

Intercultural Linguistic Borders, Stereotypes and Representations in Americanah by Chimamanda Adichie Ngozie Adichie: A Socio- linguistics perspective

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Abstract

This study examines Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah* in which, any language form that has been "hybridized" or "infected" by local traditions is viewed with great suspicion. The study focuses on differentiation as a form of symbolic capital used by the powerful to enforce their values of taste, gender status, and progress. There is a widespread belief that one must earn legitimacy, authenticity, and recognition at home and abroad by acquiring the forms of capital represented by one's colonial socio-cultural and linguistic past through means such as imitation, appropriation, and formal education. However, often, the foreign is worshipped as a godlike sign of achievement, while the native is typically demonized as a symbol of backwardness.

This paper thus analyzes this novel in terms of its intercultural representation, use of language and the difficulties associated with learning a new language. It employs a Socio-linguistics perspective and deconstructs the meanings associated with the story: its characters and the episodes through which the novel unfolds.

The findings show that, the novel's discussion of language serves as a metaphor for its exploration of a variety of identities and representations. These are also the major themes, employed by the novel.

Keywords: Intercultural, Accent, Identity, Prejudice, Representation, Distinction, Authenticity, Self-Denial, Self-Reinvention

Introduction

The Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie wrote the novel, *Americanah*, to explore the role of language as a social marker and a means of differentiation. In it, he delves into the impacts of language and linguistic insecurity on representation. The plot focuses on the romance between Obinze and Ifemelu. It explores love, ethnicity, immigration, and individuality while diving into the broader economic, political, cultural, and linguistic contexts in which these topics arise (Niswa et al., 2023). Ifemelu serves as the narrator and point-of-view character throughout the novel's several settings. She puts herself in the shoes of an outsider looking in, letting the reader tag along with the characters as they cross geographical and linguistic borders. Adichie uses language and identity to show her characters' social and cultural backgrounds.

In this context, this paper aims to illuminate the relationships that exist in society, in defining and engaging intercultural linguistic borders, and stereotypes as represented in literary works.

Its objectives are:

1. To analyze the novel, *Americanah* written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie employing a socio-linguistics perspective.
2. To identify the themes employed in the novel.
3. To recognize the spoken, and written words as being significant in discussions of identity, class, status, and existence.
4. To unravel how being and becoming are captured through language.

Theoretical Basis

The Language Question: Prescriptivism, Place and Belonging

This investigation is founded on the ideas of Bourdieu, (1984) related to linguistic capital, differentiation, tastes, and representation (Herman et al., 2022). According to Bourdieu, (1984), differentiation and taste are products of the social environment. An individual's tastes can be defined as both their "manifested preferences" and their "aversion to various life-styles," or their hatred for the simple and the vulgar (Bourdieu, 1984). According to Aristotle, the taste is "the innate capacity for appreciating excellence" (Bourdieu, 1991). When people have diverse preferences, it can be used as a way to set themselves apart socially. Indeed, it is the celebration of uniqueness (Bourdieu, 1979). Aesthetics, elegance, delicacy, and quality are inextricably linked to the idea of differentiation from what is not distinctive. Therefore, the distinction seems to be a form of symbolic capital used by the powerful groups to enforce their own standards of attractiveness, social status, and aesthetic preference.

Bourdieu, (1979) writes that, "schooling gives the linguistic skills and the references" for the expression and construction of aesthetic experience. Therefore, if you want to stand out, you should learn the language and ideals of the bourgeoisie and the cultural elite.

According to him,

"...the style of utilising symbolic products, particularly those seen as the traits of excellence, forms one of the fundamental markers of 'class' and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction..."

Bourdieu, 1979: 66

As Bourdieu (1979) points out, the language of the colonizer or dominating group is seen as a resource that must be gained through learning if one is to gain acceptance, validity, and acknowledgement. Undeniably, language is a powerful tool of not just communication but is a tool to define to define people, ascribe identity to them and more critically to marginalize the oppressed without elaboration or justification, while celebrating the powerful. It is thus prescriptive and endows the people, places and events values and meanings beyond what is physically present and exist, and contribute to the states of both 'being' and 'becoming'.

In the context of a vernacular group, it acts in a way that concretizes the everyday experience and help construct an authentic identity that arises from who people really are and what they do, while in a group that is occupied by an external power, it dismantles and

reconstructs a constructed 'authenticity' defined by the occupiers. Inevitably, they manifest as colorants of the people, in which the others position them, while eventually, they themselves believe in. This theoretical foundation provides the essential lens through which to examine this novel.

Research Methodology

This research investigates how the characters draw on the English language and colonial past to explain their own experiences, gender patterns and social, political, and economic realities through "a mastery of the signs and emblems of distinction and taste" (Bourdieu, 1991). For this purpose, it employs qualitative research, which uses data that is descriptive in nature and not necessarily measurable or countable. In fact, it focuses on social groupings or specific people. It employs content analysis as a tool, which utilizes a variety of analytical techniques of different types of texts. It explores each text's main idea before interpreting it, and for the benefit of specific symbolic expressions, it also connects its interpretation to other texts. (Drisko & Maschi, 2016; Purba et al., 2023). Its application in this research is examining the novel's text to investigate its ideas and decipher their significance, particularly to comprehend the problem of inter-cultural representations, linguistic borders and stereotypes in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's novel *Americanah*.

Findings and Discussion

The plot of this novel focuses on the romance between Obinze and Ifemelu the main character. The word language is used several times in "*Americanah*". It is used to comment on the definition of a particular expression, its applications, language and educational quality, personal traits of a member of a speech community, accent and understandability, and distinctiveness, or all of the above. Moreover, it contrasts several dialects of English, including British English and Nigerian English, British English and American English, French and English,. It then links them to status, ethnicity, and class-related issues.

As a result, Ifemelu's perspective on language mirrors the idea of prescriptivism, which holds that there are specific ways that individuals should speak and write. Anything else is seen as contaminating or ruining the language (Curzan, 2014; Nasution et al., 2023). They fight for the right usage of English while trying to live up to their socio-political and ideological objectives.

Adichie, however, responded as follows when asked by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo regarding her use of English as a "medium of expressive writing":

"Sometimes when we discuss English in Africa, we act as though Africans have no voice and that there is no particular dialect of English spoken in Anglophone African nations. I received education in it, and I spoke it concurrently with Igbo. My English is influenced more by my experience in Nigeria than by British, American, or Australian culture. I've claimed English as my own."

Adichie, 2013:41

The appropriation of the colonial linguistic and cultural heritage is highlighted in the text above. Intriguingly, when Ifemelu, the main character visits a hair salon, she pays special attention to the language skills of the braiders and how they communicate with one another and with their clients:

"The conversations were loud and swift [emphasis is mine], in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. Words came out half-completed. Once a Guinean braider in Philadelphia had told Ifemelu, "Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh." It took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand that the woman was saying, "I'm like, Oh God, I was so mad"

Adichie, 2013:10-11

The hair salon is a microcosm where speech frequently draws attention to weakness, origin (French, Wolof, Malinke), or to portray an absurd situation. As a result, Ifemelu's observations highlight the linguistic challenges that some African migrants encounter when trying to blend in, sometimes to the point of seeming being absurd, as in "Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh."

Not only do they lack proficiency in English, but they also rapidly attempt to adopt a "slangy" style—not even "American slang," but rather "slangy Americanism". The narrator occasionally uses stinging humor to highlight and critique characters' social position, educational attainment, and place of origin. In doing so, Ifemelu's fixation with signs' openness comes into focus. She believes that words must be spoken exactly as the "native speakers" (i.e., the British) do so as to avoid misrepresenting reality or being branded as "bush".

As a result, Aisha's use of improper grammar when speaking with Ifemelu affects the way they relate to each other. She uses the present tense and avoids using the copular verb "be" or the third-person singular suffix "s" when it is necessary. The author uses these diverse signs to emphasise Aisha's language and cultural deficiencies. Her language deficiencies and her lack of documentation are related. Moreover, she essentializes inter-ethnic marriage in her attempt to change her immigration status by implying that Ifemelu could assist her in finding a husband who is Igbo. She divulges the following details regarding her relationships with Igbo men: "... Two Igbo men are my. really good Igbo men treat women very well [...]. I wish to wed. They say they adore me, but the family wants an Igbo woman. Because Igbo always marry Igbo.

Aisha made "Ifemelu barely stifle the temptation to giggle" by stating that she wants to "marry" without identifying anyone (18). Aisha's failure to use the past tense demonstrates her linguistic deficiencies and highlights the present, which is her primary preoccupation. It is as if "the past and the future" are present in Aisha's "today." The use of the deictic pronoun "they" is ambiguous. Ifemelu picks it up quickly. She sarcastically asks Aisha whether she wishes to marry both men. This situation evokes an interesting observation:

"Deictics connect language and context. If listeners do not correctly determine what deictics allude to (using contextual information), they do not comprehend or may misunderstand the message. Conversely, speakers expect their listeners to understand what the deictic refers to when they utilise deictics."

Gee, 2011:6

When Aisha says something Ifemelu dislikes, she uses the tagline "Aisha clucked," which compares her speech to that of an animal or an idiot. You do not understand America. When you mention Senegal to Americans, they ask, "Where is that?" They ask my friend from Burkina Faso, "What nation are you from in Latin America?" Aisha resumed twisting with a wicked smirk on her face and then asked Ifemelu, as if she could not possibly comprehend how things were done in America, "How long have you been in America?" (18) Thus, the reader infers from Aisha's assertion that Ifemelu, like Americans, may not be able to locate or identify an African country on a map. This naturally upsets her, and she seeks to avoid the subject by texting on her phone.

The hair salon is a venue for social commentary on hairstyle and the English language, violence, status, nationality, and acceptance. As shown in the following excerpt, having an accent might result in physical and psychological abuse.

The woman gave a shrug. "I've been here for many years. It does not make a significant difference."

Halima responded vehemently,

"No" while standing behind the woman. "When I bring my son here, the school bullies him because of his African accent. In Newark. If you see the face of my son? Purple like onion. They beat him repeatedly. Black boys abused him in this manner. Now, there are no difficulties"

Adichie, 2013:230

Although the woman's accent did not appear to alter her situation, it led to her child's marginalization and abuse. This shows that perceived linguistic differences can be used as an excuse for exclusion from major in-groups and may lead to bullying behaviour.

The vocabulary used to represent accents is derogatory. When the topic of discussion switches to Nigeria in the novel, the nation of Nigeria is represented as the epitome of corruption. Indeed, there is a contrast between the flawless American accent and the statement that Nigeria is "the most corrupt country in Africa." Mariama went on to make a definitive statement on marriage with Nigerians: "I cannot marry a Nigerian, and I will not allow anyone in my family to marry a Nigerian" (231).

In addition, Kelsey (a white American) joins the discourse regarding Africa. Ifemelu was disturbed by her "liberal American" ideas of Africa, African women and Africa in Things fall apart compared to her "contemporary Africa" perspective in "A Bend in the River." It seems as if Kelsey was able to encapsulate the essence of "contemporary Africa" by reading a single book. This reflects the characters' inadequacies with written and spoken language. Kelsey's attitude is comparable to some of the characters' pursuit of the ideal status or representation of the truth regarding individuals, situations, and histories. Her forceful statements such as "so honest" and "the most honest" are paralleled by her characters' perceptions of the "ideal American accent." Her intrusive queries, such as "where are you from?" or "what's it all about?", are designed to elicit a single origin or tale.

For example, there is a disparity between "Trenton" (a poor community) and "Princeton" (a prestigious university). Both terms partially rhyme with "-ton," and the contrast between "fellowship" and "intimidated Aisha" emphasizes education, location, class, and prestige. Ifemelu uses these signs to show that, although being African and having her hair braided by "undocumented African immigrants," she still belongs to a prominent in-group that has prestige. She believes that she must differentiate herself from "other immigrants" like Aisha: "Yes, Princeton. Yes, the type of place that Aisha could only envision would never have **QUICK TAX REFUND** signs [bold is mine]; the residents of Princeton did not require quick tax returns (20). There is a significant relationship between indicators and both status and privilege. Ifemelu's statement that she will return to Nigeria for employment heightens the strain. In contrast to Aisha and other "immigrants," she is not only a student at Princeton University but also returning home to work. This repatriation project demonstrates that Ifemelu does not fear "the return" because her Princeton education has prepared her for better chances in Nigeria.

At all levels, characters tend to despise the native culture and embrace foreign or Western fashion as a means of differentiation. Yet, as Lippi-Green contends (2012: 20-21), "spoken language differs from utterance to utterance in terms of speech sounds, sound patterns, word and sentence structure, intonation, and meaning." This is true even for folks who believe they speak a sophisticated, supra-regional English.

A. Distinction: Recognition, Status, Power in and Behind Language

In Americanah, the significance of language is widespread. Naming involves identifying, locating, and indexing. For example, Obinze's mother pays the following attention to Ifemelu's name:

"What a lovely name you have! Ifemelunamma," she said. Ifemelu was speechless for some seconds. "Thank you, mother."

"Yes, what is the translation of your name? Did Obinze tell you I do some translation? Originally French. I am a professor of literature, not English literature, mind you, but English literatures, and translation is a pastime of mine. The English translation of your Igbo name may be Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made. What do you think?"

Adichie, 2013:83

By interpreting "Ifemelunamma" as "Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made" in English, she is indicating that Ifemelu may be a suitable mate for her son. Obinze's mother's English name appears to hold greater weight and significance. In addition, she acknowledges her own talent as a translator. As characters strive to make sense of local speech, there is an ongoing effort to embrace the West's primacy. The local is only acknowledged and appreciated when it is incorporated into the colonial discourse, which renames and reconstructs its legitimacy.

Even Emenike questions the authenticity of "foreign names," the reader observes. Should "foreign names" not be considered "legitimate names?" Nonetheless, Emenike's name is strange in Britain. Then, it is clear that his laughter is nothing more than the insecurity of a subaltern who employs linguistic tricks and artifices to deceive himself. He attacks foreign names while oblivious to the fact that his own name is alien in the eyes of the British. This demonstrates a sense of self-perception that manifests in the characters' attitudes, thoughts, tastes, and preferences. Through Ifemelu's observations, the reader learns about the characters' inconsistencies, doubts, uncertainty, cognitive dissonance, insecurity, and inclination to essentialize place, home, and belonging. For instance, in the United States, Ifemelu realizes that "Nigerians took on a variety of identities, including her own" (10). Changing identities and the search for new methods of self-representation are frequently correlated with the economical and political circumstances that characters face. Because "foreign names" or "African names" may be perceived as intimidating and impediments to development, Nigerians change their names to pass as locals.

In addition, the reader observes that correctly pronouncing local names is highly valued; otherwise, one becomes a source of ridicule, as shown in the sentence below:

"Once, I was with him [Emenike] in London, and he was making fun of a Nigerian coworker for not being able to correctly pronounce Featherstonehaugh. He said it phonetically like the other man, which was plainly incorrect, and he did not pronounce it correctly. I didn't know how to say it either, and he knew I didn't; there were these awful moments when he pretended we were laughing at the person together. Of course, we were not. He was also laughing at me. It was the moment I discovered that he was never my friend."

Adichie, 2013:536-537

One becomes humorous when he or she cannot speak or act in accordance with the norms of the in-group. In fact, the line above exemplifies the notion of culture: what is said and what is not said, what is visible and what is not apparent. One is able to traverse a culture's sociolinguistic, written, and unwritten norms as they immerse themselves in it and truly accept it. The inability to properly pronounce signifies exclusion from the group. Emenike employs authentication, which causes Obinze distress. According to (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004a), Emenike is engaging "the essentialist interpretations in the articulation of identity" and a sense of belonging. This reminds us of the Bible's account of the shibboleth. According to (Senior, 2004), "Shibboleths serve as a barrier to the goals of cultural unity, a language delineation of the "other" that may be difficult to conceal." Obinze determines that Emenike has never been his friend after realizing he was being subjected to the "shibboleth test."

As evidenced by Ifemelu's father's job loss, language can elevate or degrade a person's social or economic standing. Indeed, Ifemelu's father was fired for refusing to address his supervisor as "Mummy." His refusal to accept the role of excellent subject costs him his job. While Ifemelu's father highlights his expertise and professional talents, his boss [now, ex-boss] considers "name" to be the most significant factor. Not only is calling her "Mummy" a sign of respect, but it also asserts a form of matriarchy. She is both the "mother" of her company and its source of income and employment. Therefore, Ifemelu's father was sacked when he refused to call her "Mummy." He arrived home earlier than normal, stricken with bitter disbelief, with his termination letter in hand, and lamenting the insanity of a grown man calling a grown lady "Mummy" because she determined that it was the best way to show her respect. Twelve years of diligent effort. "It is inexcusable" (56). This example demonstrates a clear relationship

between language and position, respect, and how an individual manipulates these indications to rise in society. However, his inability to use the two-syllable word "Mummy" profoundly affects his life and his family's financial situation. He refused to adopt the Nigerian method, where "...boundaries were blurred, work flowed into life, and employers were referred to as Mummy" (483). Here, the significance of language capital becomes more apparent. A linguistic error has individual, social, and economic repercussions. Ironically, Ifemelu's father is renowned for his fondness of "elevated English":

His English was formal and pompous. Their housekeepers barely comprehended him, but were nonetheless impressed. Once, their previous housekeeper Jecinta entered the kitchen and began silently clapping, telling Ifemelu, "You should have heard your father's great word right now! O di egwu!" Ifemelu often envisioned himself in a classroom in the 1950s as an eager colonial subject wearing an ill-fitting school uniform made of inexpensive cotton and vying to impress his missionary teachers. Even his handwriting was formal, complete with curves and flourishes and a constant grace that made it appear to be printed. As a child, dad had reprimanded Ifemelu for being obstinate, rebellious, and intransigent, words that made her small actions appear heroic and nearly worthy of pride. But as she grew older, his formal English began to irritate her, as it was really a disguise, his defense against insecurity. As he was troubled by what he lacked — a postgraduate degree and an upper-middle-class lifestyle — he used his affectations as a shield. She enjoyed when he talked Igbo since it was the only time he appeared unaware of his fears. Losing his employment caused him to become more reserved, and a thin barrier between him and the rest of the world grew. He no longer murmured "intractable sycophancy nation"

Adichie, 2013:57-58

Ifemelu's father's fervor for proper English is a colonial inheritance that he only utilizes as armor for self-protection, self-representation, but also for self-negation. The dominant linguistic bias towards local languages perceived as "vernacular" or non-languages is internalized. At this point, the reader sees that speaking "elevated English" is not necessarily correlated with maintaining employment and economic standing. Ironically, the adjectives he used to describe Ifemelu, such as "recalcitrant, rebellious, and intransigent," now describe him. As a result, Ifemelu's mother reprimands him, saying, "If you had to call someone to obtain your salary, you should have" (57)!

In *Americanah*, the characters' worldviews are significantly influenced by linguistic conservatism. The characters position themselves as linguistic ideologues eager to reprimand anyone who breaks the standards of proper English. Some view English as a precious language whose sanctity must not be tainted by "local dialects." The breaking of grammatical or phonological standards is synonymous with "backwardness" or incomprehensibility (Danladi, 2013).⁴³

Ifemelu's father remarks, "I don't understand Americans. They say 'job,' but you hear 'jab,'" her father said, spelling both words. The British manner of speech is vastly preferable (373). This reflects Lippi-Green, (2012) finding that when an accent interferes with communication, the person with the accent becomes the problem or carries the communication burden. Obinze's mother also hates American English, as evidenced by the following:

"Obinze just said 'trunk,' mum. "He said it's in your car's trunk," she said. In their America-Britain debates, she consistently supported his mother.

"My dear kid, a trunk is a part of a tree, not a car," his mother said. When Obinze pronounced "schedule" with the k sound, his mother remarked, "Ifemelunamma, please inform my son that I do not speak American. Could he express himself in English?"

Adichie, 2013:69

Obinze's mother highlights the distinction between "part of a tree" and "part of an automobile" in order to demonstrate that when signs are misapplied, they muddle diverse realities and truths and become erroneous. Her linguistic study by Bloom, (2009) evokes a description of the reduction and rigorous definition of words: "Every concept that will ever be required will be described by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its secondary meanings erased and forgotten." Similarly, "In 1995, His Royal Highness the Prince of Wales complained to a British Council audience that American English is very corrosive,' according to *The Times*." Specifically, he lamented that "people tend to generate all sorts of nouns and verbs and create terms that shouldn't be"(Atay & D'Silva, 2019). These attempts are intended to control history, freedom, and the ability to think for oneself and independently. It is also consistent with the (Curzan, 2014) claim that verbal hygiene consists of a group dictating to the remainder what to say in order to adhere to societal linguistic standards and expectations.

This colonial history and language complication reveal themselves in Mrs. Akin-Cole's view on education in French versus British schools: "You must send her to the French school. They are excellent and rigorous. Obviously, they teach in French, but since the child already speaks English at home, it will only benefit her to learn another polite language (34-35). The notion of "civilized language" is reminiscent of social Darwinism, which aims to categorize civilizations and languages as primitive, barbaric, and civilized. This behavior clearly indicates that the subaltern has adopted the dominant ideology and worldview (Hardiman et al., 2007). There is a connection with (Lippi-Green, 2012b) criticism of the use of standard American English as a form of exclusion: "First, one person or group must seek to convince another person or group that their language – and, by extension, their social allegiances and priorities – are inferior. Second, the targeted individual or group must participate in the process." Thus, in *Americanah*, Akin-Cole considers the West to be the pinnacle of civilization, in contrast to Nigerian society and educational systems, which, according to her, are still in the developmental phase or corrupted by local customs.

In addition, certain characters resemble Lakunle, the "modern gentleman" in (Soyinka & Wole, 1990) novel *The Lion and the Jewel*. While Soyinka appears to promote a return to tradition, Ojiugo is rather proud of her daughter's flawless British English in *Americanah*. "Yes, Nne," she responded, before turning to Obinze and repeating her daughter's comments in a British accent. "Mummy, may I please have one? Do you hear how posh she sounds? Ha! My daughter will go far in life. Therefore, all of our funds will go to Brentwood School" (299). Once again, location, language, and accent are associated with success. The satire, though, lies in the admiration for all things British and the slavish imitation of the ideal British accent, which is in fact hilarious modernity. Ojiugo invested in her daughter's education so that she would speak great British English, but not so that she would be like those males who wear "bright chains" or become "rappers" (298). British English is synonymous with excellence. Any other form of English is considered to be worthless. It appears that British English adequately captures all speakers' histories, needs, wants, and aspirations. Negation of one's background and identity and frenzied attempts to embrace western culture or modernism are observed. This is consistent with Edwards, (1835) Said's argument regarding the colonized's use of colonial discourse to discuss their own realities: "...stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history" (2012: xiii).

However, when the parents of her daughter's friends talk with a British accent, she quickly chastises them for impersonating someone they are not. "I believe she was wearing something unlawful, such as the fur of an extinct animal, and she was attempting to conceal her Russian accent by claiming to be more British". Expressions such as "illegal" and "extinct animal" demonstrate how she criminalizes them, despite being "more British than the British" in a noticeable manner. Thus, the colonized looks to be a fervent defender of the colonizer, in this example of British linguistic and cultural legacy.

In an ironic twist, while some characters strive to embrace the West, the West seeks to deport them. Such is the case with Obinze, who has become invisible and nameless out of dread of deportation. When he appears, he is viewed with suspicion or as an "illegal immigrant." He

will be denied by the United Kingdom and deported under humiliating circumstances. His deportation will be a blessing in disguise since he will become "someone" in Nigeria after a lengthy time of tribulations, including the avoidance of friends and the rejection of employment applications. However, the foreign has always been a part of his goals, hopes, and projects, just as it has been for the majority of Nigerians. Despite the humiliating rejection, they continue to glorify the foreign in their daily goals and dreams. It is a symbolic capital whose appearance demonstrates status, taste, and distinction from the local, which is regarded as inferior. Auntie Onenu's following statement demonstrates the manifestation of symbolic capital.

"The majority of my personnel are foreign-educated graduates, while that woman at Glass hires illiterate riffraff!" Ifemelu imagined her saying this at a dinner party: "the majority of my employees," making the magazine sound like a vast, active operation, but having only three editorial staff members, four administrative staff members, and only Ifemelu and Doris, the editor, possessing foreign degrees"
Adichie, 2013:495

It is typical for characters to exaggerate their social standing, whether it is in regards to their schooling, occupation, English, ethnicity, religion, "taste," or nutrition. Briefly, the characters have a high opinion of themselves and their preferences. Ifemelu mocks Doris for being a vegetarian and speaking with an "American accent of adolescence" (495). Both the accent and the taste are susceptible to scathing criticism. Doris's use of English, particularly her tone and transition from a "teenage American accent" to a "stolid Nigerian accent," indicates her instability and ambivalence. Auntie Onenu incorporates the foreign into her marketing approach. Her argument suggests that the foreign could attract clients and be a source of visibility and success. "Auntie Onenu nodded and remarked, "You are a beautiful girl," as if being beautiful was a requirement for the job and she was concerned that Ifemelu would not be. "I enjoyed your voice over the phone. With you on board, I am certain that our circulation will soon surpass Glass's. You know that we are a much younger newspaper, but we are quickly catching up"(483)!"

Characters are fascinated with language and representation throughout the novel. *Americanah* is a novel about the linguistic market and the fungibility of linguistic capital, not just in speaking "elevated English" but also in what one reads and discusses. "I read American literature because America represents the future, Mother". Remember that your husband received his education there." "At that time, only idiots attended school in America. At the time, American universities were believed to be on par with British secondary schools. After we were married, I did a lot of research on that man" (84-85). As writing is another type of language, it is easy to comprehend that reading American literature is synonymous with aspiration for the future. However, Ifemelu's mother alludes to American schools condescendingly, stating that only individuals with low intelligence attended them. This exemplifies the linguistic attitude and inflated sense of superiority and differentiation seen in Bourdieu, (1979) writings. As if to declare, "I am what I eat or what I read," discussing the objectified forms of cultural capital is also a source of differentiation. This reminds the reader of Lakunle's desire to captivate Sidi with western clothing, style, poetry, and literature (Soyinka, 1959). Therefore, Obinze attempts to get Ifemelu to read "real works" like *Huckleberry Finn*, which she rejects as "unreadable gibberish" (81). When she travels to the United States, Obinze sends her a list of books he believes she should read.

Obinze proposed that she read American literature, including novels, history, and biographies. In his first e-mail to her, sent shortly after the opening of a cybercafé in Nsukka, he sent her a list of books. The first film was *The Fire Next Time*. She stood beside the library shelf and scanned the first chapter, bracing herself for boredom, but she eventually moved to a couch, sat down, and continued reading until three-quarters of the book were gone, at which point she stopped and removed every James Baldwin title from the shelf. [...] She wrote to Obinze about the books

she read in thoughtful, opulent letters that ushered in a new intimacy between them; she had finally begun to comprehend the influence books had over him. [...] She read the novels on Obinze's list, but she also randomly pulled out book after book, reading a chapter from each before determining which ones she would speed-read in the library and which ones she would check out

Adichie, 2013:166-167

Books have power, and they facilitate and strengthen her love for him and their relationship. Reading is not just a technique for Ifemelu to avoid boredom; it is also a chance for her to live her love and relationships with Obinze. Therefore, reading is the culmination of her hopes, ambitions, and desire for knowledge of the outside world and herself. Through reading, "...America's mythology began to acquire significance, and America's tribalisms—race, ideology, and region—became evident. She felt comforted by her newfound understanding" (166-167). Books assist people to cross geographical barriers, establish relationships, and grow closer together. By reading the same literature, people may conclude that they share a great deal of cultural capital, tastes, and worldviews. Ifemelu's perspective on the matter is captured in the following passage: "Ifemelu and Jane giggled when they realized how similar their childhoods in Grenada and Nigeria had been, with Enid Blyton books, Anglophile teachers, and fathers who idolized the BBC World Service" (136). Thus, family and educational actors all participate in the deification of British media, exemplified by the BBC. According to (Wa Thiong'o, 1992), "the language of formal education for an African youngster was strange. Foreign was the language of the books he read. Foreign was the language of his thinking. Therefore, the written language of a child's education in school (and even his spoken language within the school site) became distinct from his spoken language at home. There is a disconnection and separation from local realities.

Intriguingly, the novels that Obinze suggested to Ifemelu include James Baldwin's "The Fire Next Time," in which the narrator states, "Know where you came. If you understand where you came from, there is no limit to where you can go" (Bucholtz & Hall, 2004b). Yet, the characters frequently attempt to imitate "others" and mock the locals. They do not seek to concentrate on their origin, roots, or true identity. And when they do so, they portray their roots negatively. According to Fanon, (2008), "to speak a language is to assume a world and a civilization." The Antilles Negro who desires to be white will get whiter as he gains a stronger command of the language, which is a cultural weapon. The following passage exemplifies such conduct:

"Ginika, please ensure that you can still communicate with us when you return," Priye added. "She will return as a serious Americanah like Bisi," Ranyinudo said. At the memory of Bisi, a girl in the form below them who had returned from a short vacation to the United States with peculiar affectations, pretending she no longer knew Yoruba and adding a slurred r to every English word she spoke, they shouted with delight

Adichie, 2013:79

This exemplifies Frantz Fanon's assessment on the absurdity of the Black man's attempt to surpass the French in speaking the language through hypercorrection. The fervent desire for distinction frequently causes characters to display contempt and revulsion towards what is "too easy," vulgar, facile, or down-to-earth (Bourdieu, 1991). Ultimately, differentiation and taste also pertain to the educational and cultural commodities one consumes. There is a hierarchy underlying the types of books one reads: the hierarchy of readers through the hierarchy of reading (Bourdieu, 1979). This is demonstrated by Yemi's opinion of novels that qualify as "real literature."

"Yemi had studied English at university, and Obinze asked him what novels he loved, eager to chat about something worthwhile at least. However, Obinze quickly discovered that for Yemi, a book was not considered literary unless it contained polysyllabic vocabulary and nonsensical parts. "The trouble is that the novel is extremely simplistic; the author doesn't even use big words," commented Yemi. Obinze was pained by the fact that Yemi was so poorly educated and did not realize it

Adichie, 2013:38

"polysyllabic words and incomprehensible portions" is the sum total of Yemi's particular evaluative criterion for works of merit. The paradox becomes evident when "incomprehensible" and "excellent" are juxtaposed. There is frequently a dual and contradictory depiction of the foreign and the local. For example, Chika stated, "I recently met this dude." "He is pleasant but so bushy. He was raised in Onitsha, therefore, you can understand that he has a bush accent. He confuses ch and sh. I wish to visit the meat processing facility. "Take a seat on a sheer." They chuckled. (302; italics are mine) The imitation of a "poor accent" is intended to mock linguistic intrusion. This is intended to underline the breaking of linguistic rules and the consequent inability of the colonized to achieve the "civilized" style of articulating common practices such as "shopping" instead of "chopping" (which is destructive). There is an implied relationship between "butchery" and "chopping," and hence "uncivilized language" is "butchered." The local poses a threat to the integrity of Western language and, by extension, to sociolinguistic and cultural heritage. It indicates that the colonizer is no longer solely responsible for imposing the normative rules of daily discursive activities. Now, the colonized have assumed responsibility for self-policing. They simultaneously became the subject and overseer of linguistic surveillance.

Chika must conform to the socioeconomic and political limits of immigration in London. She feels obligated to recognize other Nigerians with a "bush accent" despite the discriminatory nature of her linguistic remarks. She finds her prejudiced and antagonistic attitude to be really amusing. However, there is a blurring of socioeconomic, regional, and racial borders in London (a separate location). Therefore, she is compelled to socialize with those from Onitsha, even though she feels superior to them due to her English pronunciation. Ifemelu's "allergy" to accents may have been triggered by Cristina's condescending gaze during the international students orientation (163). The narrator consistently delivers scathing criticism at characters she sees to be straining to sound English or American, especially when she dislikes them:

"Bartholomew wore khaki pants pushed up high on his stomach and talked with an American accent riddled with gaps, garbling words to the point where they were unintelligible. Ifemelu perceived, based on his behavior, that he had a disadvantaged rural background that he attempted to make up for with his American affectation, his "going to and want to"

Adichie, 2013:141-142

However, she takes pride in the fact that she does not have an American accent, as noted by Obinze. However, she becomes rather emotional when he implies that her written language does not match "the Ifemelu" he knew.

"You don't have an American accent."

"I made an effort not to."

"I was surprised when I read the archives of your blog. It didn't sound like you."

"I really don't think I've changed that much, though."

"Oh, you've changed," he said with a certitude that she instinctively disliked.

"How?"

"I don't know. You're more self-aware. Maybe more guarded."

Adichie, 2013:534-535

Although Ifemelu claims that she "attempted not to" speak American, the reader recalls that her first experience with Cristina Tomas at the orientation for international students was a complete and utter disappointment and a source of great frustration. She felt ashamed and began to study American English as a result.

"She knew that Cristina Tomas was speaking with a foreign accent because of her, and for a moment she felt like a toddler, drooling and languid... She had spoken English her entire life, captained the debate club in high school, and had always found the American accent to be incoherent; she had no reason to fear and shrink, but she did. In the weeks that followed, as autumn's chill descended, she began practicing an American accent

Adichie, 2013:163-164

Yet, when Ifemelu does not sympathize with a character, she is prompt to attack his/her linguistic abilities or educational background as illustrated in the following passage:

Before becoming an apprentice for traders, Edusco had only a primary school education; he began with one stall in Onitsha and now owns the second-largest transport firm in the country. It did not occur to him to doubt himself as he entered the restaurant with a confident stride and a large stomach, yelling his bad English

Adichie, 2013:561

It is as if individuals who do not have "comfort in the language itself," to borrow a phrase from Ifemelu, should not even attempt to speak it or, if they must, should keep a low profile or remain mute. One cannot help but consider, in the words of Baldwin, (2014) "The Fire Next Time", whether characters should learn to stay where they are from, or "make peace with mediocrity." There is contempt for characters of a rural background or upbringing or who speak English with a regional accent.

In addition, the narrator transports the reader to Great Britain to investigate "the language question." There, Adichie describes a context in which she emphasizes the employment of pidgin and Yoruba, particularly among undocumented immigrants. "Later, on the train to Essex, he [Obinze] observed that everyone around him was Nigerian; boisterous talks in Yoruba and Pidgin filled the carriage; and for a minute, he experienced the unrestrained non-white foreignness of this scenario through the skeptical eyes of the white woman on the tube" (320). The familiar appears to cause discomfort or to remind one of his or her background and desire for the "foreign." However, the narrator consistently rejects any attempt to sound foreign, discuss the foreign, write about the foreign, or consume foreign food. Briefly, there is a sort of love-hate connection between the colonized and the colonizer, which translates into a constant desire to outdo one another. The British deem the foreign "suspect" because, despite its proximity, it is remote and difficult to comprehend.

B. Sociolinguistic Essentialism and the Myths of Place and Home

While language is a component of human behavior, it also serves as a metaphor for Americanah's everyday practices, performances, and strategies. However, methods are ever-changing in order to accommodate our various and rich experiences. According to Bucholtz & Hall, (2004b), tactics refer to "... the local, contextual, and frequently improvised aspect of the everyday practices by which individuals, whose freedom to act is constrained by externally imposed limitations, achieve social goals." The characters in Americanah engage in a language fight about identity, authenticity, authentication, legitimacy, and belonging. Such contradictory and essentialist depictions abound in the text. The following comment from (Lippi-Green, 2012b) captures linguistic insecurity and the never-ending hunt for acceptance:

"Very quickly, you will begin adopting an American accent since you don't want customer service representatives to constantly ask you 'What? What?' You will begin to admire Africans with impeccable American accents, such as our brother Kofi. Kofi's parents immigrated from Ghana when he was two years old, despite how he sounded. At their home, they consume kenkey every day. His father spanked him when he received a grade of C in a class. There is no American idiocy in that home"

Adichie, 2013:172

In addition, the self is quasi-pathologized. Auntie Uju refuses to acknowledge a concept if it is discussed in English. English has become, in her eyes, the language of abstraction and distancing from reality or what she considers "truth."

"Auntie Uju ridiculed. "Okay, you can speak English about it, but I'm simply stating the truth. Natural hair has an untidy, unkempt appearance." Auntie Uju hesitated for a moment. Have you read the essay that your relative authored? "Yes." "How can he claim that he has no idea who he is? When did he become conflicted? And even his name is problematic?" "You should converse with him, Aunt. If that is how he feels, then he feels that way." "I believe he wrote that because that is the type of material taught here. Everyone is conflicted, identifying with this and that. Someone will commit murder and claim that it was because his mother did not embrace him when he was three. Or they would do a misdeed and claim they are afflicted with an illness."

Adichie, 2013:269

In the preceding passage, the topic of self-representation and self-awareness resurfaces. The English language is utilized to emphasize the dichotomy between "the messy and untidy" and "the natural." The English language cannot polish the word "untidy." This discussion is about identity and self-representation in addition to hairdo. Again, the significance of "name" is emphasized to demonstrate that the characters are conflicted. Ifemelu reflects once more on ignorance and the fact that the characters are unaware of "how insignificant they had become" (143-144). Indeed, consistency is not a daily practice for the characters, as they are always devising strategies to achieve their personal goals, including altering their given names (10).

Occasionally, they go to great efforts to make sweeping generalizations, as evidenced by the following passage: "I do not rent to Igbo people," the landlord whispered softly, shocking the woman. Were such statements now so commonplace? Had they been uttered with such ease, and had she simply forgotten? "This has been my strategy ever since an Igbo man wrecked my home in Yaba." But you look like a responsible somebody" (485). The concept of "the other" as harmful and irresponsible is essentialized and accompanied with distrust. However, Ifemelu appears to be remarkable based on her appearance. Even in Nigeria, there is a resistance to recognize shared heritage and, by extension, belonging. English is simultaneously a bridge and a barrier. The following paragraph exemplifies this perspective:

Clearly, this is the issue with the Igbo people. You do not engage in brother-brother relations. I like the Yoruba because they watch out for one another. The other day I went to the Inland Revenue office near my home, where I noticed the name of an Igbo man and spoke to him in his language, but he did not respond. A Hausa guy will communicate in Hausa with another Hausa man. A Yoruba man would speak Yoruba whenever he encounters another Yoruba individual. But an Igbo man will speak English to an Igbo man. I am even shocked that you are conversing with me in Igbo.

Adichie, 2013:561

As one reads Zemaye's views about Black Americans, crime, the television show 'Cops', and Nigerian emails nicknamed 419, a highly tense and hostile atmosphere is created, as well as a strong bias towards the other as portrayed by the media. According to Zemaye, media portrayal of African-Americans has become a "sacred truth." In a culture saturated with media, English has also become a medium for propagating prejudices.

Zemaye mumbled this, as if she were thinking it, upon discovering race, an exotic and self-indulgent phenomenon. "Aunt Onenu informed me that your boyfriend is a black American who will arrive shortly," Ifemelu was taken aback. [...] "Yes. "He should arrive by the end of the month," she stated. Why are black people the only criminals in that region? Ifemelu opened and closed her mouth. Here she was, a prominent racial blogger, and she was speechless. "I enjoy Cops. "I have DSTV because of this program," Zemaye stated. "And every single criminal is black." Ifemelu concluded, "It's the same as saying that every Nigerian is a 419." She sounded very feeble and inadequate. However, it is true that we all have tiny 419 in our blood! Zemaye grinned with what appeared to be genuine amusement in her eyes for the first time. Then she continued, "I apologize o. I did not want to imply that your guy is a felon. I was only inquiring."

Adichie, 2013:499-500

The ignorant sentiments present in Zemaye's questions mirror the prevalent media portrayal of "black bodies" in American society. The stigmatization and criminality of "black bodies" transcends borders, leaving the renowned "race blogger" nearly speechless. According to (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008), citing (Gerbner et al., 1986), "... our views of reality are "cultivated" or shaped by what we view in the media." This is consistent with Zemaye's perspective. Ifemelu is "tetanized" by Zemaye's startling revelation. It is as if language essentialism rendered her incapable of expressing her thoughts and emotions. She has nearly lost her voice. On her blog, she writes, "The manifestation of racism has changed, but the rhetoric has remained the same" (390). Zemaye exemplifies the naive and credulous belief that what the media propagates is the gospel truth. The categorization of a single member of a certain group is viewed as a universal truth applicable to all members without exception. By caricaturing Zemaye's worldview, the author is challenging such absolutist labeling. Her attitude parallels what Punyanunt-Carter, (2008) describes in the following passage: "...African American television portrayals often portrayed the following stereotypical personality traits: inferior, ignorant, comical, immoral, and dishonest..." Other African American stereotypes included being disrespectful, violent, selfish, stupid, and power-hungry.

Thus, language is used to marginalize the oppressed without elaboration or justification, because in the eyes of the speaker, in this case Zemaye, such generalizations require no clarification. According to her, the media's vocabulary and depiction of African-Americans tells the complete truth. Zemaye's passion for the Cops show is merely the expression of a subaltern who is certain that her condition of existence differs from that depicted in the media. The subaltern talks in the language of the dominant only to denounce other subalterns. In her contemptuous view of the other, Zemaye breaks all linguistic taboos by describing them as "threatening, messy, rebellious, disrespectful, buffoonish, sexual, immoral, hopeless, untrained, illiterate, and boisterous." (Punyanunt-Carter, 2008). Language becomes a metaphor, a discussion platform for sociolinguistic, historical, political, and economic issues. Americanah is not only critique self-negation and a demand for self-assertion and self-reinvention, but also a critique of the traditional discussion on the relationship of African writers and African people with the colonial legacy.

Conclusion

Through the narrator's observations and remarks, this article examined the position and function of language in the characters' perceptions, worldviews, status, and sense of location in Nigeria, America, and Britain. Adichie brings to the

forefront the age-old debate regarding the role of European or former colonial languages in educating, socializing, informing, forming, and transforming African societies and African people by emphasizing the significance of "English language" and identity, socio-economic and political success. The fact that Ifemelu's father lost his job despite his "elevated English" demonstrates that flawless English proficiency does not necessarily equate to success.

Through his attitude, the author emphasizes the problem of alienation and separation from the African cosmos in favor of mindless admiration of the "foreign," which does not necessarily provide security or stability. Locals are nearly invariably linked with backwardness, while the foreign has become the epitome of success. Foreign degrees and a foreign accent could be sold and used to achieve socio-professional success.

As shown, the foreign, however, is not an aim in itself. Despite her reluctance to speak American English, Ifemelu was unable to evade the "linguistic trap" since her blog demonstrates that, if anything, America has altered her and she has become more mature in her approach to delicate problems.

In *Americanah*, the shadow of the 1962 Makerere conference on the relationship between African writers and English or the colonial language and cultural heritage reappears. Others, like as Chinua Achebe, believed that African authors could and should appropriate English language in their writings and daily routines. In contrast, the characters in *Americanah* criticize any kind of English that is not "British," authentic, or "perfect American accent."

Indeed, any language form that has been "hybridized" or "polluted" by local practices is severely criticized. Such a language attitude mirrors "Black Skin, White Masks" according to the author Frantz Fanon's critique of the isolation of Black people. Adichie noted that Africans can utilize English to express their perspectives in a manner that reflects local circumstances. Briefly, the language discussion in the novel is about identity, differentiation, and representation. The spoken, written, and multimedia capacities are significant in discussions of identity, class, status, and existence. The novel decisively demonstrates that being and becoming are captured through language. Needless to say that all kinds and types of language are necessary to accomplish this objective.

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