

Review

**Linguistic Boundaries, Subjectivity and
Representations in *Americanah*, a novel by
Chimamanda Adichie Ngozie**

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Abstract: This paper examines linguistic boundaries, linguistic insecurity, distanciation, status, identity and various forms of representation in *Americanah*, a novel written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. Any linguistic form that is “hybridized” or “contaminated” by local practices is subject to severe criticism in *Americanah*. The paper therefore highlights distinction as a symbolic capital deployed by the dominant group to impose their sense of aesthetics, belonging, class and modernity. The colonial sociocultural and linguistic heritage is often perceived as forms of capital to be acquired through mimicry, appropriation and formal education to achieve legitimacy, authenticity and recognition at home and abroad. The foreign is deified as the symbol of success and the local is often discredited and associated with backwardness. The debate about language in the novel is therefore a metaphor to capture multiple forms of identities and representations. It is also about finding new ways beyond binarism towards self-assertion and self-reinvention.

Key words: Accent, Identity, Subjectivity, Representation, Distinction, Authenticity, Self-Denial, Self-Reinvention.

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INTRODUCTION

This paper examines the interconnection between language and representation, linguistic insecurity, language and distinction, language as a social marker and means of distinction in *Americanah*, a novel written by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, a Nigerian novelist and short story writer. On the outset, the title of the novel could be read as a Nigerian/African represented or who self-represents as American, or as the representation of Americans. The story mainly deals with the relationship between Obinze and Ifemelu. Yet, it also delves deeper

into the socioeconomic, political, cultural and linguistic configurations of human relationships while examining love, ethnicity, immigration and identity. Ifemelu is the main character and observer in the various worlds and spaces depicted in the novel. She takes on the role of an insider-outsider and enables the reader to follow characters as they navigate different spaces and linguistic boundaries throughout the novel. Adichie resorts to the concepts of language and identity to depict the characters and their socioeconomic and ethnic status.

This analysis builds on Bourdieu's (1984) concepts of linguistic capital, distinction, tastes and representation.

For Bourdieu (1984: 489), distinction and tastes are socially constructed. Tastes are “manifested preferences” and also “aversion to different life-styles,” disgust for the facile and the vulgar (Bourdieu 1984: 56). Taste is “the natural gift of recognizing and loving perfection” (Bourdieu 1984: 68). Through taste, one is able to distinguish or distance oneself from others with different tastes. It is the affirmation of difference (Bourdieu 1984: 226). There is a constant association between distinction and characteristics such as aesthetics, elegance, delicacy and excellence attributed to something or an individual as opposed to others without such characteristics. Distinction therefore appears as a symbolic capital deployed by the dominant groups to impose their sense of beauty, class and taste.

Also, “schooling provides the linguistic tools and the references” for the expression and constitution of aesthetic experience (Bourdieu 1984: 53). Therefore, striving towards distinction implies cultivating the tastes of the cultured or bourgeoisie, adopting their language and sense of perfection. As Bourdieu (1984: 66) argues, “...the manner of using symbolic goods, especially those regarded as the attributes of excellence, constitutes one of the key markers of ‘class’ and also the ideal weapon in strategies of distinction...” The language spoken by the colonizer or dominant class or group is perceived as a set of resources to be acquired through familiarization and education to achieve legitimacy, authenticity and recognition.

The paper therefore explores how characters mobilize the English language and colonial heritage, and endeavor to display “a mastery of the signs and emblems of distinction and taste” to articulate their own experiences, sociocultural, political and economic realities (Bourdieu 1984: 141).

The Language Question: Prescriptivism, Place and Belonging

The word language is used in multiple instances in “Americanah” either to comment on the meaning of a specific expression, its uses, language and quality of education, characteristics of an individual from a speech community, accent and intelligibility, language and distinction. It also contrasts various uses of English, notably British English versus Nigerian English, British English versus American English, French versus English, Igbo versus Yoruba, and connects them to issues of status, ethnicity and class.¹

¹ The audio version: Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi, Adjoa Andoh, LLC Recorded Books, and Ltd W.F. Howes. *Americanah*. Unabridged, [Recorded Books ed.]. Prince Frederick, MD: Recorded Books, 2014. The audio version read by Adjoa Andoh allows the listener to better appreciate the various uses of accents and representation in the novel.

Thus, Ifemelu’s attitude toward language echoes the concept of prescriptivism which states that people should speak or write in a certain way. Doing otherwise is perceived as corrupting or contaminating the language (Curzan 2014). Ifemelu, her father, Obinze’s mother, Emenike and Ojiugo are critical towards the use of English, especially when it is not British. Their attitudes could be interpreted as prescriptivist since they represent themselves as language mavens (Curzan 2014). They are defenders of the proper use of English and they endeavor to meet their sociopolitical and ideological demands in their daily practice.

Yet, when asked by Ada Uzoamaka Azodo (2008: 2) about her use of English as a “medium of expressive writing,” Adichie said the following:

Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency, as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English.

The above passage highlights the appropriation of the colonial linguistic and cultural heritage. Interestingly, when Ifemelu, the protagonist, goes to a hair Salon, she pays close attention to the braiders’ linguistic abilities and how they interact among themselves, and with their customers:

“The conversations were **loud** and **swift** [*emphasis is mine*], in French or Wolof or Malinke, and when they spoke English to customers, it was broken, curious, as though they had not quite eased into the language itself before taking on a slangy Americanism. Words came out half-completed. Once a Guinean braider in Philadelphia had told Ifemelu, “Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh.” It took many repetitions for Ifemelu to understand that the woman was saying, “I’m like, Oh God, I was so mad” (10-11).

The hair salon is a microcosm where speech often highlights deficiency, origin (French, Wolof, Malinke) or to depict a ridiculous situation. Thus, Ifemelu’s observations reveal the linguistic barriers faced by some African migrants endeavoring to fit in, even at the point of becoming ridiculous as in “Amma like, Oh Gad, Az someh.” Not only they do not master the English language, they even hastily try to embrace the “slangy” style, not even “American slang” but “slangy Americanism.” The narrator sometimes resorts to biting humor to portray and point at characters’ geographic

origin, educational status or economic class. By so doing, Ifemelu's obsession for the transparency of signs begins to emerge. For her, words must be pronounced exactly as they are used by "native speakers" (that is, the British), otherwise, they misrepresent reality or else they are labelled as "bush" or having artificialities.

Thus, in her discussions with Ifemelu, Aisha violates Standard English grammar. She speaks in the present tense and does not use the copular verb "be" when required or does not pronounce the suffix "s" to mark the third person singular. The writer uses these various signs to underscore Aisha's linguistic and cultural deficiency. There is a parallel between her linguistic shortcomings and her undocumented status.

Further, in her quest to remedy her immigration status, she essentializes interethnic marriage by insinuating that Ifemelu could help her get married to an Igbo man. She therefore shares information about her relationships with Igbo men as follows: "...I have two Igbo men. Very good. Igbo men take care of women real good [...].I want marry. They love me but they say the family want Igbo woman. Because Igbo marry Igbo always." (18)

By saying she wants "to marry" without specifying who, Aisha made "Ifemelu almost swallow the urge to laugh" (18). Aisha's inability to use the past tense does not only show her linguistic shortcomings, but it also illustrates the "here and now," which is her main concern. It is as if for Aisha, "the past and the future" are in the "now". "You want to marry both of them" (18)? The use of the deictic "them" creates ambiguity. And Ifemelu is quick to pick it. She therefore asks Aisha quite sarcastically if she wants to marry both men. This situation reminds us of what Gee (2014: 15) observes:

"Deictics tie speech and writing to context. If listeners do not correctly figure out what deictics refer to (using contextual information), then they do not understand what is meant or they can misunderstand it. At the same time, when speakers use deictics, they assume that their listeners can figure out what the deictics refer to."

Further, when Aisha says something Ifemelu does not like, she uses the tag phrase "Aisha clucked," which clearly parallels Aisha's speech to that of an animal or a stupid person. "You don't know America. You say Senegal and American people, they say, Where is that? My friend from Burkina Faso, they ask her, your country in Latin America?" Aisha resumed twisting, a sly smile on her face, and then asked, as if Ifemelu could not possibly understand how things were done here, "How long you in America" (18)?The reader thus perceives in Aisha's statement the sub-text that Ifemelu, just like Americans, might not be able to locate or recognize an African country on the world map. Of course, this irritates her and

she attempts to avoid the conversation by engaging in texting on her phone.²

The air salon turns out to be a place for social comments not only on hair style but especially on English language and violence, status, nationality and acceptance. Thus, having an accent can even lead to physical and psychological abuse as illustrated in the following passage:

The woman shrugged. "I've been here a long time. It doesn't make much of a difference."
 "No," Halima said, suddenly animated, standing behind the woman. "When I come here with my son, they beat him in school because of African accent. In Newark. If you see my son face? Purple like onion. They beat, beat, beat him. Black boys beat him like this. Now accent go and no problems"(230).

While having accent didn't apparently affect the woman's situation, it led to the exclusion of and violence against her child. Thus, perceived linguistic difference leads to violent bullying. Such assaults are clear signs of xenophobia.

The lexicon deployed to depict accent is depreciative. When the conversation shifts to Nigeria, the country is portrayed as the embodiment of corruption. There is juxtaposition between perfect American accent and Nigeria being the "worst corrupt country in Africa." Mariama even went a step further to make a categorical pronouncement about marriage with Nigerians, "I cannot marry a Nigerian and I won't let anybody in my family marry a Nigerian," Mariama said (231). The English language thus becomes a tool for exclusion.

Also, Kelsey (a Caucasian American) steps in the conversation about Africa. Her "liberal American" views of Africa, African women and Africa in *Things Fall Apart* versus her sense of "modern Africa" in *A Bend in the River* upset Ifemelu. It is as if reading a single book allowed Kelsey to capture the essence of "modern Africa." This tense atmosphere reveals the struggles of the characters with written or spoken words. Kelsey's attitude is similar to some of the characters' quest for the perfect accent as the ideal status or representation of truth about people, situations, circumstances and histories. Her emphatic statements such as "so honest" or "the most honest" book parallels with characters' perception of "perfect American accent." Her invasive questions such as "where are you from?" or "what's it about?" are meant to capture single origin or a single story. One thus realizes that language is used to locate, exclude or distinguish.

For instance, there is a contrast between "Trenton"

² Ifemelu also uses blogging, another form of technology-mediated communication to discuss the issue of race in American and beyond.

(poor neighborhood) and "Princeton" (a prestigious university). Both words partially rhyme "-ton", the contrast between "fellowship" and "intimidated Aisha" highlights the notion of education, place, class and status. At this point, Ifemelu deploys these signs to emphasize the fact that even though she is African and comes to braid her hair by "undocumented African immigrants," she still belongs to prestigious places. She insists on the need to distinguish herself from "other immigrants" such as Aisha: "Yes, Princeton. Yes, the sort of place that Aisha could **only imagine**, the sort of place that would **never have signs that said QUICK TAX REFUND** [bold is mine]; people in Princeton did not need quick tax refunds" (20). Note here the use of capital letters in "**QUICK TAX REFUND**" expressing the strong emotion embedded in that "sign." There is a clear association between signs and status as well as privilege and prestige. The tension heightens when Ifemelu added that she will be returning to Nigeria to work. Not only she studies at Princeton University, unlike Aisha and other "immigrants," she is returning home to work. This return project shows that Ifemelu does not fear "the return" because she has better opportunities awaiting her in Nigeria given her educational background at Princeton.

At all levels, characters tend to loath the local and to embrace foreign or Western style as a form of distinction. Yet as Lippi-Green argues (2012: 20-21), "Spoken language varies for every speaker in terms of speech sounds, sound patterns, word and sentence structure, intonation, and meaning, from utterance to utterance. This is true even for those who believe themselves to speak an educated, elevated, supra-regional English."

Distinction: Recognition, Status, Power In and Behind Language

The significance of language is pervasive in *Americanah*. Naming is recognizing, situating and indexing. Thus, Obinze's mother pays attention to Ifemelu's name as follows:

"What a beautiful name you have. Ifemelunamma," she said. Ifemelu stood tongue-tied for seconds. "Thank you, ma."

"Yes, how would you translate your name? Did Obinze tell you I do some translation? From the French. I am a lecturer in literature, not English literature, mind you, but literatures in English, and my translating is something I do as a hobby. Now translating your name from Igbo to English might be Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made, or what do you think?" (83)

Translating "Ifemelunamma" into English by "Made-in-Good-Times or Beautifully Made," she is signifying that Ifemelu may be a good match for her son. It is as if

Ifemelu's name needs to be translated in English to make sense. It is similar to baptizing her, creating thus the condition of representation through the translated word. The English version of her name seems to carry more weight and value for Obinze's mother. It is also recognizing her own capacity as a translator. There is a constant endeavor to embrace the centrality of the West in how characters attempt to make sense of local discourse. The local is only recognized and valued when translated into the colonial discourse which renames and construes its validity.

The reader notices that even Emenike doubts about the validity of "foreign names." Shouldn't "foreign names" be viewed as "valid names?" Yet, Emenike's name is indeed "foreign" in Britain. One then easily understands that his laughter is nothing but the expression of insecurity of a subaltern who deploys linguistic tactics and artifices to fool himself. He criticizes foreign names while apparently forgetting that his name is foreign in the British eyes. This illustrates a sense of self-perception that transpires in characters' attitudes, thoughts, tastes and preferences. Through Ifemelu's observations, the reader discovers the characters' inconsistencies, their doubts, confusion, cognitive dissonance, insecurity and tendency to essentialize place, home and belonging. For instance, in America, Ifemelu discovers that "Nigerians took on all sorts of names here. Even she had once been somebody else" (10). Shifting identities and the quest for alternative ways of self-representation are often linked to socioeconomic and political realities that characters are experiencing. Nigerians change names to pass for locals because "foreign names" or "African names" may be viewed as threatening and obstacles to prosperity and opportunities.

Further, the reader also notices that being able to pronounce foreign names properly is positively appreciated; otherwise, one becomes a laughingstock as underscored in the passage below:

"Once I was with him [Emenike] in London and he was mocking this guy he worked with, a Nigerian guy, for not knowing how to pronounce F-e-a-t-h-e-r-s-t-o-n-e-h-a-u-g-h. He pronounced it phonetically like the guy had, which was obviously the wrong way, and he didn't say it the right way. I didn't know how to pronounce it either and he knew I didn't know, and there were these horrible minutes when he pretended, we were both laughing at the guy. When of course we weren't. He was laughing at me too. I remember it as the moment when I realized he just had never been my friend." (536-537)

One becomes ridiculous when one is not able to speak or act in a manner that meets expected standards of in-group members. Indeed, the above passage illustrates

the definition of culture: what is said and what is not said, what is visible and what is not. Yet, as one immerses in and fully embraces culture, one is able to navigate its sociolinguistic and cultural written and unwritten norms. Failing to pronounce properly means that one does not belong to the group. Emenike resorts to authentication, thus putting Obinze in a discomfort. Borrowing from Bucholtz (2004:386), one could say that Emenike is activating “the essentialist readings in the articulation of identity” and belonging. This reminds us of the biblical shibboleth story. As Andrew Senior (2004: 1) notes, “Shibboleths stand as a boundary to the ideals of cultural integration, a linguistic demarcation of the “other” which may be impossible to hide.” Having realized that he was being submitted to the “shibboleth test,” Obinze concludes that Emenike had never been his friend.

On the other hand, language can promote or demote an individual’s status or economic class as illustrated in Ifemelu’s father job loss. Indeed, Ifemelu’s father lost his job by refusing to recognize his boss by the name “Mummy.” His refusal to assume the good subject position costs him his job. While Ifemelu’s father emphasizes his experience and professional skills, his boss [now, his former boss] sees the “name” as the most important of all. Calling her “Mummy” is not only a symbol of respect, but also the assertion of a kind of matriarchal authority. She is both the “mother” of her company, the source of job creation and livelihood. So, when Ifemelu’s father refused to call his boss “Mummy,” “he was fired... He came home earlier than usual, wracked with bitter disbelief, his termination letter in his hand, complaining about the absurdity of a grown man calling a grown woman Mummy because she had decided it was the best way to show her respect. “Twelve years of dedicated labor. It is unconscionable” (56). This instance shows a clear connection between language and status, respect and how an individual manipulates such signs to advance in society. Yet, his failure to use a two-syllable word “Mummy” radically transforms his life and his family economic status. He refused to accept the Nigerian way, that is, a place “...where boundaries were blurred, where work blended into life, and bosses were called Mummy” (483). Here, the impact of linguistic capital becomes clearer. Linguistic misstep has individual, collective and economic consequences. Ironically, Ifemelu’s father is well-known to love “elevated English”:

His was a formal, elevated English. Their house helps hardly understood him but were nevertheless very impressed. Once, their former house help, Jecinta, had come into the kitchen and started clapping quietly, and told Ifemelu, “You should have heard your father’s big word now! O di egwu!” Sometimes Ifemelu imagined him in a classroom in the fifties, an overzealous colonial subject wearing an ill-fitting school

uniform of cheap cotton, jostling to impress his missionary teachers. Even his handwriting was mannered, all curves and flourishes, with a uniform elegance that looked like something printed. He had scolded Ifemelu as a child for being recalcitrant, mutinous, intransigent, words that made her little actions seem epic and almost prided-worthy. But his mannered English bothered her as she got older, because it was costume, his shield against insecurity. He was haunted by what he did not have— a postgraduate degree, an upper -middle-class life— and so his affected words became his armor. She preferred it when he spoke Igbo; it was the only time he seemed unconscious of his own anxieties. Losing his job made him quieter, and a thin wall grew between him and the world. He no longer muttered “nation of intractable sycophancy” (57-58).

Ifemelu’s father’s zeal for correct English is a colonial legacy which he only uses as armor for self-protection, self-representation, the lack of satisfaction with the “self”, but at the same time as self-negation. There is an internalization of the dominant linguistic bias towards local languages perceived as “vernacular” or non-languages. At this point, the reader realizes that speaking “elevated English” does not necessarily mean keeping one’s job, and therefore economic status. Ironically, the very words that he used to characterize Ifemelu, such as “recalcitrant, mutinous, intransigent”, now apply to him. As a result, Ifemelu’s mother rebukes him as follows, “If you have to call somebody Mummy to get your salary, you should have done so!” (57)

In *Americanah*, linguistic conservatism is heavily present in the characters worldviews. Characters see themselves as linguistic ideologues out to call to order anybody that violates the rules of correct English. Some of them have a quasi-religious perception of English as a sacred language whose purity should not be soiled by “local dialects.” The violation of grammatical or phonological rules is equated to “backwardness” or the lack of intelligibility (Danladi 2013).

For instance, the notion of intelligibility surfaces in Ifemelu’s father’s perception of American English when he says, “I do not understand Americans. They say ‘job’ and you think they have said ‘jab,’” her father declared, spelling both words. “One finds the British manner of speaking much preferable”(373). This echoes Lippin-Green’s (1997) observation that in any communication event, when accent interferes; the one who is supposed to have an accent becomes the problem or bears the burden of communication. Similarly, Obinze’s mother rejects American English as illustrated in the following:

“Obinze just said ‘trunk,’ ma. He said it’s in the trunk of your car,” she said. In their America-

Britain jousting, she always sided with his mother.

“Trunk is a part of a tree and not a part of a car, my dear son,” his mother said. When Obinze pronounced “schedule” with the k sound, his mother said, “Ifemelunamma, please tell my son I don’t speak American. Could he say that in English”(85-86)?

Obinze’s mother deliberately emphasizes the difference between “part of a tree” and “part of a car” to underscore that when signs are misused, they confound different realities and truths, and become aberrant. Her linguistic behavior reminds us of George Orwell’s (1984: 67) book about the reduction and strictly narrow definition of words: “Every concept that can ever be needed, will be expressed by exactly one word, with its meaning rigidly defined and all its subsidiary meanings rubbed out and forgotten.” Similarly, “In 1995, [...] his Royal Highness the Prince of Wales was reported by The Times as complaining to a British Council audience that American English is ‘very corrupting.’ Particularly, he bemoaned the fact that ‘people tend to invent all sorts of nouns and verbs and make words that shouldn’t be’ (PBS.org 2015). Such efforts are designed to control history, freedom, the ability to think for oneself and by oneself without any fear of being watched or victim of Big Brother’s wrath. It also resonates with Curzan’s argument (2014) when she says that verbal hygiene consists of efforts a group dictating to the rest what to say in order to respect societal linguistic norms and expectations.

This colonial legacy and linguistic complex manifest itself in Mrs. Akin-Cole’s perception of education in French versus British schools: “You must send her to the French school. They are very good, very rigorous. Of course, they teach in French but it can only be good for the child to learn another civilized language, since she already learns English at home” (34-35). The use of “civilized language” echoes social Darwinism which seeks to rank societies and languages as savage, barbaric and civilized. This attitude is a clear indication of the subaltern embracing the dominant ideology and world perception (Hardiman et al 2007). There is a parallel with Lippi-Green’s (2012: 335) criticism against the use of mainstream American English as a means of exclusion: “First, one person or group must want to make another person or group believe that their language – and hence their social allegiances and priorities – are inferior. Second, that targeted person or group must become complicit in the process.” Thus, in *Americanah*, Akin-Cole views the West as the apex of civilization as opposed to Nigerian society and educational programs, which according to her are still at the developmental stage or sometimes corrupt by local practices.

Also, some characters have a striking similarity with Lakunle, the “modern gentleman” in Wole Soyinka’s *The*

Lion and the Jewel performed in 1959 and published in 1963. While Soyinka seems to encourage the return to tradition, in *Americanah*, Ojiugo rather shows pride when her daughter speaks perfect British English: “Yes, Nne,” she said, and, turning to Obinze, repeated her daughter’s words in an exaggerated British accent. “Mummy, may I have one please? You see how she sounds so posh? Ha! My daughter will go places. That is why all our money is going to Brentwood School” (299). Once again, place, language, accent and success are associated. But the sarcasm behind all this is the infatuation for all thing British and the blind mimicry of perfect British accent which indeed is laughable modernity. Ojiugo invested in her daughter’s education to ensure that she speaks perfect British English, but not to be like one of those men wearing “shiny chains” around their neck or becoming “rappers” (298). British English is associated with perfection. Any other type of English is labelled as worthless. It is as if British English is sufficient to capture all speakers’ histories, needs, desires and aspirations. There is the negation of one’s origin and identity and the feverish attempts to embrace western culture or modernity. This is in line with Edward Said’s argument about the colonized appropriation of colonial discourse to talk about their own realities: “...stories are at the heart of what explorers and novelists say about strange regions of the world; they also become the method colonized people use to assert their own identity and the existence of their own history” (2012: xiii).

Yet, when her daughter’s friends’ parents speak with British accent, she is quick to criticize them for pretending to be who they are not. “I think she was wearing something illegal, like the fur of an extinct animal, and she was trying to pretend that she did not have a Russian accent, being more British than the British!”(300) Expressions such as “illegal” or “extinct animal” show how she criminalizes them or characterizes them as out of place and time or “extinct” (an allusion to extinct primitive beings), and yet being modern in a conspicuous manner, “more British than the British.” Thus, the colonized appears as the ardent defender of the colonizer, in this case, the defender of British linguistic and cultural heritage.

Ironically, while some characters are striving to embrace the West, the West on the other hand seeks to deport them. Such is the case of Obinze who has become invisible, nameless, haunted by the fear of deportation. When he becomes visible, he is perceived with suspicion or as an “illegal immigrant.” He will be rejected by Britain and deported in humiliating conditions. His deportation will be a blessing in disguise as he will become “somebody” back in Nigeria, yet after a long period of ordeals, including avoidance by friends and failed job applications. Yet the foreign has always been part of his dreams, aspirations and projects just like many other Nigerians. Despite the humiliating rejection, they

still celebrate the foreign in their everyday dream and aspirations. It is a symbolic capital whose display shows class, taste and distance from the local which is considered as lower quality. One can see the manifestation of symbolic capital in Aunt Onenu's following statement:

"Most of my staff are foreign graduates while that woman at Glass hires riffraff who cannot punctuate sentences!" Ifemelu imagined her saying this at a dinner party, "most of my staff" making the magazine sound like a large, busy operation, although it was an editorial staff of three, an administrative staff of four, and only Ifemelu and Doris, the editor, had foreign degrees"(495).

Exaggeration of class position is common among the characters that are always on the lookout for the slightest opportunity to display their distinction either regarding their education, job, English, ethnicity, religion, "taste" and diet. In short, characters have a high opinion of themselves and their tastes. Ifemelu takes a job at Doris for being vegetarian and speaking with a "teenage American accent" (495). Both accent and taste become subject of biting criticism. Doris' use of English, especially her intonation and shift from "teenage American Accent" to "stolid Nigerianness" are signs of instability and ambivalence. As for Aunt Onenu, she sees the foreign as part of her marketing strategy. There is in her discourse, the perception that the foreign could attract customers and be a source of visibility and economic prosperity. "You are a pretty girl," Aunt Onenu said, nodding, as though being pretty were needed for the job and she had worried that Ifemelu might not be. "I liked how you sounded on the phone. I am sure with you on board our circulation will soon surpass Glass. You know we are a much younger publication but already catching up to them"(483)!

Throughout the novel, characters are preoccupied with language and representation. It is hard not to notice that *Americanah* is a novel about linguistic market and the fungibility of linguistic capital not just in speaking "elevated English" but also what one reads or talks about. "I read American books because America is the future, Mummy. And remember that your husband was educated there." "That was when only dullards went to school in America. American universities were considered to be at the same level as British secondary schools then. I did a lot of brushing-up on that man after I married him" (84-85). Writing being another form of language, one can easily understand that reading American books is tantamount to aspiring for the future. Yet, Ifemelu's mother refers to American schools in a condescending manner: only slow-minded people attended American schools. This is the epitome of language attitude and an

exaggerated sense of superiority and distinction as echoed in Bourdieu's writing (1984). Talking about the objectified forms of cultural capital is also a source of distinction as if to say, "I am what I consume or I am what I read." This reminds the reader of Lakunle's infatuation for western clothes, style, poetry, words and books to seduce Sidi (Soyinka 1963). Thus, Obinze tries to persuade Ifemelu to read "proper books" such as *Huckleberry Finn*, which she rejects as "unreadable nonsense" (81). However, when she goes to America, Obinze sends her a list of books that he believes she should read:

Obinze suggested she read American books, novels and histories and biographies. In his first e-mail to her— a cybercafé had just opened in Nsukka—he gave her a list of books. The *Fire Next Time* was the first. She stood by the library shelf and skimmed the opening chapter, braced for boredom, but slowly she moved to a couch and sat down and kept reading until three-quarters of the book was gone, then she stopped and took down every James Baldwin title on the shelf. [...]She wrote to Obinze about the books she read, careful, sumptuous letters that opened, between them, a new intimacy; she had begun, finally, to grasp the power books had over him. [...]She read the books on Obinze's list but also, randomly, pulled out book after book, reading a chapter before deciding which she would speed-read in the library and which she would check out" (166-167).

Books have power and they bridge and enhance her love and relationship with him. For Ifemelu, reading is not just a way of evading boredom; it is a way of living her love and relationships with Obinze. Reading is therefore the fulfilment of her dreams, aspirations and quest for knowledge of the outside world and herself. Through reading, "...America's mythologies began to take on meaning, America's tribalism— race, ideology, and region— became clear. And she was consoled by her new knowledge" (166-167). Books enable to overcome geographic boundaries, create relations and bring people closer together. Thus, by reading the same books, people could imagine they share a lot in common in terms of cultural capital, tastes and world views. The following passage captures Ifemelu's perception on this issue: "Ifemelu and Jane laughed when they discovered how similar their childhoods in Grenada and Nigeria had been, with Enid Blyton books and Anglophile teachers and fathers who worshipped the BBC World Service" (136). Thus, family and educational actors are all engaged in deifying British media symbolized by the BBC. Without specifying which of Enid Blyton books they read, one should note here that Enid Blyton was also a prolific and

controversial writer accused of xenophobia, racism and sexism in some of her writings. As discussed in the following passage by Coppard (2013: 48):

“In *The Little Black Doll*,] “A black-faced doll is disliked by his owner, Matty, who considers him black and therefore ugly. The other toys don’t like him either, so he runs away and is befriended by a fairy. When he sets off in the rain to fetch a doctor for the fairy, who has fallen ill, he finds that all his blackness has been washed off, and that underneath he is pink. Returning to Matty with his pink face, he now finds himself accepted both by her and other toys.”

Ifemulu and Jane seem to admire, almost naively Enid Blyton’s books without realizing how controversial she was. It is as if they read such authors to get rid of their “ugliness” and to achieve beauty and higher status in the eyes of their former colonial masters. It could also be an attempt to elevate oneself to the level of the writer whose educational and cultural capital are celebrated by the middle class. Yet, the irony of it all is that they are rather objectified like the “little black doll.” As Ngũgĩwa Thiong’o (1986:17) observes: “the language of an African child’s formal education was foreign. The language of the books he read was foreign. The language of his conceptualization was foreign. So, the written language of a child’s upbringing in the school (even his spoken language within the school compound) became divorced from his spoken language at home.” There is a kind of divorce and dissociation with local realities.

Interestingly, the books that Obinze proposed to Ifemelu include “The Fire Next Time” by James Baldwin where the narrator says, “Know whence you came. If you know whence you came, there is really no limit to where you can go” (Baldwin 2013:8). Yet, the characters often try to emulate “others” and to ridicule the local. They do not attempt to focus on their origin, their roots or who they really are. And when they do, they paint their roots in a negative light. As Fanon (2008: 25) puts it, “To speak a language is to take on a world, a culture. The Antilles Negro who wants to be white will be the whiter as he gains greater mastery of the cultural tool that language is.” The following passage illustrates such a behavior:

“Ginika, just make sure you can still talk to us when you come back,” Priye said. “She’ll come back and be a serious Americanah like Bisi,” Ranyinudo said. They roared with laughter, at that word “Americanah,” wreathed in glee, the fourth syllable extended, and at the thought of Bisi, a girl in the form below them, who had come back from a short trip to America with odd affectations, pretending she no longer

understood Yoruba, adding a slurred r to every English word she spoke” (79).

This highlights Frantz Fanon’s discussion of the ridiculousness of hypercorrection of the Black man striving preposterously to outdo the French in speaking the language. The zealous quest for distinction often leads characters to show disdain and disgust for that which looks “too simple, vulgar, facile or down-to-earth (Bourdieu 1984: 486). After all, distinction and tastes are also about the kinds of educational or cultural goods that one consumes. There is a kind of hierarchy underlying the categories of books that one reads: the hierarchy of readers through the hierarchy of reading (Bourdieu 1984). This is illustrated in Yemi’s perception of worthy books qualified as “true literature.”

“Yemi had studied English at university and Obinze asked him what books he liked, keen to talk about something interesting at last, but he soon realized that, for Yemi, a book did not qualify as literature unless it had polysyllabic words and incomprehensible passages. “The problem is that the novel is too simple, the man does not even use any big words,” Yemi said. It saddened Obinze that Yemi was so poorly educated and did not know that he was poorly educated” (38).

Yemi’s special evaluation criteria of valuable literature, boils down to “polysyllabic words and incomprehensible passages.” The conundrum is apparent when one puts side by side “incomprehensible” and “quality.” Very often, there is a dual and conflictual representation of both the foreign and the local. For instance, “I met this man recently,” Chika said. “He is nice o, but he is so bush. He grew up in Onitsha and so you can imagine what kind of bush accent he has. He mixes up *ch* and *sh*. I want to go to the **chopping** center. Sit down on a **sheer**.” They laughed. (302; *bold is mine*). The mimicry of the “bad accent” is meant to ridicule linguistic interference. This is meant to highlight the violation of linguistic norms, and therefore the incapacity of the colonized to reach the “civilized” way of articulating everyday practice such as “shopping” rather than “chopping” (which is destructive). There is an implicit association between “butchery” and “chopping,” and therefore the “butchering” of “civilized language. “The local threatens the purity of Western language, and therefore sociolinguistic and cultural heritage. It appears that the colonizer is no longer the only one in charge of enforcing expected rules of daily discursive practices. Now, the colonized took upon themselves to self-police. They became both subject and object of linguistic surveillance.

Yet in London, Chika has to comply with the socioeconomic and political constraints of immigration. Even though her linguistic comments are discriminatory, she is compelled to recognize other Nigerians with “bush

accent.³She rather views her discriminatory and hostile attitude as a laughable subject. However, in London (a different place), there is a blurring of socioeconomic, geographic and ethnic boundaries. She is therefore forced to associate with people from Onitsha despite the deep feeling that she is better than them because of her better English pronunciation. Ifemelu's "allergy" to accent might stem from her deep frustration when Cristina looked down on her during the international student's orientation (163). The narrator always directs a biting criticism against characters she perceives as attempting to sound English or American, especially when she dislikes them:

"Bartholomew wore khaki trousers pulled up high on his belly, and spoke with an American accent filled with holes, mangling words until they were impossible to understand. Ifemelu sensed, from his demeanor, a deprived rural upbringing that he tried to compensate for with his American affectation, his gonnas and wannas" (141-142).

Yet, she takes pride when Obinze notes that she does not have an American accent. However, when he suggests that her written language does not reflect "the Ifemelu" that he had known, she becomes a little sensitive:

"You don't have an American accent."
 "I made an effort not to."
 "I was surprised when I read the archives of your blog. It didn't sound like you."
 "I really don't think I've changed that much, though."
 "Oh, you've changed," he said with a certitude that she instinctively disliked.
 "How?"
 "I don't know. You're more self-aware. Maybe more guarded." (534-535)

Though Ifemelu says that she "made an effort not to" speak American, the reader remembers that her first encounter with Cristina Tomas at the international students' orientation was a total disappointment and frustration. She felt humiliated and even started to learn American English as follows:

"She realized that Cristina Tomas was speaking like that because of her, her foreign accent, and

she felt for a moment like a small child, lazy-limbed and drooling... She had spoken English all her life, led the debating society in secondary school, and always thought the American twang inchoate; she should not have cowered and shrunk, but she did. And in the following weeks, as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent" (163-164).

Yet, when Ifemelu does not sympathize with a character, she is prompt to attack his/her linguistic abilities or educational background as illustrated in the following passage:

Edusco had only a primary-school education before he began to apprentice for traders; he had started off with one stall in Onitsha and now owned the second-largest transport company in the country. He walked into the restaurant, bold-stepped and big-bellied, speaking his terrible English loudly; it did not occur to him to doubt himself (561).

It is as if those who did not "ease in the language itself," to borrow from Ifemelu herself, should not even try to speak it or if they have to, they should keep a low profile or remain silent. One cannot but ask the question, borrowing from James Baldwin (*The Fire Next Time*); should characters learn to stay where they come from, or in other words, "make peace with mediocrity?" There is disgust or disdain for characters with rural background or up-bringing, or characters who speak English with local accent.

Further, the narrator takes the reader to Britain to explore "the language question." There, Adichie provides a situation where she highlights the use of pidgin and Yoruba, especially for the undocumented immigrants as follows: "Later, on the train to Essex, he [Obinze] noticed that all the people around him were Nigerians, loud conversations in Yoruba and Pidgin filled the carriage, and for a moment he saw the unfettered non-white foreignness of this scene through the suspicious eyes of the white woman on the tube" (320). The familiar seems to create discomfort or to remind one's origins opposed to the longing for "the foreign." Yet, the narrator always snubs any attempt to sound foreign, talk about the foreign, write about the foreign and eat foreign food. In short, there is a kind of love-hate relationships between the colonized and the colonizer which translates the permanent quest to outdo each other. The foreign is "suspicious" in the British eyes because even though it is close; it is still distant and difficult to grasp.

³Her attitude reminds the reader of a French movie titled *Bienvenue chez les Ch'tis* (Welcome to the Sticks) in which Philippe had hard time understanding Antoine who mispronounces "s" for "ch". Though comic, the movie also highlights linguistic barrier and the negative perception of French Northerners by Parisians.

Sociolinguistic Essentialism and the Myths of Place and Home

While language is part of human behavior, it is also a metaphor to capture everyday practice, performance and tactics in *Americanah*. Yet, practices are dynamic as they morph to capture our diverse and rich experiences. According to Bucholtz (2004: 382), tactics refer to "... the local, situated, and often improvised quality of the everyday practices through which individuals, though restricted in their freedom to act by externally imposed constraints, accomplish their social goals." In *Americanah*, characters engage in linguistic battle for identity, authenticity, authentication, legitimacy and belonging. Such conflictual and essentialist representations are rife in the novel. Linguistic insecurity and the permanent quest for acceptance are well-captured in the following statement by Wambui:

"Very soon you will start to adopt an American accent, because you don't want customer service people on the phone to keep asking you 'What? What?' You will start to admire Africans who have perfect American accents, like our brother here, Kofi. Kofi's parents came from Ghana when he was two years old, but do not be fooled by the way he sounds. If you go to their house, they eat kenkey every day. His father slapped him when he got a C in a class. There's no American nonsense in that house" (172).

Further, there is *quasi-pathologization* of the self. For Auntie Uju, speaking English about something means refusing to recognize it. In her eyes, English has become the language of abstraction and distancing from reality or what she views as "true."

"Auntie Uju scoffed. "Okay, you can speak English about it but I am just saying what is true. There is something scruffy and untidy about natural hair." Auntie Uju paused. "Have you read the essay your cousin wrote?" "Yes." "How can he say he does not know what he is? Since when is he conflicted? And even that his name is difficult?" "You should talk to him, Auntie. If that is how he feels, then that is how he feels." "I think he wrote that because that is the kind of thing, they teach them here. Everybody is conflicted, identity this, identity that. Somebody will commit murder and say it is because his mother did not hug him when he was three years old. Or they will do something wicked and say it is a disease that they are struggling with" (269).

The issue of self-representation and self-awareness resurfaces in the above passage. The English language is used here to highlight the contradiction between "the scruffy and untidy" versus "the natural." English cannot polish the "untidy." That conversation is not only about hairstyle, but also about identity and self-representation.

Once again, the significance of "name" is underscored to show how characters are conflicted and they even have difficulties articulating their own names. Ifemelu once again comments on ignorance and the fact that characters are not even aware of "how inconsequential they had become" (143-144). Consistency is indeed not part of characters daily practices as they are always trying to figure out tactics to achieve their personal goals, including changing their original names (10).

At times, they go to lengths to make sweeping generalization as stated in the following passage, "I do not rent to Igbo people," [the landlord] said softly, startling her. Were such things now said so easily? Had they been said so easily and had she merely forgotten? "That is my policy since one Igbo man destroyed my house at Yaba. But you look like a responsible somebody" (485). There is an essentialization and suspicion of "the other" as being destructive and irresponsible. Yet, Ifemelu seems to be exceptional based on her look. Interestingly, even in Nigeria, there is the refusal to acknowledge shared heritage and therefore belonging. English has become both a bridge and a barrier. The following passage illustrates this attitude:

You see, this is the problem with you Igbo people. You don't do brother-brother. That is why I like Yoruba people; they look out for one another. Do you know that the other day I went to the Inland Revenue office near my house and one man there, an Igbo man, I saw his name and spoke to him in Igbo and he did not even answer me! A Hausa man will speak Hausa to his fellow Hausa man. A Yoruba man will see a Yoruba person anywhere and speak Yoruba. But an Igbo man will speak English to an Igbo man. I am even surprised that you are speaking Igbo to me."(561)

As one reads Zemaye's comments on Black American, criminality, Cops show, Nigerian emails called 419 resonate and create a highly tense and negative atmosphere and the strong bias on the other as often mediatized. Media representation of African-Americans has become a "gospel truth" in the eyes of Zemaye. In a media saturated culture, English has also become a vehicle for the dissemination of biases.

"Hmm," Zemaye murmured, as though she thought this, discovering race, an exotic and self-indulgent phenomenon. "Auntie Onenu said your boyfriend is a black American and he is coming soon?" Ifemelu was surprised. [...] "Yes. He should be here by next month," she said. "Why is it only black people that are criminals over there?" Ifemelu opened her mouth and closed it. Here she was, famous race blogger, and she was lost for words. "I love Cops. It is because of that show that I have DSTV," Zemaye said. "And all the criminals are black

people." "It's like saying every Nigerian is a 419," Ifemelu said finally. She sounded too limp, too insufficient. "But it is true, all of us have small 419 in our blood!" Zemaye smiled with what seemed to be, for the first time, a real amusement in her eyes. Then she added, "Sorry o. I did not mean that your boyfriend is a criminal. I was just asking."(499-500).

Zemaye's naive and yet quite disturbing statements reflect the pervasive media representation of "black bodies" in American society. The villainization and criminalization of "black bodies" cut across borders and leaves the famous "race blogger" almost speechless. Zemaye's attitude corresponds to what Punyanunt-Carter (2008: 245) said, quoting Gerbner et al (1986) that "... our perceptions of reality are "cultivated" or developed by what we view in the media." The shocking statement by Zemaye "tetanizes" Ifemelu. It is as if linguistic essentialism killed in her the ability to voice her opinion and feelings. She has become almost voiceless. On her blog, she states, "Here's the thing: the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not" (390). Worse, Zemaye embodies the naive and gullible view and perception that what the media circulates is the gospel truth. The characterization of one individual member of a specific group is perceived as a universal truth that applies to all members without distinction. Such absolutist labelling or extremist view is what the writer challenges by caricaturing Zemaye's world perception. Her attitude echoes what Punyanunt-Carter (2008:243)describes in the following passage, "...African American television portrayals typically depicted the following stereotypic personality characteristics: inferior, stupid, comical, immoral, and dishonest...Other stereotypes of African Americans existed, including disrespectful, violent, greedy, ignorant, and power-driven."

Thus, language is used as a tool of marginalization of the downtrodden with no care to elucidate or back up such statements because in the eyes of the speaker, in this case, Zemaye, such generalities need no elucidation. For her, the media language and representation tell the whole truth about African-Americans. Zemaye's love for Cops show is nothing but the expression of the subaltern persuaded that her condition of existence is different from that of those portrayed by the media. The subaltern speaks only to condemn other subalterns in the language of the dominator. Zemaye breaks all linguistic taboos in her condescending view of the other "portrayed as menacing, untidy, rebellious, disrespectful, buffoonish, sexual, immoral, hopeless, untrained, uneducated, and noisy..."Punyanunt-Carter (2008:243). Thus, language becomes a metaphor, a platform for discussing sociolinguistic, historical, political and economic issues. *Americanah* is not just about the old debate on the rapport of African writers and African people with the colonial heritage, it is also a critique of self-negation, and

the call for self-assertion and self-reinvention.

Concluding Thoughts

This paper discussed the place and role of language in the characters' perceptions, worldviews, their status and their sense of place in Nigeria, America and Britain through the narrator's observation and comments. By underscoring the significance of "English language" and identity, socioeconomic and political success, Adichie brings at the forefront the old debate about the role of European or former colonial languages in educating, socializing, informing, shaping and transforming African societies and African people, individually and collectively. The perfect mastery of English as in the case of Ifemelu's father does not necessarily imply success as evidenced by his job loss despite his "elevated English."Through his attitude, the writer highlights the issue of alienation and divorce from the African universe for the blind emulation of the "foreign," which does not necessarily offer any guarantee or stability. The foreign became the symbol of success and the local is almost always associated with backwardness.

Speaking with a foreign accent, having foreign degrees could be monetized and be a source of socio-professional success. Yet, the foreign is not an end in itself. Despite her resistance to speaking American English, Ifemelu could not escape the "linguistic trap" because her blog underscores that, if anything, America has changed her, and she has become more mature in handling sensitive issues. The shadow of the 1962 Makerere conference on the rapport of African writers with English or the colonial linguistic and cultural heritage resurfaces in *Americanah*. While African writers such as Ngũgĩ waThiong'o (1986) decided to shift from English to African language to represent postcolonial realities, others such as Chinua Achebe believed that African writers could and should appropriate the English language in their writings and daily practices. Yet in *Americanah*, characters mock any form of English that is not "British," authentic or "perfect American accent." Any linguistic form that is "hybridized" or "contaminated" by local practices is subject to severe criticism. Such a language attitude echoes Frantz Fanon's criticism of the alienation of Black people in his book "*Black Skin, White Masks*". As Adichie observed, African can appropriate English to express their views in a way that reflects local realities.

In short, the debate about language in the novel is about identity, belonging, distinction and representation. The spoken, written and multimedia potentials are all significant in discussing the issue of identity, class, status and existence. To be and to become are captured in language. All forms and varieties of language are critical to achieve this agenda. Most of all, Ifemelu's return to

Nigeria could also be a metaphor for the return to Africa for self-reinvention and fulfilment of the quest.

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