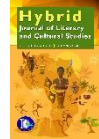




Sociolinguistic aspects of meaning in Kofi Awoonor's, *This Earth, My Brother...* (1971) and *Comes the Voyager at Last* (1992)



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Abstract

Sociolinguistics concerns with how language use is governed by factors such as age, class, gender, race, and the like. It is used to investigate the form and use of language in different cultures, and to what extent the development of language has been influenced by cultural environment. Studies have investigated language forms in markets, schools and different aspects of societies but we are bereft of how this concept is represented in interactions of characters in literary texts. This study thus, does a Sociolinguistic Investigation of Kofi Awoonor's two novels 'This Earth, My Brother...' and 'Comes the Voyager at Last'; texts that have been found to be underexplored in terms of systematic studies, in order to determine how sociolinguistic factors impinge on language choice and use, and also enhance comprehension of the texts. Sociolinguistic aspects of age, sex, status and educational attainment were used as the theoretical parameters of determining how characters in the texts used language forms. Findings revealed that the kind of language people use is determined by where and to whom they are engaged with in the interaction(s). Thus, this study affirms that the society/environment one finds oneself impinges on the form or type of language one uses.

Keywords: context, environment, language choice, pragmatics, society, sociolinguistic

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Public Interest Statement

Existing literature show that sociolinguistic studies abound on various segments of societies; that include investigations carried out in market places, religious settings, educational setting and variations of language among people or groups such as age, sex, status and the like. All these tell us so much on the level of language and the society but we are bereft of how literary texts incorporate these sociolinguistic aspects among characters in texts. Equally, Awoonor's literary works have been greatly researched on but mostly from his poetic works. This study therefore, investigates Kofi Awoonor's two literary texts from a sociolinguistics perspective to determine societal influence on language use amongst characters in the texts.

Introduction

Language is both a system of communication between individuals and a social phenomenon. The area of language and society – *Sociolinguistics* – intends to show how our use of language is governed by such factors as age, class, gender, race, and the like. A subsection of this area is *Anthropological Linguistics*, which is concerned with form and use of language in different cultures and to what extent the development of language has been influenced by cultural environment. Sociolinguistics concerns with how language use is a determinant of a given society's linguistic requirements. Every society has linguistic codes acceptable for communication and interaction. Sociolinguistics shows how groups in a given society are separated by certain social variables like ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, age, etc. and how adherence to these variables is used to categorise individuals in social class or socio-economic classes. It is in light of the foregoing that this study investigates Kofi Awoonor's two literary texts: *This Earth, My Brother...* and *Comes the Voyager at Last*, to determine sociolinguistic factors influence language use among characters in the texts.

Research Objectives

The aim of the study is to investigate how individuals or groups in the texts are separated by certain social variables like ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, and age, through the use of language. The specific objectives are to: identify sociolinguistic features in the texts; and determine how sociolinguistic factors delineate people or group in their use of language

Conceptual and Empirical Reviews

This section addresses both conceptual and empirical review of extant literature that is related to this study. In looking at sociolinguistics, van-Herk, (2012:3) posits that sociolinguistics is “the scientific study of the relationship(s) between language and society.” This is further expounded to affirm that sociolinguists study how the language practices of one community differ from those of the next, by looking at the relationship in a particular community between language use and **social categories** like class and status, gender and sexuality, and ethnicity. This can also be viewed from how language reveals **social relationships**, such as how each of us, as social

beings, adapts our language to suit the situation and the audience, style, and interaction.

Sociolinguistics is therefore a concept that has to do with language use and a society's response to it; by looking at how language and culture are related, and how language is used in different social contexts. It studies the relationship between language and social factors such as class, ethnicity, age and sex. It is clear that sociolinguistics is a discipline that yokes sociology with linguistics. It is a branch of sociology, and as a concept, it is concerned with how language use is a determinant of a given society's linguistic requirements. Every society has linguistic codes acceptable for communication and interaction. Sociolinguistics thus show how groups in a given society are separated by certain social variables like ethnicity, religion, status, gender, level of education, age, etc. and how adherence to these variables is used to categorise individuals in social class or socio-economic classes in speech situation.

Empirical Review

Studies that have been done in the area of Sociolinguistics which include: (Ayeomoni, 2012), (Jie Li, 2014), (Olaoye, 2015), and (Uwaechia, 2016). An investigation of these studies reveal that Ayeomoni, (2012), investigated languages in Nigerian socio-political domains, by looking at their features and functions and affirmed that with about 500 languages spoken in Nigeria, the linguistic diversity has occasioned the development and spread of the concepts of bilingualism, multilingualism, diglossia and language choice. As a result of this diversity, it is noticed that the phenomenon of Language Choice has become inevitable on the language use habit of Nigerians. Jie Li, (2014), did a sociolinguistic study of language and gender in Desperate Housewives. The study observed that, since language is used as a tool for human communication, it is inevitably featured by gender. The study mainly concentrated on differences in the amount of talk, the amount of turns and in interactions. Findings showed that in terms of the amount of talk, women use more words to compose more sentences as they are more talkative than men. With regards to the amount of turns, women also take the turn floor for a longer time. Uwaechia, (2016), investigated the use of Nigerian pidgin in interactions in select Zaria markets and found that Nigerian pidgin is a language of effective communication in Zaria markets. Also, that code-switching and code-mixing of pidgin and Hausa is a regular feature in the language use in Zaria markets.

Methodological and Theoretical Approaches

This study purposively chose Kofi Awoonor's prose narratives for study due to the dearth of systemic studies on them as against his poetic works that makes him well known in the literary genre. His only two novels: *This Earth, My Brother...* (TEMB) and *Comes the Voyager at Last* (CTVAL) were read over and aspects that reflected societal influence in language use were highlighted and subjected to sociolinguistic investigation. Secondary data consist of extant literature to accommodate conceptual and theoretical review. Sociolinguistic aspects of age, sex, status, educational attainment, were used as the theoretical parameters of determining

how characters were created in the text to express their language forms and the meaning(s) deduced from such.

Data Analysis

Background Information on Kofi Awoonor

The Ghanaian, Kofi Awoonor is a poet and play-writer and novelist. Born in Wheta, Ghana in 1935, Awoonor was raised in his maternal home, where he was exposed to Ewe traditional from his youth. He graduated from the University of Ghana in 1960 and took up teaching in the same University. He is renowned for his poetic work, especially his first compilation “Rediscovery and other Poems” which was published in 1964. Awoonor has also written plays and two novels; the first novel - *This Earth, My Brother...*, mirrors Awoonor’s own African upbringing and transplantation to the West. The second - *Comes the Voyager at Last* was published in 1992 while he was an Ambassador to the United Nations. He is one of the famous Ghanaian writers. He was killed in an attack on the Westgate Shopping Mall on 21st September, 2013 in Nairobi-Kenya.

Sociolinguistic aspects and meaning in the study texts

Here, we engage sociolinguistics as the aspect of linguistic study to investigate the relationship between language and the society in the selected texts. We investigate how the society configures and or shapes the way language is used and vice versa. Thus, the goal in this analysis is to determine how language reflects the society of user(s) and usage and also how the society also determines what and how language is used. Instances that pervade the texts are instantiated and discussed here to reflect how meaning is construed and understood.

Excerpt 1:

Mr Smith arrived home at Keta, tired and thirsty. His steward boy,
Seidu, was faithfully standing in front of the house...

Seidu! Sah!

I come. Cook make chop?

Yes sah, masa.

Any beer in the fridge?

No, masa. Anginia come drink am. E bring some woman, they come
drink all, masa.

TEMB p. 48

In excerpt 1, Mr Smith, who we understand from the text, is the District Inspector of Schools in Keta Division, returns home and is received by his steward, Seidu, who is not educated and hence not literate, which affects his fluent communication ability in English. Mr. Smith by his

designation, and as seen in his engagement in other instances is well schooled and speaks impeccable English. In the excerpt however, the interaction is between Mr Smith and his steward: “Mr Smith arrived home at Keta, tired and thirsty. His steward boy, Seidu, was faithfully standing in front of the house...” from the excerpt, we observed the use of pidgin English both by my Smith and Saidu, the steward. Mr Smith, who was speaking standard English while at the office switches to pidgin at home because the context and his co-participant in the interaction has change and there is the need to communicate to this person in the language he will understand. Saidu’s proficiency in English is limited due to his lack of formal education; hence the medium Mr Smith, his master, uses to communicate with him is through the use of Pidgin English. This points to the fact that societies are stratified along different lines, among which is educational level and exposure. The more one is educated and exposed the better one is able to communicate fluently in other languages of communication – in this case, the English language. Mr. Smith’s educational attainment affords him the privilege to speak good English while in the office and among contemporaries and switch when the need arises. This is evidenced in the text as he is just returning from inspecting schools under his jurisdiction as the District Inspector of Education, where he expresses himself in Standard English. Back home, however, he is received by his steward, who is semi-literate, hence the choice and form of language as seen in the excerpt reflects the setting and participant the discourse is involved with. From the salutation, it is noticeable that the form of language in use ‘sah!’ the piginized version of ‘sir’ is what Saidu addresses his master. Mr. Smith equally communicates with the steward at his level ‘I come. Cook make chop?’ to mean ‘I am back, have you cooked something for me to eat?’ Saidu uses the the term ‘Aiginia’ to refer to ‘Engineer’ a transliterated form of the original term to tell his master about who had come to the house. This illustrates that settings as determined by the context of interaction greatly affects how and what language is used. The environment and the audience have great effect on language choice and language use.

Excerpt 2:

What be your name?

Yawo Letsu.

Wen dey born you?

Yawo didn’t understand the second question. He turned round to the interpreter, who said, ‘Gbekagbes wodzi wo?’

Nye me nya o. He doesn’t know.

You must put sah every time you hamser question. O.K? Yes sah.

He say e don’t know when dey born am...

TEMB p. 84

In this instance, excerpt 2, demonstrates another occasion of how language is used based on social stratification and how the segment of the society in question in the interactive encounter determines what and how language is used. The excerpt is from a context where people are being enrolled into the military and the one in-charge of recruitment is semi-literate while some of the applicants are non-literate in English and pidgin and require an interpreter, who himself is semi-literate to interpret.

In the interaction the semi-literate junior army personnel responsible for the recruitment process of locals into the armed forces is himself not really educated, but it is made clear from the text that he rose through the ranks by virtue of experience and is saddled with the responsibility of enlisting others to the army. It is in the course of such enrolment that the discussion in the excerpt ensued. The kind of language observed in the context as exemplified in the excerpt is colloquial and unrefined, characteristic of the unlearned. 'what be your name?' instead of 'what is your name?' 'wen dey born you?' instead of 'what's your age or when were you born or 'where were you born'. The use of local dialect is also observed as used in the text: 'Gbekagbes wodzi wo? Meaning, 'When were you born?' And 'Nye me nya o.' – meaning 'I don't know' used in the text to elicit and get information by an interpreter who stands to mediate between the recruiting officer and the local applicants. The use of these language forms reflects the kind of setting the language is coming from and the nature of the participants who are unlearned. The argument that the society determines what language is used further comes to full glare. There is a language form for the unlearned as well as a prestigious form of language for the learned.

Excerpt 3:

I knocked on the door, first timidly, then louder. I waited. No response. I knocked again. And again. No one answered. I sat propped against the door for a time weary, tired. I sat there, must have been for hours. I must have dozed away when I heard my name from afar coming over the hills and valleys of my weariness. I woke up. Standing before me was Mrs. Thomas of one of the apartments above... They all gone, honey, where you been? They moved out, le me see, musta been around June when them two guys just pack up. Must have been like this time. Previous day they was making a helluva noise, crashing and cursin. Then they was shuffling the whole night. I wanted to come down, but didn't feel like poking my nose in, especially with that colored boy who feels very superior.

CTVAL p. 53

Excerpt 3, presents another instance of how society impinges on language and vice versa. In the text, a young man gets released from jail, where he spent six months for a crime he never committed, only to get back to the apartment he shares with his friends and discovers he has been locked out. The excerpt states: “I knocked on the door, first timidly, then louder. I waited. No response. I knocked again. And again. No one answered. I sat propped against the door for a time weary, tired... I sat there, must have been for hours. I must have dozed away... when I heard my name from afar coming over the hills and valleys of my weariness. I woke up. Standing before me was Mrs. Thomas of one of the apartments above.... They all gone, honey, where you been? They moved out, le me see, musta been around June when them two guys just pack up. Must have been like this time. Previous day they was making a helluva noise, crashing and cursin. Then they was shuffling the whole night. I wanted to come down, but didn’t feel like poking my nose in, especially with that colored boy who feels very superior.” We observe from the excerpt that while the young ex-convict is stranded at the door and waiting for his supposed flatmates, a neighbour in the compound, Mrs. Thomas, sees him and part of their interaction is what is captured in the excerpt. Mrs Thomas is said to be someone living on welfare, so that suggests that she is on the lower cadre of the society’s stratification. The kind of language she uses also suggests she is not schooled. “They all gone, honey, where you been? They moved out, le me see, musta been around June when them two guys just pack up. Must have been like this time. Previous day they was making a helluva noise, crashing and cursin. Then they was shuffling the whole night. I wanted to come down, but didn’t feel like poking my nose in, especially with that coloured boy who feels very superior.” Beyond the fact that the language used suggests that the user is unlearned, it is observed that unlike the previous excerpts in this section which show the speakers to be of African descent, who use English as found in ghettos - Pidgin version of English. It is observed that Mrs. Thomas, though also of African descent, is resident in the New World – Americas. And because slaves and ex-slaves never get the opportunity to be educated, even long after the abolition of slave trade, their form of language use was not the standard form. Hence, the kind of language used by Mrs. Thomas reflected her environment and the circumstance she was in. This portrays a clear instance of how society reflects the kind of language forms people use based on their social stratification and the choice of language people adopt for use (whether it is the standard form, pidginise version or local dialects) depending on the person or people involved in the interaction at given periods.

Excerpt 4:

The Brown man was preparing an elegant sentence in his head... The table had come back to life. The journalist spoke, “Well, let me introduce my friend bother...” He mentioned a number of names. The only one I remembered was Lumumba! “Oh, is he from the Congo? I mean Zaire, they now call it Zaire, sorry,” I asked, once more making my voice as cultured as possible. “No, no he’s from the States...We really liked that, the way he said it... we really liked

American slang... The American... had a firm hard handshake...
“Can we call you Mr. Lumumba then?” I asked the man from the
States. He said “Yeah.” We like the way he said it...

CTVAL p. 78-

Equally, excerpt 4, presents another form of language characteristic of American English form and slang. In the text, a couple of friends go to a pub for some drinks and they are met there by two other guys who ask to join them in hanging-out. The excerpt captures the exchange of pleasantries between the new found friends in the pub. “Well, let me introduce my friend bother...” Lumumba! ... he’s from the States... We really liked that, the way he said it... we really liked American slang.... The American... had a firm hard handshake... “Can we call you Mr. Lumumba then?” I asked the man from the States. He said “Yeah.” We like the way he said it....” In the context of the text it is clear that one’s environment has a great deal to do with how one speaks. As the American and his friend join the other group, the group is said to enjoy the American form of language, especially the slang. And because members of the other group have company, they could not speak their native language as they usually would do freely but had to stick to English language. The American, based on where he is from, speaks in a particular way based on his background. His friend adopts the same kind of speech pattern while he schooled there and the kind of friends he kept – Americans. Their speech pattern is said to intrigue their new found friends who love the American form of English and the slang. The Africans on their part who delight in mixing English with their local dialects in communicating are forced to stick to English language because of their new company of friends. This affirms the argument that society impinges on language and vice versa, as where one is, and who one is interacting with determine the form of language one speaks and the language one uses is dependent on the people, where they are from and what they understand. The excerpts from the foregoing have shown that some people can actually speak different language forms depending on the environment and people involved in the interaction; these are identified to be the determinants of the form of language used at every given point. Hence, society shapes the language form for use and the meanings that can be derived from such language use.

Conclusion

The entire discussion as exemplified in the excerpt indicates that the kind of language people use is determined by where and to whom they are engaged with in the interaction(s). Thus, this study affirms the argument that the society/environment one finds oneself in, impinges on the form or type of language one uses. It is in this vein that the sociolinguistic aspect of this study becomes pertinent to show how language use varies in different context and to generate different meanings in different contexts to express intentions and enhance comprehension of meanings. Understanding the place of context and socio-cultural background of participants in discourse encounters is therefore important in determining how and why language choices are made and used. It also shows how people adapt and switch from different language forms as they change context or participants in a discourse.

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Disclaimer Statement:

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