

African Proverbs and Idioms in English in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of the Savannah*

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Abstract: Language is constructed in the context of culture; however, the latter in any society is portrayed in the picture of language. African culture is characterized by its richness and diversity that are reflected in its literature. African proverbs and idioms as a part of this richness create a discursive approach that fashions the African fiction and shapes its particularity. In this sense, African fiction in English as a conveyer of African culture via the foreign language forms a hybrid discourse that harmonizes between native and English language. For that reason, the main objective of this paper is to investigate the use of African proverbs and idioms in English as features of English indigenization in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of The Savannah*. The latter depicts the post-colonial African society that is governed by a military rule. To accomplish the research work's aim, the two researchers adopt a sociolinguistic perspective with a descriptive method in order to analyze the selected novel. In doing that, the present paper reveals the significance of African proverbs and idioms in English in creating a new authentic discourse that is shaped by a new variety of English.

Keywords: English language, proverbs, idioms, African novel in English, English variety

Introduction

There is no doubt that African novel today is the major literary genre in the Dark Continent. Its privileged status was increased in the colonial and the postcolonial eras with the encounter of the European sovereignty in Africa. The latter affected in many ways the structure and the discourse of the African novel and shaped it. African fiction written in English and other foreign languages is the product of African authors' increased consciousness to eradicate the European wrong perception about Africa and Africans and to reveal the cultural richness of their continent (Irele, 2009). In doing that, African writers establish a new canon in the African literature in which they promote African cultural heritage via introducing an indigenized form of English language that is a result of the hybridization between English language's rhetoric and the African oral narrative traditions aesthetics.

The African oral traditions are considered as the sole underpinning of African literature, particularly the prose fiction written in both indigenous and European codes (Ogude, 2016). In African societies, since there is no written language that is adopted to document the cultural heritage, Africans tend to convey their didactic messages through telling stories, myths, proverbs and idiomatic expressions orally to educate their people and to ensure culture preservation across generations (Lugira, 2009). Since proverbs and idioms are part of African oral traditions, they are usually regarded as statements that express wisdom about human experiences and teach people ethics and morals (Ibid, 2009). For that reason, in their attempt to express and convey African culture African authors used proverbs and idioms as discursive and stylistic approaches.

However, African novel in English as well as other foreign languages forms a paradigm in the African literary scene and it distinguishes from that in indigenous languages. The use of African proverbs and idioms in this genre is one of its main characteristics in which Anglophone African writers utilize them as a way to portray African wisdom and consciousness. In this sense, due to their link with indigenous thoughts, African proverbs and idioms in English construct ambiguous discursive statements when they are utilized in African fiction in which they create incomprehensible structures that their meaning may be violated or infringed in order to convey the author's message. Thus, the main objective of the present work is to cast light on the use of those linguistic units, proverbs and idioms in African novels in English and their role in creating a new indigenized English variety.

I. Literature Review

African fiction in English is the fledgling of African society even though it is written in a foreign code. Kehinde (2005) (In Olanyan, 2017) states that "for any literary work to merit meaningful consideration, it is necessary that it bears relevance explicitly or implicitly to the social milieu which it is set" (p. 88). Anglophone African authors cannot extend themselves or their narratives' discourse from the community with which they deal (Olanyan, 2017). As parts of African cultural and social realities, proverbs and idioms are regarded as indicators of their richness and diversity. The proverb is defined as the following:

Proverbs are concise traditional statements of apparent truths with currency among the folk. More elaborately stated, proverbs are short, generally known sentences of the folk that contain wisdom, truths, morals, and traditional views in a metaphorical, fixed, and memorable form and that are handed down from generation to generation. (Mieder, 1996, p.597).

Proverbs in general include everyday experiences and shared observations in a concise and formulaic language which facilitate their remembrance and make them ready to be adopted as efficient eloquence in oral or written communication. In this sense, proverbs accomplish people's deprivation to resume knowledge and reflection into kernels of wisdom that offer poised comments on personal relationships and social affairs. They are relevance rhetorical effect in different ways of communication from sociable chatters, vigorous political speeches and religious discourse to lyrical poetry, best-seller novels and momentous mass media (Mieder, 2004).

On the other hand, idioms are described as "linguistic expressions or lexical items representing objects, concepts or phenomena of material life particular to a given culture" (Adelina & Hossein, 2011, p.880). Idioms are not different from proverbs, and they are introduced in any language and render it its cultural coloration and mood (Igono & Ogudu, 2018). For that reason, idioms can be considered difficult for individuals who are not aware of the cultural background in which these expressions are originated (Kperogi, 2015). In the case of African novel in English, both proverbs and idioms are affected by the nativization of English language in this genre. This phenomenon is the result of language contact in the African context that indicates the variation which occurs in the foreign code at linguistic levels and turns it an essential part of the culture of any community in which it is used as a supplemental language. The

nativized foreign code misses some native-like features and receives the indigenous languages' characteristics of the society in which it has been adopted (Oboko & Ifechelobi, 2018)

As other African authors, Chinua Achebe is well known of his narrative style that mixes between English language and oral traditions. In his novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People*, Achebe employs his Igbo tribe's traditions that are mainly expressed via proverbs and idiomatic expressions. In doing that, Achebe does not only eliminate the dominance of European culture and discourse on the African literary scene, but also establishes a new canon in Anglophone African fiction in which he promotes his people cultural heritage and discourse (Lynn, 2017). In this sense, the use of proverbs and idioms in Chinua Achebe's and his African fellows' novels still requires the attention of critics and researchers. Obiechina (1993) discusses the use of proverbs as a narrative means in the African novel. He explains that the majority of African oral traditions' features such as myths, stories and folktales are expressed in the African fiction-taking Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as an example- in the form of proverbs which preserve their cultural values.

Igboanusi (2001) examines Igbo English as a variety of Nigerian English that is adopted in the majority of Nigerian novels. He considers Igbo proverbs' translation into English in Nigerian authors' creative writings as a stylistic device that is produced from the inference of Igbo language and culture. Similarly, Istomina (2011) casts light on the use of idiomatic expressions in Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* as an anti-colonial instrument. She tackles the difficulty to translate and to grasp those cultural bond expressions without violating the connotative meaning of them. Agu, Agu and Olijeh (2018) regard proverbs as a discourse strategy in certain African novels such as *Things Fall Apart*, *A Man of the People* and *Anthills of The Savannah*. They discover that since they are cultural bond expressions, proverbs are linked tightly to language and their meanings are related to the context in which they are occurred. They also conclude that proverbs in African novels in general and particularly in Achebe's narratives have rhetorical, epistemological and didactic values. Moreover, in their investigation of English domestication in Achebe's creative writings, Oboko and Ifechelobi (2018) explain that proverbs and idioms are the main features in this process since they convey the African traditions via the foreign code and preserve the Africanity of the literary discourse.

The present paper is an attempt to investigate the extent to which proverbs and idioms are used in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of The Savannah* as a way of English nativization in this work and their roles in creating a new indigenized authentic African discourse.

II. Methodology

The main objective of the present work is to cast light on the use of African proverbs and idioms in Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of The Savannah*. For that reason, the two researchers adopt both descriptive and sociolinguistic frameworks to accomplish the intended aim. The former is selected in order to depict the usage of proverbs and idioms in the target novel that represents a bilingual context that mixes between English and the indigenous language. However, the sociolinguistic approach is chosen to explain the relationship between English language and the use of proverbs and idioms in social reality and to identify the meaning of those statements in

their context. In order to fulfill the research objective, Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of The Savannah* is selected as a corpus of the study. Unlike Achebe's previous works such as *Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *A Man of the People* which depict the African context in the colonial era and the relation between Africans and their colonizer, *Anthills of The Savannah* is a political novel that portrays post-colonial Africa. It reflects the political realities in Africa, particularly in Nigeria (Kangana) that are characterized by civil war, corruption, the misuse of power and the obliterating of the conscious elite in the African community (Carroll, 1990). The meanings of the selected proverbs and idioms are based on Kaperogi (2015). Glocal English and Mieder. 2004. Proverbs: A Handbook.

III. Proverbs and Idioms in *Anthills of the Savannah*

As other Chinua Achebe's literary works, *Anthills of The Savannah* is abounded with different proverbs and idiomatic expressions that are a stereotype in this genre. The results are represented in the tables below with the meanings of the selected proverbs and idioms.

A. Proverbs

Igbo Proverbs are frequent in Achebe's *Anthills of The Savannah*. They are translated literally from Igbo into English language. Table.1 presents those proverbs with their possible meanings in English.

Table.1. Proverbs in *Anthills of The Savannah*

Proverbs	Meaning
●One finger gets soiled with grease and spreads it to the other four. (p.22)	Someone's mistake can affect others.
●A man must not swallow his cough because he fears to disturb others. (p.22)	Don't satisfy others on the pain of yourself.
●It takes a lion to tame a leopard. (p.24)	He doesn't use the right way.
●Is it not the same fellow who was born in a goat shed because his father had no money to pay for a chalet? (p.26)	He was not born with a gold spoon in his mouth.
●Power is like marrying across the Niger; you soon find yourself paddling by night. (p.45)	Power is so difficult.
●An animal whose name is famous does not always fill a hunter's basket. (p.121)	Fame is not synonymous with intelligence.
●A man who answers every summons by the town-crier will not plant corn in his fields. (p.122)	The person who listens to everyone nonsense cannot do anything in life.
●If you cross the Great River to marry a wife, you must be ready for the risk of night journey by canoe. (p.127)	If you intervene in a matter, you will be responsible of the results.

●The earthworm is not dancing, it is only its manner of walking. (p.157)	Looks can be deceiving.
●Whoever ate the foofoo let him mop up the soup as well. (p.227)	If someone starts something, he should finish it

B. Idioms

As proverbs, idioms are major aspects in the target novel. They are presented in Table.2 with their possible meanings in English.

Table.2. Idiomatic Expressions in *Anthills of The Savannah*

Idiomatic Expressions	Meaning
●He owns all the words in this country. (p.9)	He is responsible of information broadcasting.
●It's me the world will laugh at .(p.19)	I'm Pilloried.
●Children washing only their bellies. (p.21)	We are always learning.
●God does not sleep. (p.21)	God knows everything.
●Only half-wits can stumble into such enormities. (p.47)	The stupid man who falls in troubles
● Chris and Louise didn't make it once in Bed. (p.49)	They did not have sex.
● You can't open up to every sweet tongue that comes singing at your doorstep. (p.88)	You should be cautious.
●I drank it in from my mother's breast. (p.101)	It is something inherited.
●I do not know ABC. (p.122)	I'm illiterate.
●There is nothing left in the pipeline. (p.154)	I don't have anything to say.

African proverbs and idioms in English are two discursive and sociolinguistic phenomena that are frequent in African prose fiction written in English. Chinua Achebe as a pioneer of African Anglophone novels is considered as the founder of this technique. In order to express his people wisdom and experience, he translates their proverbs and idioms into English language and nativizes this code. In his novel *Anthills of The Savannah*, those two aspects are frequent and they follow the syntactic norms of English; their meanings are not extremely violated and they depict a sociolinguistic map for English language in African fiction. In this sense, a proverb such as "It takes a lion to tame a leopard" which means "He does not use the right way" is translated literally, but it expresses correctly the writer's intention since it is impossible to domesticate a leopard. Also, the use of animals as metaphors can be met in the novel in many cases as "Is it

not the same fellow who was born in a goat shed because his father had no money to pay for a chalet?" which means "he was not born with a gold spoon in his mouth". Achebe uses 'goat shed' which is popular in Igbo society as a metaphor to portray poverty. Similarly, the use of nature as an image in proverbs may make them difficult to be understood like "Power is like marrying across the Niger; you soon find yourself paddling by night" and "If you cross the Great River to marry a wife you must be ready for the risk of night journey by canoe". In this case, Great River or Niger River is a metaphor of power and hardship in West African myth that may be obstruct the comprehension of the intended meaning since it stems from the African culture.

Similarly, African idioms in English represent a major aspect in *Anthills of The Savannah*. As it is observed, the selected idioms are affected by the widespread of English in post-colonial Nigeria in which Nigerian English is used as a variety of English in this community. Used by both illiterate and educated strata, idiomatic expressions in Achebe's *Anthills of The Savannah* represent the English nativization in the African society. For instance, using idiomatic expressions like "Chris and Louise didn't make it once in bed" is the result of cultural and social effects on language use in which the utilization of phrases like "having sex" explicitly is undesirable. Also, the expression "I drank it in from my mother's breast" is an example of the indigenized form of English in the form of a cultural bond statement. In this case, Chris, the commissioner of information, utilizes this expression that is acquired from his Nigerian community to explain that such traits are inherited. Furthermore, the use of idioms in *Anthills of The Savannah* is an indicator of the education level such as the expression "I do not know ABC" which is used in the conversation between Ikem, the editor, and the Abazonian old man to indicate the social difference between the two interlocutors.

Conclusion

In a nutshell, the present paper's main objective was to investigate the use of African proverbs and idioms in African novels in English and their role in creating an indigenized form of English language. For that reason, the two researchers selected Chinua Achebe's *Anthills of The Savannah* as a corpus of the study. The novel seemed to be an appropriate choice since it depicts post-colonial African social reality in which colonial traces affected the African culture and society. The research outcomes revealed the predominance of proverbs and idioms as a discursive approach and the use of their literal translation in order to convey African cultural experiences. They depicted the impact of cultural beliefs such as the use of nature and animals' symbols in reformulating such proverbs. Furthermore, the research results indicated that such African idiomatic expressions in English reflect the conservative nature of certain African societies and reveal the education level of individuals in the same communities. Thus, African proverbs and idioms in English are aspects of the indigenized English in Anglophone African novels that create a new English variety and shape African fiction with a kind of authenticity.

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