

Code-Switching and Code-Mixing As Stylistic Devices In Nigerian Prose Fiction: A Study Of Three Nigerian Novels

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Abstract

Nigeria has a very complex linguistic system, with many indigenous languages, various dialects, and the English language. In a multilingual and bicultural society, literary artists are constrained in their literary works by many problems. One of such problems is the expression of African/Nigerian culture, experiences and worldview in English, the language of another culture. Nigerian novelists, like the poets and the dramatists, create literature deriving from Nigerian background, with varying local situations. To proffer solutions to language problems, the novelists modify English language and adopt various stylistic-creative strategies. Among these are code-switching and code-mixing. In this paper, we examine and explicate how three Nigerian novelists employ code-switching and code-mixing as stylistic strategies in their fiction, highlighting also their stylistic significance.

KEYWORDS: Code switching, code mixing, dialect, multi-lingual, culture, sociolinguistics, audience and participants.

1. Introduction

The use of English, a second language in Nigeria, as a lingua franca is the result of British rule, the consequent imposition of English language, and the complex linguistic situation in Nigeria. In a complex speech community, Nigerians communicate in English or in the indigenous Nigerian languages, depending on the situation in which they operate at a particular time. English is employed for formal occasions while the indigenous languages are used for informal occasions.

The culture of a people is best expressed and preserved in their literature through language. It is, therefore, expedient that the language in which a people's culture is articulated indicates, to a large extent, the community or society of its origin. Every culture has its peculiar way of looking at the general world. Language, culture and literature are intimately related. To effectively and adequately articulate the Nigerian culture in English, the language undergoes structural adjustments and changes. In the attempts by Nigerian prose writers to adequately cater for the varying local situations in their works, they employ various stylistic-creative devices and strategies, among which are code-switching and code-mixing.

The novels under study are *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe, *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Everything Good Will Come* by Sefi Atta. A man of the people is preoccupied with societal issues. In the novel, Achebe exposes the ills in most African nations. Such ills include corruption in government, social inequalities, rigged elections, poverty, injustice etc. Through the eyes of Odili, the hero, all the vices in the novel are revealed. Achebe emphasizes the failure of the new generation of educated Africans to resist corruption, temptations and abide by their principles, and fulfill the electoral promises to the people. The major character in the novel is Chief Nanga, the man of the people, who is a man of charm, and an expert in public relations. He employs various skills as political weapons in his political activities.

Purple Hibiscus is the story of Eugene Achile, the major character in the novel and his immediate and extended families. Eugene pretends to be a devoted Christian, but his behaviour does not portray him as one, but as the devil's incarnate. His wickedness to the members of his family results in his tragic death through food poisoning. The major

theme of the novel is socio-political problems in the Nigerian society. Adichie exposes and ridicules the vices and evils in Nigeria in every area of life through the characters in the novel with her effective use of the language of satire.

Everything Good Will Come is “a rallying cry to women to speak out against the world, which tries to muzzle them” (blurb). The thematic preoccupation of the novel is feminism and the socio-political problems in Nigeria. The story centres mainly around two childhood friends, Enitan Taiwo and Sheri Bakare. The author tells her story through the omniscient narrator.

1.2. Code-switching and Code-mixing

Code-switching and code-mixing are sociolinguistic phenomena. They are features of language in contact, and the effects of bilingualism and multilingualism. They are stylistic devices employed by Nigerian novelists in their attempts to tackle the nagging problems of language in Nigerian literature. Code switching and code mixing are, therefore, aspects of language use in Nigerian prose fiction, and by implication, the Nigerian society. Azuike, Macpherson (1987) identifies three major factors inducing code switching and code-mixing in a given speech situation. These include the participants in the speech event and the code the first speaker selects, topic and setting.

1.2.1 Code-switching

As a sociolinguistic phenomenon, code-switching involves rapid switch or change from one language to another, depending on the situations, audience, subject matter etc. It is a consequence of language in contact. Hudson, R.A. (1980) asserts that it is an inevitable consequence of bilingualism and more generally multilingualism. As a common feature in bilingual and multilingual societies, it is a situation where a speaker changes from one language code to another in a speech event. John Lyons (1977) sees code-switching as the ability of members of a language community to pass from one dialect or variety of the language to another according to the situation of utterance. He adds that code-switching is not restricted to language communities employing two or more languages or dialects. He cites the example of a conversation between an executive and his secretary, where there are code shifts from English to Spanish, and then back again to English in the course of a single conversation. In this situation, Spanish is employed for causal and friendly discussion while English is for all formal discussions.

Code-switching occurs at intersentential level. It occurs between people capable of making themselves understood in either code. A bilingual speaker chooses between his languages according to the circumstance, and in a way that his audience will comprehend his utterance. But sometimes, code-switching is not determined by social situations alone. Speakers can switch codes for their personal reasons.

In communities where everyone speaks the same range of languages, the different languages are used for different circumstances, and the choice is always controlled by social rules (Hudson, 1980). In such a situation also, each person switches codes several times daily. Hudson (1980) calls this type of code switching ‘situational code-switching.’ He says that this is by virtue of the fact that the switching between languages always coincides with changes from one external situation to another. Each of the languages has a social role to play, which others cannot. He further claims that bilingual speakers use their choices of languages to define situations, rather than letting the situations define the choice of languages. But he also states that “where language choice varies with the situation, it is clearly the situation that decides the language, not the other way round. He calls cases where the choice of languages determines the situation ‘metaphoric code-switching’ (53).

Code-switching is a common feature in Nigerian prose. This involves the characters in the choice of appropriate linguistic codes for different contexts in their interactions. The authors employ this as a stylistic device to cater adequately for the varying local situations in their novels. For instance, in *A Man of the People*, Achebe engages his characters in code-switching, depending on the situations in which the characters find themselves. Choices of appropriate codes enable the characters assume corresponding roles, which best serve their communicative needs in different speech encounters (Azuike, 1987). Sometimes, characters communicating in English switch to indigenous languages or Pidgin English. In informal occasions, Pidgin or local languages are employed, while English is the medium of communication in formal situations. In *A Man of The People*, Chief Nanga, a minister and a major character in the novel, switches codes in his communication as situations demand. For instance, in the reception organized in his

honour in his hometown, Anata, a formal occasion, he addresses the audience in Standard English. This is because it is a formal occasion. In addressing the journalist in his entourage, he employs Standard English saying:

‘It is a mammoth crowd.’ (11)

The proprietor of Anata Grammar School also interacts in Standard English during the official reception saying:

‘It is an unprecedented crowd in the annals of Anata.’ (11)

Explaining the serious effort he puts in while organizing the reception, Mr. Nwege says:

‘I had to visit every section of the village personally to tell them of your- I mean to say of the minister’s visit.’ (11)

Aware of the official nature of the occasion, Chief Nanga and Mr. Nwege communicate in Standard English to suit the occasion.

But soon after the official reception, when Chief *Nanga* and his entourage are hosted in Mr. *Nwege’s* lodge, an informal occasion, the minister who had earlier been communicating in English switches to Pidgin English. In response to Odili, the narrator’s remark that the minister might have spent so much money on the various dance groups, the minister says in Pidgin:

“You call this spend? You never see some thing my brother. I no de keep anini for myself, na so so troway. If some person come to you say ‘I wan make you Minister’ make you run like blazes commot. Na true word I tell you...”(16)

Chief Nanga’s switch to Pidgin English in the extract above depicts a close relationship between him and Odili, his former school pupil, and his awareness of the informal situation in which they are interacting.

Soon after, the minister switches code back to Standard English in addressing Odili on a serious and an important issue, bordering on the idea of Odili’s postgraduate studies overseas. In Standard English, he invites Odili to his house in the city, saying:

‘If you come as soon as you close, you can stay in my guest room... you can live by yourself and do any thing you like there.’(20)

Immediately, Mrs. John, a lady in Chief Nanga’s entourage, warns Odili against him. In response to Mrs. John’s remark Chief Nanga switches to Pidgin, telling her jokingly not to disgrace him:

‘Eleanor, why you wan disgrace me and spoil my name for public for nothing sake. Wetin I do you?’ (20)

Similarly, Chief Nanga switches code during the incident of the suspected poisoned coffee taken by Chief Koko, his friend. He employs Standard English as he makes a distress call on phone, inviting a doctor for help without success. Angry with the doctor, he shouts at him on phone. Abusing and threatening him, he says:

“This is Chief the Honorable Nanga speaking’,
‘I will see that you are dealt with. Idiot. That is the trouble with this country. Don’t worry, you will see. Bloody fool...” (38)

Chief Nanga communicates in Standard English on this occasion because of the seriousness of the matter. He expects that the doctor would take him more serious and respond promptly to his phone call. But when the cook explains the mystery of the suspected poisoned coffee, which has caused anxiety, fear, panic and false alarm, everyone becomes happy and relaxed. Teasing his friend, Chief Koko, Chief Nanga, who a while ago had been shouting and insulting a doctor on phone in Standard English, switches code to Pidgin English saying jokingly:

“But S.I., ‘you too fear death. Small thing you begin holler
‘they done kill me, they done kill me!’ Like person wey scorpion done lego am for him...” (40).

In response, Chief Koko says laughing:

‘Why I no go fear?’

‘If na you you no go piss for inside your trouser?’

On another occasion, Chief Nanga engages in a telephone conversation in Standard English with the Honourable Minister for public construction popularly called T.C. Because of the seriousness of the issue and the importance Chief Nanga attaches to the tarring of the roads, he communicates in Standard English with Honourable T.C. Kobino on phone saying:

‘Look T.C. we agreed that these roads should be tarred.
What is this dillying dallying...?’ (47)

In the above examples, Achebe puts code differentiation to effective use. He uses different language codes to suit different situations. He engages his characters in code-switching, based on the different occasions and situations in which they operate, thereby paying a great deal of attention to appropriateness in language use. Oyeleye, Lekan (1994) quotes Gumperz and Hymes as defining ‘appropriateness’ as a specification of what kinds of things to say in what message form, to what kinds of people and in what kinds of situations. Achebe’s display of linguistic craftsmanship in *A Man of the People*, confirms the assertion that different situations and role shifts demand appropriate language codes for effective communication.

In the same vein, Chimamanda Adichie employs code-switching as a stylistic device in *Purple Hibiscus*. This is her attempt to cater for different situations in order to suit the Nigerian environment in her narrative. She employs this useful device in an interesting manner. She engages her characters in interactions in Standard English, Pidgin English and sometimes Igbo language, depending on the prevailing circumstances. The characters interact in Standard English in formal situations, but in abnormal situations, Pidgin is adopted as exemplified below. When the law enforcement agents storm Auntie Ifeoma, a university lecturer’s house in search of incriminating documents with which to nail her, Obiora, her son, who speaks fluent English under normal circumstances, switches to Pidgin English in expressing his anger:

“How you go just come enter like dis? Wetin be dis?”(231)

Similarly, the students of the University of Nsukka, who communicate in English under normal condition in their day to day activities, switch code when the needs arise. They switch from English to Pidgin English as they riot in protest against the insensitive university management, to express their anger, lay their complaints and make their demands for better conditions of living on campus. For example, laying their complaints indirectly through questions, they chant:

“...Where is running water? Where is light? Where is petrol?” (228)

Demanding a change in the headship of the university administration, they sing:

“All we are saying, sole administrator must go!
All we are saying, he must go! No be so! Na so!” (228)

Adichie also engages her characters in switching from Standard English to Igbo language and vice versa. Auntie Ifeoma switches to Igbo language occasionally based on her mood and the prevailing circumstances. For example, complaining bitterly about her brother’s treatment of their father, she says:

Yet Eugene will not let him into his house, will not even greet him.
Ojoka! Eugene has to stop doing God’s job. (95)

On another occasion, when Rev. Father Amadi, a family friend, visits Auntie Ifeoma’s family to see her sick father, Papa Nnukwu, Auntie Ifeoma switches from Standard English to Igbo language in a single conversation.

“His recovery has been swift, father. *Chukwu aluka,*” (163)

While she addresses Kambili, whom her cousin, Amaka, teases for not knowing how to prepare *orah* leaves, Auntie Ifeoma switches from Igbo to English saying:

“*Oginidi*, Kambili, have you no mouth?
Talk back to her! (170)

Also, Auntie Ifeoma, who normally speaks English even at home with her family members, switches from English to Igbo on receiving a phone call informing her of her brother’s death. Out of shock she exclaims in response to the bad news:

“*Hei, chi mo!, nwunye m Hei!*”

Immediately, she switches to English, informing Kambili, her niece of her father's death saying:

"It's your father. They called me from the factory, they found him lying dead on his desk." (286)

Eugene's Kinsmen, who normally come to welcome him and his family home on Christmas, speak first in Igbo and immediately switch to Standard English in the same process of welcoming their kinsman home. On one of such occasions, they say:

"*Nno nu! Nno nu!* Have you come back? We will come back soon to say welcome!" (55)

From the examples above, we have established the fact that Adichie employs the stylistic device of code-switching in an interesting manner to her advantage. She portrays the emotional and psychological states of the characters at the time of their utterances through code-switching. It is evident that most characters code-switch in anger, joy, surprise, out of shock etc, as situations demand,

In *Everything Good Will Come*, Sefi Atta also presents characters, who change codes in their speeches and dialogues influenced by the circumstances of their speeches. For example, Sheri discloses to Enitan, her childhood friend, her hope of going to Paris as an actress when she becomes of age, She demonstrates in Standard English how her French fans would run around and sing her praises. Immediately, she switches to French language, and back to English.

"And they will be running around, shouting, 'Sheri, V'oulez-vous.
Bonsoir. Mercredi'. But I won't mind them." (32)

In the above example, the character switches from English to French language to reflect the French environment in which she hopes to act plays.

Other instances of code-switching in the novel include:

"Alaiye Baba", I whispered "Master of Earth". (299)

...Are we equals? ! I thought not. *Christian Ko shit- strain Ni*. (250)

I need Pierre to place the okras on the chopping board.
"Ici"

Pierre raised a brow. "*La bas Madame?*"
"I beg, put am for there", I said. (199)

In the last two excerpts, there is a change of codes from English to French and then to Pidgin by Enitan. This is in her attempt to communicate with her houseboy, who can neither speak nor understand English language.

In the extract below, there is a switch from Pidgin English to Standard English and back to Pidgin by a policeman on roadblock who terrorizes motorists on the roads.

"Sistah, you no fear? I can arrest you right now." Why
you no talk before? You for enter labour small time." (225)

The use of Pidgin English by the character above reflects the Nigerian environment, where Pidgin cuts across the different classes of people in the society. It also depicts the level of education acquired by most members of the Nigerian police force, who have little or no formal education.

In the following extract, Grace Ameh, a renowned journalist, engages in a discussion with Enitan, a lawyer, over Enitan's father's unjust arrest and detention by the autocratic government. She switches from Standard English to Pidgin and then back to Standard English.

"My dear, any news?"
"No" I said.
"Na wa, what a pity? Well, come in". (239)

In the example, Grace Ameh switches codes from Standard English to Pidgin despite her high level of education and social class. The author has reflected in this extract the informal situation in which the two women interact.

From the various examples in the various texts under study, we have shown how Nigerian novelists employ the device of code-switching, based on varying situations to their advantages. It is established that the profuse use of Pidgin English in Nigerian novels is necessitated by the Nigerian environment, with many tribes and their different languages. In the Nigerian complex linguistic situation, the authors employ Pidgin English because it serves as the most convenient language of communication by people of different ethnic groups and social classes. The advantage is that it enables them to communicate effectively.

1.2.2. Code-Mixing

Code-mixing is also a sociolinguistic phenomenon, resulting from language in contact. It is an effect of bilingualism and multilingualism. It occurs when bilinguals communicating in a language insert words or expressions from another language into their sentences. Unlike in code-switching, code-mixing occurs without changes in situations of utterances. Hudson (1980) calls this situation “conversational code-switching, involving a situation, where a fluent bilingual talking to another bilingual changes code without any change at all in situation.” (53). Code-mixing occurs randomly due to the inability of the speakers to find suitable words or expressions with which to express the ideas they intend to pass across. It is, therefore, intra-sentential, that is, occurring within sentences. Essien, Okon (1995) defines code-mixing as “a language phenomenon, in which two codes or languages are used for the same message or communication” (272).

Code-mixing generally takes place in informal situations, usually among speakers with the same linguistic background. It occurs at home, in parties among intimate people etc. Code-mixing is done for specific purposes, serving both linguistic and social functions. Essien (1995) also asserts that code-mixing is ad hoc and strongest in areas such as the academic disciplines, the professions, politics, the economy etc (281).

Code-mixing is one of the features of the use of language in Nigeria, resulting from the complex linguistic system and biculturalism. Instances of code-mixing abound in Nigerian prose fiction. It involves the presence of the dominant English language (the target language), and the indigenous Nigerian languages (the source languages) in literary creation. The novelists involve their characters in the insertion of words and expressions of the local languages into English speeches and sentences.

Code-mixing is very common in the speeches of semiliterate characters in Nigerian novels. In *Purple Hibiscus* for instance, the characters often code-mix as Adichie tries to reflect the realities of the use of English in Nigeria, and preserve the culture and tradition of the Igbos. She actualizes her aims by the insertion of a lot of Igbo words and expressions into English sentences of the characters in her novel.

These are exemplified below.

Lunch was Jollof rice, fist-size chunks of *azu* fried
until the bones were crisp, and *ngwo-ngwo*. (32)

“Papa Nnukwu, *nno*,” I said (152)

Only the chirping of *Ochiri* birds outside interrupted it. (32)

But, *gwakenem*, will the truth feed your children? (223)

... his cheeks would bulge out like unripe *udala* fruit... (209)

Aku is flying (218)

Lunch was *fufu* and *onugbu* soup. (II)

Mama was already making me *ofe nsala*. (14)

... so that *chukwu* will send a good man to take care of you and the children. (183)

In *Everything Good Will Come*, Sefi Atta tries to project and preserve Nigerian languages, which are vital aspects of Nigerian culture, through the speeches and sentences of the characters in her novel. They code-mix, inserting Yoruba and Hausa words and expressions into English sentences, thereby reflecting Nigerian environments. Examples are given below:

“You’re so funny, *aburo!*” (34)

Not even of the *eyo* who dressed in white sheets like spirits... (35)

They were *omo-ita*, street children. (45)

“Don’t mind her jo,” (232)

You and your *aje butter* friend in the corner who cannot take the smell of ... (247)

Maybe he thought I was a prostitute like Born Again over here or a crazy like *Do-Re-Mi*. (252)

“*Sanu*, madam,” (96)

Moreover, Atta presents characters that code-mix, inserting some of the words, which have come to stay in the Popular Nigerian English (NPE) into English sentences in her novel as follows:

... private transport vans we call *kabukabu* and *danfo*. (95)

... ‘whereas’ my life story was straight, all of a sudden my life story got *k-legs?*” (252)

The above instances where the characters code-mix, are for stylistic effects. The use of code-mixing, therefore, reflects the Nigerian setting, as well as the realities of the use of English language in Nigeria and the Nigerian prose fiction.

1.3 Conclusion

Various situational variables or extra-linguistic factors impose constraints on the language and styles of Nigerian novelists in their literary works. Code-switching and code-mixing are some of the stylistic strategies devised to tackle the problems of language in Nigerian prose fiction, thereby catering adequately for the varying Nigerian local situations, culture and environment. English language is in contact with the numerous Nigerian local languages and dialects. The use of code-switching and code-mixing are demonstrations of some of the attempts by Nigerian novelists to reflect the realities of the use of English in Nigeria.

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