

# English Language and The African Literary Experience: An Examination of Selected Works of Akachi Adimora- Ezeigbo

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## Abstract

The aim of this study is to investigate how the African novelists have domesticated the English language to suit their environments, experience and purpose. Specifically, the literary pieces – *The Last of the Strong Ones* (Strong Ones), *House of Symbols* (symbols), *Children of the Eagle* (Children) and the *Trafficked* of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo were xrayed. This exploration adopted the Hallidian Systemic Functional Linguistics, which highlights how language is used. The textual method of data analysis, the primary and secondary data collection methods were employed and the results showed that the African literary artists in general and the Igbo Nigerian novelists in particular have taken on a unique style of writing in the African vernacular style. For that reason, the speeches of the characters are laced with dignified local appositives, high profile Igbo songs and tales, studded local proverbs, lexical transfers, ritzy transliterations and so on; and these have given African rhythm to the English language. This notwithstanding, the aura, glamour and credibility of the English language as the medium of communication are retained.

Keywords: Literature, African literature, Domestication, Igbonization.

## Introduction

Literature is a manifestation and a projection of the life and culture of the people. It transmits the socio-cultural values and creates great awareness of the tradition of its enabling society. Consequently, Achebe (1975) describes African literature as the creative writing which authentically handles African experiences. In line with this, the African writers in general and the Nigerian creative artists in particular have taken advantage of poetic license, and nativisation or domestication or Nigerianization or Africanization or acculturation or indigenization to create a variety of the English Language that suits the African milieu, pertinacity, nuances, experiences and sensibility (Adegbiya, 2004). They feel that the European language, can carry the burden of African experience but it has to be a “new English” modified to suit the African environment, and purpose. This has resulted in the manipulation of the English language by Nigerian Novelists. Subsequently, many of the novels written in English by the Igbo of Nigeria reveal a great deal about the Igbo world and values. Accordingly, these Novelists have drawn a lot from the character and syntax, semantics, phonology, lexis and so on of the Igbo language even while they write in English. This exploration therefore seeks to unravel how Akachi Adimora- Ezigbo has used the process of “Igbonization or igboism” to stretch the resources of the English language to accommodate her Igbo thought patterns and experiences.

## Conceptual Concerns

Domestication of the English Language in Nigeria Achebe brags “I have been given the language (English) and I intend to stretch it to accommodate my African thoughts.” This statement has affected the use of the English language in Nigeria and indeed Africa, because

it has given impetus to the domestication or nativization of the European languages in Africa. It is as plain as the nose on your face that the English language has become Nigerian and African property and in the opinion of Adebija (2004:20) “English has been applied to African numerous conveniences, nuances and sensibilities.” As a consequence, he adds “just as a domestic servant abides by the dictum of his master, the English language is made to toe the line of Africans’ linguistic demand at different linguistic levels.

At the lexical level, Nigerian literary artists introduce coinages or new terms, hybridisation, analogisation, transliteration, transfer, affixation, acronymisation and so on into the English language. At the level of idiomatic domestication, there is idiomatic deviation of the English language. Phonologically, we observe a reduced vowel system, reduced intonation system, voicing of non-voiced consonants, insertion of vowels within syllabic consonants, monophthongization of diphthongs and triphthongs and so on.

Grammatical and syntactic domestication give several aspects of the grammar of the English language an African flavour. So, we observe an invariant tag system, pluralisation of noncount nouns and so on. In the areas of pragmatic and cultural nativization, the importance of titles, positions, age, politeness, greeting norms and respect in African tradition have been infused into the English spoken in Nigeria, and Africa in general. Semantically, many aspects of sense and reference in English have been acculturated in order to suffuse an African “aura” into them; as observed in these expressions:

1. “I have not seen any woman for two years” (Adebija, 2004).
2. “I met her at home” (Onuigbo, 2006)

The meaning of these statements is different in pragmatics and semantics from what it would mean in native English context. So, sentence (1) could mean (I have not had sex for two years), while sentence (2) means (She is a virgin). Thus, Terkina in Adebija (2004:22) concludes that “English is no longer foreign to Africa” and since “English is a guest who is

not willing to go,” Africans have decided to make optimal use of it in the areas of literature and other expanse of African life (Awa,2014) Achebe (1975:61) appreciates this bravery but makes the following proposals:

The African writer should aim to use English the way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its values as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He shall aim at fashioning out English, which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experiences.

Acknowledging Achebe’s stand Okaro in Abugu (2010:1) maintains:

There are American, West Indian, Australian, Canadian, and New Zealand versions of English. All of them add life and vigour to the Language while reflecting their own culture. Why shouldn’t there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way.

This singular authority has resulted in many “Englishes” used by African writers. Anyokwu (2006) lists the variants as the Creole, Pidgin, Broken English, Rotten English and so on as used by, Ken Saro Wiwa in his *Soja boy*, Iweala, in his *Beast of No Nation* and Okara in *The Voice*. Adebija (2004) also identifies more trends of English used by Nigerians. First is that associated with Amos Tutuola, which Achebe describes as “Half strange dialect.” The other is the type connected with Soyinka and Okigbo, who are competent in the use of English but are consciously experimenting with the English in several ways. Another set of writers like Achebe and Clark use English to convey the “regenerative” condour in indigenous words, proverbs, imagery and so forth in order to portray African peculiar experiences. The next group and the last so far is the new generation writers like Adichie, Chika

Unigwe, Chris Abani, Ojaide, Garuba and so on who use their literary artefacts to elegantly advance the Africanisation of the English language.

### Igbo Tradition In The Nigerian Novel

The language of the writers of Igbo literary tradition is an ethnic variety of Nigerian English, which is characterized by lexical innovation, translation and linguistic and cultural transfers. This literary tradition has become a significant stylistic device in that, it grants writers the freedom to use the English language ingeniously.

The successes attained by the pioneer Igbo writers in the English language derive from the creative use of the English language by incorporating Igbo speech habits. Therefore, it embodies the literary aspects of Igbo oral performances such as folklores, folksongs, riddles, proverbs, incantation, drama and festivals. However, when they write in the English language, they may have two classes of audience in mind - the Igbo or African audience and the European audience. Consequently, they try not to distance themselves from any of their two groups of readers. Thus, they use the English language, which is European in such a way that they incorporate the language resources of Igbo and to be able to play the role effectively, the structure of native speaker's English has to be adjusted. Thus, the purpose of African literature finds fulfillment in their works.

### Theoretical Foundation

This study concurs with the Hallidian Systemic Functional Grammar. This theory is useful in the analysis of the novel. This model is all about how language is used. It maintains that language does not operate in a haphazard manner, but it is a system because meaning in a language is a well organized phenomenon. Hence, the term "Systemic" that is language is a system of making meaning by choice. So, for a language user to communicate his intention he

has many linguistic options to choose from and it is therefore the choices made in the language that produce texts. So, for Halliday and Hassan (1976: 1-2) “a text is a unit of the language in use.” To Halliday all linguistic choices are meaningful and all choices are stylistic. Asiyanbola (2012), then, Projects Systemic Functional Grammar as a functional approach to language and he envisages that adults use language to perform three primary functions, which Halliday christens metafunctions, ideational, interpersonal and textual metafunctions. Ideational Metafunction uses language to organize, and express our perceptions (experiences) of the world around us, about us and also inside us, the world of our imagination. It corresponds with the grammatical category known as transitivity, which informs discourse. This means that it is the presentation of the writer’s experience of reality which is the marker of style especially the style of narrative discourse. Hence, it stresses the concept of style as choice. (Simpson 2007) Interpersonal Metafunction on its own part uses language to establish and maintain all human relationships. That is, it is concerned with the maintenance of social relationship. So, grammar indicates the attitude of the language user to what he says. (Emezue 2012) while the textual metafunction uses language for the internal organization of texts. It is concerned with the form in which the experiences are coded. It relates to style; the internal organization and communicative nature of a text.

In conclusion, Halliday’s Systemic Functional Grammar or Functional Linguistics is of the opinion that linguistic elements are selected according to the communicative purposes they serve. Aligning themselves with the model of Systemic Functional Grammar, African Writers therefore manipulate (domesticate) the English language to achieve their aim – to sell their culture to the world.

Igbonization In Adimora's *The Last Of The Strong Ones, Children Of The Eagle, Trafficked And House Of Symbols*

Use of Igbo Appositives

Since Adimora intends to reconstruct the identities of the African women and deauthorize the chauvinistic ideology that male authors like Achebe have regaled the African readership with. Particularly, *The Last of the Strong Ones* eulogizes the ebullience of the matriarchs – Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka (the Oluada – the top women representatives). To achieve this aim, Adimora uses unsurpassed Igbo appositives as a stylistic strategy to clearly mark out the identity of the matriarchs she describes. Appositive strategy therefore, enables Ezeigbo to give a vivid description of the nominal entity or referent being discussed.

1. Ejimnaka, mother of the land, you were born to lead (p.47)
2. Oluada, cream of Umuga daughters (p.47)
3. Ejimnaka,... Lioness that leads the pack
4. Oluada, woman of peace... (p.71)
5. Oluada, mother of vast multitudes... (p.89)
6. Chieme, daughter of Nlebedum the warrior renowned for strength and Nnuola, the singer and leader of women (p.119)
9. Omesarannaya, Woman Mountain, seeded in tradition. (p.119)
10. Chibuka, the mushroom that breaks the earth without a hoe. (149)
11. Daughter of Umuga... the squirrel that scales the Iroko. (p.149)
12. Chibuka, daughter of Idemmiri, you are the memory of Umuga...

Appositives in this context depict the women of Umuga, especially the Oluada – Ejimnaka, Onyekozuru, Chieme and Chibuka as amazons. Strong women characters, who attempt to displace the dominating gender stereotypes and take up extraordinary responsibilities. This alters the patriarchal praxis that held sway in Achebean fiction by introducing some indomitable female angle (matriarchal praxis). Thus, Adimora's women are resourceful, determined, resilient and who when necessary, breakthrough the barriers imposed by tradition and even nature. They speak like their male counterparts and organize themselves with incredible grandeur. For instance, Ejimnaka represents everything positive by upholding the tradition and culture of Umuga and her sense of responsibility indescribable and enormous. She occupies a revered position of "mother of the land." "Mother" is used here to indicate a woman of great pedigree and of dignity. "Born to lead" depicts her as having the innate qualities of a leader. These are the type of women that Adimora desires for Nigeria and indeed Africa.

#### Use of Thought Provoking and Quintessential Igbo Proverbs

Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo incorporates many proverbs to guide her people and African society for a more affable, organized and idyllic society. Her proverbs reflect the values of Igbo society such as equality, fairness, justice, love, hard work, patience, diligence, humility and doggedness as lasting virtues among men and women as seen in the following proverbs:

1. It is the visitor that leaves the homestead, not the landowner.

(*STRONG ONES* P.21)

2. They are like the man in the tale who was carrying a huge elephant carcass and at the same time trying to catch a cricket with his leg. (*STRONG ONES* P.19)

3. A toad does not run in the middle of the day without cause (*STRONG ONES* P.78)

4. We must look for the black goat when it is still daylight. (*STRONG ONES* P.124)

5. Those who hurry in battle do not know that battle and death are close allies. (*STRONG ONES* P.157)
6. The hour a farmer begins work is the morning of his day. (*STRONG ONES* P.149)
7. A woman who neglects or disrespects her husband will become destitute. (*TRAFFICKED* P. 9)
8. The living must make regular sacrifices to the gods, so that when disaster strikes, the gods will be held responsible.” (*TRAFFICKED*)
9. Everyday is for the thief but one day belongs to the owner of the house. (*TRAFFICKED* P.145)
10. A child who is carried on her mother’s back does not feel the stress of a long walk.(*TRAFFICKED* P. 177)
11. Legs that fly like shooting star must remember that eyes that flash like lightning are watching.”(*TRAFFICKED* P. 181)
12. All lizards lie flat on the floor, it is impossible to tell which of them is suffering from belly ache.” (*TRAFFICKED* P. 204)
13. It is not every fruit that is good to the eyes that is good for the belly.  
(*THE TRAFFICKED* P. 208)
14. It is said that a fart that explodes in the air is a puzzle to the housefly... (*SYMBOLS* P.34)
15. It is a wise child who destroys the thing that killed his father, but a foolish child is killed by the thing that killed his father.” ( *SYMBOLS* P.82)
16. It requires a cunning person to bury a cunning dead person.( *SYMBOLS* p.225)
17. The harassed bed bug counseled her children with comforting words that whatever is hot will get cold. (*CHILDREN* P.67)
18. One thing I am sure of at the moment is that I will not wash my hands and crack nuts for fowl to carry away and swallow. (*CHILDREN* P.68)

19. It is not everything the eyes see that the mouth talks.(*CHILDREN* P.46)
20. It is after a woman has tasted two marriages that she is in a position to say which is better.  
(*CHILDREN* P.99)
21. Our people say, it is a big problem when you chew herbs which you rub on the chest of someone suffering from a cold and instead of doing the same for you, he spits the herbs he has chewed into your eyes to blind you. (*CHILDREN* P.421)

### Embellishment of Local Songs

Another influence of African tradition in Akachi Adimora Ezigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones* is her embellishment of local songs such as love songs, children songs and war songs. Just as other African writers, she takes her cues from oral literature, which uses beauty to communicate important truths and information to society. Adimora-Ezigbo particularly, uses her songs, which are larded with poetic qualities to edify her women and Igbo culture, as used in these instances:

Here, Ejimnaka sings her favourite song swinging on a tree. The happy child swings from branch to branch, agile like a monkey,  
nimble like a squirrel, on a withered branch; the world is a pleasant place, let the enemy beat a retreat there is no room for him here. (P.36)

Again, Ejimnaka sings a well known song about wine tappers to a man she desires,

### Obiatu

When the wine tapper enters the palm grove his heart is filled with joy when he climbs the palm tree and then reclines against his ete he strikes the palm with his chisel abe nchiki, gbe nchikichiki abe nchiki, gbe nchikichiki (P. 32)

Here again, Chibuka sings a lullaby thus: My little one please do not cry if you stop crying I will give you the thing a child gives to her younger ones. (P.127)

#### Use of Folktales

In *The Last of the Strong Ones* Adimora tells a story about the raven who wanted to exchange its beautiful shiny black feathers for the white feathers of the egret. The story went thus to narrate how the raven went to the river and bathed itself for a long time, but its colour would not change. It tried this for a great number of times. No matter how hard it tried, it could not achieve its desire, rather its beautiful black feathers looked dull and worn after all the repeated washing (P.58).

This particular story in the novel was told by Onyekaozuru's mother to her the moment her life was in shambles and she really needed an elderly counsel and advice. The event that triggered this story is this. Onyekaozuru was lured and given away in marriage to Umeozo, an old man with grown up children. The marriage was simply based on selfish reasons. Onyekaozuru's father gave her out in order to compensate for a large farmland Umeozo gave him to cultivate. Onyekaozuru tried to cope with the marriage and had children too. She was well provided for and would not have complained had Umeozo not died after falling from a height. It was after his death that the tussle for possession of all that Umeozo left behind started. She needed a man to comfort her. The family suggested she marry Udoye, Umeozo's eldest son but she protested to that. In search for companion she met Obiatu, a young handsome bachelor. Obiatu proved to be there for her but was not ready to marry a woman who has had a husband. Obiatu later met Ejimnaka and developed deep affections for her. It later cumulated to marriage at the detriment of Onyekaozuru's love for him. That was how Onyeka lost Obiatu. It was when she was dying in mourning and brokenheart that her mother came to her rescue and told her the story about the raven that wanted to change her black feathers for that of the

egret. The story is intended to advise her to seek for things within her limits. She was grateful for that tale used in advising her years later.

Onyekaozuru confessed thus:

For many days I thought about what my mother said, the story of the raven began to make sense. I must not hunger after what I could not have, or it would break my spirit and dry my bones. My mother had advised me to make friends with Ejimnaka (P.59).

This she later did. That is the moral lesson of the story and its significance. Akachi used this tale to teach Onyeka the right morals and ethical behaviour and in the same vein, she is teaching us, her readers on the best way to look at life and follow it in all diligence.

In the *House of Symbols*, she tells the story about the willful child who was killed by spirits when he disobeyed his parents and went out at an ungodly hour in search of the beautiful flute he had forgotten in the farm. Lois, one of the characters was telling the children this story and sings the boy's song as he pleaded with the spirits to spare his life.

Kesiga have mercy on me

Kesiga, have mercy on me

My mother told me not to go to the farm

My father told me not to go to the farm

Where I forgot my flute

Under the withered tree

Kesiga, have mercy on me

The spirits replied in their guttural voices:

Taa, child! Zamirizi

Taa, child! Zamirizi

Let the hawk carry you away,

Carry you far, far away  
You and your flute  
That you left under the withered tree  
In your father's farm (P.183).

The purpose is to teach children and instill in them the virtues of obedience and respect for the elders, while painting out the reward of disobedience.

In *Children of the Eagle*, Akachi recreated the story that centres on the bitter quarrel between Sky and Earth, each of the two claiming to be better than the other and this resulted in their final separation in the end. Eagle woman remembered this tale when the “war of sexes” was the topic of the debate. From the tale, one realizes the negative side of the fight, feminism and all that gender mêlée. Such wars are really uncalled for. This tale was fulfilling a major function in the story which is to instill morals, one of the major pre-occupations of Igbo folktales. The unwarranted war between the Sky and the Earth that led to their inevitable separation is just the same as the unwarranted war of sexes, male and female chauvinism going on around the globe. She believes that it is uncalled for if only we can listen and obey God's commandments.

She uses tales in her novels to teach moral and social values of her society, to criticize and reprimand her characters and to give her works a local flavour as works which come from Igbo geographical areas where storytelling performs an imperative function in the lives of the people. (Asikia, 2010)

#### Use of Transliteration

Adimora's direct transliteration (Igbonization or Igboism) speaks volumes of her narrative style. Emezue (2012:159) describes Igboism as “the act of speaking Igbo in English.” Adimora therefore radiantly makes use of numerous images, ideas and objects familiar to her

native people and she renders them without mincing words to suit her purpose. This culminates to the spark of African authenticity one encounters each time one opens the pages of her works especially in *The Last of the Strong Ones*. The speakers are actually speaking Igbo although the dominant language is English. A typical example of transliteration in *the Last of the Strong Ones* is in the speech of Onyekozuru during the bitter quarrel between her and Abazu:

Ejimnaka, let me speak, Onyekozuru said, “let me clip Abazu’s wings. It is said that when a commoner wishes to criticize the king, he must wear the disguise of a masquerade. But that is not my style. Abazu, I am not afraid of you. I will say to your face, you are not a man. Your strength displays itself only in appearance; in reality it is like air. It is as hollow as the inside of a bamboo” (P.81)

In *Children of the Eagle* we look at these few examples:

My daughter, this experience shook our marriage to its foundation. That man and his followers planned my destruction but my chi was too strong for them. Then help came through Inyang Asuquo Etim. Okon’s father. He knew what to do; our people say that a person who visits a town does not know where an abomination has been committed... (P.122)

“Yes, I did, you are right. I completely forgot. As I was saying, apple and Udara look alike. To us, Udara is the symbol of love. It has the roundness of a virgin’s breast. It gives up a sap that has the look but not the texture of breast milk. Our people say that Udara especially when it is split into two halves, is shaped like a vagina, that part of woman’s body through which a baby shoots into the world. A woman’s innermost core is a symbol of love” (P.24).

Use Of Lexical Transfers In *The Last Of The Strong Ones*

There are also phrases and words which represent direct translation into English of Igbo expressions. The following are examples:

Agbudu	–	boundary marker
Atani	–	small animal belonging to the family of bats
Awigu	–	edible warm- like creature like caterpillar which feeds on the leaves of plants.
Ete	–	strong and thick ropes woven together and used for climbing palm trees.
Idemmiri	-	a god
Igbadara Onu	–	a talkative and gossipy person
Ime chi	–	annual celebration of her personal god by every middle aged mother.
Ise	–	amen or let it be so
Jigida	–	waist bead
Kpalakwukwu	–	a bird fond of calling out when everywhere is quiet
Ngwuru	–	compound
Nkushi	–	levirate system of marriage
Ochu	–	murder
Ogwugwu	–	god of vengeance
Oluada	–	top women representatives
Olutaradi	–	association of wives
Omesarannaya	–	she who brought fame to her father
Oyoyom	–	my beautiful one

Ugegbe	–	mirror
Uhie	–	substance from a plant, reddish and usually mixed with water; the mixture is rubbed all over the body to smoothen and beautify it.
Umunna	–	Patrilineage

Adimora intersperses her literary works with local lexicons to achieve meaning and aesthetics. Principally, it is to decolonize her writings from western influences, to achieve local flavour and to give meaning to African language routes, for uniqueness and distinctiveness.

#### Conclusion

Looking at the literary productions of Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo examined above, the processes of domestication and igbonization are the major literary tools of her creativity. This portends that she belongs to the Achebe school of thought and this has empowered her to lengthen the resources of English language to accommodate her Igbo thought patterns and intents. She triumphs in her expeditions because she has not debilitated the integrity of the English language as the medium of communication. All she does is to use the English language creatively by incorporating into her writing the literary aspects of Igbo performances such as folksongs, folktales, riddles, proverbs, transliteration, Igbo appositives local words and so on to bend the English language to achieve her desired local colour. Thus, the African literary artists have excelled in the art of “nativization” of the European languages to sell African culture to the world.

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