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Use of Ghanaianisms: A Mark of Identity?

Dr. James Nsoh Adogpa

Akenten-Appiah Menka University for Skills Training and Entrepreneurial Development, Department of Languages Education, Kumasi, Ghana.

ABSTRACT

Ghanaianisms play a critical role in managing linguistic taboos. These are marks of Ghanaian cultural and linguistic identities. The Ghanaian creative writer, as well as the journalist, who has to stylistically contextualize his/her work, ought to adjust, distort and enlarge the scope of the English and change its shape to suit the linguistic space and time. This space and time fulfills what Zvemoya (2011) says "Our ancestors recognised this and, as a way of control and to encourage creativity designated the times and places for obscene." From the perspective of an emic researcher, data were gathered from creative works of Ghanaian creative writers and from the media (broadcast and print). It was found out that the culture of Ghana is unique, so Ghanaians use Ghanaianisms to play a critical role in managing linguistic taboos and to mark identity. Another finding was that the use of Ghanaianisms is as a result of the passion Ghanaians have attached to the reality of life instances when it comes to how Ghanaians see English as their own. It is suggested that Ghanaianisms are recognized and codified so as to ease the use of English in the Ghanaian context.

KEYWORDS: *Ghanaianisms, identity marker, culture, language, Ghanaianisation of English*

INTRODUCTION

English has made many inroads into many nations, many areas, as well as contexts and cultures. The varying cultures have brought about varying usages of English world-wide. Hence, World Englishes. Kachru (1965) and Quirk (1972) open the doors to the study of New Englishes leading to Kachru's classification of English into the Inner Circle, the Outer Circle and the Expanding Circle whilst the Dynamic Model proposed by Schneider (2007) has also outlined the developmental stages of English at each stage. English in the Outer Circle is learnt from books and by the Dynamic Model, the first stage in the Outer Circle is as a result of languages in contact. Languages in contact produce a distinct culture neither local nor native. Nations of the Outer Circle use English to serve their linguistic needs such as administration, governance, schooling and many other purposes. The English language that has left its ancestral home no longer bears a full cultural identity to the native speaker. Its new home becomes a bearer of the new identity. Schneider (2003) maintains that the New Englishes can be attributed to identity formation. This identity formation is that of linguistic identity, a product of culture.

Ghanaians have been using English in every social aspect of life and some researchers have referred to it (English) as another 'Ghanaian Language' (Anderson, 2009:21) and 'our language' (Quarcoo 1994:342). As Ghanaians employ English to serve its linguistic and communicative needs, the English seems to lack some expressions that would fill in the linguistic lacuna the English language and culture have no expressions for. Aidoo (199:34) questions how the English could have the same feeling just as a Ghanaian would. She concludes:

> *One thing the Ghanaian is good at is simply turning English down on its head. They had decided to create out of 'overwhelmed' and 'flabbergasted' a new word (flabberwhelmed) to describe an emotional state which they had decided the English were not capable of experiencing and therefore had no expression in their language for.*

The expressions that Ghanaians create or employ to serve the peculiar linguistic context of Ghana are known as Ghanaianisms. These expressions have to be sprinkled in their speech or writing as stated by Schneider (2011:127)*"…sprinkling one's English with African words and expressions may be a means of asserting one's African identity"*. The sprinkling of English with lexical items and expressions that are peculiar to Ghana appears to be symptomatic of marking Ghanaian identity.

Though Ghana uses English as an official language and some even claim that English is another Ghanaian language, and despite the desire of Ghanaians to sound British-like in their use of English, the culture of Ghana plays a role in regulating what 'this English language' (another Ghanaian language) should say and should not. This becomes a contributor

to the variety of English in Ghana because of the culture, context and social functionality of English in Ghana. The educated Ghanaian might aspire for a British Standard English but his/her culture limits the extent to which he/she employs English. Although some research has been done on Ghanaianisms and Ghanaian English (Dako, 2001, 2003, 2013; Ngula 2014; Quarcoo, 1994; Sey 1973) little is worked on how Ghanaianisms serve as identity marker.

The aim of this work is in threefold. Firstly, it is to explore the extent to which Ghanaianisms are a marker of identity; secondly, it is to examine how culture determines the employment of Ghanaianisms in the speech and writing of educated Ghanaians especially in the works of Ghanaian creative writers as well as that of the media; and thirdly, establish the role of language in the establishment of identity.

The paper therefore aims at finding out the following:

1. To what extent do Ghanaianisms serve as an identity marker in the writings of Ghanaian creative writers?

2. How does culture determine the use of Ghanaianisms?

3. What role does language play in the establishment of identity in Ghana?

LITERATURE REVIEW

Language, Culture and Identity

> *Language is not passive but actually helps shape society itself. This is one reason why language, identity and cultural difference are important because they shape our world and they actually help shape how we see ourselves, how we interact with others, and how we conform to social rules and norms* (Zou, 2013:46).

What we say and how we say what we say are governed by our belief systems, norms, practices and attitudes; all of which are a sum total of our identity. Definition of identity might be convoluted but what seems to fit in for the purpose of this work is provided by Jerkins, (1996:4). Identity is "the systematic establishment and signification, between individuals, between collectives, and individuals and collectives, of relationships of similarity and difference." Ghanaians are a collection of individuals with different linguistic and cultural backgrounds; yet, bounded together as a nation with a second language that has travelled space and time through languages in contact. This process has brought about a 'rerooting' of the English language (Schneider 2003:233). The rerooting of English in Ghana has given it an identity that could be seen as one with similarity and difference. The similarity of English use in Ghana adorns Ghana with an identity but also differentiates Ghanaian users of English from other users.

Language and culture are inseparable; for, language carries the culture of a people and culture determines the way language should be put to use in context. Self-belonging is more reflected in language than in any other aspect of

identity, and culture is more expressed in language which is the belief system of the people and normally transmitted from one generation to another. According to Rovira (2008:66), "Culture is a defining feature of a person's identity." This identity is an outcome of shared values, customs and histories characterized by culture. The linguistic history of Ghana traces back to the advent of the British whose language and culture culminated in a new variety of English that Ghanaians utilize for their linguistic, social and cultural needs. The identity of Ghanaians is more expressed in the homogeneous language that Ghanaians sometimes refer to as one of the Ghanaian languages because of its long stay in Ghana and the "functional nativeness" it portrays (Kachru, 1997). Functional nativeness is a situation in which English is used to perform every aspect of a nation's linguistic need. Ghana is not genetically native but functionally native. The New English has to adapt to the socio-linguistic, socio-cultural and socio-historic context of Ghana.

"Culture is language, and language is loaded with culture" (Agar, 1994:28). Language, in whatever variety, becomes building blocks of a world full of its own meanings. These meanings are being differentiated because of culture which is society specific. The differentiation labels each society according to its "system of beliefs and sentiments of self-worth" (Rovira, 2008:66). A loss of this self-worth is a loss of cultural identity which only seems to happen when one is dispossessed of linguistic identity. This is because culture is transmitted from generation through language. Even if Ghanaians consider English as a second language but has functional nativeness, it carries the culture of Ghana. Language and culture appear to be two sides of the same coin helping to shape identity – linguistic identity and cultural identity. The work examines how language as well as culture helps to establish identity.

English in Ghana

The scrambling and partitioning of Africa led to language groupings being spread across borders. Languages that were mutually unintelligible were found in one nation. Building a united nation with languages that have no common linguistic relationship seems extremely hard if not impossible. The introduction of the European languages became eminent because the colonizers needed to bring all these heterogeneous ethic groups together and use their (the colonisers') languages as a symbol of power. The European languages became "a symbol of modernization, a key to expanded functional roles, and an extra arm for success and mobility in culturally and linguistically complex and pluralistic societies" (Kachru 1986:1). These languages remain with the nations in which they had influences on. They either remain as official languages or lingual franca or both. Ghana uses English as both national language and a lingual franca.

Ghana, formerly Gold Coast, is a nation with a multiplicity of languages of about 50 which are mutually non-intelligible

(Anyidoho and Dakubu Kropp, 2008). These local languages perform cultural-specific roles. The coming of English into contact with the existing Ghanaian languages dates back to 1550 (Anderson, 2009 citing Sackey, 1997). English as a language was used for the training of interpreters, colonial administration and education. Since English was used and is still used to perform many activities for about six centuries, its linguistic elements have to be accommodated and linguistic bleaching (Sueren, 2013) had to occur due to the languages in contact. When languages are in contact, settling begins to occur. Linguistic settling is a process whereby norms become acceptable in a society. Linguistic settling is about individuals who collectively agree on what standards to follow. Settling defines speakers of a certain language and gives them an identity. The English language has now acquired almost all if not all the characteristics of all that the Ghanaian languages possess.

English is used almost in all spheres of the Ghanaian social, religious, cultural lives especially where we have different ethnic groups coming together.

Grieve (1964:12 - 13) expresses the pervasive presence of the English language as follows:

> *One of the features of West African which forcefully strikes the visitor is the wide currency of English in a great variety of forms. By Africans, it is used for every purpose from literary composition or complex technological exposition to the most trivial ('phatic communication'). It is more than a 'second' language to most people who use it.*

According to Quarcoo (1994), the English language in Ghana is older than any Ghanaian alive. He states: "…the English used in Ghana, and the transformation it has gone through, does not render it a language of foreign culture" (Quarcoo, 1994:336). He concluded by saying that English is a Ghanaian artefact because it is used to serve many practical purposes. English is "our language". Anderson (2009:21) in the same vein reiterates: "The decision of the colonial masters to make English the language of administration, commerce and education has turned English into a 'Ghanaian language'." Since English is now a Ghanaian language because of its period of stay and the functions it performs, it has to function to reflect the practices, norms and belief systems of the various ethnic groups who are grouped together as a nation.

The function of English in a heterogeneous country such as Ghana is necessary. Dako (2013:19) said: "For a country of heterogeneity to function with homogeneity and find cohesiveness elements to rally around, there is the cognition that some topics are avoided in public discourse or are discussed with utmost circumspection." Recently, there has been a serious and furious resistance in Ghana against the implementation of comprehensive sexual education in the primary school curriculum throughout the country. One of the statements that attracted attention was "The front door is made for entry; the back door is made for rejection of faeces" (Joy Fm Midday News, 10/10/2019).

The statement above is an emphasis on how Ghanaians pragmatically employ English when certain topics cannot be avoided but have to be discussed. They 'bend' the English language to fit into the Ghanaian context without causing any linguistic casualty. This act of making English serve the socio-cultural needs of the people is a matter of settling and linguistic bleaching because in settling normally results in severe denting of the direct correlation between linguistic and conceptual structures and categories. Languages in contact subsequently diminishes semantic transparency and enhances semantic opacity. These are necessary for a community to acquire its own cultural identity. Ghanaianisms are an outcome of settling. They are, therefore, necessary for Ghanaians to negotiate their discourse successfully. This calls for a variety of English that can lend itself to the culture of Ghana and be a vehicle to carry the culture and experiences of Ghanaians and not the culture of British or Americans. This variety is not to be viewed as one of lexical or structural deviations but expressions that are meaningful in the Ghanaian context. Contextual analysis and interpretation are needed to assess how English has successfully settled in the Ghanaian culture and how the culture has accommodated the homogenous Ghanaian language (English language) to serve the communicative needs of the heterogeneous ethnic groups.

Ghanaianisation of English

> *…the English language is a methodical, energetic businesslike and sober language that does not care much for finery and elegance, but does care for logical consistency and is opposed to any attempt to narrow-in life by police regulation and strict rules either of grammar or lexicon. As the language is, so also is the nation…It must be a source of gratification to mankind that the tongue spoken by two of the greatest powers of the world is so noble, so rich, so pliant, so expressive and so interesting.* (Jesperson, 1905, cited in Fishman 1977 and cited by Kachru 1986:144).

The quotation above clearly depicts how English is friendly to settle in every nation. But for the English language to take the tilt of any nation, it is possibly a deliberate effort by the nation or a natural process that occurs with any language in social reality that no one can be police over the purity or otherwise of such a language. The English language in Ghana, because it is so pliant, has its grammar and lexicon going through linguistic bleaching and settling. Linguistic bleaching is a process whereby norms become acceptable in a society. Linguistic settling on the other hand is said to occur when certain ways of speaking catch-on in a society or community (Sauren, 2013). Willingly or unwillingly, educated Ghanaians, whether linguistic purists or not, find themselves employing Ghanaianisms to express their ideas. These expressions are signs of linguistic identity.

Though settling seems to be a result of the wish of the groups of speakers to manifest themselves linguistically, it might be

argued that not all the time that the people have to agree but when there are clear linguistic signals indicating that some settling has occurred whether the linguistic community agrees or not. For example, in Ghana, perceptions about the existence of Ghanaian English is still in the 'balance'. It must be pointed out that a substantial amount of research has indicated that the phonology of Ghanaian English exists (Koranteng, 2006; Lomotey, 2017).

According to Sauren (2013) when language settles for a long time, slow process begins affecting some elements of the language imperceptible to its speakers. The English language has been in Ghana since the 16th century so if there is any process of settling at all, speakers and users of English in Ghana will hardly notice it. Some results of settling are '*severe denting of the direct correlation between linguistic and conceptual structures and categories', 'diminishing of semantic transparency', and 'enhancing of semantic opacity'* (Sauren, 2013:28). For instance, "The front door is made for entry; the back door is made for rejection of faeces" (Joy Fm Midday News, 10/10/2019) has demonstrated the enhancement of semantic opacity. The *front door* refers to the female genital organ. It is not quite easy to interpret what the *front door* refers to; likewise, the *back door.* This is one way of 'Ghanaianising' English. The English language has to speak according to the 'language of Ghana' just as indicated by (Wierzbicka, 1992:3):

> *Every nation speaks... according to the way it thinks and thinks according to the way it speaks. Thoughts cannot be transferred from one language to another because every thought depends on the language in which it has been formulated.*

The formulation of these thoughts are expressions of the souls of the people who are seemingly trapped by a language they cannot 'divorce' and a language they cannot fully claim. The best way is to 'Ghanaianise' it and let it function for them.

Some of the ways by which to 'Ghanaianise' English are making meanings of expressions, utterances and propositions in English probably acquire meaning according to the thoughts of the nation due to its adherence to the people of Ghana. It therefore becomes apparent to explore whether Ghanaianisms are representations of identity marker. It is through the functionality of Ghanaianisms that the processes of acculturation, hybridization, nativation and languages in contact can properly display the settling of English in Ghana and how Ghanaians have unconsciously, created a variety that identifies Ghanaian variety that identifies with Ghanaians and their cultural context.

DISCUSSION

> "We (the excolonised) have to stretch the language to adapt to alien thoughts and values which have no precedent of expression in English, subject the language to a pressure that distorts, or, if you like, enlarges its scope and changes its shape" (Sidhwa, 1996:240).

Finding one's identity through creativity can possibly never be well-defined than what has been quoted above. In order to make English serve the purpose of any linguistic community, the language has to be turned on its head to fit in the culture and context of the people. Aidoo (1991:34) captures the creativity of the educated Ghanaian as follows:

> *One thing the Ghanaian is good at is simply turning English down on its head. They had decided to create out of 'overwhelmed' and 'flabbergasted' a new word (flabberwhelmed) to describe an emotional state which they had decided the English were not capable of experiencing and therefore had no expression in their language for.*

The English, Ghanaians turn on its head, possibly, has to bear the identity of the Ghanaian since emotions and experiences are not universalized. By contextualizing English in Ghana means 'Ghanaianising' English. The 'Ghanaianisation' of English is a result of creativity by users; particularly creative writers and journalists. Kwesi Yankah, a professor of linguistics at the University of Ghana, Legon, limns how helpful English has been as follows in the preface to Kirby's *A North American's Guide to Ghanaian English*:

> "Being myself a linguist, and a newspaper columnist well known for the liberal use of Ghanaian English, I have grown to appreciate its efficacy for satire and humour in literary works, and do wonder how my two columns: Kwatriot and Abosam Fireman would have fared without splashes of Ghanaian English."

To 'Ghanaianise' English is not because users just desire to create a variety but because it is fashioned out of necessity. To the journalist and the creative writer, it is a tool to ridicule, an instrument to entertain, and to a linguist who is sensitive to what is said and how it is said to appropriately fit in the socio-cultural context have to variously rely on creativity to serve their purposes. The immediate audience of these users are normally Ghanaians. The variety of English has to look like Ghanaians. The process of making English look like Ghanaians is 'Ghanaianisation' of English. This process is made possible because the 'weapon' of creativity, typical of language, allows the recolonized to break down the barriers that language police would have liked to erect. The ancestors of African languages have equally provided a linguistic 'immune system' that penetrates other languages to create meaning(s) according to cultural-context. The new variety looks like a sacred text, a message delivered by the gods, and must be interpreted by the messenger god, Hermes. The sacredness of the text becomes culturally and contextually specific – signs of identity marker.

Another way through which Ghanaianisms manifested the identity of Ghanaians is the linguistic patterns as illustrated below:

> "There is no trouble here. You are the path walker" (Nyantakyi, 1998:50).

"They just went into her bedroom and started eating one another" (Aidoo, 1991:117).

"He broke the journey at Winneba Junction" (Djoleto, 1975:29).

The instances above could be attributed to cultural interference, a part of identity. To enquire someone about his/her mission of paying you a visit, it is customary to make the visitor feel welcomed and to enable him/her state the purpose of his/her visit. The import of the communicative effect would have been lost and taken as deviation had this been decontextualized. However, it becomes meaningful because it pragmatically fits into the linguistic patterns of Ghanaians. To what extent do Ghanaianisms mark the identity of Ghanaians if not for Ghanaians to stretch English to serve their cultural needs, a portrayal of an identity? *Eating one another* in the eyes of the linguistic purist is a deviation. But to the creative writer, who has to stylistically contextualize his/her work, ought to adjust, distort and enlarge the scope of the English and change its shape to suit the linguistic space and time. This space and time fulfill what Zvemoya (2011) says "Our ancestors recognised this and, as a way of control and to encourage creativity designated the times and places for obscene." The obscenity that could not be expressed in *eating one another* is indicative of the place 'bedroom'.

It appears evident that Ghanaian creative writers write without 'apology' to the English. Creative work 'written without apology' to Bulter (1997) is one of the five ways of identifying a new variety of English. Their works are symbols of 'Ghanaianising' English through creativity; hence, a mark of identity with Ghanaianisms.

Linguistic taboos are very characteristic of African languages. What to say, how to say what you say and where to say what you intend to say are all regulated by every linguistic society and culture. Whatever is likely to cause a linguistic casualty in a linguistic community is either avoided where necessary or discussed with greater care. Dako (2013) indicates that for Ghana to function homogeneously though a heterogeneous country in terms of culture and languages, Ghanaians try to avoid certain topics or discuss such topics with utmost circumspection. It was established that due to cultural reasons Ghanaians do not refer to the sexual organs directly.

Nana turned, and when her sleeping cloth slid off her waist, a slight smile, like a knife mark in fresh dough, parted Awo Yaa Akoto's lips. Her grandmother covered her genitals with a red bandana, which meant she had entered puberty.(Nyantakyi, 1998: 17)

The text above indicates how the educated Ghanaian pragmatically conveys a message of a young girl who experiences her first menstrual cycle with little or no signal of linguistic casualty.

In consonance with linguistic taboos, Abi-Esber, Yang, Muranaka and Moustakim (2018:90), say "taboos are social

'thought police' discouraging individuals from considering a specific type of action." Agyekum (2002) and Gobert (2015) noted that taboos are culturally related. Also, they are socio-contextually interpreted in accordance with the beliefs, norms practices, and as well as the perceptions and attitudes of a people; very depictive of an identity.

The next sentence below was taken from a discussion from Joy News when there was some news about a certain politician whose 'side chick' (girlfriend) seemed to have caused him to behave to some unreasonable extent, as thought by some people.

"When blood from our hearts pumps blood into that *langalanga*between our legs, the mind in most cases switches off the part that is meant for caution." (Joy News 2020)

One can realize the creative use of language. The speaker knows the cultural-sensitive context of the speech community and has to pragmatically manage the communicative load. There appears to be no word in English that could best convey the sense without causing communication problems. The use of *langalanga*to describe the male genital organ is a linguistic strategy of communicating effectively because linguistic taboos are to be observed. What is critical in this situation is the fact that every living language is socially-context, culturally-determined and socio-contextually interpreted. What is also noticeable is the unnecessary repetition of blood after the verb pumps in which case many language police would consider redundant and a deviation from Standard English. However, when there is passion attached to what is being discussed, such natural occurrences are bound to surface. It appears that such repetition does not even suggest any L1 interference. It might be attributed to passion attached to the reality of life instances.

Though Ghanaians use English in almost every social situation, the culture of Ghana plays a major role as to how the language should be employed in the Ghanaian context to function effectively for their communicative purposes. Ghanaians, therefore, linguistically manage the official language, English, to serve their linguistic needs. The fact that the culture of Ghana is unique, Ghanaians use certain expressions peculiar to Ghana known as Ghanaianisms. These Ghanaianisms play a critical role in managing linguistic taboos. These are marks of Ghanaian cultural and linguistic identities. They are in line with what the Former President of Singapore, Lee Kuan Yew, in 1972 said:

Whilst we may speak English, whilst we may use the English language, whilst we may watch what the English-speaking world in America and Canada, in Britain, in Australia and New Zealand, are doing, … much of it is not ours.

Only when we know our traditional values, can we be quite clear the Western world is a different system, a different voltage, structured for purposes different from ours.

(Bokhorst-Heng, Rubdy, Mckay and Alsagolf, 2010:136)

Ghanaians might use English in every social aspect but its usage is not akin to any native-speakers' cultural or linguistic identity. The use of English by Ghanaians seems to strongly suggest that the culture and linguistic identities of Ghanaians are reflected in its functional-nativeness. Ghanaians have to reincarnate the English language with a cultural identity potent enough to serve their communicative needs. Such an English is representative and symptomatic of a search for social and national identity; identity capable of liberating their 'imprisoned souls and spirits'. Take away Ghanaianisms from the English of an educated Ghanaian, and he/she is devoid of cultural identity as well as linguistic identity. The use of Ghanaianisms apparently are markers of identity of the Ghanaian user of English.

CONCLUSION

Linguistic identity and cultural identity are two sides of the same coin. It will be difficult to have a coin without the two sides. Language carries identity and identity pulls language wherever it chooses to go. Ghanaians have no choice as long as English remains a national language, a language with functional-nativeness. They have to invest the English language with cultural power capable of carrying the right linguistic 'voltage' to serve their communicative needs. The linguistic voltage is an embodiment of the soul and the spirit of the people. The language is an identity marker that is worn like a badge. It is a key to the soul of a people, and the day the key is lost, the identity of such a people is lost. Ghanaianisms are unavoidable linguistic ingredients in a socially realistic context. They are necessary to a culturally-sensitive community that has to glocalise English to liberate the souls of its people.

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