A Lexico-semantic study of Vernacular Expressions in Chimamanda Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*

By

Innocent Ejimofor Agu Ph.D and Evangelista Chimebere Agu

Department of English and Literary Studies

Federal University Wukari

Email: ejimofology@gmail.com

Abstract

This paper examined the use of vernacular expressions in Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun* with the intention of establishing the appropriateness or otherwise of such usage. It has become an established style for renowned authors to incorporate vernacular expressions in their writings. Code-mixing from different languages is sometimes done with the sole purpose of emphasizing some salient points that would enable the author achieve a particular artistic effect. But it can also affect meaning and thus cause ambiguity in the interpretation of the intended points. The extracts were purposively selected and discussed under the sub-heads: Use of Ambiguous Expressions, Use of Code-switching and Code-mixing, Introduction of Different Dialects of the Igbo Language into the narrative, Use of Plural Markers, Use of Vernacular Expressions of Non-Igbo Etymology and Use of Sound Effects. The analyses revealed that the author is very skilful in weaving vernacular expressions into a novel written in the English language thus creating a perfect blend of two or more languages into a single narrative for stylistic effect. It is recommended that budding and even established writers may decide to adopt this style so as to reach a wider African audience and at the same time create a balance of style and meaning in the narrative tissue.

Keywords: Style, Stylistics, Meaning, Lexis and Semantics

Introduction

Adichie has within a very short time established herself as a literary icon to be reckoned with all over the world. Her ability and dexterity at story telling has earned her a pride of place amongst literary giants of this present generation. Part of this accolade is achieved primarily through her manipulation of words. It has been stated that literature is art expressed in words, (Agu, 2008). Words are combined and manipulated skilfully by writers to achieve artistic effects. Sometimes, some authors go out of their ways to select words and phrases from other languages other than the primary medium of communication and laced them up within the same communicative field. Some do this as a stylistic device while some employ this as a narrative technique. Whatever the aim of such authors might be, this device has worked effectively for some while for some it has brought about some elements of ambiguity in the interpretation of texts.

This paper therefore examines the use of such vernacular words and phrases in Chimanada Ngozi Adichie's *Half of A Yellow Sun* with a view to ascertaining the lexico-semantic effects they have on the novel's style and meaning.

A brief review of literature shows that quite a lot has been written on style and stylistics as well as lexico-semantic analysis of literary texts. Stylistics is a word derived from style; it is a discipline which studies different styles. It can refer to the study of proper use of words or language in proper places. Widdowson (1975, p 3) defines stylistics as "the study of literary

discourse from a linguistic orientation"

Style has grown to mean so many things to so many people today. Carter (1989, p 14) is of the view that it is generally recognized that the style of a work can depend on linguistic levels and that one fairly crucial factor is our expectation concerning the literary form or genre employed. Haynes (1989, p 3 cited in Li Ke 2010) believes that the study of style is the study of distinctions: looking at what was said against what might have been said. Style is almost synonymous with variety. Style refers in a simple way to the manner of expression which differs according to the various contexts. Style or stylistic variation may also be reckoned or analysed in linguistic terms like sentence types, phonological elements, morphological variety, lexical variety: rhetorical terms (e.g. figures of speech) semantic terms, and even semiotic terms.

There are different levels of language study, namely: morphology which is the study of word formation and structure; syntax which deals with the arrangement of words to form sentences; phonology which studies speech sounds and how they are organized into a system of a given language, etc. This study concerns itself mainly with lexicology and semantics as parts of the levels of language.

These levels in turn are used in analysing the data. The notion of word is central in the study of lexicology and semantics. Lexicology deals with the study of the form, meaning, use and behaviour of words. Semantics deals with the study of meaning. It shows how words and sentences including non-verbal behaviours are understood, interpreted and related to objects and situations in the world. Semantics also relates syntactic structures to writing as a whole. Words and sentences are carefully selected and well-ordered to convey intentions.

According to Syal and Jindal (2010) "Stylistics is that branch of linguistics which takes the language of literary texts as its object of study". Stylistics is the study of various styles used in literary and non – literary texts which distinguishes the uniqueness of a writer from another. Style is a pattern of linguistic features that distinguish a piece of writing from another; it also distinguishes the personality of one author from another. Syal and Jindal (2010) opined that out of the many types of variations that occur in language, it is the variation in literary style that is most complex, and thus offers unlimited scope for linguistic analysis. Stylistics is very important in Literature because each literary text represents an individual's use of language which reflects his unique personality, thoughts and style. The study of literary styles shows the linguistic repertoire of a writer.

Stylistics looks at the choice of words, the sentence patterns and figurative usage of words by a writer. Figurative expressions which are sometimes called "Rhetorical Expression" helps a writer to be vivid in his description of events and ideas.

According to Ezugu (2011, cited in Ohanedozi 2013) Figures of speech, sometimes called "rhetorical" figures are expressions, phrases or words used to convey more than their ordinary literal meaning. These figures, if properly used, not only enrich but strengthen and give life to literary texts.

A good number of other writers and critics have made comments on Adichie's writings. Izeybaye(1979:14 cited in Ohanedozi 2013) states that Adichie exhibits a careful manipulation of linguistic resources to aptly express the civilizing function which literature performs by dealing with the African image in the past or the politics of the present. Also, Osofisan (cited in Ohanedozi 2013) says that Adichie's effective manipulation of language enhances a cerebral analysis and interpretation of her environment, which makes her works worthy of scholarly attention. Thus it is this manipulation of language that has attracted the attention of this paper under stylistic analysis. This is because stylistics as a study of style involves the deliberate investigation of the language features present in a text. Style is unique and specific. It differs from one author to another. A writer's intention goes a long way to influence his choice of linguistic features. Linguistic features of a language are innumerable, thus a writer has various features at his disposal to choose from.

Before we finally conclude this segment of our discussion, it may be pertinent to add a line about the concept of code-switching and code-mixing since they may feature in the course our analysis. In linguistics, code-switching occurs when a speaker alternates between two or more languages, or language varieties, in the context of a single conversation. Multi-linguals—speakers of more than one language—sometimes use elements of multiple languages when conversing with each other. Thus, code-switching is the use of more than one linguistic variety in a manner consistent with the syntax and phonology of each variety, (Meyers-Scotton 1993).

Code-mixing refers to the mixing of two or more languages or language varieties in speech.

Some scholars use the terms "code-mixing" and "code-switching" interchangeably, especially in studies of syntax, morphology, and other formal aspects of language. Others assume more specific definitions of code-mixing, but these specific definitions may be different in different subfields of linguistics, education theory, and communications and so forth.

Code-mixing is similar to the use or creation of pidgins; but while a pidgin is created across groups that do not share a common language, code-mixing may occur within a multilingual setting where speakers share more than one language. (Sridhar and Sridhar 1980)

The short literature review has really shown that Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has engaged the attention of writers and critics. Her thematic preoccupation and narrative technique have attracted quite a good number of comments. It is also a known fact that the language of her works has been explored by critics. But to the best of the knowledge of these writers not much has been done on her use of vernacular expressions. Hence this write-up aims to fill this gap.

Method of Analysis: The texts for analysis are purposively selected. Most of the vernacular words are explained or translated into the English language appositionally. Some of them are explained contextually. Hence this paper isolates some of those texts that are not translated which might still pose some semantic problems to readers that do not speak the same language from where the vernacular expressions are extracted.

Discussion:

Use of Ambiguous Expressions

.i. *I nugo:* This is a complete sentence in its own right. When translated, it should read: 'Have you heard?' But this is not explained in any way. When examined contextually, a non-Igbo reader may find it difficult guessing the meaning. For instance, the author writes 'You should look around the house and put your bag in the first room on the corridor. I

am going for a walk, to clear my head, *i nugo?'*. (p.6) The only possible clue a reader may have is the question mark that follows the vernacular expression. The next paragraph provides the answer thus:

ii. '**Yes, sah**.' A non-Nigerian reader may only guess the meaning of the word 'sah' which is a phonological distortion of the word 'sir.' This phrase occurred first on page 4. There, it is italicised. This shows that it is a deviation from the norm or that it is used for a special stylistic effect. But after that the italics is removed and that becomes the normal way that particular character, Ugwu, pronounces the word. So he pronounces 'sah' which can be transcribed as /sæ/ instead of 'sir' /sɜː/. This particular distortion by Ugwu is deliberately made by the novelist to show the class difference between Odenigbo, the master and Ugwu, his servant as clearly shown in the following dialogue:

'You've ironed my socks, haven't you?' Master asked

'Sorry, **sah**! Sorry, **sah**!'

'I told you not to call me sir.'

Even when Ugwu is instructed to call his master by his name, he refused out of deference to Odenigbo, the master. Unfortunately, he persistently uses the word **sah** instead of the correct English rendition of the word **sir.** The word **sah** is indeed a pidginized version of the correct word. The same could be said of the word **carpenter** which is pidginized in the novel into three different spellings as **capenter, capinta and capainta.** Many a time when the not-educated characters try to imitate the highly-educated characters in the novel, the result is either a phonological distortion of the English word or a

creation of the Pidgin variety of similar word with same referent.

iii. *Okwuma:*   The word is not translated appositionally as we see in some other vernacular lexical items used in the novel. The only aid a non-Igbo speaking reader will have on encountering this word is just the verb with which it co-occurs: 'whenever he was ill with the fever, or once when he fell from a tree, his mother would rub his body with *okwuma...'* The verb 'rub' and the circumstances of applying the *okwuma* will help the reader guess that okwuma is a kind of locally made ointment. In other words, apart from using translations in apposition, the author should be commended for choosing appropriate collocations even in the code-mixed lexical items as seen above.

Use of Code-switching and Code-mixing

The novelist made use of code-switching and code-mixing in quite a number of conversations in the text. Some of them are structured in such a way that non-Igbo speakers may be a little confused about the meanings of such words and phrases. We look at them thus:

i.   'she did not look as if she wanted to go home today.' Okeoma said.

'*Nwoke m,* are you sure you are not planning to do something with her?'(p.21)

The expression *nwoke m* literally stands for 'my man.' Friends often refer to their friends in the Igbo language as 'nwoke m but the syntactic structure of the expression in the text in its initial position may cause some semantic ambiguity because one may think it is the name of a person. The syntactic structure of the lexical item is that of nominal in the

vocative case. Thus one may be tempted to think that the lexical item, ***nwoke m*** is the name of a person who is being asked a rhetorical question by the speaker.

ii.   ***'Biko***, wear something nice, Kainene will be dressing up too' (p.30)

iii.   'Chief Okonji stood in front of her. His ***agbada*** was embroidered with gold thread in the collar'

There are many instances of code-switching in the text. In this excerpt (i) above, the lexical item ***biko*** started an imperative sentence. Just like what has been said earlier, a reader who has no idea whatsoever of the semantic import of the word will misconstrue it to be the name of a person. It stands in the sentence as if **Biko** is being addressed to wear something nice. But in the context Olanna is the person being addressed though the subject is overtly mentioned. She is the implied subject. The parents merely want to showcase her before a government official. The finance minister has been invited to dinner. The parents want to use her as a bait to catch the minister and win juicy contracts. To attract, the attention of this said minister, the mother enjoined her o wear something nice. Her twin sister, Kainene is said to be dressing up at that same time. Thus the lexical item, **biko** can be said to be an entreaty. It literally means **please.**

In the second excerpt the word **agbada** is presented as a noun. The pronoun *his* that precedes it shows possession. But the lexical item can easily be explained because of the other word, the verb *embroidered* that co-occurred with it. Since that word has to do with ornamental fittings in a piece of cloth, then it follows that ***agbada*** must be a kind of clothing material.

In fact even in some of the songs which the author interjected in the course of the narrative there are code-switching and code-mixing. An example will suffice at this point:

> *Biafra win the war.*
>
> *Armoured car, shelling machine,*
>
> *Fighter and bomber,*
>
> ***Ha enweghi ike imeri Biafra*** (P.275)

Here the first three lines are rendered in the English language and the last one in vernacular. And there is no attempt to translate or explain this particular song or the line. This is bound to confuse some readers. The line simply means: 'They cannot defeat Biafra.'

A similar song with code-switching is seen on page 283 thus:

> *Caritas,* ***thank you,***
>
> *Caritas si anyi taba okporoko*
>
> *Na kwashiorkor ga-ana.*

Again, the first line wets the appetite of the non-Igbo speaking reader to enjoy the song. But on getting to the rest of the lines, there is nothing but communication breakdown. This song is one of those many songs composed extempore by the suffering masses of the defunct Biafra when they received relief materials from the Caritas Organization. It is simply saying in the last two lines:

> *Caritas said we should be eating stock fish*

That kwashiorkor will go away.

One important phenomenon noticeable here is that the author can code-mix or code switch at any point in the narrative. Some occur at word-initial or word-final. The reader is therefore, expected to guess intelligently the meaning of some of the lexical items used.

Introduction of Different Dialects of the Igbo Language into the Narrative:

Another phenomenon that is bound to cause semantic problems to the non-Igbo speaking readers of the novel is the introduction of differences of dialects of the Igbo language in the novel. Some examples are explained below.

i.   Chioke shook master's hands with both of hers. 'Thank you, master. ***Deje!***'

'Do you want some bread?' Ugwu asked

'Yes, my brother. ***Dalu.*** Thank you.'

The two words we want to analyse here are '**Deje**' and '**Dalu**.' Mostly people from the Nsukka area of Igbo land use 'Deje' when they want to show appreciation or to simply say 'Thank you' as we see in the above text. The Igbos of Anambra extraction will say **'Dalu'** for the same 'Thank you' while '**I mela**' is used by all Igbos as the standard or general way of saying thank you. In the text above, the character who said **'Deje**' is Ugwu's step mother and we know from the novel that Ugwu as a character is from Opi in Nsukka and the character who used '**Dalu**' is from Anambra area. The same word is also used by both Olanna and Odenigbo

who come from Umunnachi and Abba respectively both in Anambra area of Igbo land. Another example of the use of different dialects of Igbo land can be found in the following examples in the excerpts below:

ii.   'Is that not so, Amala? Does a boy belong in the kitchen?'

'***Kpa***, Mama, no,' Amala said. (P.95)

'No.' Aunty Ifeka put the pestle down. '***Mba.*** You will go back to Nsukka.'(P.226)

In the first text we see vernacular expressions: '***Kpa***' and '***Mba***' with one common English translation '**No.**' It is worth noting, therefore, that Adichie explores the richness of the Igbo language in writing this particular novel. There are a lot of people even among readers of this novel who speak Igbo as their first language who unfortunately may not know that '***Kpa***' is an Igbo word referring to '**No**'

The Use of Plural Markers in Vernacular Expressions:

There are certain morphemes that grammatically act as plural markers in the Igbo language which the author has used with dexterity in her narrative. We need to explain such here because a non-Igbo reader may encounter some semantic problems while reading the novel.

i. ''Richard was relieved. 'It has been nice talking to you, *jisie ike'*, he said'' (P.152)

ii. ''Three men were spreading palm fronds on the tarmac...Richard went over to say, 'Well done, *jisienu ike*''

In the first text Richard is talking to one person and he said **'jisie ike'**, but in Text ii while greeting the three men working in the tarmac he said, **'jisienu ike'**. The graphic difference between **'jisie ike** and **jisienu ike** is the inclusion of the bound morpheme **'nu'** to the latter. This morpheme equally has affected the grammar of the vernacular expression from singular to the plural form. Another example like this one can be found in the expressions:

iii. 'Welcome, Mama, *nno'* he said. (P.94)

iv. 'Many of those children had stopped by to say, *nno nu,* welcome' (P.184)

The same explanations made in text i and ii above are applicable here.

Use of Other Vernacular Expressions of Non-Igbo Etymology:

So far we have been examining vernacular expressions traceable to the Igbo language. But it is important to note that the novelist made use of vernacular expressions that originated from other languages. some examples will suffice at this point:

i. '*Na gode*. Thank you, **Hajia**,' Olanna said...(P.46)

ii. '...a crowd of young men on the roadside, chanting, *Araba, araba!'*(P.147)

iii. 'The first soldier waved his gun...*Ina nyamiri!'*(P.152)

iv. '...the nurse who placed a bowl of thin *akamu* next to him smiled...(P.394)

v. 'He just drinks and drinks cheap *kai-kai*.' (P.388)

vi. '...but there is something terribly *nouveau riche* about him.' (P.59)

Texts i-iii have expressions that are of Hausa etymology, text iv is of Yoruba origin while text v possibly derives from the Nigerian pidgin. Text vi cannot necessarily be said to be a vernacular. It is both foreign to the English language and our vernacular. It is of French etymology. Since these expressions are not translated into the English language, the much the reader could do is to rely on the context. For instance the first text is syntactically juxtaposed against its English equivalent: '*Na gode*. Thank you.' But same cannot be said of the rest of the texts.

Use of Sound Effects

i. His aunty walked faster, her slippers making *slap-slap* sounds...(P.3)

ii. She could hear the raspy *caw-caw-caw* of the blackbirds that ate the pawpaw...(P.107)

iii. 'Our people say that the chorus sounds like *mmee-mmee-mmee*, the bleating of a goat...(P.130)

iv. ...she heard the town crier walking past the house, beating a loud ogene....***Gom-gom-gom***.(P.187)

v. The swift roar of planes and the sharp ***ka-ka-ka*** of anti-aircraft came from above...(P.275)

vi. ...the fierce ***wah-wah-wah*** sounds of the bombers appeared from nowhere...(P.279)

vii. He heard the first *boom*....It came again: ***boom,boom,boom***...the shelling sounds very close by, and again there was a series of ***boom,boom,boom***.

An example or two would have been enough to make the point intended at this point but we have to deliberately bring out these examples to demonstrate Adichie's preoccupation with the near-real-life description of the sounds made by various objects in the narrative: ranging from the sounds of slippers to those of bombs. The alliterations and assonances seen here are all onomatopoeic. Reproducing the sounds graphically enriches the linguistic and hence the stylistic provisions of the novel.

Conclusion

What is done here is just a tip of the iceberg considering the gamut of vernacular expressions in the novel. Inasmuch as the paper did not go into quantitative stylistic analysis, it is still pertinent to observe that a greater percentage of the vernacular expressions are explained using parenthetic or appositional syntactic structures. Thus the few that are examined in this paper show that much still could be done to enhance the reading pleasure and semantic interpretation of the novel by non-Igbo speaking readers. It is thus recommended that young writers as well as already established ones should not shy away from using such expressions that might enrich the linguistic tissue of their works.

References

Adichie, C.N. (2006). *Half of a Yellow Sun*. Lagos: Farafina Publishers

Agu, I.E. (2008). A Linguistic-Stylistic Analysis of Soyinka's *The Interpreters*. Unpublished PhD Thesis, Federal University of Technology Yola

Carter, D.W. (1989). *Context in Language Use*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press

Li Ke (2010). Project based College English: An Approach to Teaching Non-English Majors *Chinese Journal of Applied linguistics* Vol.33 No.4

Myers-Scotton, Carol. (1993). *Social Motivations of Codeswitching*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Ohanedozi, L.C. (2013). Stylistic Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Half of a Yellow Sun*, Unpublished Thesis. Caritas University Enugu

Sridhar, S.N. and Kamal K. Sridhar. (1980). The syntax and psycholinguistics of bilingual code-mixing. *Canadian Journal of Psychology* 34(4):407-416.

Syal, P. & D. Jindal (2010). *An Introduction to Linguistics, language, Grammar & Semantics*. India Prentice Hall

Widdowson, H.G. (1975). *Stylistics and the Teaching of Literature*. London: Longman