

## A Sociolinguistic Study of Conversations in Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People*

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines sociolinguistic features of conversational interactions among characters in Achebe's *A Man of the People*. The aim is to differ from the largely stylistic examination of the text, and therefore, to study conversations in the mediated arena of literature to see how societal structures and beliefs are projected through the voices of fictive characters. For data, all the conversations in the text were sampled and analysed, using ethnographic theories with particular reference to Hymes' SPEAKING.

Our findings reveal that social and contextual variables such as cultural norms, topics, gender, situational impositions, etc. influence the interactions between and/ or among the characters in the text. These, as our findings reveal, constrain the linguistic choices made by the characters. These social-contextual variables also facilitate readers' understanding of both the text and the world views advanced by the writer through the voices of the characters.

This paper concludes that analyzing literary texts most especially prose works using Hymes' SPEAKING aids a better understanding of the texts and the world views projected in the texts.

**Keywords:** Sociolinguistics, Ethnography of Communication, A Man of the People, texts, and conversational interactions

### **Introduction**

Since its publication prior to the first military intervention into Nigerian politics in 1966, Achebe's novel, *A Man of the People* has continued to attract the attention of both the literary scholars and linguists of different orientations. Within the purview of linguistics, for example, the text has been explored by scholars (of Okunoye and Odebunmi (2003); Osisanwo (2004); Faniran (2005); Brown (2005); Adjei (2015); Bamigboye (2015); Ifechelobi and Ifechelobi (2016); etc.). Generally speaking, these works have largely concentrated on the pragmatic, stylistic, sociolinguistic and paralinguistic features of the novel. Besides, using the literary analytic perspectives, the text has

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equally been analysed by variants of scholars (e.g. see Jappe, 2001; Dwivedi, 2008; etc.).

While Ifechelobi and Ifechelobi (2016) is an analysis of the use of Pidgin in *A Man of the People*, the present study, unlike earlier works on the text, is preoccupied with a sociolinguistic analysis of conversational interactions among characters in the text using Hyme's theory of ethnography of communication (Hyme's SPEAKING). The study is inspired by the need to differ from the existing trend in the literature, and therefore, to study conversations in the mediated arena of literature with a view to examining how societal structures and beliefs are projected via the voices of fictive characters. The text was extensively examined and only conversations between characters were sampled and analyzed against ethnographic theories. An analysis of these social contextual variables in the text would facilitate readers' understanding of both the text and world views advanced by the writer through the voices of the characters.

### **Language, Society and Literature**

Language is a unifying factor that connects members of a particular society together in their interactions and interrelationship. It is a veritable instrument of social integration and cohesion. Besides, it is an indispensable tool of information dissemination. Without language, human interactions would be a herculean task. Little wonder that Adeyanju (2002: 527) argues that: "Man cannot... part with language and remain himself in terms of creative ingenuity intellectual capacity and social upliftment above all other creatures".

*Sociolinguistics* is a branch of linguistics which studies the *relationship between language and society* (cf. Hudson, 1996; Holmes, 2001). It studies language as it is used by human beings in social situations. This social situation commonly known as *context* exerts tremendous influence on the form of language to be used as well as the meaning to be read to utterances (cf. Stockwell, 2002: 1). Language and society are closely related to the extent that without language, members of any society or community cannot relate meaningfully with one another. A society's language is a repository and transmitter of the culture, values, social norms and habits as well as the world-vision of that society (Dare, 2000: 2). For Abdullahi-Idiagbon (2007: 202), a society's culture is better understood and promoted through its language because language serves as a mirror to a society and its cultural practices. Dare (*op. cit.*) points out further that the sum total of a particular society is evident in literature which is a profound manifestation of language. This position is a corroboration of Spencer's

et al. (1964: 59) earlier submission that “literature can be regarded as part of the total patterning of a culture, as a relatively self-contained institution of that culture”. African literature, especially the novel, has, at one time or the other, embarked on the social mission of cultural nationalism. The novel of cultural nationalism, as noted by Kehinde (2005: 88), was a literature of self-assertion. In *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, for example, Achebe has vividly portrayed, embellished and celebrated Igbo cultural tradition of his people.

Besides, through ‘social realism’ (reflection or refraction of societal realities) (Kehinde, 2005: 89), African novelists in general and Nigerian writers in particular have given (and are still giving) their readers the true picture of the prevailing social realities in their respective home countries. This is achieved effectively via the instrumentality of language. The foregoing implies a kind of symbiotic relationship among language, society and literature. Given the above explication, it could be conveniently argued that African literature, especially the novel, is a profound portrayal of social events. In *A Man of the People*, our focused text in this study, Achebe, among other things, focuses on the themes of corruptions, political turbulence, anti-intellectualism etc. and their attendant social effects in Nigeria. While commenting on the social function of literature, Bach and Harnish (1979) have noted that: “literature is social discourse in which the writer operates on the linguistic and communicative presuppositions in the social context.”

In the same vein, Kehinde (2005: 87) points out that “art is never created in a vacuum” but that it is “a mirror of the social milieu in which it is created”. He argues further that “for any literary work to merit meaningful consideration, it is necessary that it bears relevance, explicitly or implicitly, to the social milieu in which it is set” (p. 87–88).

African writers cannot, to large extent, divorce themselves from the society in which they operate. Within every society are embedded raw materials for the production and articulation of literary work. According to Hassan (1988: 69), “no author lives alone with the language”. She notes further that “she (the author) is surrounded by the taken-for-granted realities of her community. The assumptions that insidiously flow into the writing speak of the culture”. Despite the existence of some forms of formalism and structuralism which try to prove the autonomy of literature independent of historical and social realities (cf. Kehinde *ibidem*: 89), the consensus among literary critics is that every work of art must have been influenced by the historical-social realities in which the author finds himself. Little wonder that readers of

contemporary literary works simply find their daily experiences freshly enacted and interpreted for them in literature (Babatunde, 2003: 183).

The foregoing has extensively examined the indivisible relationship between language, society and literature. By and large, literature has been described as a mirror of the socio-cultural milieu or context in which it is produced. It is, however, the contention of this paper that no matter how perfect a mirror may be, it cannot be a complete reflection of reality. In literature, writers often embellish their stories by blending fiction with fact, thus projecting their characters and events in mediated contexts.

### **Sociolinguistics**

Milroy and Milroy (1990: 485) have defined sociolinguistics as “the study of language as it is used by real speakers in social and situational context of use”. The social context in which language is used by human beings determines, to a large extent, the interpretation of the speech or utterance used. Besides, to effectively study human speech behaviour, knowledge of the social structure of the speaker(s) and hearer(s) involved cannot be dispensed with. This view is corroborated by Hudson’s (1996: 1) argument that “to study speech without reference to the society which uses it is to exclude the possibility of finding social explanations for the structures that are used”. Apart from studying the language structures used by the speaker(s), sociolinguistics also examines “the speakers themselves, their relationship with each other, why they have used language in certain ways, the topic of discourse, the place and manner in which the discourse takes place” (Adeyanju, 1998: 25; Abdullahi-Idiagbon, 2007: 202).

In a bid to examine the use of language by real speakers in social and situational contexts of use, renown sociolinguists have propounded a number of theories namely; the deficit hypothesis, the variability concept, the speech act theory and the ethnography of communication. We shall limit ourselves to only ethnography of communication because it is central to the present study.

### **The Ethnography of Communication**

The Ethnography of Communication otherwise known as Hymes’s SPEAKING (Hymes, 1992) was introduced into sociolinguistic studies when the need for the analysis of language in its social context became imperative among linguists. The indispensable role of social context in meaningful and effective interpretation of speech events has been much emphasized in the literature (see Hymes, 1972; Saville-Troike, 1982; Williams, 1992; Coupland and Jaworski, 2002 etc.). The introduction of

the theory into sociolinguistic studies marked a radical departure from Chomsky's (1966) emphasis on linguistic competence and performance, a theory that deals with ideal situations which do not really exist (Mbisike, 2005: 187). For Chomsky (1966) cited in Williams (1992: 172), "linguistic competence was a matter of the mastery of grammatical rules". The proponents of the ethnography of communication have, however, forcibly maintained that there is much more than this to linguistic competence. For Hymes (1972), "the competency of users of language entails abilities and judgments relative to, and interdependent with socio-cultural features". Therefore, scholars in sociolinguistics have variously argued for the expansion of the object of linguistic enquiry from linguistic competence to communicative competence (e.g. see Hymes, 1972; Gumperz, 1984; Gumperz and Hymes, 1986; Williams, 1992 etc.).

With communicative competence, as proposed by Hymes (1972), a child acquires knowledge of sentences, not only as grammatical, but also as appropriate. He notes further that "the child acquires competence as to when to speak, when not, and as to what to talk about with whom, when, where, in what manner. In short, a child becomes able to accomplish a repertoire of speech acts, to take part in speech events, and to evaluate their accomplishment by others".

Therefore, communicative competence entails the mastery of grammatical rules as well as the ability to infer (generally) what the interaction is about, what is expected of us and general knowledge of the social norms of the society or social context in which the communicative encounter takes place (cf. Gumperz, 1984: 1; Williams, 1992: 172; Goodenough, 1957: 167; Adegbite, 2000: 65; Mbisike, 2005: 188). For Adegbite, 2000: 65, "communicative competence implies the ability of participants in an interaction to relate linguistic forms with the social norms and situational features in order to interpret utterance correctly". In his own view, Adeyanju (1998: 53) points out that "speaking goes beyond adherence to certain grammatical rules. It is a culturally patterned activity...".

For effective communication to take place between interlocutors in a speech event, both have to have not only the knowledge of all of the grammatical sentences of the language of communication. They must also share certain cultural norms stipulated by the culture of the society in which they find themselves. Every society's culture specifies the conventional or socio-cultural rules of behaviour which participants must share before they can communicate successfully or meaningfully with each other (Adegbite, 2000: 65; 2005: 54). Some of these conventional rules, as noted by Adegbite (2000: 65), may be universal in

application while some are culture-specific. He notes further that sometimes, different societies may also have different orientations towards certain universally-formulated conventional rules. Conventional rules, according to Adebite (*op. cit.*) guides the use of linguistic utterances, paralinguistic devices (e.g. gestures and nodding) and non-lexical vocal devices (e.g. laughter, clicks and hisses) in different societies. Some societies are said to have more elaborate greeting systems than others. Adebite (*op. cit.*) point out, for instance, that a nodding may mean 'Yes' in a society whereas it means 'no' in another. Participants' knowledge of conventional rules are essential for meaningful communicative interaction. This position corroborates Hymes' (1966) cited in Williams (1992: 179) earlier contention that "the cultural and social knowledge of any society is an essential feature of successful communication".

Besides, every language event takes place at a particular place with some people in attendance. This, according to Malinowski (1923), is called "context of situation". The context of situation is based on the idea that the meaning of an utterance, word or an expression is provided only in the context in which it is uttered. Therefore, the analysis of language within the social context in which it is used was first described by Hymes (1964) as "ethnography of speaking" and later called ethnography of communication (Hymes, 1972). This theory underscores the role of social context in the interpretation of utterances or speech events. In fact, for effective and meaningful interpretation of an utterance or speech event to be realized, language user's knowledge of the social context of such a speech event is important. Our utterances or speech events are more meaningful and effective when they are uttered in the appropriate social contexts (cf. Adeyanju, 1998: 52). Trudgill (1985: 101) has equally argued that language varies not only according to the social characteristics of the speaker (such as his social class, ethnic group, age, sex, literacy level, profession etc.), but also in terms of the social context in which he (speaker) finds himself.

Other factors that also determine language variation include the subject matter(s) or topic(s) being discussed; medium of communication (written/ spoken), the physical setting and occasion of the language activity, the 'context' of the person spoken to and in particular, the role relationships and relative statuses of the participants in a discourse or speech event. All these have been recognized as features of social context (see Trudgill, 1985: 100–102). While commenting on the participants' role relationship and relative statuses, Trudgill (*ibidem*: 102) notes that "speech between individuals of unequal rank is likely to be less relaxed and more formal than that between equals."

Hymes (1972: 1992) has identified a number of features considered to be components or features of social context. For mnemonic convenience, Hymes (*op. cit.*) has therefore, suggested the acronym, SPEAKING to encapsulate all the features. Hymes' components of SPEAKING, as reviewed by Adegbite (2005: 53–71), are presented as follow:

**Situation:** This is composed of both the setting and scene. These refer to the general physical circumstances in which the communicative event takes place, including the time, period, place, weather conditions and cultural view of the setting.

**Participants:** This describes the status, roles and relationship between sender/ addresser, on the one hand, and hearer/ receiver/ addressee, on the other hand. The speaker–hearer denotes participants in a speech event; sender–receiver denotes participants in both speech and non-fictional writing (i.e. real author and real reader); addresser–addressee denotes the implied author and implied reader of fictional texts.

**Ends:** This refers to outcomes of speech act, which can be classified into (i) results – intended and/ or unintended, and (ii) goals – individual and/ or general.

**Act Sequence:** This refers to the form and content of the message of text: how and what is said; ‘words’ and the ‘topic’.

**Key:** This describes the manner in which a textual message is conveyed, e.g. the lecture might be delivered in a precise way or perhaps in a light-hearted way.

**Instrumentalities:** These are the channels employed in communication and the forms of speech, e.g. telephone, telegram, face-to-face, E-mail, etc.

**Norms:** This refers to conventions or rules of social and speech behaviour: linguistic, paralinguistic and non-linguistic. Conventions may be universal or may be specific to cultures of participants.

**Genres:** Genres are categories which can be fairly identified through the linguistic forms they typically employ, e.g. poem, letter, story, etc. The presentation above integrates components of both context of culture and context of situation. Adegbite (*ibidem*: 60) notes further that contextual meaning generates the concept of ‘stylistic’ meaning, which describes relations between linguistic forms and features of situational contexts; while it also includes ‘co-textual’ meaning which relates particularly linguistic features to one another in the linguistic environment.

### Summary of Text

*A Man of the People* is set in post-independence Nigeria (and Africa by extension). It is Achebe's fourth novel. It mirrors the terrible political deterioration that characterizes post-independence Nigeria. In discussing the political situation in the country during the aforementioned period, Achebe focuses attention on certain social vices such as tribalism, corruption, greed, favouritism and nepotism, unhealthy political rivalry, anti-intellectualism and expertise, etc, which have collaboratively hampered the growth and development of the country.

In his effort to bring credibility to the story, Achebe chooses Odili, a university graduate as the narrator – the first person narrator. The activities of the politicians including their weaknesses are revealed to readers through the first person narrative voice of Odili. The political upheavals that characterize the first republic Nigerian politics (1960–1966) are still part and parcel of the contemporary Nigerian politics.

The novel also portrays another character, Chief M.A. Nanga as a brutally corrupt politician of the period. Most political issues discussed in the novel are revealed via his utterances and actions. Achebe portrays Chief M.A. Nanga as the experienced politician and indeed, “a man of the people”. Chief Nanga reveals his character traits through his own utterances. Through his utterances, actions and interactions with other characters in the novel, readers are able to see that Chief Nanga is a typical example of Nigerian politicians. He displays his political wickedness, inordinate ambition, deceit, intolerance, aggression, arrogance, and hot temperament to the fullest in the novel. In some cases in the novel, Chief Nanga portrays his inordinate political ambition by curtailing the freedom of the press in order to maximize his political gain.

The story concludes by predicting the overthrow of the politicians. However, Achebe's disenchantment is portrayed in the fact that even Max and Odili are not presented as better than those they tended to react to (cf. Okunoye and Odebunmi 2003: 291).

### Findings and Discussion

Our findings in this study are analysed against the components of Hymes' SPEAKING. These are discussed as follows.

#### Situation

Our idea of situation in *A Man of the People* henceforth *A Man* shall be discussed in relation to the social context in which the story and the conversational interactions in the text are set. Conversational interactions in *A Man* are observed to have been set in two different



places in the novel. These are the grassroot village of Anata and other neighbouring villages, and the fictitious city of Bori. Most of the events projected in the interactions are set in the two settings. For example, Chief Nanga's electioneering campaign for second term election into the parliament is held in Anata village while Maxwell and his friends' launching of the Common People's Convention (C.P.C) take place in the city of Bori. Odili later contests against Chief Nanga under the platform of the Common People's Convention (C.P.C), an incidence perceived as a do or die affair. This later culminates into unhealthy political rivalry and turbulence which eventually lead to military incursion into the politics of the land.

In the two settings, two forms of characters' interactions namely; formal and informal are observed. Given the mediated context of the novel, formal interactions take place between and/or among characters who are either close acquaintances or not but discuss non-personal issues. Our findings also reveal that while some of the characters interact in formal setting, formal language is employed for communication. The interaction below can be considered.

**Example 1:**

**Background:** (Mr. Nwege, the principal of Anata Grammar school is introducing teachers of the school to Chief Nanga (the minister) prior to the electioneering campaign.)

Mr. Nwege: I have the honour, sir, to introduce...  
 Minister: That's right, you are Odili.  
 Odili: Yes sir. You have a wonderful memory. It's at least fifteen years...  
 Minister: I taught him in...  
 Odili: Standard three.  
 Minister: That's right  
 Mr. Nwege: He is one of the pillars of this school. (p. 8)

Given the context in which the characters find themselves and the existing status differential among the minister and his interlocutors, formal language is employed to interact. The minister occupies a higher hierarchy on the social ladder in relation to his (Chief Nanga) co-interactants. This status hardly gives room for the use of common place linguistic structures. No wonder that formal language is used. On status differential, Trudgill (1985: 105) notes that "speech between individuals of unequal rank or status is likely to be less relaxed and more formal than that between equals".

Conversely, informal interactions in the data take place largely in non-formal settings where characters relate informally and discuss

personal issues. In these settings, the choice of language is informal and it portrays, to a large extent, intimate relationship amongst the characters involved. Besides, in this context, characters interactions are not constrained by any special rule or convention. Given the mediated context of *A Man*, it is also observed that interactions in informal setting, in some cases, involve characters with or without equal status who meet in informal situations. The interaction between Odili and Andrew during the latter's visit can be considered here.

**Example 2:**

(A Knock at the door)

Odili: Come in if you are good-looking

Andrew: Is Odili in?

Odili: Come in, fool (Joking) How de go de go?

Andrew: Bo, son of man done tire.

Odili: Did you find out about that girl?

Andrew: Why na soso girl, girl, girl been full your mouth. Wetin? so person not fit talk any serious talk with you. I never see.

Odili: O.'k; Mr. Gentleman, any person way first mention about girl again for this room, make him tongue cut... (p. 20–21)

Odili and Andrew are workmates and friends and this informs their mode of interaction and the form of language (Pidgin English) employed in the interaction is occasioned by the relaxed or non-formal communicative situation they find themselves. It is, however, observed that characters with status differential also interact and relate informally most especially to create an atmosphere of friendship and cordiality. Examples of this kind of conversational interaction can be found on pages 15, 59, 61, etc. of the text. By projecting these characters of sundry statuses interacting in different ways within the mediated context of *A Man*, Achebe has employed language together with his artistic skills to portray a picture of our daily life experiences via the medium of literature.

Given the time of the speech event, the story in the novel is set in the first republic Nigeria (1960–1966) – the period immediately after the country's attainment of political independence and prior to the first military intervention into Nigerian politics. Achebe uses the novel to mirror the socio-political events of the country's first republic and predicts what our contemporary politics and politicians would be most especially in Nigeria and some parts of Africa. The author's disenchantment with the political situation of our time is expressed through the interactions of the major characters such as Chief Nanga, a typical example of our contemporary corrupt politicians, Odili, Maxwell, Mr. Nwege, Chief Simon Koko, etc.

### **Participants**

Our data reveal multiple participants (characters) of different social classes who interact in different mediated communicative situations within the context of the text. It is observed that participants' interactions, in the sampled conversations take place in different micro-contexts of the macro-context of the text and are influenced by certain socio-contextual variables in the text such as the relationship between/ among them, their contextual beliefs, their social roles in relation to each other or one another, their socio-cultural background and perception of the world around them. These shall be discussed in turn. Two major kinds of relationship, namely formal and informal are observed to exist among the participants in the conversations. As noted in the previous section, formal relationship is observed in formal context (setting) while informal relationship takes place in non-formal context. Below is an instance of conversational interaction involving participants that have formal relationship which in turn constrains their interaction.

### **Example 3:**

John: ...So you see, Mr. ... I'm sorry. I didn't catch your first name?

Odili: Odili.

John: Odili – a beautiful sound – May I call you by that?

Odili: Sure.

John: Mine is John. (p. 45)

As the background information to the above interaction reveals, John and Odili are strangers to each other and they are meeting for the first time. Besides, John is an American ambassador while Odili is a native within the context of the novel. As their interaction reveals, formal relationship between the duo accounts largely for the formal interaction observed, polite request made by John, respectful response given by Odili and, finally, cautious interactional exchange between them. Other instances of this abound in the text. As pointed out earlier on, informal relationship prevails among participants who are either friends, equals or close acquaintances in some ways. Examples of this can be found on pages 59, 74, etc.

Participants' contextual beliefs that are found to characterize the conversational interactions in the text are independent contextual beliefs of individual characters and mutual (shared) contextual beliefs between/ among the characters but the former is found to be predominant in the text. Some of these independent beliefs expressed by some characters are: (i) belief that politics is not meant for the elites (intellectuals) in the society but for illiterates like Chief Nanga, a character in the novels; (ii) belief that participation in partisan politics is an avenue for getting one's

share of ‘national cake’ and by extension, a means of amassing wealth at the expense of the populace as portrayed in the characters of Chief Nanga and his political associates; (iii) belief that appointments or elections into various political offices should be rotational and a host of others. The interactional exchanges below can be used to exemplify (i) and (ii) above.

**Example 4:**

**Background:** (Both Odili and his friend, Maxwell are discussing about Chief Nanga and his lust for women).

Maxwell: If you put juju on a woman, it will catch that old rotter.

Odili: I know someone who did but the old rotter wasn’t caught.

Maxwell: That’s all they care for. Women, cars, landed property. *But what else can you expect when intelligent people leave politics to illiterates like Chief Nanga?* (Our Emphasis) (p. 76)

**Example 5:**

**Background:** (This interaction takes place between Chief Nanga and Odili. The former is trying to encourage Odili to leave teaching for a more lucrative job.)

Odili: ...I am applying for a post-graduate scholarship to bring myself up to Mr. Nwege’s expectation.

Chief Nanga: ... By the way, Odili, I think you are wasting your talent here. I want you to come to the capital and take up a strategic post in the civil service. We should not leave everything to the highland tribes. My secretary is from there. *Our people must press for their fair share of the national cake.* (Our Emphasis) (p. 12)

In (4) above, our societal belief that politics is not meant for intellectuals but for riff-raff illiterates like Chief Nanga, a fictive character representing our contemporary politicians, is expressed through the voice of Maxwell who is one of the major characters in the text. In order to reverse the ugly trend, a group of intellectuals from different callings decides to come together and launch the Common Peoples Convention (C.P.C), a political party that is used to contest against Chief Nanga with a view to bringing an end to the regime of mediocres in politics as well as reversing the trend of using political office as a means of amassing wealth at the expense of the populace.

In example (5), the belief in a cross section of our contemporary social structure that people should press for their share of ‘national cake’ is expressed by Achebe through the voice of Chief Nanga. Besides, this belief expressed by Chief Nanga portrays him as a corrupt politician coupled with the fact that the phrase, “national cake” within the social

setting of the novel implies corruption. By projecting these characters and the beliefs, Achebe uses the novel to mirror the prevailing social realities in our contemporary society. Considering the events in the novel, *A Man* can be described as “a reflection or refraction” (Kehinde, 2005: 89) of societal realities per excellence.

An instance of the Mutual (shared) Contextual Beliefs (MCBS) observed in the data is the characters’ shared belief in the efficacy of our orthodox medicine in providing cure against poison. Chief Nanga and Odili visit Chief Simon Koko, minister for Overseas Trading over Odili’s intention to go for a postgraduate programme abroad. They are served coffee and as they are drinking, Chief Koko suddenly has a strange feeling in his stomach. He entertains the fear that he may have been poisoned by his political opponents through the assistance of his domestic staff. As he is lamenting his misfortune, Odili and Chief Nanga express their shared belief as we have in the interaction below:

**Example 6:**

Odili: Let’s go and call a doctor

Chief Nanga: That’s right. (p. 33–34)

Through his utterance, Odili expresses his belief that a medical doctor is required to save the situation. This belief is shared by Chief Nanga who gives his acquiescence to Odili’s suggestion. The mutual (shared) contextual belief of both Odili and Chief Nanga in the above interaction is enhanced by their shared situational knowledge (SSK) (Odebunmi 2006: 159) that a medical doctor should be able to handle the situation. This therefore, enhances effective communication between them as the appropriate response is given by Chief Nanga to Odili’s proposal. Chief Koko who does not share the same situational knowledge responds, however: *What is the use of a doctor? Do they know about African poison?*

Besides, participants’ (characters) social role relations observed in the sampled conversations are addresser/ addressee, master/ servant, parental/ children, friendship, close acquaintances etc. These role relations are social roles that participants (characters) in the novel perform in relation to each other or one another within the context of the novel (cf. Fishman 1972). As noted by Lyons (1977: 575), these role relations have the obvious effect of determining terms of address. For example, role relationship of close acquaintances is performed in the interactional exchange below.

**Example 7:**

**Background:** (After the humiliation suffered by Odili in the hand of Chief Nanga who snatched his (Odili) girl friend, Odili visits Mrs. Nanga in the village with a vengeance mission. After the exchange of pleasantries, the interaction below ensues.)

Odili: When are you preparing to return to Bori? The house is quite cold without you and the children.

Mrs. Nanga: Don't tell me about Bori, *My brother*. I want to rest a bit here... Eddy's father says I should come back at the end of next month before he goes to America but I don't know... (Our Emphasis) (p. 87)

Odili and Mrs. Nanga are not, strictly speaking, members of the same family let alone brother and sister. Yet, Mrs. Nanga addresses Odili as 'my brother'; a kin term that not only reflects their close relationship but equally reflects African cultural norm of address. In African cultural tradition, most especially in Nigeria, the expression, 'my brother' has an expansive usage and meaning that encompasses blood relation and our close acquaintances or whoever we intend to respect. Other instances of role relations abound in the data.

Participants' socio-cultural backgrounds and their perceptions of the world around them also exert considerable influence on their interactions and choice of language. Osisanwo (2003: 78) has noted that people from different cultural backgrounds are most likely to have different beliefs, habits, value systems, cultural heritage and religion. For example, the socio-cultural background of Mr. John manifests in his utterance and interaction with Odili in example 3 cited above. Information in the text reveals that Mr. John is an American and American cultures of politeness, address system and social relation reflect in his utterances. Other cultural nuances that are observed in the data are African culture of hospitality; respect for in-laws and elders and the use of proverbs to reinforce our messages etc. Interactions below reflects cultural tradition of hospitality and visitor's reception that some tribes in Nigeria are known for.

**Examples 8:**

**Background:** (Odili has gone to visit Edna with a view to discourage her from getting married to Chief Nanga. He met her father and after the exchange of pleasantries, the interaction followed).

Edna's father: *I must carry the debt of a kolanut*. It got finished only this morning.

Odili: Don't worry about kolanut. You do not know me, I'm sure. I am one of the teachers at the Grammar school. (Our Emphasis) (p. 89)

In the above exchange, Edna's father expresses his displeasure with his inability to offer his visitor kolanut. Odili who shares the same cultural knowledge with his host says: 'Don't worry about kolanut'. Within the ethnocultural context in which the novel is set, kolanut has a cultural significance as it is believed that offering kolanut to a visitor is the highest level of hospitality that can be extended to our visitors. This culture of hospitality, as noted by Adegbite (2005: 63), might not be universal because it might not be the same in some other cultural traditions. Hymes' (1966) cited in Williams (1992: 179) contends that "the cultural and social knowledge of any society is an essential feature of successful communication".

As our data reveal, participants' (characters) perception of the world around them manifests in the different world views advanced by the author through the voices of the fictive characters. World views that are found to characterize the data are: (i) excessive materialism and love of women; (ii) inordinate ambition for power and hegemonic tendency of political office holders, (iii) white man supremacy over the natives, (iv) It is government that sponsors political parties. In a bid to mirror the prevailing social situation, Achebe presents characters that have excessive and inordinate desire for material things. People's excessive desire for material things accounts for the high rate of corruption and embezzlement of public funds which have become the order of the day among our contemporary political office holders. Besides, excessive materialism has impacted negatively on the social psyche of the nation to the extent that people now see politics as a do or die affair. This in turn accounts for people's unwillingness to relinquish power a scenario that culminates in unhealthy political rivalry and turbulence that are evident in the characters' interactions in the novel. Conversational interaction below exemplifies this point.

**Example 9:**

**Background:** (After his interaction with Chief Nanga turns sour, Odili visits his old school mate, Maxwell Kulamo who gives him a warm reception.)

Maxwell: Good gracious! (he shouted) Diligent! Na your eyes be this?.

Odili: Cool Max!. The writer of these lines!

Maxwell: I have been on the waiting list for a telephone for two months. You see, *I have not given anyone a bribe, and I don't know any big gun...* so you have been staying with that corrupt, empty-headed, illiterate capitalist. Sorry-O.

Odili: Na matter of can't help. He na my old teacher, you know. (Emphasis mine)

Through the voice of Maxwell, Achebe portrays, among other things, that our society is (i) a corrupt one, (ii) one needs social influence to get things done in the public sphere of our national life and (iii), Chief Nanga, though a fictive character, is an epitome of our contemporary corrupt politicians. To corroborate the large scale corruption and misappropriation of public funds by our political office holders, Achebe himself notes, through the voice of the omniscient narrator, Odili that: “Chief Nanga was a minister bloated by the flatulence of ill-gotten wealth, living in a big mansion built with public money...” (p. 75).

### Ends

Here, we shall examine the purposes of the communicative events in the text. As already noted earlier on, the data reveal multiple participants that interact within the mediated arena of literature. Therefore, their purposes of participating in the speech event are largely determined by the purposes that the author intends the story to serve. Given the prevailing social context and relevant circumstances surrounding the story, it is obvious that the author’s purpose is to unequivocally satirize and condemn various kinds of social vices that characterize post-independence politics in Africa and Nigeria in particular. These are projected by the author via the actions and utterances of fictive characters. Below is an example of characters’ conversational interaction that exemplify the theme of bribery and corruption which is the overriding theme in the novel.

### Example 10:

**Background:** (Chief Nanga had come to bribe Odili with two hundred and fifty pounds and a scholarship award. All efforts by Odili’s father to urge his son to take the offer proved abortive as Odili rejected it on account of principles, integrity and anti-corruption crusade he stands for.)

Odili: ...So your party gives ministers authority to take bribes, eh?

Odili’s father: What?

Odili: Chief Nanga said that *the ten percent he receives on contracts is for your party. Is that true?*

Odili’s father: If Alligator comes out of the water one morning and tells you that crocodile is sick, can you doubt his story?

Odili: I see. (Our Emphasis) (p. 120–121)

Odili’s utterances above is a reflection of corrupt practices that take place at the corridors of power. Besides, in his effort to further condemn corruption in our contemporary society, Achebe presents to readers the



exploitative inclinations of Boniface, a political thug hired by Odili for his self-protection against assault by his (Odili) political rivals. When Odili asks Boniface to give account of how the latter expends ten pounds earlier given to him, he says:

**Example 11:**

Boniface: We give three pounds ten to that policeman so that he go spoil the paper for our case. Then we give one ten to court clerk because they say as the matter done reach him eye the policeman no kuku spoil am just like that. Then we give another two pounds... (p. 114)

In the above example, the pervasive nature of corruption in the society is projected through the voice of Boniface.

**Act Sequence**

This shall be discussed in relation to the message form and message content in the speech event. The forms of the message that are found to characterize our data are characters' conversational interactions and story telling through the voice of Odili, an omniscient narrator in the novel. As our data reveal, the author Achebe chooses Odili as his mouth organ and through the latter's voice; Achebe intrudes into the story with a view to appreciating, discussing and assessing the situational categories of field, mode and tenor in the speech event. Below is an example of authorial comment through Odili's voice:

**Example 12:**

... most of the hunters reserved their precious powder to greet the Minister's arrival – *the price of gunpowder like everything having doubled again and again in the four years since this government took control.* (Our Emphasis) (p. 2)

Through the above comment, a picture of the deplorable economic situation of the country in the first republic (1960–1965) in Nigeria is painted. This situation, as revealed in the novel, is occasioned by the large scale corruption at the corridors of power. Some of the characters' conversational interaction observed in the novel have been cited as exemplification of the major issues in the novel.

The message content refers to the subject matter of the discourse. As pointed out earlier on, the novel focuses on the themes of money politics, corruption, moral decadence, greed, favouritism, anti-intellectualism and expertise, unhealthy political rivalry and turbulence, etc in the post-independence Nigeria using the fictitious city of Bori. For example, Chief Nanga's moral bankruptcy is emphasized in the interaction below:

**Example 13:**

Chief Nanga: .... I am sorry if you are offended; the mistake is mine. I tender unreserved apology. If you like I can bring you six girls this evening. You go do the thing so tay you go beg say you no want again. Ha, ha, ha, ha!

Odili: What a country! You call yourself minister of culture. God help us.

In the above interaction, the level of moral bankruptcy in our society is portrayed through Chief Nanga’s actions and utterances. Chief Nanga’s utterances above are least expected of a person of official caliber in the government of the day, a minister of culture.

**Key**

The author presents the speech events by telling the story that focuses on some characters. These characters are involved in mediated conversational interactions designed by the author to emphasize the thematic preoccupation of the story and the worldviews in Nigerian socio-context of the first republic (1960–1965).

**Instrumentalities**

Instrumentalities in the present study shall be examined in relation to the channel of communication and forms of the speech employed. The channel employed here is mainly story telling with conversational interactions among the participants in the events. Through this medium, Achebe presents the major concerns of the novel. The forms of speech in the data shall be discussed in relation to the language forms and address forms observed in the conversations. Language forms observed are standard/ formal English, non-standard/ pidgin English and code switching. The address forms observed in the data are the use of personal names, second person pronouns and kinship terms. These shall be discussed in turn.

The use of standard or non-standard English in the conversations is largely determined by the participants’ relationship and context of interaction; topic/ subject of the discourse and status equality and/ or differential between them. Standard English is used mainly in formal context where participants discuss serious and non personal issues/subjects whereas in non-formal context where participants interact at interpersonal and intimate levels, non-standard or Pidgin English is used. We can consider the conversational interactions below:

**Example 14:**

Odili: He is the author of *The Song of the Blackbird*.

Chief Nanga: I see. So your society includes musicians as well?

Mr. Jolio: No.

Odili: Hello, Jalio.  
Chief Nanga: You didn't tell me, Mr. er...  
Jalio: Jalio, sir.  
Chief Nanga: Thank you, Mr. Jalio. Why didn't you tell me that you are expecting ambassadors at this function?  
Mr. Jalio: I am sorry, sir but ... (p. 62)

**Example 15:**

Odili: All right, what do you want the twenty-five pounds for?  
Boniface: They no tell you say Chief Nanga done return back from Bori yesterday?  
Odili: So you wan give an money too? (p. 114)

In example 14, each of the speakers speaks standard English occasioned by the situational context in which the interaction take place. Conversely, in example 15, Odili first speaks Standard English to Boniface, but the latter does not get the code. Instead, he (Boniface) responds by using pidgin. Odili thereafter switches from Standard English to Pidgin despite the status differential between them. As our findings reveal, Odili's code switching is a product of the context of interaction and the need to meet the literacy level of his conversational partner. This supports Trudgill's (1985: 100) claim that "the same speaker uses different linguistic varieties in different situations..." Several instances of this variety switch abound in the data.

Personal names are used in two different ways in the conversations. First, participants with + HIGHER social status address their co-interactants who hold – HIGHER status by first name and second, among equals. Kinship terms such as 'my brother', 'my sister', etc. are used among participants (characters) who are close acquaintances in some contexts. Second person pronouns are used to mark status inequality.

**Norms**

In this study, norms shall be examined culturally and socially. What kinds of behaviour and utterances are culturally and socially expected or unexpected of characters (participants) within the social context in which they find themselves in the novel. In the course of their interactions in *A Man*, some characters utter certain statements that not only demean them but are also unexpected of them. For example, the interaction between Chief Nanga and Odili below can be considered.

**Example 16:**

**Background** (The quarrel ensues between Chief Nanga and Odili because the former had snatched and slept with Odili's girl friend.)

Odili: Look here, Mr. Nanga, respect yourself. Don't provoke me any more unless you want our names to come out in the newspapers today...

Chief Nanga: Don't be childish, Odili. Afterall she is not your wife. What is all these nonsense? She told me there is nothing between you and she, and you told me the same thing... But anyway, I am sorry if you are offended... *If you like I can bring you six girls this evening. You go do the thing so tay you go beg say you no want again. Ha, ha, ha, ha!*

Odili: What a country! You call yourself minister of culture. God help us. (Our Emphasis) (p. 71–72)

Given the status of Chief Nanga as a minister of culture in the novel, the cultural and social norms of the society in which the novel is set and the relationship between him and Odili, Chief Nanga's action and utterances in the above interactions are flagrant violation of the established cultural norms. Besides, he behaves in contradiction of the social expectation of him. By so doing, he could be said to have violated the cultural norm of the society. This earns him disrespect from Odili and eventually, their relationship turns sour from that moment. Several other examples abound in the data.

### **Genre**

Our data are composed of several conversational interactions between and/ or among the characters in the novel. Through these conversational interactions involving characters of different social statuses, the themes of the novel unfold. Besides, via the characters' interactions and utterances, the societal world views, structures and beliefs are also projected by the author.

### **Conclusion**

In the foregoing, we have examined and analysed conversational interactions in *A Man* using Hymes' (1972, 1992) model of speaking. Through this Hyme's speaking, and considering the social context in which the novel is set, our analysis has revealed the fact that the thematic preoccupations in the text is constrained by the socio-cultural context of the text. Besides, our findings also reveal that societal structures and beliefs are projected through the voices of fictive characters. In the novel, the social contextual variables such as cultural norms, topics, gender and situational constraints are observed to have largely influenced the interactions between the characters and these determine the language used by the characters. Considering these, Hyme's SPEAKING has contributed immensely to the overall understanding of the novel. Therefore, it can be concluded that analyzing literary texts most especially prose works using Hymes' SPEAKING aids better understanding of the texts.

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