

Making the Best of a “Bad” Situation: Onwudinjo’s Linguistic Gymnastics in *De Wahala for Wazobia*

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Abstract

*A second language set up is viewed by some scholars, especially linguistic purists, as an arena for language corruption. For most purists, a bilingual situation is prone to bastardization as one language has the proclivity to interfere with the other. However, other scholars claim that a second language situation provides an ambience for a richer linguistic milieu and creativity than that provided by a monolingual community. This paper, therefore, using critical stylistic methods, analyses the linguistic creativity of four poems in Onwudinjo’s collection of poems entitled *De Wahala for Wazobia*. It attempts to highlight and analyze the different linguistic levels within which Onwudinjo has displayed some form of legerdemain and/or dexterity while still maintaining the focus of his message. The study adopts Kees Hengeveld and Lachlan Mackenzie’s (1997) *Functional Discourse Grammar* theory to show how context, co-text and culture intermingle with language production especially as it affects the poet’s linguistic situation in the text. The study reveals that Onwudinjo’s choice of Pidgin English which is primarily to reach a wider reading audience exhibits some linguistic effects in the duplication of terms for emphasis and meaning intensification, creative formation of new words as a character of a living language and approximation of sounds to ease pronunciation. The paper concludes that the dynamism in language has offered the writer the opportunity to manoeuvre his way through national rhetoric.*

Keywords: *Linguistic creativity, bastardisation, context, co-text and cultural interference*

Introduction

Many second language writers have turned the linguistic complexity they are embroiled in into a fertile ground for creativity. A second language situation should therefore be viewed as a source of linguistic differentiation for poets, dramatists and novelists; this should make character delineation easier and enhance the ascription of idiolects to characters since in a second language situation, languages are assigned values and therefore, status. As many sociolinguists point out, knowledge of the second language is an index of mobility socially (Kachru, 1983, Bamgbose, 1995, Banjo, 1996, Akindele & Adegbite, 1999). Non-standard variations will therefore inevitably arise, particularly when multilingualism is combined with it. This is because many people would want to demonstrate their proficiency in the prestigious language, regardless of their actual level of mastery.

This paper, therefore, examines the exploitation of the language situation by a Nigerian poet, Onwudinjo, and attempts to determine to what advantage the writer has utilised his chosen variety, the Nigeria Pidgin, aesthetically to convey his message. The paper studies, in detail, only four poems from a collection entitled *De wahala for wazobia* in order to present a qualitative analysis of the text. These poems were selected based on their richness in morphological creativity and subjected to a functional grammar analysis.

Nigeria is both a multilingual and bilingual community thus making the development of non-standard varieties a necessity. The different varieties are used in different social situations and for different purposes. Creative writers, therefore, began to use the Pidgin English as a medium in order to address an even wider audience than would be the case were they to use the standard variety only or a local language. While many writers use the Pidgin merely to spice their texts, some employ it as the sole medium, as in the case of Onwudinjo. This study is aimed at exploring the creativity in the deployment of Pidgin in the text, with a view to establishing the stylistic effect in communication, in the formation of new words and in the reduction of sounds in the language of the text.

Empirical Studies

Among the first Nigerian writers to use pidgin as the linguistic code is Ken Saro Wiwa in the novel, *Soja Boy*, which he says is a novel written in "rotten English". More poets, such as Dennis Osadebay, Odia Ofeimun, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and of course, Peter Onwudinjo, among others however, have used the pidgin as their creative medium.

As Onwudinjo puts it (cited in Asika 2015, p18), "perhaps nothing blunts the edge of the expression of the African consciousness like writing in a foreign language. A foreign language suppresses the poetic force ... [because] many African languages are full of vigour and imagery, the Igbo language for instance is highly figurative and uses landscapes of imagery to define as well as reflect the Igbo worldview". The enthralling power of this language turns languid, tepid, watered down as it crosses the cultural/linguistic border, as a poet crawls around a jumble of words to approximate to the meaning in the original language. At the end, a poem emerges that tastes flat like under-salted dish, or dull, like soup castrated by lack of pepper (see Asika 2015: 103).

Onwudinjo also argues that Pidgin poetry yields its meaning without undue tasking of the intellectual resources of the reader. "Just as the rendition of folktales captures the attention of an audience in the hands of an experienced raconteur, so does a creative performer of pidgin poetry capture the attention of the listening audience in the motor park, market place.... Because pidgin is so powerful, and reaches a wider local audience" (p. 102).

Another writer who advocates the use of Pidgin is Ezenwa-Ohaeto who argues in a similar vein insisting that Pidgin is a language that bridges orality and is able to absorb several cultural elements and is therefore able to sustain works of literature. It is obvious that the choice of language or language variety is influenced by a writer's choice of implied audience. When a non-standard variety is chosen, the writer clearly has the interest of the local audience at heart.

Asika's paper on the importance of the choice of language a writer makes concludes that Pidgin poetry gives African poets identity as Africans as well as helps the poets to 'express the pride in culture, local custom and heritage'. In examining Onwudinjo's collection, *De wahala for wazobia*, Asika argues that it is a rich collection that draws on the palatable and pitiable state of affairs in

his country, Nigeria. The issues discussed include the socio-economic policies and religious systems in the nation. The problems focused on also include ethnicity, religious violence, corruption, election malpractices, neocolonial imperialism, and insecurity' (p.107). Woven in Pidgin, the collection choreographs, minutely, the reality of the Nigerian nation.

Ayodabo (2015) also echoes Asika's sentiments by quoting Asika (2011) who declares that during an interview with the Director of the first Pidgin radio station (Wazobia FM), the Director declared that "Nigerians have found a station that goes down well with them... in a language they understand.... With Pidgin, our listeners feel free. We can make mistakes when we talk Pidgin, because it is a language that has no dictionary". This language enables the writers to create without being afraid of any linguistic censor.

Ayodabo concludes that Onwudinjo's collection illustrates the blend of serious issues and language experimentation which contradicts some of the recent views that pidgin is suited only for comic situations. He then argues that if the poems are seen as humorous in some sections, they nevertheless capture with accuracy of post-colonial problems in Nigeria. Another point raised by Ayodabo is that, Pidgin provides a lyrical quality but does not reduce figurative usage and therefore helps "to produce an innovative critique of the country's socio-political and economic problems".

Another critic who welcomes Pidgin literature is Osadebey (2015). He begins his write-up by quoting Ezenwa-Ohaeto who charges Nigerian writers to bridge the rawness of verbal dialogue and the formality of the written word by using the medium of Pidgin English. Osadebey advocates the use of Pidgin English despite its being 'non-standardised', what he calls "formlessness" and its association with the lower social classes. He does not see these facts as serious deterrents. In an interview by G. M. T Emezue in 2008, Onwudinjo said that he writes to exorcise his heart of hurts. When further questioned, he explained that to him, exorcism means 'to ventilate' just as the opening of doors and windows in a house brings about cross ventilation so does writing cleanse one's mind of "worries, stress.... writing can be a way of invigorating the mind' (p.1).

Onwudinjo's language choice has, therefore, established some creative ambiances in the formation of new words: neologism, as a means to communicate to wider audience with minimal western education, and more importantly, the poems capture the Nigerian creative milieu in a more vivid way without alienating readers in the use of language.

Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative study approach which is usually inductive, as data is not quantified. The method is used to explore and identify the linguistic choices of the poet, Onwudinjo, and to establish this choice as his creative impulses in meaning making processes of the texts. Four poems are purposively selected. The choice is based on their thematic preoccupation and those that work round the title of the collection, "*De Wahala for Wazobia*".

Theoretical Underpinnings

This paper uses the functional discourse approach to investigate to what extent the Nigerian Pidgin English has afforded Onwudinjo the opportunity to explore his themes, while not neglecting aesthetics as an integral part of literature. It also considers the peculiarities in Nigerian Pidgin English compared with standard Nigeria English.

Functional grammar is a model of grammar motivated by functions. It was proposed by Simon C. Dik in the 1970s but has undergone several revisions. The latest version published not long after Dik's death features the expansion of the model with a pragmatic/interpersonal model by Kees Hengeveld and Lachlan Mackenzie. This revision and expansion has necessitated the modification of the name of the theory to read functional discourse grammar.

The principles of functional discourse grammar that guide the analysis of natural language usage explain the phonology, morphosyntax, pragmatics and semantics in one linguistic theory. Functional discourse grammar posits that utterances are built top-down in this order: the pragmatic, the semantic and the morphosyntactic aspects of the utterance.

These result in the three components involved in building up an utterance or text – the grammatical, the contextual and the output components. The grammatical component is said to be made up of the interpersonal level, the representational, the morpho-syntactic and the

phonological levels. Functional discourse grammar, developed from functional grammar (Kees, 1999), has as its goal the complete description and explanation of the meaning-making capabilities of languages, particularly, modern English language. Functional grammar, the Halliday and Matthiessen model (2003) looks at texts as ‘instances of language in any medium that makes sense to someone who knows the language’ (p.3).

Kees maintains that the language helps the encoder and decoder to discern reality, decide on what is important and what is not. It helps in the organisation of activities visible and recognisable as such by others. Language enables users to build identities or roles and/or define relationships. It is an inter-connector and the instrument used in assigning values to different phenomena. Functional discourse grammar, thus, provides the framework in this study with which to situate the selected poems as they fit into the conceptual, contextual and grammatical jacket designed for them.

Data Analysis

Pidgin for Communication

Four poems have been selected, one from each of the sections into which the poems have been divided thematically. The first poem selected is entitled ‘**I go de sing my song for pidgin**’. The poem explains why the medium used is Pidgin instead of the standard variety. On the literal level, the poet explains that he had once given a long speech in Standard English at the end of which he received a loud applause which made him believe that he had given a powerful speech. His elation was however short-lived when he overheard a member of the audience asking another person in Igbo what the speaker had talked about. This made him believe that Queen’s English was not suitable to hungry Nigerians.

The poem has ten stanzas of unequal length. Apart from the first person singular subjective pronoun ‘I’, every other word is written in lower case letters except the word ‘Wazobia’, an acronym that is used to represent Nigeria. ‘Wazobia’ was the name given to the proposed national language that was to have evolved from the three Nigerian languages which have the largest number of speakers.

Duplication and Doubling as Meaning Intensifiers in the Poems

Duplication or doubling is a sequential means of repeating words within the same thought, especially in the same sentence to emphasise or intensify meaning. It is a central attribute of the Nigerian Pidgin. The first stanza which narrates how the speech went on for more than two hours has twelve lines but only one comma and one full stop at the end. Some features of non-standardness include the presence of clause-like constructions without a punctuation to indicate whether they are sentences or clauses. The poet just runs on and on thus:

I tell my people just relax
and listen to my yarn,
dey listen listen one hour pass
I dey rap de go de rap de go
de blow oyibo gramatika
wey de sound like de groan
of tap root of iroko
wey hurricane de uproot...

This short stanza contains features of African languages such as duplication for intensification: ‘listen listen’, ‘de rap de go de rap de go’; ‘...clear my eye well well’. Other features of non-standardness are the paucity of punctuation marks such as the period which should be placed at the end of sentences so that the next sentence would begin with a higher case letter. There is the absence of articles, for instance, there is ‘de groan of tap root’ with the definite article missing. The repetition of structures and sometimes of words gives a lyrical quality to the poem. For instance, the lines below convey the poet’s message while not neglecting aesthetics:

na im make poverty full everywhere
na im make hunger full everywhere
na im make *amu rubber* full everywhere
.....
na im make war full everywhere
na im make refugee full everywhere

.....
na im make fear full everywhere

The repeated “na im make” intensifies meaning in the lines above.

Approximation for Pronunciation-ease

Approximation in language studies is a way of pronouncing words of a target language to copy the first language of the speaker; most of this is done in the reduction of sounds as seen in the poems. Other interesting features are lexical creativity displayed in deviant spellings which depict pronunciation problems resulting from the phonological system of the mother tongue of the user. Some examples are: *dey* instead of *they*, *dem* for *them*; *dat* for *that*; *im* for *him*; *gramatika* for *grammatical* etc. There is the striking example of pronouncing ‘armed robber’ as ‘amu rubber’. In the word *amu*, the poet depicts the Igbo syllable structure which is usually a regular alternation between a consonant and a vowel. The word ‘armed’ is therefore ‘odd’ because in its pronunciation, /m/ is followed /d/ thus constituting a consonant cluster. Such syllables are often simplified with the insertion of a vowel sound. In addition, the poet creates humour in rendering *robber* as *rubber* thus emphasising that many Nigerian users of English do not distinguish between the two words in their pronunciation.

Neological Expressions in the Poems

Neologism is the process of forming or coining new words in a language. The Nigerian Pidgin, as a contact language exhibits this tendency, as much. In Onwudinjo’s poem, there is also an instance of lexical coinage and a peculiar collocation such as: ‘devilman’ and ‘tight heart’. The poem also borrows words such as ‘oyibo’ used to refer to the white race. In addition, the only instance of code switching “nwoke ahu oshi ini?” which means ‘What did that man say?’ is employed to reinforce the poet’s choice of language since it indicates that the speaker did not understand the message since it was rendered in a ‘strange’ language. In addition, the poet uses the imagery of the tortoise, an animal known for its slow movement, to advise himself that if he desires to reach his audience with his urgent message, he has to change his linguistic code since ‘de wretched of Wazobia/no de hear oyibo gramatika’. The poet talks to himself thus:

na im I ask myself say
a be dis na de leg wey tortoise go take
reach Umuahia today?

The poem concludes that poverty, hunger, robbery, disease, war, refugees, fear, tight heart, devilman ‘full everywhere’ ‘because de hand wey de rule Wazobia no care /whether Wazobia children go school /or no school/ na im make ignorance full everywhere’ and these result in other vices.

Another poem analysed here takes its title from a popular Nigerian slogan: ‘Man know man’ which is used to express favoritisms and partiality. The poem is entitled: “**As Man Know Man**”. Again the poem begins with a small letter and maintains it throughout, except for the word Wazobia. The poem laments the fact that in every situation in Nigeria, the criterion for selection is to know someone.

The poem has six stanzas, some of which are as short as two lines whereas others contain up to twelve lines. Each stanza is made up of several clauses but there is only one period at the end. The poem lists several situations where in Nigeria it is only when one knows someone that would enable the seeker get the required service. The poem uses a refrain which is discordant with the clause that follows in each case as if to state that that is not how things should be. For instance, the opening lines read:

as man know man
na im de kill Wazobia;
to get job
na as man know man....

Situations in Nigeria where people are usually favored, whether unfairly or not, include: job interviews, passing examinations or getting admission into schools, etc. According to the poet, knowing someone has become a bad thing because it discourages people from working hard since hard work is not rewarded. For instance, ‘person wey de break im head for wazo.../wen e crack im head finish.../person wey de do jibiti /wey guys call sorting/ go get ‘A’ and you sef.../go get ‘C’ or even ‘D’. As a result, ...guys no de care to read again o...’. It could be

argued therefore that ‘man know man’ in Nigeria, is the original sin since it has given birth to several others.

Other Stylistic Effects in the Poem

The major stylistic device employed is repetition, both structural and lexical. For instance, in the first stanza, four of the lines begin with the phrase: ‘as man know man’. There are also some deviant spellings such as ‘broda’ for ‘brother’. In addition, the meanings of the words ‘sorting’ and ‘runs’ are extended to include meeting lecturers and teachers and offering them something that would make them award the student a higher grade than what is merited, thus ‘sorting’ the situation.

The third poem selected is entitled “**Who am I?**” The poet questions why people receive different treatments and wonders what would be the reason why some are favoured and others are despised. The poem consequently employs rhetorical questions to interrogate this situation, the title of the poem being an example. The poem repeats this question twice within the poem and then adds others such as:

na im make I de wonder
who I be
and why my way de dey blocked
by discrimination of who I am;.../wetin I do?.../
why dis fire in zion train
where no man suppose to burn?
from where dis wedge come
where de drive wazobians apart?

The poet does not understand why things should be as they are since no reason has been given. The questions reveal the mind of someone in a dilemma. The poet wonders whether his birth place has anything to do with his ill-luck. Other poetic devices exploited include repetition both structural and lexical such as:

who am I?

who am I?
all the *bad bad* things of this city de come to me
all the *good good* thing of this city de pass me by
de poison the heart of young wazobians
de wound de heart of wazo like snake poison.

These structures display Nigerian language features such as reduplication: good good; bad bad. There is Biblical allusion in the lines ‘...Lazarus wey hunger kill/ for rich man gate’. These lines reinforce the idea raised earlier that in a country where there are several opportunities, quite a large number live under deprivation. Another example is the phrase ‘...fire in Zion train...’ depicting the problem in the country. Zion represents salvation for Christians whereas ‘fire’ represents problems so there is something wrong when a haven turns out to be a furnace.

The fourth poem examined is entitled “**Dem Sow Corruption Like Melon Seeds**”. The title immediately directs the reader as to what to expect. If something is sown, it is expected to yield so if what is planted is ‘corruption’ then the harvest can easily be imagined. The poem chronicles changes that have resulted from military rule. It argues that the corruption sown by military rule has permeated every aspect of the society such that students are no longer interested in studying but indulge in different vices.

As was the case with the earlier poems examined, the local linguistic features found include: reduplication such as is seen in – ‘na *many many* plenty plenty big big books .../and de *fine fine* better better way/wey dem de dress.../de *gallant gallant* way’. These noun phrases describe how students were before they were corrupted. These days, the poem says, the male students ‘... perm hair wear earring [sic] like women/de follow follow girls for *nyash*. The word ‘nyash’ is the Pidgin word for ‘buttocks’. Another borrowed word used here is ‘magu magu’ which represents corrupt practices.

Other features of non-standardness include deviant spelling – ‘them’ becomes ‘dem’; ‘government’ is spelt as ‘goment’; ‘the’ is rendered as ‘de’. Because the language is not standardised, there are many inconsistencies in spelling and assignment of meaning but without the accompanying censor that would have followed were the artist to write in the standard variety.

The advantage is that the writer's creative license is almost unlimited thus giving much room for manipulation.

For instance, in the line 'the first thing wey you go take know undergraduate', the word 'wey' stands for 'which', 'go' represents 'will' and 'take' could be read as 'use' or 'help'. There is also the absence of the article 'the' before the noun 'undergraduate'. The word 'de' means two different things in the lines 'and **de** gallant gallant way' and in 'wey dem **de** treat girls'. The first one is the determiner 'the' whereas the second 'de' marks aspect and could mean 'usually'. The line would then read, 'the way they usually treat girls'.

The word *na* in the same manner could also be used to refer to *are* or *were* as in the line '... na many many plenty plenty big big books...' but it is to be read as 'is' in the lines, 'teacher na teacher/ doctor na doctor/ trader na trader'. The first example in the last set would then read, 'A teacher is a teacher'. Pidgin does not pay much attention to the use of functional words. Emphasis is placed on content words without undue regard to the correctness in capitalisation, punctuation, spelling, pluralisation or tense.

Findings and Conclusion

Peter Onwudinjo has been able to utilise his chosen lingo to present his thematic concerns to a much wider audience than would have been the case were he to use the standard variety. He has explored what he considers the political, religious, economic and social problems with his country, Nigeria. As the title of the collection *De Wahala for Wazobia* says, the poet is concerned with 'The Trouble with Nigeria' which he nicknames 'Wazobia'. This paper has attempted, with the few poems selected, to examine features of Nigerian Pidgin especially those peculiar to a particular writer and has been able to establish that the variety provides a freedom unparalleled with that available in any other variety. The study revealed that most of what the Nigeria pidgin does is to duplicate words, reduce their sounds and provide alternative spellings, in some cases, and *commonise* the English language grammar in such a way that communication is not deterred in the reader. Its beauty is appreciated by a large audience though language purists may find it unpalatable.

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