatrice nicknamed Greedy mouth having drunk both from Elewa's breast,
> pendant like a gorgeous ripe papaya on the tree, was sleeping quietly in her cot.

More than any other type of personal name, the nickname reflects the social power that namers can exert over the named. "Mr So Therefore", "Mad Medico", and "Greedy mouth" can do little to stop the namers from calling them such names. Whether known to them or not, they have the options of either bear such names or assume the role of social outcasts. Nicknaming as the ones found in the Anthills of the Savannah are usually found in unofficial, intimate, or covert social milieux; in their most prolific forms, they belong naturally to a communal life-style that is socially closed and intensely competitive; only occasionally do they surface in the mainstream of normal public relations.

Conclusion

The study has revealed that there are three discourse values of names in *Anthills of the Savannah*. These discourse values include: names as identity markers, names as markers of social class and names as expressive and stylistic markers. The study argues that changing the names of characters enables the development of new identities; when a character enters into another world, her or his name may change, which symbolises that the character takes on a new identity. Further, it is revealed that names are deployed by Achebe to show power symmetry and high affective involvement. It is also revealed that the expressive values of names are common with nicknames.

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