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LANGUAGE AND CULTURE: WORD CHOICE AND LOCAL EXPRESSIONS IN AKACHI ADIMORA-EZEIGBO'S THE LAST OF THE STRONG ONES

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Abstract

This study investigates the place of culture and language in Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo's *The Last of the Strong Ones*. It anchors on Sapir-Whorf's linguistic relativity hypothesis and postcolonial literary theory in examining how the novelist uses local linguistic codes in opposing colonial dominion and portray the valid pre-colonial Umuga people and culture. The study, therefore, centres on how indigenous expressions and word preferences conserve cultural identity. A qualitative textual analysis of the novel centres on specific Igbo idioms, proverbs and transliterations. These are integrated within the English text. Findings disclose that the novelist deliberately employs these local expressions as ornamental stylistic devices. More than amusement, the artist uses the local idioms as vital means of conveying collective values, historical memory and gender attitudes. The reading concludes that the conscious domestication of the English language generates a typical hybrid conversation that efficiently portrays the viewpoint of the characters in the novel. Through these findings, the reading recommends that scholars and critics take into account various domesticated micro-linguistic preferences manifesting in female African literary works. Furthermore, policymakers and curriculum developers should not ignore these linguistically rich texts but incorporate them into basic and advanced literary studies, thereby ensuring an enhanced cultural preservation and dissemination among learners.

Keywords: Culture and language, Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo, local expressions, linguistic relativity, postcolonial literature.

Introduction

Culture and language are basically connected within the matrix of societal values, beliefs and norms. Through the duo, society transmits and preserves its beliefs and values. The African writer commonly navigates the intricacy of relating his indigenous sensibilities while using a colonial linguistic channel. By consciously integrating proverbs, and other local expressions, along with culture-based idioms into her English narrative, Adimora-Ezeigbo defies the cultural erasure of colonial hegemony, while reclaiming a unique Igbo identity. The reading examines the novelist's exploitation of domesticated linguistic strategies and deliberate word preferences in creating a valid cultural account that confronts Eurocentric viewpoints. This cardinal novel, *The Last of*

the Strong Ones, is a poignant examination of the Afrocentric dynamic, exposing the cultural resilience and linguistic identity of the Umuga society prior to the incursions of colonialism.

Among the goals of the study is an examination of the interface of culture and language within the novel through the analysis of local idioms and definite word choices. This study intends to identify and categorise the instances of code-switching, transliteration and use of proverb, characterising the conversations in the novel. In addition, it aims at assessing these linguistic options as they become literary devices for confrontation, agency and cultural conservation of the characters, especially the *umuada* (the women's assembly). By interpreting these linguistic patterns, the study aims at showing how the novelist recreates the pre-colonial



and early-colonial Igbo milieu, turning it into a matchless authentic material for both local and international audience.

The study adopts a two-fold theoretical framework made up of Postcolonial Literary Theory and Sociolinguistics. Postcolonial theory draws from the viewpoints of scholars like Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe. It explains how language can be used to "write back" to the centre and decolonise literary works. Sociolinguistic concepts like lexical borrowing, ethnography of communication, conceptual metaphor, complement, assessing how culture shapes linguistic structures. Methodology, in this study, is based on a qualitative textual analysis. It relies on close reading to extract purposive samples of idiomatic phrasing, localised idioms and cultural vocabulary from the novel. In the long, these textual passages are contextualised sociologically and historically, exemplify language choices, reflect identity and the wider cultural conflicts that are vital the novelist.

Purpose of the Study

The general aim of this reading is to examine how the novelist uses linguistic choices and domesticated expressions to reflect and preserve cultural identity. However, the specific objectives are, to:

- i. **identify and categorize** the specific Igbo local expressions, proverbs, and transliterations in the text used by Adimora-Ezeigbo in the novel.
- ii. **analyse the cultural implications** of these linguistic choices and how they contextualise the historical battle of the Umuga people against colonial intrusion
- iii. **analyse the literary effects of blending** of blending indigenous speech patterns with the English language to project an authentic African worldview.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts a binary frame that blends Linguistic Stylistics with Postcolonial Language Theory / Cultural Linguistics. The first frame helps in grounding those choices in Igbo cultural and socio-political identity; while the second addresses precise word choices and expressions. Linguistic Stylistics is also seen as the Lexico-Semantic Level. It hinges on M. A. K. Halliday's (1978) Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL). Depicting how a writer deals with linguistic options involving word classes, diction, syntax, in order to achieve specific aesthetic and thematic results. The Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) stresses that language choices directly reflect the cultural context and social interactions of the speakers. Scholars like Leech, G., & Short, M. (1981) also contributed the development of this frame. This study code generates the precise linguistic devices that could be used in classifying and exploring Adimora-Ezeigbo's word choices such as her deliberate selection of words to highlight gender equity, along with her structural manipulation of native Igbo idioms, proverbs and transliterations.

The second aspect of the framework is Postcolonial Language Theory. It is also termed the Domestication and Re-lexification Model. It dwells on the domestication of the colonial language (English) to transmit the exclusive burden of African cultural realities. Zabus, C. (1991) avows

that re-lexification which is the conscious branding of African lexical codes and rhythms into a European linguistic medium. The novel acts as a narrative canvas where English is "Igbonised". This framework would help in explaining why the novelist blends Standard British English phrasing, with literal translations of Igbo thought patterns and direct cultural idioms which recover the dignity of her pre-colonial characters.

Also relevant is Cultural Linguistics or the Cultural Conceptualisation Model. This is propagated by Farzad Sharifian (2011). This field highlights the express interface of culture, language and conceptualisation. It shows how human linguistic components like culturally-bound local idioms are tied to cultural models, schemas and worldviews in the society. This form is used to evaluate profound cultural notions linked to the author's word choices. Why does she exploit expressions showing traditional titles and kinship like *Oluada* or *Lolo*? Among other things, this helps in portraying the local religious paradigms in the novel, by invoking the intricate, historical Igbo cultural worldview.

On the whole, this reading applies a unified methodology: the Stylo-Cultural Linguistic Framework, involving Halliday's Stylistics which takes care of the plain, grammatical approach to phrase construct and word choice. This is mixed with **Zabus' Re-lexification / Indigenisation Theory** which clarifies how those choices purposely subvert usual English standards. Finally, **Sharifian's Cultural Linguistics** is used to describe the direct connection between the definite local idioms and the rich Igbo heritage the novelist conserves in this novel.

Literature Review

This literature review is tailored to reflect a comprehensive view of the investigation. It reflects both the conceptual and contextual frameworks. These codes involve the interface of culture and language, exposing them as the foundations of postcolonial African literature. By means of a colonial linguistic standard, it signifies an indigenous worldview. Like many other African artists, Adimora-Ezeigbo achieves what Ashcroft et al. (2002) conceive as the twofold mechanism of abrogation and appropriation. While abrogation entails a rejecting the absolute authority of Standard English, appropriation involves a remodeling the language to bear the weight of a local culture. These concepts, in Nigerian literature, appear as the "Igbonisation" or "domestication" of English. It is a stylistic alternative originally projected by Chinua Achebe (1975) and vigorously sustained by Adimora-Ezeigbo and other third-generation authors. *The Last of the Strong Ones*, thus, remains a major sample of this linguistic testing of the deployment of cultural expressions, localised diction and gendered rhetoric in reconstructing the pre-colonial and early colonial experiences of the Umuga community.

This literature review classifies major critics and scholars under three broad sub-headings, namely, the purists, the stylistic domestication theorists and the feminist discourse and cultural re-constructors. The purists and decolonisers, including Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) and Obi Wali (1963), focus on the rejection of colonialist appropriation of English; insists on literal writing in



local African languages. Since, language is said to be the mover of a people's culture and collective memory, they opine that applying English, no matter how stylised, distorts the valid African consciousness. In other words, they argue that an accurate African cultural reality cannot be fully expressed in a colonial idiom, insisting that through writing in English Africa and Africans are in danger of cultural linguistic imperialism and alienation. Part of their contributions lies in alerting scholars to the dangers of global linguistic domination and the inflection that using English inevitably diminishes native experiences through foreign syntactical structures. However, they failed to admit the pragmatism of modern African writing. Accordingly, ignoring the reality that artists like Adimora-Ezeigbo write for a global audience and use English as a multi-cultural bridge to validate African histories globally, the framework of the purists and decolonisers cannot account for the aesthetic achievements of hybrid texts.

Next are the stylistic domestication theorists, among whom are scholars Chinua Achebe (1975), Alagbe (2026), Adegbiya (2009), Banjo (2004) and Kachru (1985). Seeing English as a channel that can be enlarged to carry the cultural burden of African experiences by means of local expressions, direct translation and lexical shifts, they highlight general functional linguistics, proverbs, transliterations, and local elements. These scholars analyse *The Last of the Strong Ones* as a creation of "contact literature", showing how the novelist employs local proverbs, lexical transfers and straight transliterations to create an "African rhythm" by means of English. Their contributions include effectively identifying the structural elements of Ezeigbo's prose narrative, establishing that her lexical preference is not strictly a "morphological aberration" but a deliberate style or literary method that aims at the defence of the reliability of English in the projection of an Igbo milieu. They, thus, articulate the acceptable procedure of her native components like proverbs and chants. However, these scholars frequently diminish linguistic analysis to untainted syntax and grammar, negating some vital proportion of literary components. The analysis of the *mechanics* of lexical choices without sufficiently relating them to the deep gender-dynamic and political statements in the narrative reduces their arguments against colonial patriarchal systems.

The third group involves feminist and African cultural re-constructors and revivalists. These include Elaine Showalter using Gynocriticism concept (1979) and Alicia Ostriker (1986) and Adimora-Ezeigbo employing the Snail-sense womanism (2012). They look at feminine naming conventions (*Oluada*), non-hostile discourse and matriarchal songs, while deconstructing patriarchal colonial perspectives and reconstruct powerful, historically grounded female identities. This school argues that Adimora-Ezeigbo exploits domesticated diction to generate specific voice to feminist sensitivity and recreate pre-colonial matriarchal influence. Part of their contributions lies in contextualising cultural idioms such as *Oluada* or a gathering of daughters/women leaders and *Nluikwa*, revealing how language introduces both socio-economic and political self-sufficiency of traditional women. Hence, they

connect the novelist's theory of "snail-sense womanism" expressly to her deliberate, resilient and balanced lexical preferences. However, they erratically place thematic feminist ideological investigation over untainted linguistic thoroughness, seeing local idioms simply as symbols of empowerment and overlooking how these concepts influence the overall syntax, narrative texture and readability for foreign non-indigenous readers.

While stylistic domestication theorists have effectively interpreted the structural hybridisation of Adimora-Ezeigbo's English; the feminist and African cultural revivalists have segregated the feminist motivations behind the characters' actions. However, there remains a distinctive critical gap which existing scholarship has basically failed to address. This hinges on how the precise lexical preferences and local idioms function concurrently as micro-linguistic units of translation and macro-political devices of gendered empowerment. Since most existing investigations isolate style from ideology, the critic neglects how specific lexical items contextually modify the reader's socio-cultural insight. This reading sees the way forward to this critical void, in blending Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) with African Womanist Theory to illustrate how these structural alternatives expressly constrain ideological significance in the novel. Again, shifting from the mere identification of proverbs to the analysis of definite lexical items like *Obuofo* or custodians of tradition versus *Oluada* would aid the structural juxtaposition of these local idioms to linguistically create gender complementarity. There is also the need to assess cognitive readability.

Analysis of Language and Culture: Word Choice and Local Expressions in the Text

Language and culture are intensely related, with word choice and local expressions showing the matchless social habits, values, history of a specific people. Language is a structure of communication whereas culture includes the shared values, customs, beliefs and behaviors of members of a society. Language and culture work together constantly. The term expression is vital. Language is the main device people employ in expressing their cultural ideas, traditions and art. In the society, older generations use language to pass cultural history, rules, stories and traditions down to younger generations. Thus, words and language aid groups in defining who they are and how they belong to a society. This is what is termed their identity.

Word choice means the precise words selected by a speaker to convey a message based on social context and cultural meaning. It hinges on formality and respect. All over the world, cultures have regulations about who gets called by a formal title and who is addressed by a casual name. In effect, word choice explains age differences, social rank and politeness. Notably, the same literal concept can have very different emotional standing depending on the words chosen. For example, describing an elderly person with a respectful term versus a casual one shows how a culture values age.

Local expressions mean unique phrases, slang and idioms used within a specific region or community. These expressions often

come from local history, food, weather or conventional way of life; hence, they are usually meaningless to strangers. The literal translation into another language becomes problematic. Regional greetings or sectional conversational expressions illustrate this local flavour, making people from the same area feel attached. *The Last of the Strong Ones* show that language and culture are intensely related. Transliteration and culturally loaded vocabulary demonstrate this viewpoint:

The Oluada was the apex women's organization in Umuga, and its leadership comprised representatives from the four quarters of the town... Similarly, the Obufo, the council of elders and decision-makers, gathered at the square (4).

Adimora-Ezeigbo deliberately circumvents Western structural approximations such as "women's committee" or "parliament". The novel aligns with pre-colonial Igbo socio-political reality by this cultural purity. This is ultimately achieved by using untranslated, culture-specific words like **Oluada** or top women/matriarchs and **Obufo** or the ruling council of elders. Again, this method supports the notion of gender complementarity and traditional democratic forms prior to Western colonial disruption. This is also seen in this extract that highlights untranslated cultural artifacts and kinship terms: **"She was a proud member of the alutaradi, adjusting her wrapper tightly as she stood to speak before the daughters of the soil"** (52). An act of linguistic decolonisation is occurs in the insertion of this untranslated word **alutaradi** or the association of wives married into a specific village or lineage which is comes up with the local expression *"daughters of the soil"* or *umuada*. These word choices expressly convey multifaceted shared kinship codes that lose their precise lawful, physical and ancestral connotation when reduced to such simple expressions like "in-laws" or "wives". Another example is: **"We must use snail-sense; we must tread softly so that we do not break the shell. A woman does not escape danger by running blindly into a stampede"** (38). This transliteration relates to emotional and ideological idiom, the Snail-sense womanism concept projected by Adimora-Ezeigbo. The extract also perfectly tallies with **lexical transliteration and metaphorical transfer**. The expression *"snail-sense"* is an express linguistic rendition of an Igbo philosophical viewpoint advocating for tactical fortitude, negotiation and poignant intelligence. Thus, the novelist safeguards the rhythmic quality of the indigenous language to accentuate her trademark womanist frame rather than adjust the prose to Standard English idioms like "exercising caution".

To maintain an Afrocentric aura of the narrative, the author employs local idioms, proverbs and the art of rhetoric. Igbo proverbs are used as a tool for thematic development, characterisation and subversion of linguistic supremacy. This agrees with Achebe's famous recognition of traditional Igbo cultural notion of proverbs as "the palm oil with which words are eaten". Proverbs act as the assertive speech act: **"If a man brings home a basket full of ant-infested faggots, he should not complain when lizards visit his home"** (24). This quotation signifies a typical **proverbial expression** that is intensely ingrained in traditional

Igbo culture. It serves as a cultural symbol which shows lexical choice as a reflection of local wisdom and everyday ecological veracity. This is evident in Speech Act Theory. Proverbs are applied as the declarative confronting act directed against colonialist supremacy: **"We must speak with one voice; our words must be like the sting of a bee, sharp and deep. We will not allow the white man or his collaborators to trample upon the customs of Umuga"** (68). This quotation accentuates the **oral tradition of shared consensus** and collective vocal confrontation. The vivid simile *"like the sting of a bee"* highlights how spoken words are used as dynamic weapons. In **Speech Act analysis, it stands out** as a strong **"commissive/declarative act"** with the characters vowing their collective resistance. Again, it is possible to analyse it as a **Face-Threatening Act (FTA)** raised against colonial powers. Here, language becomes an instrument of political empowerment. In the text, therefore, characters utilise proverbs in the assert authority, negotiation, or communication of grief.

This shows the oratorical traditions of the Umuga community. The novel highlights the semantic burden and cultural implication of character and place names. The names of the four major women (*oluada*), Chieme, Onyeka, Chibuka, and Ejim, along with several other key characters, show that their names reveal their personal strengths, destinies and the socio-cultural climate of the story. Patrilineal naming and family continuity are linked effectively, with the excerpt stressing the cultural confidence attached to personal and family names in Igbo society. In traditional onomastics, a name is not just an identifier. It is a container of historical continuity and immortality: *"Obiatu is an only son. What he needs is not companion but a wife, to bear him [male] children who will perpetuate his name"* (52). The expression *"perpetuate his name"* is an index that underscores the patriarchal anxiety of lineage extinction. It explains how word choice replicates the cultural mandate placed on women to sustain the male name through childbirth. Another crucial aspect is use of title nouns and gender-transgressive onomastics: *"Ejimnaka, Onyekaozuru, Chieme and Chibuka – through their activism became members of 'Obufo' [custodians of the ancestral staff...]"* (63). The author deliberately employs traditional socio-political titles such as *Obufo* or custodians of the ancestral staff and *Oluada* or top women leaders as influential onomastic symbols. By naming these four women as part of the *Obufo*, a title traditionally reserved for a privileged male, the novelist maneuvers local idioms to redefine institutional power and confront the patriarchal status quo using linguistic assignation. There is also the derogatory onomastics name-calling and societal derision: *"...over an argument called me fish-bone...and I resented the way some other members burst into laughter"* (144–145). This passage underscores the mental and social force of fleeting naming or character-based name-calling within local community idioms. The selection of the expression *"fish-bone"* serves as a derogatory modifier projected to afflict, deride and weaken the target's position in the group dynamics. It shows how naming can be weaponised in local social relations to mark an individual with a precise adverse social reality.

Code-mixing, code-switching and loanwords are other manifestation of **language and culture: word choice and local expressions in the text. The novel accommodates numerous samples of** the integration of Igbo words and expressions within the largely English text. Untranslated Igbo lexical items and loanwords ultimately alienate the non-native reader or intentionally force them to engage with the text on indigenous conditions, pushing as a linguistic declaration of cultural identity. The narrative attempts linguistic defiance and resistance against marginalization: **"Chibuka, the mushroom that breaks the earth without a hoe. Daughter of Umuga... Chibuka, daughter of Idemmiri, you are the memory of Umuga..."** (47). This is an allegorical local expression which is also a poetic visual anchor for a conversation centred on autonomy and natural authority. The expression **"the mushroom that breaks the earth without a hoe"** used in depicting Chibuka is an extremely nuanced linguistic selection. In the circumstance of a colonial and local patriarchy that deliberately stands out to suppress female agency, this expression underlines that women hold an innate, self-sustaining potency. Again, tagging a female character as the **"memory of Umuga"** undermines the masculine domination over history-telling, demonstrating that language and cultural memory are firmly secured by the community's women. This goes to show that the word preference framing the *oluada* or the representative women frequently subverts colonial and patriarchal definitions of gender. Most expressions attached to female-led institutions, religious roles or their collective resistance is highly explosive in portraying women's solidarity, roles, resilience and power.

Language is also applied as a means of colonial resistance in the novel. The novel heavily employs native terms to mark semantic borders between the indigenous population and the colonizers:

...and 'they' refers to the warrant chiefs whose presence beside the white man is seen as an act of betrayal. *Kosiri* may sound strange but it connotatively refers to the white man in general (47).

The text distinguishes the unifying pronoun **"we"** (representing the *Oluada* or the collective community) against **"they"** (the colonial warrant chiefs). The local term *Kosiri* acts as a potent verbal machinery of opposing colonial forces. Language is used to segregate the white coloniser and launch an essential structural distance, mood of apprehension and communal cultural rebellion against the white oppressors and their local collaborators. It becomes a valid apparatus for reclaiming identity and political power by means of cultural naming (*Oluada*): **"Ejinnaka, mother of the land, you were born to lead... Oluada, cream of Umuga daughters..."** (47). In this passage, the author employs precise, imposing local titles and cultural indicator as a linguistic stratagem to take apart patriarchal conversation. The word preference of **"Oluada"** (the privileged voice/representatives of the daughters of the soil) and **"mother of the land"** serves as a localised gendered idiom that promotes female power. The text purposely substitutes the language of subordination with a language of collective reverence and leadership, by expressly blending traditional Igbo titles and appositives into the characterisation of the matriarchs.

The role of language in the cultural life of the people is also visible in this passage: **"Chieme, daughter of Nlebedum the warrior renowned for strength and Nnuola, the singer. Omesarannaya, Woman Mountain, seeded in tradition"** (47).

The multiple local title **"Omesarannaya"** along with and its literal transliteration as **"Woman Mountain"** signifies a powerful linguistic channel for female empowerment. In traditional Igbo cultural milieu, a barren woman was frequently stripped of her linguistic and social identity. She was, thus, reduced to pity or scorn. Conversely, by means of the conscious word preference of a praise-name that indicates firm permanence and enormous vigour (**"Woman Mountain"**), the author applies indigenous cultural expressions to authenticate the woman's organisation as a position of self-sufficient power and individual attainment free of motherhood position.

Conclusion

This study successfully fulfilled its main goal of probing into how **Akachi Adimora-Ezeigbo applies deliberate word preference and indigenous idioms in *The Last of the Strong Ones*** as a means of preserving, protecting and disseminating Umuga cultural identity. Anchoring the scrutiny on the theoretical frameworks of **linguistic stylistics with postcolonial language theory / cultural linguistics**, the reading demonstrated how language serves as both a means of cultural confrontation and a channel for historical recovery. The interface of these structures aided a careful examination of how the author transliterates Igbo concepts into English, thereby challenging Eurocentric linguistic supremacy, thereby asserting the self-sufficiency of African verbal arts. From the domain of **African feminist linguistics and postcolonial stylistics**, it is opined that Adimora-Ezeigbo's lexical approaches are not simply decorative but intensely political. The methodology exploited a **qualitative textual analysis**, thoroughly classifying local expressions, proverbs and culture-specific idioms to assess their thematic impact. By means of close reading, the study evaluated how the linguistic selections recreate the shared memory of the Umuga women, promoting their voices from the repressed colonial history to the centre of cultural resilience.

In the long run, findings accentuate that culture and language are inextricably connected, showcasing word choice as the prime mover of cultural diffusion in postcolonial creative writing. The examination of the novelist's exceptional linguistic and cultural permutation opened a valuable channel of enormous contributions to this reading with new perceptions to the wide scholarship on language and indigenisation in modern African fiction. To further map out the unbroken evolution of the Nigerian/African novel, future researches can build upon these findings through comparative linguistic analyses involving the works of Adimora-Ezeigbo and those of her contemporaries.

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