

## LINGUISTIC PREFERENCES IN *A MAN OF THE PEOPLE*: A PEEPHOLE TO AFRICAN POST-COLONIAL POLITICS

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**ABSTRACT:** This paper focuses on *A Man of The People* written by Chinua Achebe with a view to discussing the linguistic circumstances in which Anglo-Africans find themselves immediately after independence. The political implications of a multi-lingual society are discussed in order to show how dreams of fair and honest rule and national unity are possible through an ample appreciation and acceptance of a co-existence of diverse language forms and their representative cultures.

**Key-works:** Anglo-Africans; independence; linguistic circumstances; diversity, coexistence.

*"The language of Africanist literature always presupposes an ideology, considering this to be ... a complex of ideas and representations articulated among themselves with a relative coherence, within a perspective detectable through analysis of the discourse and serving as support to an action, an attitude ... to discourses of an essentially political nature in their most ample sense".*

Isabel Maria Ribeiro Ferin Cunha<sup>1</sup>  
Thesis (1983:19)

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(1) My Translation. In *'Descolonizar' Uma Linguagem: A Documentação Africanista*. Isabel Maria Ribeiro Ferin Cunha. Masters Dissertation. Communication Sciences. University of São Paulo. São Paulo, 1983.

One is given an insight into the intrigues and weaknesses of local African political behaviour through this engaging work written by Chinua Achebe. An obvious condemnation, but, at the same time, a highly entertaining version of initial African experience in political self-rule, the novel adopts an ironic tone which is used to describe a well-known and constant political theme – how power corrupts.

The story itself is simple but engaging. If one is to consider the post-colonial trajectory of other African and even some Caribbean states just out of colonial subjugation, one will definitely be able to associate oneself with traits and attitudes which appear in Achebe's work. Achebe's work is thus specific yet global in its treatment of these characteristics found not only in those who have been chosen for the sweet experience of ruling, but also in the rest of us who, like Odili Salamu in this novel, are condemned to criticise, satirise and idealise opposing attitudes and actions in an attempt to eradicate what they rightfully view as corruption and abuse of power.

In this novel, the main figure on the receiving end of Odili Salamu, the narrator's condemnation is Chief, the Honourable Dr. M. A. Nanga, MP., L.L.D. One of the main figures of the People's Organization Party and Minister of Culture, Chief Nanga is made to appear humanly imperfect. As a politician, he assumes the airs and graces of a leader of the people, in whose presence he adopts expansive attitudes, together with a condescending air which appears occasionally to remind those around him of his status and importance. As an African of simple roots, he had a fair education which allowed him to be a schoolmaster before entering the political arena. He seems to preserve traditional social beliefs which operate in his favour, while turning away from his heritage, its simplicity, stark living conditions and cultural divergence only if these threaten his political ambitions. And this is just to be able to take advantage of the wealth, comfort and false security his political authority bequeathed him.

The narrator, Odili Salamu, is the one who sets the satirical tone for the story, and, at the same time, participates, passing from Chief Nanga's close friend to his mortal enemy. Seeking academic opportunity, Odili accepts an invitation to stay at Chief Nanga's mansion in the city and this seems to be the beginning of a prosperous relationship. Odili is cruelly brought back to earth by the amoral manipulations of Nanga who seduces his girlfriend, Elsie. Furious and avowing revenge, Odili seeks to strike back and this rage, together with knowledge of the Minister's political abuses, inspires Odili to attempt overt political confrontation. Attacks and counter-attacks, both physical and verbal leads to much pain and death, with the odds going against Odili. Party strife is interrupted by an army coup. Chief Nanga is captured and Odili is allowed the sweet taste of revenge by marrying Edna, the beautiful young woman Nanga spent years grooming to be his second wife.

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As a novelist, Achebe establishes his own particular kind of discourse. He makes a point of always highlighting the clashing socio-political and cultural traits that compose African society. In *A Man of the People* we once again register this mark of the author. It is as if talking about any aspect of Nigerian life implies confronting these apparently contrastive components encountered in this society and representative of the historical and ideological unfolding experienced since slavery and colonisation.

Here we are faced with what I visualise as attempts to reach a compromise. It is a search for a way to describe this cultural and political co-existence between what is African and what is not, between traditional ways and new trends of existence, between typically simple and rudimentary African way of life and imported English mannerisms.

The option for compromise comes in the face of the impossibility of ignoring local historical circumstance. The marks left are too deep to be ignored. The present craving for the white man's ways and for the power he had, shows that there is an urge for this new type of experience. Whatever exploitation or corruption that comes with it is a result of a loss of universal ideals in favour of personal ease and the sensation of omnipotence. Here one reads in Achebe's words that this was not planned but it will not be tolerated.

In spite of its wordly message, there are certain traits which direct the novel towards African nations once under English rule, their rules and population as a whole. One of the most interesting aspects of this novel is its use of language.

Written in Africanised Standard English with insertions in direct speech of the local English dialect, the novel assumes its local flavour. For the political reasons, Chief Nanga chooses to speak Standard English when addressing himself to the people. We are not allowed to forget the unifying effect English language has on a country like this, blessed with an infinite diversity of tongues. It is a detail Chief Nanga himself notes:

*"He would have preferred not to speak to his own kinsmen in English which was after all a foreign language, but he had learnt from experience that speeches made in the vernacular were liable to be distorted and misquoted in press". (p. 13-14)<sup>2</sup>*

By focusing on the language in the novel, we see the serious political implications of being able to use the right language as it were. An incorrect choice could

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(2) *A Man of The People*. Chinua Achebe. Heinemann. African Writers Series. Great Britain, 1989.

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cost darely to a man in Chief Nanga's position. We see here that the political game he plays is fundamentally a game linguistic manoeuvres in which he takes advantage of his diversity of tongue to persuade his audience, wield his influence and impose his authority.

We also are given an insight into the linguistic circumstance this country finds herself in shortly after independence. With independence, and for nationalistic and sentimental reasons, English is considered a foreign language. A point of view which represents a political strategy used to inspire sentiments of patriotism and local pride. Not that this is taken very seriously by the politicians themselves. In the novel, in the situations where Africans and Americans or English meet, English is the common medium of expression, a situation provoked by the foreigners' disdain of the local dialects coupled with the local politicians' urge to be accepted as equals.

In *A Man of the People*, Chief Nanga expresses himself differently in public and in private. The eloquence of his public speeches sharply contrasts with the frankness of his private conversations with Odili. Here he is direct and clear:

*"We shouldn't leave everything to the highland tribes. My secretary is from there: our people must press for their share of the 'national cake'". (p. 12)*

No doubt 'national cake', a locally coined expression refers to what Max, Odili's political accomplice describes as *"woman, cars, landed property."* (p. 760). It is a polite expression, used by Chief Nanga to deceive the gullible but at the same time to make his intentions clear to those who understand how the system works. It hides the real situation from outsiders unfamiliar with local political intrigues, but clarifies the specific intentions and objectives of those in power.

Odili observes with interest these apparent changes in personality. He expressed surprise at the familiarity with which the American Ambassador and his wife treated Chief Nanga on their arrival at his home. To be called by his first name was something the Minister of Culture would not have tolerated from any of his own people:

*"I was dead certain that if I or any of our people ... had called him Micah he would have gone rampaging mad. But ... We have all accepted things from white skins that none of us would have brooked from our own people." (p. 44)*

Chief Nanga remains a man of the people when he is in their midst. It is his strategy for securing their support and for feeding his own personal ego. He slips

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into local dialect English and even tries to show he is on their side by down-playing his ministerial position, by showing that he is working in their favour. When asked about the amount of money he distributes on his meet-the-people tours he responded:

*"You call this spend? You never see some thing ... I no de keep anini for myself, na so so troway ... Minister de sweet for eye but too much kata-kata de or inside. Believe me yours sincerely".* (p. 15)

In public, surrounded by an avid crowd who admire his self-confidence and prestige and slightly envy his wealth, power and privileges, Chief Nanga takes advantage of his superior state. It is not surprising that Odili, in his role of narrator, adopts a sarcastic tone:

*"No one can deny that Chief the Honourable M.A. Nanga, M.P., was the most approachable politician in the country."* (p. 1)

He thus assumes his position as a man of the people, superficially. Physically he remains in their midst, one of them by origin and heritage but continues to deceive them into believing that he is working in their favour. He seems to speak in their language but it is all a disguise to hide the prosperity he enjoys at their expense:

*"But they say me na Minister of Culture and as such I suppose to be there. I no fit say no. Wetin be minister? No be public football? So instead for me to sidon rest for house like other people I de go knack grammar for this hot afternoon. You don see this kind trouble before?"* (p. 61)

Chief Nanga thus adopts a nonsense discourse that serves the political demands of the moment, and at the same time opts for developing it in the people's language – pidgin. It's a clever choice which shows he knows his audience. He is a veteran at false play and no doubt enjoys the game while it lasts.

In his public appearances, he continues to denounce politics and politicians using a kind of internal jargon available only to those who already enjoy the privileges of the position being condemned:

*"Don't you know that minister mean servant? Busy or no busy he must see his master."* (p. 9)

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It is a linguistic choice that marks him as being of the class of exploiters. Too much effort is made to be one of the people, to act naturally, to speak their language, to postulate self-condemnation. The language gives the man away. Obviously he left his job as a schoolteacher in little village with its meagre wages and lack of future perspective because he was ambitious. He wanted more money, a better life style, power prestige and even though he pretends otherwise his assets reveal the truth. During his visit to Anata Grammar School where Odili taught he pretends otherwise, reminiscing about his days as a schoolteacher with false sentimental display. As he tells a teacher:

*"Sometimes I use to regret ever leaving the teaching field. Although I am a minister today I can swear to God that I am not as happy as when I was a teacher". (p. 9)*

Thus, Chief Nanga yields to the power of language. He sees it has gotten him far and, once put to artful use, will take him further. He recognises that the force of the local tongue, and its pronunciation together with his majestic appearance and prestige has an hypnotising effect on his audience. As he himself stated on one of his more honest occasions:

*"Talking is now in my blood – from teaching into politics – all na so so talk talk". (p. 60)*

Thus through language, in its various forms, information is passed and subversion takes place. Those less capable and aware of the dangers of this art are exploited and become victims of the 'tongues' of others. Language thus becomes the means by which intentions are masked and operates as the thick cover which hides the commerce of power.

The use of Standard English and local African English in the novel shows that what we face here is not a severe linguistic division. It represents a linguistic continuum which ranges from Standard British English, (familiar to those who received a formal education in this tongue) to the local dialect which mixes elements from English and African languages and thus is generally comprehensible only to the local inhabitants. No doubt this local language could be described as a sort of pidgin created by the contact between these two peoples. Words like anini, troway, lego, gree, sidon, and structures like: Minister de sweet for eye; Believe me yours sincerely; they done kill me; Weting be minister?; I de go knack grammar for this hot afternoon, point to the word and structure transformations provoked by the cul-

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ture contact and the local efforts to overcome the language barriers that accompany such a contact. As a result, this language is familiar to those who have it as one of their daily forms of expression.

Politicians like Nanga and the Hon. Simon Koka, Minister of Overseas Training are public figures, men of simple roots whose ambitions and successes have made them accustomed to good living and influence. Their contact with the standard language causes them to be familiar with this variety which they use in the presence of foreign company, only to disregard when among their own people. Indeed, we perceive that they are most comfortable using the pidgin, a detail that can be confirmed during the incident at Koka's home where, on drinking some coffee, he accuses his cook of trying to poison him. During the incident, the participants converse in pidgin:

"you too fear death. Small thing you begin holler they done kill me, they done kill me! Like person wey scorpion done lego am for him prick." (p. 35)

In spite of the predominance of the standard language, internal characteristics within the novel point to an African heritage. One such characteristic is the proverbial tendencies encountered through verbal speech, an inclination which takes us back to the oral tradition, considered a profound mark of African literary expression. In the novel, Edna's father considers Nanga and effect Odili's opposition activities must be having on him:

"My in-law is like a bull ... and your challenge is like the challenge of a tick to a bull. The tick fills its belly with blood from the back of the bull and the bull doesn't even know it's there. He carries it wherever he goes – to eat, drink or pass ordure. Then one day the cattle egret comes, perches on the bull's back and picks out the tick..." (p. 106)

What better way to describe the existing inequality between institutionalized power and idealistic opposition. Using familiar local concepts, the old man builds up a vivid image of what Odili's destiny could be. There is a clearness and simplicity in the language resources he uses, a fact that points directly to socio-cultural values and interests, and also situates the speaker within an atmosphere of typical village life where there are few political ambitions and where wisdom and experience are valued and revered.

This linguistic display is thus an important weapon in Achebe's novel. It is used to highlight and at the same time ridicule political and social attitudes which,

when revealed, tend to show how hypocritical and selfish politicians and aspiring politicians can become. Effort is made to draw on familiar local scenes and play on them to create situations appreciated through local speech tendencies with which Anglo-Africans are so familiar. This also causes Achebe's use of language to be universally comprehensive and at the same time definitely directed towards internal socio-political circumstance.

The constant references to internal socio-political and cultural detail point to the trajectory through which newly independent African states passed and, to a certain extent, are still passing. We can appreciate Achebe's novel as an insight into the diversified language situation in which these countries find themselves and the socio-political implications of this diversity. As Achebe's novel seems to suggest, linguistic and cultural divergences will necessarily reflect and affect political attitudes and the tendency to privilege one portion of the population in the detriment to all the others is one of the main ills that will have to be fought if any unity is to be achieved.

Personal preferences always intrude, indeed, one cannot expect a man to deny his origins. But, at the same time, effort must be made to think collectively. Under the present circumstances, the choice for the common denomination may have to be made, even though it means adopting the 'foreign' language, the language which, like it or not, represents years of political, economic and human subjugation.

This does not mean condemning local expression for its apparent lack of global linguistic force. As long as language remains a cultural component, any attempt to under-rate one form of expression to exalt another will necessarily have repercussions. In the end what is to be expected here is a compromise through the co-existence of various linguistic forms, on equal levels to avoid political conflict.

As this point I cannot help but refer back to Achebe's well-known comment. I see it as representing to a certain extent his point of view with regards to these post-colonial circumstances in which his kinsmen find themselves.

*"La lengua inglesa será capaz de soportar el peso de mi experiencia africana. Pero tendrá que ser un inglés nuevo: en estrecha conexión con la patria de sus antepasados y, sin embargo, distinto para que le vaya bien a su nuevo ambiente africano"*<sup>3</sup>.

There seems to be less concern with the controversial use of English to write a novel about Africa. Here Achebe seems to say, the language is also mine, and what

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(3) See J. Jahn (1971:310)



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better way to seek national unity that through a medium of expression that is ours by inheritance and that now presents all the signs of being an African language and no longer just European?

As a reader of Achebe's work, I therefore tend to disagree with Nubukpo (1990:403) who speaks of the impossibility of African expression outside local linguistic forms:

*"Les langues européennes constituent un handicap aussi insurmontable pour l'expression des choses africaines... Sur ce point précis, la position d'Achebe paraît moins nationaliste..."*

With this new Afro-English there is no need to isolate African production from the rest of the world, and at the same time, the literature remains highly accessible to those who are the object of Achebe's study – the Africans themselves.

The use of English cannot at this point be classified as subjection to European forms of expression since with the end of colonial rule, the language forms in use can no longer be described as belonging exclusively to England. Forced on the local citizens by historical circumstance, it now stands as their property, an inheritance claimed at independence. Local ownership is sealed when transformations take place due to internal influence from other linguistic forms co-existing in the same geographical space.

The first few years of independence is a crucial period for the formation of solid local linguistic foundations since these will have an significant participation in the formation of an internal political construct and in the maintenance of an internal dialogue which is universal and not discriminatory. No doubt, as political disagreement between Nanga and Odili shows, nationalistic vindications may call for a 'back-to-roots' campaign, but it would be necessary to see the universal benefits of such a strategy. For Achebe, the situation presented here represents African political reality and is all part of the maturing process the new independent nations. The mistakes shown here need to be made but also condemned if there is to be future benefit and experience:

*"Every society has to grow up, every society has to learn its own lesson, so I don't despair. A Man of The People is a serious indictment ... of post-independence Africa. But I don't give up because I think this is a necessary stage in our youth."*

Achebe 1971<sup>4</sup>

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(4) See D. Dererden (ed.). (1972: 13).

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RESUMO: Este artigo procura focalizar, através da obra *A Man of the People*, de Chinua Achebe, a questão das circunstâncias lingüísticas com a qual se deparam as anglo-africanos imediatamente após a independência. As implicações políticas de uma sociedade multi-lingüística são apresentados de maneira a mostrar como as perspectivas de preceitos justos e honestos e de unidade nacional são possíveis através de uma ampla apreciação e aceitação de uma coexistência de diversas formas de linguagem e suas culturas representativas.

Palavras-chave: Anglo-africanos; independência; circunstâncias lingüísticas; diversidade; coexistência.