

Multilingualism in Nigeria: A socio-linguistic investigation of Ewan Alufohai's *The Moto-Boy*

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ABSTRACT

This study is a socio-linguistic examination of Ewan Alufohai's *The Moto-Boy*. The text is a Nigerian novel, pre-occupied with the challenges facing road transportation and those involved in the business. This paper, therefore, attempts to explore the interplay of the linguistic variables of function, use and usage of contextualization and Nigerianization of Nigerian English (NE) in the text, by exemplifying these with some empirical data, drawn from the text. Adopting the sociolinguistic theoretical model, derived from the systemic functional (SF) approach, the selected data in the text are subjected to analytical investigation, to show that Nigeria is a multilingual society. The study reveals that language variations employed in the text, are reflections of the uniqueness and peculiarities of the diverse cultures inherent in Nigeria, with a view to underlying the indispensability of multiple language situation in a multilingual society. The analysis of the features of language variations in the text selected, is aimed at enhancing communication in Nigeria's diverse cultural setting. Therefore, the findings in the study shows that the use of creative language variations in the text enhances readers' deep understanding of their meanings in the context of use.



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1. Introduction

Multilingualism refers to the proficient use of more than one language, either by an individual speaker or by a community. It implies having the capacity to communicate effectively in multiple languages, thus providing cognitive, social, and economic benefits, such as improved problem-solving skills, enhanced cultural awareness, and increased job opportunities in our globalized world (Adegbite, 2023). To Okesola (2024), the communication between English and the multilingual and multi-cultural communities of Nigeria has resulted in linguistic hybridization and acculturation of various forms. This situation continues to influence the socio-political life of Nigerians, which involves integrating traditions, modernity and the utilization of mother-tongue and second language resources.

In his view, Akere (2009) notes that Nigeria is a country known for its cultural diversity, with approximately 250 ethnic groups. Each group has its own language, traditions, and customs, making the country a melting pot of different cultures. This diversity plays a significant role in shaping the country's identity, and contributes to its vibrant social interactions. Again, Adegbite (2004) observes that Nigeria is a highly diverse and multilingual society, known for its rich linguistic and cultural

tapestry; having over 500 languages, with three major ethnic groups (Hausa-Fulani, Yoruba, and Igbo), and numerous smaller ones. Nigeria is therefore a speech community where, apart from indigenous languages, foreign languages also compete with other languages and cultures. This linguistic diversity reflects Nigeria's complex history and serves as a source of cultural pride and identity for its people, despite the challenges the situation poses in communication, education, and national unity. Of the foreign languages, there is in existence an exo-language English which performs official and national functions, while the various indigenous languages are used for interactional communication in their respective domains of operation (Adegbite & Akindele, 2005). Thus, the English language in Nigeria, in its multilingual nature, performs both official and national functions at the level of administration, politics, education, trade and commerce and science and technology. On the other hand, Adekunle (1990) notes that the educational policy in Nigeria equally promotes and recognizes the major Nigerian indigenous languages as national languages of politics, education, administration, and even of the judiciary.

Nigerian Literature in English is studied in several English-speaking countries throughout the world. Quite a number of scholastic materials on literary criticism, written by Nigerian literary critics and scholars are published in international literary journals and books. They all contribute to knowledge in the various genres of literature the world over (Akere, 2009). Through the employment of creative language, Nigerian literary artists have produced works, which not only portray the familiar pattern of social life of Nigerians, their customs and traditions, their general cultural characteristics are also demonstrated. The artists attempt to influence the processes of social-cultural change, as engendered by the colonial experience and the consequent culture contact. However, according to Banjo (1996), the most critical aspect of the use of English in creative writing in Nigeria is the extent to which Nigerian artists have been able to adapt this foreign language to the complex cultural, sociopsychological and linguistic situations over which the language was superimposed, and yet they were still able to produce excellent works of art. Therefore, the literary and stylistic properties of writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Christopher Okigbo, John Pepper Clark, and Ewan Alufohai are highly acclaimed in the literary world, as they attempt to address the issues of socio-political challenges in their creative works. They are deeply influenced by the country's multilingual environment to enrich their storytelling, with diverse linguistic flavors, cultural perspectives, and narrative styles. Many Nigerian writers incorporate indigenous languages, Nigerian pidgin and English (the official language), in order to create a unique literary landscape. The language situation has allowed Nigerian writers, especially novelists, to explore themes of identity, tradition, and modernity, bridging local and global audiences. Therefore, many creative writers have received international acclamation for showcasing Nigeria's unique linguistic resources, for which they demonstrate evidences of dexterity in their literary works to shape multilingual perspective (Awonusi, 2011).

Ewan Alufohai's *The Moto-Boy*, a Nigerian novel is pre-occupied with the challenges facing road transportation and those involved in the business, and the linguistic resources employed reflect Nigeria's cultural identity. In his opinion, Agho (2018), notes that Ewan Alufohai's *The Moto Boy* is a creative work which subscribes to a social ideology that emphasizes the functionality of creative literature (in the context of a multilingual society), in order to expose societal problems, and providing panacea for such identified problems for the good of the society. This essentiality of art is basic to Africa, and underscores the continuous rejection of the art for art's sake school of thought in the literary tradition that has taken root in Africa. Thus, through the use of appropriate linguistic features, Alufohai's work shows that Nigeria's multilingual society reflects cultural unity in diversity, as portrayed through authenticity of custom and tradition; social realities, accessibility and inclusiveness of cultures; language innovation; and naming and personal identity. These concepts are demonstrated through the setting, language and style of the novel.

2. Theoretical Background

This study adopts sociolinguistic model of textual analysis, which primarily attempts to interpret specific meaning of actual instances of language usage. This approach reflects the prevalent linguistic interest in the development of the English language in Nigeria which centres on its form and status as a second language (L2) in a multilingual context. The emphasis here is on English as language in a contact situation with all the attendant interference phenomena resulting from its superimposition on

several indigenous languages in Nigeria. The sociolinguistic exploration of English in this study exposes the relationship between language usage and social meaning, implying the way speakers manipulate linguistic resources in subtly different ways in order to create unique social meaning. Coupland (2016) considers sociolinguistics as a conventional codes, behavior, ideologies of a social class, individuals or a society, which represent their social realities. In other words, this study considers the language choices as a means through which members of the Nigerian society express their diverse thoughts, ideas and cultures, thus making language a tool for cultural expressions and values (Barbara 2018).

In the study therefore, specific lexical choices in the selected text are analyzed, to portray the behavior of Nigerian multilinguals who share similar cultural characteristics. Jowitt (1991), describes this form of language as a domesticated variety of English, functioning within the Nigerian linguistic and socio-cultural characteristics of the Nigerian environment (social and physical). This position of language use shows that language is an important tool in the explication of human experiences.

3. Methodology

The paper adopts the qualitative method of data analysis, in order to showcase language variations in Nigeria as a multilingual society, as exemplified in the selected text. The approach reveals that the use of English in the text is at variance with British English. The study, therefore, identifies the peculiar features of Nigerian English, referred to as NIGERIANISMS (Kachru, 1994), which are accounted for as Nigerian English variants, in order to portray multilingualism in relation to Nigerian language situation. The actual results of our analysis and discussions are reflections of what play out in a multilingual society, as presented and accounted for in the study.

4. Findings and Discussion

4.1. Language as instrument of cultural identity and authenticity

Alufohai's *The Moto-Boy* emphasizes that the narrative has the power to shape perceptions and realities. The narrative of the text is aimed at reclaiming African cultural identity, pride and dignity, using language as a tool of transmission. Replete with the use of indigenous languages, the text adds authenticity to the characters and settings of the work. This approach helps in portraying the rich cultural heritage of Nigerian society, and enhances the reader's immersion into the diverse linguistic landscape of the country (Awonusi, 2011). Therefore, the writer's incorporation of some domesticated linguistic items in the text, is to capture nuances of identity, social hierarchy and cultural practices that are closely tied to language use in the Nigerian society.

For example, the novel is set in diverse and vibrant settings, that reflect the country's rich cultural and geographical landscapes, ranging from bustling cities like Lagos, with its dynamic urban life and socio-economic contrasts, to rural villages steeped in tradition and community ties. These settings do not only represent backdrops to the narrative, they also constitute integral components, exploring themes such as societal changes, and the complexities of interpersonal relationships within the Nigerian society. In doing this, a variety of languages is employed to reflect the country's linguistic diversity and cultural richness. Though British English is employed as the target language of the text, to foreground its status as Nigeria's official language and widely used in education. However, indigenous languages, such as Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and others are integrated at one point or the other in the text, to convey local nuances, cultural expressions and the authenticity of dialogues. In other words, besides using English in the text, some lexical items are borrowed from local languages to describe local phenomena, flora, fauna, foods, and cultural practices, as shown in the extract below.

Extract 1

Adire (A fabric wear), **E-ku-Abo!** (A Yoruba greeting), **Amala and Ewedu** (Yoruba delicacy), **Idanre, kafancha, kaura** (places), **iyajiba** (Jiba's mother), among other (s) indigenous names used in the text.

The highlighted items in the extract above, exemplify Alufohai's *Moto-Boy* choices of borrowed words from indigenous languages, which are used alongside British English words. In that context, there is the mixture of English words or phrases with Nigerian indigenous languages, incorporated. The indigenous languages are borrowed words, which do not have direct equivalents in standard English, but are used to share cultural, social, or contextual experiences among speakers. This approach enriches Nigerian English expressions, with a distinct vocabulary stock that reflects the country's linguistic diversity and cultural heritage (Okugbe, 2019).

Other successful instances of the use of indigenous languages in the text include Hausa and Yoruba languages, employed to promote unity in diversity among Nigerians. This is profoundly exposed in the dialogue between the characters of Ahmed and Abiodun in the text respectively, thus:

Extract 2

"Alhamdulillah" (praise be to God) and "Kuna da karamin Allahu" (God willing) and "Ese oun" (good morning) and "Baba Ibeji" (my dear father- twins)

The inclusion of Hausa phrases like "Alhamdulillah" (praise be to God)/ "Kuna da karamin Allahu" (God willing), depicts a sense of cultural diversity in the narrative, emphasizing the importance of interface dialogue. The use of Hausa in the context serves to break linguistic barriers, as it allows Ahmed to connect with other characters who may not share his native language. Similarly, the successful insertion of Yoruba language through the character of Abiodun's dialogue in Yoruba phrases, like "Ese oun" (good morning) and "Baba Ibeji" (my dear father of twins) adds a sense of cultural authenticity to Abiodun's character, and highlights the spirit of kinship that demonstrates love and loyalty in a family setting. The inclusion of such indigenous expressions emphasizes good conduct among family members and the observance of norms and tradition of Yoruba culture, through words.

4.2. Language as instrument of social realities, accessibility and inclusiveness

Ewan Alufohai's *The Moto-Boy* description of settings and scenes represents Dadzie's (2009) position, that the second language user utilizes his first language to see the world through the eyes of his native language and interprets what he sees in the second language if he has to. Therefore, the text mirrors the prevalence of linguistic diversity in Nigeria, by showcasing how language use shapes the people's social interaction, power, dynamics and personal identity. His employment of languages in the text signifies intimacy and cultures. The extract below reflects instances that language variations is the force that drives social realities, accessibility, and inclusiveness in the multilingual environment of Nigeria. For example, the third sentence of chapter One in the text characterizes social reality, accessibility and inclusiveness, through the device of code-switching in a multilingual society, thus:

Extract 3

His "**Oga**" had been trying to overtake the dilapidated...", "**juju**" ('juju' means charm and 'oga' in our local Nigerian parlance means master); "**man must work**" (in our local parlance means man should work)

The highlighted items in the above extract illustrate the place of code switching in a multilingual Nigerian society, which portrays shared means of communication among speakers of Nigerian English as a multilingual society. Essentially, the term "Oga" as used in the extract, means 'master or boss', which is an English name for an employer. This common word "Oga" has been widely accepted and used in place of "Master". This is seen not as a grammatical error, but a creative linguistic item, incorporated in the text, in the Nigerian way. Similarly, the employment of Nigerian pidgin in the extract ("**man must work**"), represents a component of variety of languages spoken in the geographical setting of Nigeria, meant to reflect realities, accessibility and inclusiveness. The use widely reflects the spoken vernacular that bridges linguistic gaps, and adds colloquial flavor to Nigerians' speech events, which is frequently incorporated into English. Some more examples are shown below:

Extract 4

Character A: "Oga, how far na? You dey come out today?"

(Character A switches to Nigerian Pidgin English for a more colloquial tone.)

Character B: "Yes oh, I dey come out now now. Wetin dey happen?"

(Character B responds in Nigerian Pidgin English, seamlessly mixing it with English.)

In the above exchange, there is the use of Nigerian pidgin ("how far na?" and "wetin dey happen?"), alongside standard English ("You dey come out today?" and "I dey come out now now"), to create a dialogue that reflects everyday conversation in Nigeria. This blending of languages enhances the reality of the characters and the setting, making the narrative more relatable to readers who are familiar with Nigerian culture and language dynamics. It also illustrates Alufohai's intentional use of language as a tool for cultural expression and representation within his novel. As such, the novel bears the aesthetic trapping of Nigeria and Africa, which is a feature that adds to its realism. The blend of Nigerian pidgin with English, reflects Nigeria's multilingual society, adding depth and authenticity to the narrative.

The above approach proves that the text reflects a multilingual society; replete with varieties of languages to enrich and portray a clear meaning to the readers, and to demonstrate the creative skills of the writer. The multilingual approach, not only enriches the narrative, but also preserves and promotes Nigeria's diverse cultures and linguistic heritage, making literature more accessible and relatable to both local and global audiences. The expressions indicate that the writer is creative with English language in the Nigerian way, as he employs code-switching, where the narrative switches between English, pidgin and local languages within the same sentence or paragraph. This reflects the multilingual reality of Nigerians' choices of language in every speech event.

Further, the use of Nigerian pidgin in the text accounts for accessibility and inclusion to a broader audience, ensuring that Nigerian readers see their linguistic identities represented in literature. This inclusivity is crucial for fostering a sense of cultural pride and validating the experience of multilingual Nigerians who navigate various linguistic spaces daily. The characters' language use often reflects their socio-economic status, educational level and geographic location, which underscores the social and economic inequalities that exist within Nigerian society. Moreover, the inclusion of pidgin in the novel adds a layer of realism to the narrative, allowing readers to connect with characters from different linguistic backgrounds, as it serves as a lingua franca that transcends regional boundaries.

4.3. Language as innovative

Innovation in Alufohai's work is reflected in his creative use of languages to demonstrate the diverse cultures and tradition inherent in a multilingual society, by setting the narrative apart from other novelists. Various language devices in the text are effectively explored to capture a multilingual environment that mirrors Nigerian society. In that sense, new words or expressions are coined to fill lexical gaps in English, as spoken in Nigeria (Agho, 2018). Prominent among the innovative devices that enhance cultural background in a multilingual setting, is neologism, also known as coinage (Alo, 2005). This plays a significant role in Nigerian literature, including *The Moto Boy*, which typically integrates neologisms to illustrate the blending of traditional cultural elements. For instance, we have:

Extract 5

pick pockets (used to describe thieves in Lagos, that often snatch people's property); **informant**, (a message carrier); **freedom** (used to describe the occasion that marked Jiba's completion of his apprenticeship as a driver); **smallie** (a young lad); **muritala's note** (twenty naira currency note); **moto park**, (a centre set aside for passengers to board vehicles to their destinations in Nigeria).

The highlighted words in the above extract exemplify Nigerian English in the text. The expressions are coined and incorporated as domesticated English, whose meanings have been presented as markers of multilingualism in Nigeria. Another mark of language innovation which Alufohai attempts to use as communicative device, is semantic shift. The marker, as used in the text, exposes certain occurrences in the Nigerian multilingual society, resulting in the gradual evolution of the meanings associated with some words used. Some instances as used in the text are shown below:

Extract 6

Human heads (populated amount of people); **Locals** (used to refer to Guards that keep watch over the motor goods); **Spy** (a software application used in the context of human attributes); **house help**

(an individual in a household who assists in the day to day running of errands and carrying out house chores).

The change of meaning that occurs in each of the highlighted items above, is due to various factors, such as cultural shifts, changes in usage, or linguistic influences. A change of the original meaning of each of the items in question, has made the word acquire new meanings, losing old meanings, or even completely reversing its original meaning. It is a natural process in language development, and has contributed to the richness and complexity of vocabulary in multilingual societies over centuries.

Again, the employment of semantic extension in the text is also profoundly explored to typify language innovation in a multilingual society. Its use in the text has brought about semantic change that makes the meanings of some words expand to include more referents than they originally did. This process involves a word, taking on additional meanings or becoming applicable in more contexts than its initial narrow usage. Instances abound in the text, which have broadened to incorporate diverse meanings in the text.

Extract 7

Arrangements (A special plan for an event); **Target** (a specific amount of money); **do's and don't** (guidelines); among others.

The highlighted expressions above are deployed to bring about language innovation, with a view to achieving effective domestication of the English words, as explained in the extract, through the process of modifications and adaptations, in order to suit the linguistic, cultural and social contexts of Nigerian usage. This process has helped the readers to transform English from a foreign or colonial language into a local or indigenous one, making language choice more accessible and relevant to Nigerian people, by allowing the language to become more natural and intuitive for the native population.

4.4. Language as instrument of naming and personal identity

Writers often uses Characters' names in the text to reflect their ethnic backgrounds and cultural heritage. The strategy is a very effective method artists explore to expose the physical and social lives of the people, in terms of their speech, occupation and religion (Odebode, 2023). For instance, some of the characters that characterize the Moto-Boy, with peculiar ethnic colorations are named as follows:

Extract 8

"Chinedu" (Igbo), "Bello" (Hausa), "Oluwatobi"(Yoruba), "Amina" (Fulani)

The writer consciously selects each of the names listed above to signify ethnic identities and backgrounds. The names are not only identifiers, but also serve to emphasize the social status of characters, that is, the people of Nigeria, with diverse cultures. Besides naming of characters in the text, to reflect ethnic backgrounds, the blend exhibited in the character of Nneoma, who speaks a mixture of Igbo and English successfully, represents her as a multilingual. Her dialogue is infused with Igbo phrases and idioms, which adds a layer of authenticity to her character and allows readers to experience the richness of Igbo culture.

5. Conclusion

This study has identified some linguistic features of a multilingual society of Nigeria to include, authenticity and social realities of custom and tradition; accessibility and inclusiveness of cultures; language innovation; cultural naming and personal identity. The study has shown that domestication of English and incorporation of indigenous languages in a multilingual setting brings about the ability of individuals and communities to speak more than one language proficiently. It also equips multilinguals with the capacity to communicate effectively in multiple languages, and shapes individuals' cognitive, social, and economic skills.

Findings in this study have shown the manifestations of linguistic hybridization and acculturation in Nigeria as a speech community. The study has revealed that, though the language situation in Nigeria has given rise to the sociolinguistic phenomena which threaten the continued

stay of English, English as a foreign and an international language becomes the medium through which the Nigerian artist seeks to express his literary gift, thereby promoting its continued stay. This situation has created opportunity for more inventory in the growth of multilingualism in Nigeria.

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