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Language as a Symbol of Social Status in Ama Ata Aidoo's "For Whom Things Did Not Change"

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ABSTRACT

This study, conceived within the paradigm of sociolinguistics, examined the interplay between language and social status in a fictional work. Specifically, it investigated how language use gives a clue to the social status of characters in Ama Ata Aidoo's "For Whom Things Did Not Change", which is one of the short stories in her anthology, *No Sweetness Here*. The story was purposefully selected because of its fascinating language use. The qualitative research methodology was used in this study. Bickerton's (1975), Creole Continuum and Adelugba's (1981) analytical framework were used to characterize the language levels of the characters in the story. To make the analysis thorough, relevant literature and useful extracts from the short story were cited and discussed. Three levels of language corresponding to the social stratifications of the characters were found. Some of the characters were found to effortlessly oscillate between different linguistic varieties depending on the discourse situation, their roles, their perceived social status, and/or their interlocutors. The diversity of linguistic registers in the short story showed the differences between various characters in their classes, backgrounds, and educational status. It also reaffirms the notion that class hierarchies determine linguistic behaviour.

Keywords: Social status; language levels; linguistic stratification; linguistic registers; Ama Ata Aidoo.

INTRODUCTION

Just as in real life, language choice by fictional characters is usually not arbitrary. It is often determined by their position on the social ladder, their educational qualifications, or their linguistic background (Chatman 2021; Chetin 2021). African writers, especially those using English as a medium of literary expression, are not left behind in this

regard. According to Madubuike (1975), one of the tasks of African writers of English expression is to attempt to capture “the various types of English that are spoken by Africans, e. g., pidgin, creole, the English of secondary school leavers, the English of university graduates, officialese, etc.” (p. 263). This is because the standard variety of English may not be able to adequately capture the taste and flavour of African life. As an African writer, Aidoo makes sensitive use of the English language, which she adroitly employs to suggest the nature and social status of her characters (Nagenda 1969; Mahnke 2015; Appiah *et al.* 2021). She, like many other successful African writers, makes imaginative use of the (English) language to capture African socio-cultural reality. According to Balogun (1991), this is a feat that only a few writers have been able to achieve.

This study, therefore, examines how the linguistic registers used by fictional characters provide information about their power, social status, linguistic background, and educational background. Specifically, it examines the linguistic varieties used by the characters in Ama Ata Aidoo’s “For Whom Things Did Not Change,” which is one of the twelve stories in her collection, *No Sweetness Here* (1972). This sociolinguistic study uses the analytical frameworks provided by Bickerton (1975) and Adelugba (1981). The main argument is that a person’s social class will, to a large extent, determine his language choice (Nzuanke 2015). This is also the view of Sodah (2019), who submits that people are:

... distinctive not only in their possession of wealthier assets, power, favorable regard, educational qualification or status, but also in their speaking manner, style or linguistic features. A professor from a well-known college is not expected to speak like a person who works in a garment factory. A businessman can never use a beggar’s accent while talking with his partner. We can easily identify who belongs to which level. From their professions, we can infer their economic conditions and thus their belonging social classes can also be identified. So a clear distinction of using semantics, syntax, phonology, phonetics, vocabulary or style helps us to distinguish any particular person and their position in the society (p. 959).

In line with this, Aidoo manipulates the English language so as to express Ghanaian linguistic styles and forms. For example, in *No Sweetness Here*, and in most of her other stories, she uses a lot of different types of speech to show how socially and politically important the characters are. By so doing, she succeeds in giving local flavour to the English language of her characters. Balogun (1991) states that characters and narrators in most of the stories in *No Sweetness Here* speak precisely the way Ghanaians speak – the words, the patterns, and the tone of their speech – employing the nature of conversations and their mannerisms.

It seems, therefore, that Aidoo has multiple reasons for writing in English. First, it serves as a means through which she can pass her message on to a wider readership base both in Africa and beyond. In an interview, she states that her own:

...alibi for wanting to continue writing in English is, well, one gets the chance of communicating with other Africans outside of Ghana, even in Ghana alone, say you are writing in English, you are able to carry yourself over – if you have any message carry your message over to

more people outside – if you have any message carry your message over to more people outside (p. 22).

Secondly, English enables her to capture the nuances of the multiple speakers of different varieties in her society. Thus, she uses it to stratify her characters and implicitly reveals lots of information about their personalities and social status. According to Hill-lubin (1989), Aidoo is quite consistent in the portrayal of her characters through their speech. Even though English is her medium of writing, she consciously gives each character a language level that is appropriate for his status, behavior, and action. This is clearly demonstrated in “For Whom Things Did Not Change.”

This view is endorsed by Bickerton (1975) whose study of post-creole continuum (or simply, creole continuum) found in his widely acclaimed book, *Dynamics of a Creole System*, tends to argue that instead of looking at language levels as static, synchronic models of polar dialects, it is preferable to see them as a continuum of varieties of a creole language, between those that are closest and those that are furthest from the superstrate language (that is, the dominant language). To classify how different varieties of language approximate the superstrate language, Bickerton used the term “acrolect,” which he borrowed from William Stewart (1965). This term is used to refer to the most prestigious variety spoken by highly educated people. This variety is, in many aspects, very close to the standard variety. Conversely, the basilectal variety is the lowest and least prestigious and is spoken by the least educated people in society. Somewhere in the middle, there exists a mesolectal variety. In this case, the language has many syntactic and semantic features that are very different from the standard language.

While commenting on these linguistic varieties, McKay (2002) and Nero & Stevens (2018) said that the acrolect, used by the most educated speakers, is the variety of a creole that has very little or no significant difference from Standard English; the mesolect has unique grammatical features that distinguish it from Standard English (Mesthrie 2020). The basilect, often spoken by the least educated people in society, is significantly different from Standard English in terms of syntax and grammar (Deuber 2009; Maitz & Volker 2017). Nordquist (2019) reaffirmed that the acrolectal variety is accorded a lot of respect because its grammatical structures do not deviate significantly from those of the standard variety of the language. In addition, it is the variety that is used by the educated gentries, the *crème de la crème* of society. Conversely, the basilectal variety is often seen as the least prestigious dialect because of its huge differences with the standard variety and its association with the proletariat, the uneducated people of society. There is the mesolectal variety in the middle of the continuum, which is mostly a written version of the languages people speak daily.

Adelugba (1981) offers some criteria for the analysis of the speech of characters in Aidoo’s work. Based on this, he argues that the characters’ language varieties serve as an index or indicator of their social class, age, and background. In his analysis of the linguistic stratification in *The Dilemma of a Ghost*, Aidoo’s first play, he identifies different levels of language corresponding to a continuum that has many linguistic categories, namely, the American English of Eulalie Yawson (an African-American woman who returns to Africa with her new African husband), the educated English of Ato Yawson (the husband), the stylized poetry and prose of the prelude, the childlike

talk of Boy and Girl, the chit-chat in verse of the 1st woman and 2nd woman, and the language of Nana, Akyere, Petu, Mansa, Akroma, and Monka (members of Ato's family).

Broadly, however, Adelugba's levels can be grouped into three linguistic categories, namely: E₁-that is the English used by Eulalie Yawson, the character for whom English is a first language; E₂-English of Ata Yawson, Eulalie's husband, for whom English is a second language which he learnt through schooling; and E₃-the language of the other uneducated characters whose English is, by and large, a "transcribed" version of their vernacular languages. In the third variety, although the lexis is English, the syntax, symbols, images, as well as the tone and rhythm are genuinely Ghanaian (probably Fante, Aidoo's native language). This is demonstrated by the infusion of traditional proverbs and imagery in the speeches. The way people speak shows their heritage, language, education, and/or social status based on this classification.

To use Adelugba's classification to discuss the linguistic levels in "For Whom Things Did Not Change," some slight modifications need to be made. First, E₁, the English native speaker variety used by Eulalie Yawson in *The Dilemma of the Ghost* should be eliminated as it is completely non-existent in this story because all the characters are Africans and none of them speak English as a first language; similarly, none of them imitates the linguistic nuances of the native speakers of English. Secondly, there is the need to introduce another linguistic category to represent the Pidgin English used by Zirigu in talking to the "Massa." This additional variety would be referred to as E₄.

On the basis of this, three levels of language can be identified in "For Whom Things Did Not Change." The first one is the educated African English of Kobina, which would be categorized as (E₂). This, in Bickerton's terms, is the acrolectal variety. Then comes the "transcribed" English of Setu and (occasionally) Zirigu, which would be categorized as E₃. This is the mesolectal variety, in Bickerton's terms. Finally, the Pidgin English that Zirigu uses to talk to Kobina at the beginning of the story will be classed as E₄, the basilectal variety. With this background, a character-by-character analysis will be conducted to discuss how their linguistic registers align with their status.

KOBINA (THE "MASSA")

Kobina, the "Massa," is a guest at the Rest House where Zirigu works. He is a medical doctor. One of the interesting things about him is that he differs from the other post-independent elites because of his simplicity and his lack of arrogance. Unlike the other "big men," he doesn't drink alcohol; he doesn't bring women with him; he doesn't eat "white man's chop" (p. 16); he doesn't look down on Zirigu; he insists on not being addressed as the master or white man; and he doesn't want Zirigu to "wait on him hand and foot" (p. 14). Kobina is the most noticeable user of E₂ in this story. Being a medical doctor, he occupies a good social status in society. Hence, the acrolectal variety befits his social status. His use of this variety is demonstrated in the following extract:

Okay, we shall not argue further about it. Thank you for managing to get me up at last... Nothing really. You are right. But I just want to keep on waking up early. It will be bad for me to get used to sleeping late. I should try to get up much earlier than this any way, but I feel very tired so I am going slow (p. 14).

In episode ten, Kobina's internal monologue shows the same language skills and appropriateness level.

There was an air of festivity at the Rest House because I had said I was going to eat what Zirigu and his wife ate. The woman came to let me know, with the few of my language she knew, that I should have given her adequate warning so she could have feasted on me properly. I said that was okay because there was another day coming ...Zirigu laid the table and when I told him that he should not give me fork and a knife because I was going to eat with hands and that I only needed a spoon to scoop down the soup, he opened his mouth wide ... (p. 22)

In spite of his consistent use of the acrolectal variety of English, Kobina, on a few occasions, uses other varieties of the language which are not commensurate with his social status. For example, in his dialogue with Zirigu in episode five, he uses Pidgin English (E₄) in two instances, as seen in the extract below.

'Zirigu, whom did you say you were going to cook for?'

'Yourself, Massa.'

'But that is not the food I eat.'

'But 'e be white man chop.'

'Zirigu, I no be white man. And that is the second time this morning I've told you that. And if you do it again, I'll pack up and leave.' (p. 16)

'Massa, Massa. You call me woman? I swear, by God, Massa, this na tough. I no be woman. God forbid!'

'Ah, Zirigu. I am only thinking something out. Ah . . . *God is above, I no call you woman.* Soon I go talk all for you.'

'But Massa, you no know. Don't call me woman.'

'No, I will not' (p. 16-17).

Also, in episode seven, he uses the mesolectal variety (E₃) laced with code-mixing, as shown in the text below:

'Massa. I no wan' play?'

'I'm not playing.'

Heh? God. You mean you go eat *tuo*?

'Why not? At home I eat *banku*. Isn't it the same? One of rice, the other of corn? Aren't they all farina? Semolina? Whatever?' (p.17)

According to Hill-lubin (1989), Kobina uses these varieties of English to gain the confidence of Zirigu and to make him feel relaxed and comfortable. Furthermore, he uses words like "*tuo*," "*banku*," and "*pito*" to show his familiarity with and knowledge of the culture and traditions of the rural people from the northern part of Ghana.

Despite his education and his fine use of the acrolect, in Episode three (3), Kobina sounds verbose, perhaps as a strategy to show his intense dislike for imported drinks and beverages. He says:

I am mad but I think I'm sane enough not to drink pressed, homogenized, dehydrated, re-crystallized, thawed, diluted and heaven-knows-what-else orange juice imported from countries where oranges do not grow, when I can eat oranges. (p. 15)

Incidentally, in African fiction, this kind of verbiage is often associated with semi-literate characters, such as Lakunle in Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (1963).

However, Chetin (1991) is of the view that this speech shows Kobina as someone who is politically aware but existentially anguished and disgusted with the behavior of some fellow post-independent elites.

In a nutshell, despite his occasional use of mesolectal and basilectal varieties, Kobina's predominant use of acrolect varieties reflects his social status as an educated person and somehow his linguistic background as someone who is from the coastal part of Ghana (p. 9).

ZIRIGU

Zirigu is the main character of the story. He is a keeper and a cook at a Rest House, where several past and present "big men" go to. Through his job, he has come into direct contact with lots of white masters during the colonial days and many new black masters in the post-colonial era. He is a symbolic character who represents the masses for whom independence means nothing, since it hasn't brought any positive changes in their lives. Compared to his wife, Setu, Zirigu seems to be meeker, gentler, more resigned, and perhaps more submissive.

Zirigu is an interesting character whose speech oscillates between different linguistic varieties. He varies his language according to his role and interlocutors. It could thus be said that in the delineation of this character, Aidoo's sensitivity and acuteness in allowing characters to choose appropriate language in expressing their thoughts and feelings are brought to the fore. Verge (2015) submitted that "Zirigu is skillful in various languages, depending on the roles he adopts." He turns into an illustrative example of how Aidoo uses language to highlight the power that language conceals and the social reality it mirrors (p. 163).

For instance, when Zirigus speaks with the "Massa" at the beginning of the story, he uses the basilectal variety of English (or E₄). This pidginized variety of English is commensurate with his status as an uneducated person and his job as a steward. This discourse situation warrants that he speaks with "a big man," who obviously does not speak the same language as him. In this context, the choppy and banging Pidgin English, which is commonly used for inter-ethnic communication, especially among the less-educated, serves the purpose and fits his status. A clear illustration of this use of Pidgin English is manifested in the following extracts:

Knock . . . knock . . . knock . . .
 'A-ha?'
 'Massa, Massa, Massa . . .'
 'A-ha? A-ha? A-ha?'
 'You say make I com' wake you. Make I com' wake you for eight. Eight o'clock 'e reach.'
 'Okay, thank you.'
 Knock . . . knock . . . knock . . .
 'A-ha?'
 'Massa, Massa, Massa.'
 'A-ha? A-ha? A-ha?'
 'You say make I com' wake you. Make I com' wake you for eight. Eight o'clock reach long time.'
 'Okay, thank you, Zirigu.' (p. 8)

Lord, lord, Massa, such talk no fit for your mout. I like yourself so you fit do weyting you like. The sun don' com' up long time. I wan' go get good meat for you so I must hurry to market before twelve. Tell me what you sabe for breakfast make I do. Omelette? Poached eggs. Fried egg on toast. Eggs and bacon. Orange juice ... (pp. 14-5)

This use of Pidgin English by Zirigu underscores the power relations between him and his “betters” (p. 26). Hill-lubin (1989) argues that Aidoo uses Zirigu’s simple pidgin to produce a stinging political satire in “For Whom Things Did Not Change.” She does this by spelling and pronouncing some words abnormally. These new spellings and pronunciations elicit a double sense of meaning, raising the irony to a new level. For instance:

Massa, I beg. Don't make so. I no wan' vex you. This here chop, 'e be white man's chop. 'E be the chop I cook for all massas, for fifteen years. The *Ministars*, the party people who stay for here, the big men from the Ministries, the *Unifartisy* people, the big *offisars* from the army and police. [...] 'E be same chop, they chop, this white man chop. (p. 15)

The irregular spelling and pronunciation of some words in the extract above are done to achieve some kind of satire. The term “ministars” refers to the corrupt bureaucrats, political class, and kleptocrats who take advantage of their positions to exploit other people and loot the country. The term “unifartisy people” represents the “pseudo-intellectuals” who can't distinguish between right and wrong, despite their education. Hence, according to Hill-lubin (1989), like the others, this class of elites also stinks, just as the “fart” in their tag suggests (p. 162). Finally, the term “offisars” refers to the army and the police, which are also no better than the other classes of elite. This use of irregular spelling and pronunciation is what Sutherland-Addy (2012) refers to as the “corruption of words,” which Aidoo is famous for. Another example is the term “massa,” which stands for “master,” the title used by Zirigu to refer to Kobina.

When Zirigu talks with Setu, his wife, he uses the E₃ variety. This is the mesolectal variety, which is either the English language refurbished with African vernacular or just a native language ‘transcribed’ into English. This variety has unique syntactic and grammatical features that distinguish it from Standard English. According to Verge (2015), this variety is not pidgin because some parts are literal translations of African linguistic constructions. Unlike the linguistic variety he uses when talking to Kobina, this variety portrays a man’s ego talking to another person of the same social status in the same language. In support of this, Adelugba (1981) submits that by using this variety, Aidoo may suggest that the characters communicate in their mother tongues. This is also implied by Kobina, who, while talking about Setu, says, “... the woman came to let me know, *with the few words of my language she knew*, that I should have given her adequate warning so she could have feasted on me properly” (p. 22). The extract below shows Zirigu’s use of the mesolectal variety:

‘Setu, you know I do not think anything like that. But you must agree that I can say something about the type of human beings who come here after all these years. This young one seems different.’ (p. 8).

Later in the story, Zirigu’s language changes to acrolect (E₂) after Kobina convinces him that they can be friends, as in the extract below from episode eleven. When Kobina insists on sharing his drink with Zirigu and asks him to tell his story, the latter starts

addressing him as “My young Master” instead of the “Massa” (p. 20). This gave Zirigu a huge image and confidence boost, and, as a result, his language instantly changed to indicate that they were communicating with each other at the same social level as two compatriots do. In this context, Kobina and Zirigu try to bridge the “language gap” that divides them (Chetin, 1991, p. 117).

‘My young Master, forgive me for still addressing you like this. But then, is there anything else I can do? At my age, it is too late for me to start being too familiar with my betters. No, no, don’t say any more. You are a good, young man. I like you. But really, how can I call you this Kobina? Yes, in years you are a baby. You don’t have to tell me that. Can I not see that for myself? I can see that for myself. But now, age alone does not mean much, not much (p. 21).

What is ironical here is that, even though Zirigu is apologizing to Kobina in the above extract, it can be seen quite clearly that his self-image has improved, as reflected in his use of the linguistic variety of the upper class.

SETU

Setu is Zirigu’s wife, and, like her husband, she belongs to the uneducated lower class of society. She also symbolizes the oppressed and repressed people whose lives haven’t improved, in spite of independence. Compared to her husband, she seems to be tougher and less tolerant of the behavior of the post-independent elite. She abhors the way the so-called “big people” sexually harass and abuse young girls who “have seen their blood not many moons ago” (p. 10).

Setu constantly uses the mesolectal variety (E₃). Her consistent use of this variety indicates that she exclusively speaks a Ghanaian language, which is transcribed into English, as in the extract below:

But listen, my husband, if one day when you are not looking, a man comes and takes your farm house or your kraal, and he begins doing all the things a good man should not do: sells all the yams in your barns without leaving any for planting; boils your eggs as soon as they have been laid and does not spare one for a single hen to hatch; gives great feasts to all his family and all his friends, with your lambs and calves; and generally carries on in such a way that your heart hurts as though it is falling into your bowels every time you look on; and you are not able to do anything for many many years, but then one day, thanks to Allah, you get your farm house or your kraal back, what then do you do, my husband? (p. 11).

Unlike Kobina’s speech, this speech has a distinctive African flavour—the syntax, symbols, images, and cosmogony are quite African. The beauty of the language and its proverbial nature provide clues to her rural orientation. According to Adelugba (1981) and Behrent (1997), given the way traditional proverbs and imagery are incorporated, this variety is considered the most interesting and successful dialect in the story. It is successful because it represents the more traditional, non-western educated Ghanaian language, which (even though it is English) is, in a sense, closer to Fante. Aidoo’s creation of this variety comes out of a sensitive synthesis of the literary felicities of two different languages: English and Fante. Her success is informed by her familiarity with the two languages and with the thought processes of rural people.

THE UNIDENTIFIED CHARACTERS

Apart from Kobina, the acrolectal variety is used by two unidentified characters in Episode Four, while making an incisive commentary about the absence of a real change after independence and the exploitation of fellow Africans by the new master. This dialogue probably takes place at a beer parlor:

‘If you ask them, why ten years after independence, some of us still have to be slaves, they say you are nuts to ask questions like that.’

‘You are getting your definitions wrong. By what stretch of imagination does a steward-boy or a housemaid become a slave?’

‘Was it not enough that whole sections of us were bred so that all they could do was to minister to the needs of white men and women? Doing soul-killing jobs? Do they have to do them for us too?’

‘What are you talking about? It partially solves the unemployment problem. Or minimises it, at least. Can you imagine what would happen if all the house-boys and housemaids were not doing what they are doing?’ (p. 15).

In Episode Six, an omniscient narrator talks about the fate of a black man who cooks and cleans for other black men. The acrolectal variety is also used:

When a black man is with his wife who cooks and chores for him, he is a man. When he is with white folk for whom he cooks and chores, he is a woman. Dear Lord, what then is a black man who cooks and chores for black men? (p.17)

The above paradoxical and rhetorical statement could be seen as a situation where an author steps into the narrative to draw the readers’ attention to an important point. One wonders, however, why Aidoo decides not to use any of the characters in the story to voice this argument. This is a piece of acrolectal speech, whether it comes from the author or someone else. Well-educated people are likely to say this.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the relationship between the linguistic variety used by the characters in Aidoo’s “For Whom Things Did Not Change” and their social status. The findings reveal that the writer has displayed amazing artistry in allocating each character a language level that is appropriate for their social status. For instance, Kobina, the medical doctor, consistently speaks the acrolectal variety of English (E₂). This variety is commensurate with his status as an educated individual. On the other hand, Zirigu uses the basilectal variety (E₄) to speak with his masters. This register is appropriate for his position as keeper and cook at a Rest House. However, when he speaks with his wife, he uses the mesolectal variety (E₃), which is appropriate for both of them because of their lack of education. The linguistic and social differences portrayed in this story indicate, according to Adelugba (1981), that Aidoo uses the English language to portray, with veracity and accuracy, the different generations, social status, and educational levels in Africa.

In a nutshell, it could be said that the diversity of linguistic registers in this story clearly shows the differences between different characters in their classes, backgrounds, and educational status. Of the three linguistic categories identified in the story, Aidoo tactfully reproduces the educated African English in the form of acrolect (or E₂), the

rhythms and metaphoric structures of her characters' spoken African languages in the form of mesolect (or E₃), and the Pidgin English of Zirigu in the form of basilect (E₄). Therefore, it could be argued that language in this story plays an extremely important role in highlighting the characters' social status. Adelugba (1981) submitted that Aidoo's deft use of language to reflect social class, age, background, as well as a vehicle for characterization, is commendable. The finding of this study, regarding the interplay between language and social status, is consistent with those of other sociolinguistic researchers, such as Labov (1966), Macaulay (1977), Reid (1978), Snell (2014), Trudgill (1974), and Wolfram (1969), who found that middle-class speakers tend to use more "standard" variants than their working-class counterparts.

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