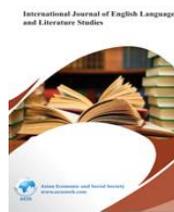




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### LANGUAGE AND THEME IN CHARLES DICKENS'S OLIVER TWIST AND CHINUA ACHEBE'S SARROW OF GOD

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#### ABSTRACT

*The paper was divided into sections with the introduction coming first. In the introduction, it was observed that language played an important role in literature as in everyday life; language expressed the themes of literary works. It was noted that this study fell within the framework of stylistic criticism. In another section, Dickens's deployment of irony to ridicule officials of the work house was treated. Proverbs as a device for cultural projection in Arrow of God was also treated. And varieties of English in the novels under study were noted to contribute to the development of the themes and characters. The main findings of the study included the following: Language conveys the themes and it is a means of characterization. Irony and proverbs are tools of satire used in Oliver Twist and Arrow of God to ridicule individuals and government policies in order to bring about the desired change in the societies portrayed. Language is a major factor in the classification of the novel according to region.*

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#### 1. INTRODUCTION

Literature expresses human experience in an imaginative way. In doing this, the novel mainly uses the everyday language. Charles Dickens and Chinua Achebe have done this in *Oliver Twist* and *Arrow of God* respectively. The experience we relate to others in real life is not devoid of imagination as we think of the best way to organize the events that form such experience. This is similar to what happens in prose fiction. Prose works according to Olaofe (2008), "recounts the writer's life experience in an imaginative manner". As prose fiction recounts the writer's life experience, the work becomes a mirror of his world and the immediate community. "Whether it is in poetry, drama, or novel or short story, the writer's dialogue with his physical and human environment comes out as mirror in which his people and society can see what they look like"

(Ohaegbu (2006). In *Oliver Twist*, Dickens portrays the English society as acquisitive while Achebe portrays clash of cultures in *Arrow of God*. In performing these tasks, language is employed in varied ways. Language expresses the themes of literary works.

Charles Dickens uses the language that expresses the sensibilities of the English society in *Oliver Twist* while Chinua Achebe uses the language that expresses the African sentiments and temperaments in *Arrow of God*. Use of language in *Oliver Twist* and *Arrow of God* shows that language is a major factor in the classification of the novel according to the region of production or origin. Even though there are varieties of English in the two novels that express the sensibilities of their regions or nations, there are many passages in Standard English in these novels which have narrowed down the linguistic gulf that could have been created by the local varieties. In Dickens's *Oliver Twist*, there are varieties of English like: standard British English, slang and uneducated English. Forms of English, according to Quirk and Greenbaum (1980) that are especially associated with uneducated use are often called 'substandard', and are in contrast with standard English. In this paper, the term, uneducated English will be used.

In *Arrow of God*, there are standard English and local varieties such as Nigerian English and Nigerian pidgin. Apart from the varieties of English that are mentioned here, there are other features of language that can be identified in the two novels like irony, proverbs, imagery, symbolism, code-mixing and code-switching. Because of space constraint, only irony, proverbs, and varieties of English will be treated in this paper.

It is pertinent to state at this juncture that this study will be carried out within the framework of stylistic criticism, which according to Ngara (1982).

Is not only confined to what is conventionally called 'style' in literature, 'the occasional idiosyncrasies which characterize an individual's uniqueness'. We are not merely concerned with what is idiosyncratic about a writer, but equally with the effect of his manner of presentation, and with the relationship between language and content... Our focus on the linguistic format will lead us to a greater understanding of content and character.

In the analysis of *Oliver Twist* and *Arrow of God* that will be carried out, both the form and content are considered to be very important. The *how* of a literary work is as important as the *what*. None is subordinate to the other. Thus, this study is in tandem with stylistic criticism as postulated by Emmanuel Ngara. It is interested in how language is used to pass a message across to the audience.

## **2. IRONY IN CHARLES DICKENS'S *OLIVER TWIST***

In our daily use of language, we use irony consciously or unconsciously. As a form of rhetoric, irony impresses greatly on listeners. When used in literature as we see in *Oliver Twist*, an irony is treated as a figure of speech or a narrative device. As a narrative device, an irony leads to the

realization of humor and it is an important tool of satire. Thus, Dickens uses irony in *Oliver Twist* as a weapon to satirize poor law introduced in England in his time. The novel adumbrates the new poor law in England. As observed by [Yakubu \(1999\)](#).

In *Oliver Twist*, Charles Dickens is declaring war against the new poor law of 1834. This was a social welfare programme in England... The areas he touched in *Oliver Twist* were the harsh regime of work house, with special regard to diet; the utter neglect of the needs of pauper children; inefficiency and inhumanity of such officials as Bumble and Mrs. Corney.

[Dickens \(2000\)](#) uses irony in the novel to expose the inhumanity of the board and the harsh regime of work house with its dietary policy in the following way;

Upon this the parish authorities magnanimously and humanly resolved, that Oliver should be ‘farmed’, in other words, that he should be dispatched to a branch work house some three miles off where twenty or thirty other juvenile offenders against the poor laws rolled about the floor all day without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing....

In “magnanimously and humanly”, as well as “without the inconvenience of too much food or too much clothing” irony is couched. The Board members are harsh and mean. They starve the children put in their care.

Furthermore, Mrs. Mann who punishes the children who claim to be hungry is described by [Dickens \(2000\)](#) as “good lady of the house” and “benevolent protectress”. The paupers are given what can barely sustain them and make them breathe and stay alive: “three meals of thin gruel a day”. Oliver and his companions suffer the torture of slow starvation which makes a boy threaten to eat up the boy who sleeps next to him if additional basin of gruel is not given to him. So, lots are cast and it falls on Oliver Twist to walk up to the master to ask for more. Oliver obeys and this is further described with another pinch of irony as “commission of the impious and profane offence of asking for more”.

Moreover, in the novel, Oliver’s incarceration is described with profuse ironies:

Let it not be supposed by the enemies of the “system”, that during the period of his solitary incarceration, Oliver was denied the benefit of exercise, the pleasure of society, or the advantages of religious consolidation. As for exercise, it was nice cold weather, and he was allowed to perform his ablutions every morning under the pump, in a stone yard, in the presence of Mr. Bumble, who prevented his catching cold, and caused a tingling sensation to pervade his frame, by repeated applications of the cane. As for society ...sociably flogged...

far from being denied the advantages of religious consolation,  
he was kicked...

Dickens uses irony to lambast and condemn the board. While doing this, he wants us to laugh at the board. In the above passage, we can see him sneering at the board and winking at us. He uses irony to show his disapproval of the system in operation. In *Oliver Twist*, as observed by Jamison (1970), Dickens attacks the philosophy underlying the new poor law. The discussion between the board as he points out proves this. They have enacted a rule so that they can starve the poor people by gradual process in the work house or if it is out of it, by a quick one. With irony as a weapon, Dickens lampoons the ideas as well as the operation of poor law. In our everyday use of language, people use irony to attack an institution, policy, individuals or an idea especially if they want to induce humor. In *Oliver Twist*, even though there are events that elicit readers' sympathy, some passages couched in irony induce laughter. So, irony as an aspect of everyday language is an important tool in literature. Writers use it to ridicule and achieve satirical tone.

### 3. PROVERBS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S *ARROW OF GOD*

The linguistic device in *Arrow of God* which performs the function that irony in *Oliver Twist* performs is the proverb. Achebe does not use irony in *Arrow of God* the way Dickens has done in *Oliver Twist*. Dickens uses irony as a tool of satire. In *Arrow of God*, Achebe uses proverbs not only as a tool of satire but also to express themes and perform other functions. Proverbs in Achebe's novels as observed by Yakubu and Jibrin (2012), "are as they are used in real life". In Africa, proverbs are used by elders to scold, advise, and correct children. So, it is an aspect of everyday language which arms elders with the tools they need to perform their functions successfully in a society. According to Yakubu (2010), "proverbs are used to comment on people's behavior". This is another function of proverb. The proverbs in *Arrow of God* that will be discussed here comment on people's behavior. They are used as a weapon of satire and they also reiterate themes. Examples of these proverbs are:

- (1) "The lizard who threw confusion into his mother's funeral rite did he expect outsiders to carry the burden of honoring his dead?"

This proverb is used by the people to lambast Ezeulu who is the custodian of the culture of the people of Umuaro, in other words, the Igbo people and yet sends his son, Oduche to acquire western education and be converted to Christianity. This action draws criticism from his followers, the people of Umuaro. Apart from using this proverb to ridicule Ezeulu, it reiterates the theme of confusion in the novel.

The same proverb is used on page 221 by Ezeulu himself when addressing Oduche who has failed in his responsibility for not disclosing to him when Umuaro people are trooping to church enmasse to offer yams to Mr. Goodcountry who has promised them an immunity against the wrath of Ulu when Ezeulu has refused to announce the date for New yam festival as there are three yams remaining to be eaten due to his detention at Okperi for weeks. The recurrence of the same proverb is on page 230, the last page of the

novel. This time, it is used by the narrator, the omniscient voice to criticize Ulu, the god that Ezeulu serves for destroying his chief priest and by implication, Ulu himself and the entire traditional religion. The death of Obika, the son of Ezeulu has brought about disillusionment and consequently, the exodus of the people to Christianity. In all the three contexts that this proverb is used, it projects the theme of confusion.

- (2) “The fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into the grave”. This is used to show disapproval over Akukalia’s behavior. Akukalia who leads Umuaro’s emissary to Okperi in a squabble breaks Ebo’s *Ikenga*. An act that nobody approves of. As a revenge to appease his ancestors Ebo kills Akukalia. The proverb condemns Akukalia for stepping beyond human boundary.
- (3) “A man who brings home ant-infested faggot should not complain if he is visited by Lizards”.

This is to say that everybody is responsible for his or her own action, good or bad. Ezeulu is suspecting that his wife, Oduche’s mother, is accusing him over the abomination that Oduche has committed. Ezeulu is responsible for Oduche’s convert to Christianity, the religion that teaches the Christian faithful to desecrate the python which the people of Umuaro worship. Oduche locks up a python in his box to suffocate to death. This alarms everybody in Umuaro. The above proverb apportions blame. Ezeulu is to blame for Oduche’s action. This proverb is repeated on page 132 by Ezeulu to blame his people and it is also used on page 144 by Nwaka, Ezeulu’s arch-rival, to mock him (Ezeulu) for being friendly with the white man.

- (4) “When two brothers fight, a stranger reaps the harvest”.
- Ezeulu uses this proverb to impress on us that those who collaborate with the colonial masters bring about the conquest of Igbo land and the erosion of traditional values. Some Igbo people form an alliance with the white men and show them the way to Igbo land and thus their conquest. Lack of unity among the people leads to the white man’s victory over them. This proverb is also used on page 220 by Akuebue to criticize the delay in the announcement of the date of the new yam festival which has led to the convert of many worshippers of the traditional religion to Christianity. This proverb reiterates the theme of rivalry in the novel.
- (5) “Did not our elders tell us that as soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace?”. This proverb is used by Nwaka to mock Ezeulu who sees captain Winterbottom as a friend. Winterbottom extends hands of fellowship to Ezeulu because of the latter’s display of honesty in the land dispute.

We can see that in *Arrow of God*, some proverbs are deployed to play the role that irony plays in a literary work. We do not see proverbs in Dickens’s *Oliver Twist* but they are profusely used in *Arrow of God* because in Africa, so much importance is attached to them. Without proverb, adults in traditional African societies cannot play their

roles effectively. So, they play an important role in African society the way we see them in the novel.

#### **4. VARIETIES OF ENGLISH IN OLIVER TWIST**

To some extent, Dickens uses language as a means of characterization in the novel. Characters with a mark of nobility like Oliver, Mr. Brownlow, Rose Maylie, Mrs. Maylie, Harry, Lobstern, and Mr. Grimwig use standard English while criminals and those who are of lowly birth use uneducated English and slang. Examples are: Fagin (the Jew), Sikes, Noah Claypole, Jack Dawkins (the Artful Dodger), Charley Bates, Barney, Gramfield, among others. The novel to some extent juxtaposes the good and the bad and varieties of English in the novel reinforce this. Varieties of English in the novel are a mark of distinction that if passages are excised without names, the form of speech can reveal the identity of the character. In the novel, varieties of English are the hallmark of characters. Below are passages from the novel to illustrate varieties of English used.

##### **4.1. Uneducated English**

‘This here boy, Sir, wot the parish wants to ‘prentis’, said Mr. Gramfield ...I wants a ‘prentis’, and I’m ready to take him. ‘Tol... de rollolol, right follairy, work us’ said Noah ... ‘What is set you a sniveling now?’.

‘Who pitched that ere at me.It’s well it’s the beer, and not the pot, as hit me, or I’d have settled somebody. I might have know’d as nobody but an infernal, rich, plundering, thundering old Jew... unless he done the River company every quarter. Wot’s it all about, Fagin? Damn me, if my neckarkercherain’t lined with beer! ... Wot are you stopping outside for, as if you was ashamed of master?’.

##### **4.2. Standard English (Educated)**

‘Now’ said Mr. Brownlow, ... ‘I want you to pay great attention my boy, to what I am going to say. I shall talk to you without any reserve, because I am sure you are as well able to understand me as many older persons would be’. ‘Oh..., don’t tell me you are going to send me away sir, pray!’ exclaimed Oliver...

There is a great deal of contrast between the two varieties quoted above. The uneducated variety appears like a dialect because of the remarkable difference in lexis and grammar between it and the standard English.

**Slang:**

‘Hello’ my covey, what is the row?

‘Oh, I see. Beak’s order...’.

‘Plummy and slam’.

‘Greenland...’.

‘...it was time to pad the hoof’.

‘A prime plant’.

Varieties of English like these in the novel play an important role because they throw light on the fictional characters and they enhance an understanding of the theme. In *Oliver Twist*, they clarify the theme of social stratification because they reveal the social status of characters.

The English language has varieties and the above extracts illustrate how English is used in England. The language of the novel is a reflection of the language of its immediate community. According to [Yakubu \(2008\)](#), “The use of slang in *Lord of the Flies* shows how much of the English language experience as used by the native speakers that is reflected in the novel”. Similarly, most African novels in English demonstrate African experience with the English language.

## **5. VARIETIES OF ENGLISH IN *ARROW OF GOD***

The varieties of English in *Arrow of God* are a proof of Achebe’s craftsmanship as a novelist. They delineate characters and project themes. They enhance an understanding of Achebe’s message.

In *Arrow of God*, there are standard British English (SBrE), Nigerian English (NigE), and Nigerian Pidgin. Nigerian English as used in the novel is close to standard British English in lexis, structure, grammar, and semantics. But in some situations there are differences in semantics which may lead to incomprehensibility. This occurs as a result of interference features. In Nigeria, these features are not yet standardized to give NigE the recognition that is given to British, American, Irish, Canadian, South African, New Zealand, and Australian English.

NigE is a variety that arises from the interference of the indigenous languages on English which according to [Quirk and Greenbaum \(1980\)](#).

Should be seen as being on a very different basis from the other types of variety discussed. In this case, we refer to the trace left by someone’s native language upon the foreign language he has acquired. Thus, the French man who says ‘I am here since Thursday’ is imposing a French grammatical usage on English; the Russian who says ‘There are four assistant in our chair of mathematics’ is imposing a Russian lexico – semantic usage on the English word ‘Chair’.

The major difference between NigE and British or American English is in the area of speech (pronunciation). But NigE is gaining wide currency that it fits what Quirk and Greenbaum says of interference varieties that:

There are interference varieties that are so widespread in a community and of such long standing that they may be thought stable and adequate enough to be regarded as varieties of English in their own right rather than stages on the way to a more native like English. There is active debate on these issues in India, Pakistan and several African countries, where efficient and fairly stable varieties of English are prominent in educated use of the highest political and professional level.

Nigeria is one of such African countries. Many Nigerian elite use the NigE. NigE has currency within educational and political circles. It is the variety that Achebe's illiterate characters in the novel use. Elements of interference in the speech of characters give it the local flavour. Their speech is sometimes interspersed with Igbo words (code-mixing) and in some situations they switch from this variety (NigE) to the native language (code-switching). The varieties of English in *Arrow of God* is a reflection of how the English language is used in Nigeria. They are also effective means of projecting the themes of culture conflict and disintegration of cultural values in the novel.

The colonial masters in the novel use standard British English while the messengers, cooks, policemen, servants and other semi-literate Africans use the Nigerian Pidgin. In this novel, as in *Oliver Twist*, language is a means of characterization. We get to know the characters' cultural and social background by the variety of English that they speak. Below are examples from *Arrow of God*:

### 5.1. Standard British English (SBE)

The characters in the novel who use this variety are colonial masters. An example is:

‘The man was a complete nonentity until we crowned him, and now he carries on as though he had been nothing else all his life. It's the same with court clerks and even messengers. They all manage to turn themselves into little tyrants over their own people. It seems to be a trait in the character of the negro’.

The language of the white man in the novel is characterized with arrogance and prejudice. They speak with authority and look down upon Africans and their ways of life. This is because they do not understand the culture of the colonized people. To the colonial masters, the African religion is fetish and his ways are savage. Thus, language reveals the psyche of the characters.

## 5.2. Nigerian English (NigE)

### Examples of NigE are:

- 5.2.1 ‘There is no cause to be afraid, my son. You have seen the magnificent, the one that gives wealth to those who find favor with him. People sometimes see him at that place in this kind of weather. Perhaps he was returning home from a visit to Idimile or the other deities. Eru only harms those who swear falsely before his shrine’.
- 5.2.2 The place where the Christians built their place of worship was not far from Ezeulu’s compound. As he sat in his Obi thinking of the festival of the pumpkin leaves, he heard the bell: GOME, GOME, GOME, GOME, GOME.

The above passages are similar to standard British English in lexis, structure, and semantics. But it is a variety that expresses African sentiments and sensibilities as portrayed in the above passages. It is a variety that effectively describes African flora and fauna.

The number one example above portrays the theme of culture which is one of Achebe’s concerns in the novel. It reveals African traditional belief. The second passage is authorial recording of Igbo thought process. The sound of the bell is indigenized to give African flavour to the narrative. We are made to hear “GOME, GOME, GOME, GOME, GOME” rather than ding-dong, ding-dong.

- 5.2.3 ‘And I think I should remind you again to hold your tongues in your hand...’.
- 5.2.4 ‘...What could bring my son and his people all this way so early?’(21).
- 5.2.5 ‘He called Uduezue by his name and title and called Akukalia son of our daughter’.
- 5.2.6 ‘Don’t you see I have strangers?’.
- 5.2.7 ‘Are you telling us, father of my mother...’.
- 5.2.8 ‘Ezeulu’sneighbour, Anosi, who was passing by branched in, ...’.
- 5.2.9 “I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. ... My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow”.
- 5.2.10 ‘Please, husband, I implore you...’.
- 5.2.11 ‘Moses Unachukwu ...take words out of the white man’s mouth for them.
- 5.2.12 ‘...No, I shall sit here until I have seen the head and the tail of this matter’..

The above examples of NigE (5.2.3 to 5.2.12) are an attempt to use English like the native language which results in interference or English with local flavor. Many educated Nigerians use English in this way. Features of interference occur because they are very difficult to control. Interference could occur at the level of speech or

writing. According to Yakubu and Ibrahim (2010), “When languages come in contact, interference is bound to occur. In Nigeria, this influence is noticeable at the various levels of linguistic description such as phonology, lexis, grammar and discourse”. The above examples are in standard English grammatically and syntactically but semantically they deviate from the general currency and make much sense to Nigerian speakers of English but little sense to non-Nigerian speakers of English. These examples show Nigerian experience with the English language.

In the above examples, “hold your tongues” is used instead of keep quiet; “my son”, “father of my mother”, “son of our daughter” instead of, my kinsman; “branched in” instead of, stopped at; “strangers” instead of, visitors; “my eye” instead of, my representative; “my spirit tells me” instead of, I have the hunch; “had we known” instead of, they will regret; “husband” instead of stepdaughter; “take words out of the white man’s mouth” instead of, interpret; “the head and the tail” instead of, the end or conclusion.

The above features of English throw light on characters and setting. Those that use this variety are from the traditional society; the rural area. This variety of English projects the theme of culture and adds an element of Africanness to the novel.

### 5.3. Nigerian Pidgin

Another variety of English in the novel is the Nigerian Pidgin. An example is:

‘My pickinnadat two wey de run yonder and dat yellow gal. Di oder two na cook impickin. Di oder one yonder na Gardener him broderpickin’.

Pidgin is similar to uneducated variety of English. It exhibits a great deal of independence in pronunciation, lexis, grammar, semantics and even orthography. We can see a complete absence of “th” from the passage. In place of these is the letter “d”. This shows the absence of “th” in Nigerian indigenous languages. Nigerian pidgin is the hallmark of semi-literate Africans in the novel. The characters who use this variety of English are in the urban area and Nigerian Pidgin is an urban phenomenon.

## 6. CONCLUSION

While Dickens uses English to project the experience of the native speakers of English, Achebe uses it to project the temperaments of those who use it as a second language. The varieties of English in *Oliver Twist* display English as used by the native speakers. Moreover, both *Oliver Twist* and *Arrow of God* demonstrate the literary significance of language. It is used to express themes, develop characters and project the setting. Language is key to an understanding of every literary work. And this, we have seen in *Oliver Twist* and *Arrow of God*. Finally, it has been discovered that the novel exemplifies language system; it reflects how language is used in a particular society. Furthermore, irony is an important tool of satire and it can bring about the desired change in society. In Africa, proverbs are used to scold, so, in some contexts, they function like irony as used

in English Literature. Dickens does not use proverbs in *Oliver Twist* but Achebe does profusely in *Arrow of God* for effective portrayal of African traditional values. Moreover, language is a means of characterisation in African and English novels and it is an important factor in the classification of the novel.

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