Verbal Hygiene and the Negotiation of Interpersonal Relationships in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's Americanah and Chika Unigwe's On Black Sisters' Street

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Abstract

The work investigates verbal hygiene in Chimamanda Adichie's Americanah and Chika Unigwe's on Black Sisters' Street and how the practice of verbal hygiene, or the lack thereof, shaped the relationships of the characters in the novels.

Data were collected using a purposive sampling technique from the novels Americanah and On Black Sisters' Street. This is to enable the researcher to collect quality data that are most relevant to the study.

The collected data were analyzed textually through the lens of Relational Work Theory by Locher and Watts. It was found that verbal hygiene is very much present in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* and that the practice of verbal hygiene helped the characters to build relationships that are peaceful and harmonious.

This work also discovered that the words of some characters analyzed in this work are verbally hygienic and aimed at enhancing the positive face of other characters. This contributes immensely to some of the characters having a strong positive face.

The researcher recommends that verbal hygiene be taught as early as literature is introduced to pupils in schools to enable people who do not have the privilege of acquiring higher education to learn the importance of being verbally hygienic, as this will help them become better parents, teachers and citizens.

Keywords: Verbal hygiene, Interpersonal relationships, Americanah, Black Sisters' Street

Introduction

1.1 Background to the study

Verbal hygiene refers to man's urge to meddle in matters of language, whether to prescribe how language should be used or to describe how it is actually used, to praise linguistic conformists, or to correct linguistic deviants. The phrase was coined by the British linguist Deborah Cameron, who describes verbal hygiene as "the urge to meddle in matters of language: that is, the effort to improve or correct speech and writing, or to arrest change in a language" (Cameron, 1995, 1). Verbal hygiene is also known as prescriptivism or language purism, and it has to do with using polite, politically, culturally and socially correct, error-free language to express ourselves.

Cameron (2012) refers to discourses and practices with an aim to make language conform to linguistic, ethical, and political ideals as verbal hygiene. Verbal hygiene may include a number of practices such as aspirations to preserve dialects, mocking of dialects and accents, guidelines on non-sexist language, opposition of such guidelines on the basis of an aim to preserve linguistic traditions, and so on. When editors edit works to conform to a preferred standard, they are practicing verbal hygiene. When a teacher corrects a student's use of language, that teacher is practicing verbal hygiene.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Language is a powerful tool that can be used negatively to humiliate, attack, malign and incite crisis or even war, or positively to create, uplift and make peace. Existing studies on verbal hygiene in the Nigerian context have concentrated almost exclusively on political and public discourse: Nzekwu (2014) examines verbal hygiene as a tool for unity and conflict resolution in Nigeria; Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) study verbal hygiene and ethnic politics through newspaper and online publications; and

Nwabunze (2020) examines polite language as an approach to political-conflict resolution. None of these studies, however, extends the discussion to Nigerian prose fiction, and particularly not to diasporic fiction, where verbal hygiene and its absence are dramatised through sustained characterisation rather than through isolated public utterances.

This gap is significant because, in novels such as Adichie's *Americanah* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, there are extended, richly contextualised examples of careful and careless language use, examples that have not previously been studied through the lens of verbal hygiene. The problem this study addresses, therefore, is the absence of a focused literary study of the relationship between verbal hygiene, and its absence, and the characters' relationships, identity and power in these two novels.

1.3 Purpose of the Study

The purpose of the study is to investigate the use of verbal hygiene in Adichie's *Americanah* and Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street* with the view to determining how verbal hygiene or the absence of it contributes to the quality of human relationships that exist in the novels. The specific objectives of the study are to:

i. Ascertain the level of presence of verbal hygiene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street.*

ii. Determine to what extent the practice of verbal hygiene contributes to peaceful relationships among the characters in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street.*

1.4 Research Questions

This study is guided by the following research questions, which correspond directly to the objectives above:

i. What is the level of presence of verbal hygiene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*?

ii. To what extent does the practice of verbal hygiene shape relationships among the characters in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*?

2.1.0 Conceptual Framework

2.1.1. The Concept of Language

Many definitions of language have been proposed. Henry Sweet, an English phonetician and language scholar, stated: "Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts." According to Robins and Crystal, language is a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. This means that language can be spoken, signed or written. The American linguists Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager opine that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group cooperates. This means that language enables cooperation between social groups.

iii. According to Bloomfield, the totality of the utterances that can be made in a speech community is the language of that speech community. This implies that a

speech community is linguistically tied and that language exceeds idiolect. According to Sapir (1921) Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires through a system of voluntarily produced sounds. This means that language is specific to the human species as animals cannot speak language. It also means that language is non instinctive, so, the act of communicating using language is not done instinctively. According to Saussure (1916). Language is a system of signs consisted of the signifier and signified.

iv. This definition is focused more on how language is used to represent objects that exist in the physical world. Words are the signifier while the objects they represent are the signified. For example, the word 'apple' is a signifier while apple fruit or tree is the signified. According to Haliday 2002, language is a system of meaning, a semiotic system.

v.

2.1.4 The concept of verbal hygiene

The concept of verbal hygiene sits at the centre of some of the most contested debates in linguistics, sociolinguistics and political discourse. The phrase is also used to refer to the processes of controlling, policing, and refining the usage of language, what Cameron (1995) observes to be "the practises born of a desire to ameliorate or to clean up language and which she describes as a single (normative) practise a struggle to control language by determining its nature." It is the act of

purifying our language by removing errors, vulgarities and profanities before presenting it to the world. The initial and arguably the central issue in the research on verbal hygiene is that researchers do not even agree on what the concept is and to what extent it should be used. Cameron (1995) makes verbal hygiene a broad term to refer to "any normative practise surrounding language - grammar manuals, assertiveness, political correctness, and style manuals." This general definition, though intellectually ambitious, is automatically open to the objection that it is so general as to be incapable of analytical rigour.

Cameron (1995) argues that:

> Every society has its ideals of goodness, logic, correctness and civility and most people strive to bring their language to match these ideals. They assess their language and try to improve it, correct their writing or speech, accept linguistic changes that align with their individual and societal ideals and protest linguistic changes that oppose those ideals.

Verbal hygiene practices are inevitable and common to all language users. These practices may be carried out to criticize deviant or incorrect language forms and to impose standards. Both linguists and lay people have strong ideas about how a particular language should sound, look and work. Cameron (1995). What people think about language is often a reflection of what they think about the world. Cameron (1995). "Our norms and values differ", argues Cameron, but "what remains constant is that we have norms and values" Cameron (2012).

Empirical Studies

In addition to conceptual issues, there are serious methodological failures in the empirical literature on verbal hygiene. Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017, p. 53) apply purposive sampling in picking newspaper texts that

hold what they have pre-determined as verbally unhygienic expressions. This method has a flaw to it that is quite clear: the researchers predetermine what is considered to be verbally unhygienic, only use the texts, and consequently, conclude that verbal unhygienic speech is prevalent and harmful. The sample will not be aimed at testing hypothesis but confirming it. Cameron (1995) would presumably reply that such recreates precisely the prescriptivist rationale she criticises speech against a normative standard and then finds that many speakers do not pass. Wegner (2000) expresses the worry of Cameron to the point: the arguments in verbal hygiene debates tend to work by the appeal to authority and emotionalism rather than hard analysis, and academic work that takes the discourse of verbal hygiene and does not critique it does the same.

The weakness that has remained throughout the verbal hygiene scholarship is that they tend to universalise what are actually cultural specific norms. Wegner (2000) reviewed Cameron (1995). is conscious of this issue and claims that the fear that motivates organisations like the Queen English Society is in fact the fear of the other of social fragmentation in the presence of diversity. However, this very structure of Cameron is based on British and generally Western liberal beliefs regarding individuality, face-work, and rational discussion, and can be considered culturally parochial as well. Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) test the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson in one of their applications to Nigerian political speech, which was in fact a theory constructed by Brown and Levinson using mostly English, Tamil, and Tzeltal data. The relevance of such concepts as negative face, which is outlined as the necessity of the person to be independent and not imposed (Nnuta and Ezeifeka, 2017) to a political culture in which the collective ethnic identity is made to be of explicit priority over the individual autonomy

is questionable at best. As Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) themselves admit, that in the case of Nigeria, most of the population tend to identify themselves as firstly as part of an ethnic group, secondly as inhabitants of a local government, and only thirdly as Nigerians. Face, in this case, is not individual but collective, and the norms of politeness should be interpreted in relation to ethnic ingroup and outgroup relationships and not translated on a universalist Western paradigm.

The most critical tension of the verbal hygiene scholarship perhaps, is the tension that Cameron herself defines but never fully accomplishes: the paradox that to study verbal hygiene involves some level of engagement in it. To say, as Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) do, that what our leaders and indeed all Nigerians have to do is to be more loving, respectful and polite in what they say is to use verbal hygiene when they pretend to have analysed it. According to Cameron (1995), verbal hygiene scholarship should aim at challenging verbal hygiene practises we dislike, defending those we deem worthy of us, and determining which are which and asking searching questions about who prescribes to whom, what they prescribe, how, and to what end. This is a good methodological stand, however, as Wegner (2000, p. Cameron herself, Cameron writes, is not always adhering to this neutral analysis perspective in her work, however, in her discussion of feminist verbal hygiene issues, her own beliefs guide her conclusions.

The orientation of the proposed study is even more prescriptive in its orientation since Anuonye et al. introduce verbal hygiene as an activity that parents, teachers, and writers should disseminate and exercise.

This review shows that the verbal hygiene scholarship, despite its authentic findings, is characterised by lack of definition, ideological contradictions, inconsistencies in its methods, cultural parochialism, and an

unsolved paradox in its core. The conceptual foundation that Cameron (1995) has established is highly significant, yet, as Wegner (2000) points out, her model has its contradictions. Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) use the concept beneficially to the Nigerian political discourse but uses circular arguments and theoretically constrained cultural frameworks. The theoretical contribution by Anuonye et al. is potentially a very important addition of the discipline to the literary and African prose-based setting, but it needs to seriously confront these existing contradictions instead of just imposing a prescriptive politeness paradigm on novel works. The most urgent thing that the field requires is a more rigorous, reflexive, and culturally situated explanation of verbal hygiene - one that takes seriously the colonial histories of language norms, the structural circumstances that give rise to verbal violence and the literary complexity of language in creative texts. Until these gaps are filled in, verbal hygiene scholarship runs the risk of being, ironically, as ideologically debilitated as the discourses to which it is directed to present an alternative.

In 2014, Nzekwu, Ifeanyi Jackson conducted research on Verbal Hygiene in the Use of the English Language: A Tool for Unity, Conflict Resolution and Sustainable Development in Nigeria. The problem that led to the study was the verbal wars that ensued between Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups sparked off because of the condemnation of Obafemi Awolowo and some humanitarian issues raised by Chinua Achebe In his bestselling autobiography, There was a country: A personal history of Biafra Nzekwu 2014 posits that even though freedom of speech is guaranteed for all citizens, it has been abused by Nigerian leaders who capitalize on this opportunity to achieve their selfish and hateful agenda. The research found out that the major cause of poor verbal hygiene in Nigeria is the heterogeneous nature of

Nigerian society. Nigerians tend to be divided among ethnic, political, religious, social and even economic lines.

3.1 Research Design

This study employs a qualitative research design to investigate the level of verbal hygiene present in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street.* A qualitative research design is a research approach that focuses on gathering and analyzing non-numerical data in order to gain a deeper understanding of a phenomenon. It prioritises meaning, context, and interpretation over measurement and statistical analysis. This type of design is particularly suited to literary and linguistic studies because it allows the researcher to pay careful attention to language, structure, and meaning in a text. The researcher chose this design because verbal hygiene, as a concept, is best understood through the close study of how language operates within particular social and relational contexts, something that numbers alone cannot capture. Qualitative research also allows the researcher to identify patterns, themes, and meanings that emerge from the primary texts themselves, rather than imposing predetermined categories on the data.

3.2 Area of Study

The research focuses on discovering to what extent verbal hygiene is present in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street.* The field of interest thus lies under both literary linguistics and sociolinguistics with special focus on the representation of social attitudes to the use of language.

3.3 Population of the Study

The population of the study is *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street.* These two novels were selected because they are the works of contemporary Nigerian female writers who explore the theme of language,

identity, and power in the Nigerian diasporic experience. The two texts together provide a rich and varied corpus for examining verbal hygiene across different social settings, characters, and narrative situations.

3.4 Sample and Sampling Technique

The sample in this study are selected text passages from both novels which have clear examples of verbal hygiene in its direct, implicit and institutional forms. The sampling technique used is purposive sampling or judgmental sampling. Purposive sampling is a non-probability sampling method that involves the researcher's choice of units or items from the population that are relevant to the research questions and objectives of the study. This method is commonly employed in qualitative literary studies as it enables the researcher to concentrate on the most relevant and informative parts of the text for the research under consideration. The researcher chose passages that clearly illustrate verbal hygiene practices, such as instances of explicit language policing, implicit social norms, and institutional control of speech, because they directly address the research questions that guided this study.

3.5 Method of Data Collection

The primary method of data collection employed in this study was close reading of the primary texts. Close reading is the careful, detailed, and analytical reading of a literary text with close attention to language, structure, diction, tone, and meaning. It is the most appropriate method for this study because verbal hygiene as a concept is embedded in the specific choices characters make with language, including what they say, how they say it, what they refuse to say, and how they respond to the language of others. Data was gathered through careful and systematic reading of Chimamanda Adichie’s Americanah and Chika Unigwe’s On Black Sisters’ Street. Passages that showed instances of verbal hygiene in any of

its three forms (direct, implicit, and institutional) were identified and selected as the data for this study.

3.6 Method of Data Analysis

A qualitative text analysis will be used in analyzing the level of verbal hygiene present in *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street*. The reason for choosing this method is that it enables the researcher to focus on quality and relevance rather than quantity. The analysis was guided by the three categories of verbal hygiene identified in the literature: direct, implicit, and institutional. For each research question, relevant textual evidence was drawn from the novels, examined in relation to Locher and Watts's Relational Work Theory (2005, 2008), and interpreted with attention to how language practices shape relationships, identity, and power in the diasporic context. The researcher employed content analysis and close reading together to identify patterns in the verbal behaviour of characters, examine the relational effects of those patterns, and draw conclusions that address each research objective.

Introduction

Language is never neutral. In each word, each silence, each word choice or emphasis, there is a burden of social expectation, cultural pressure and negotiated relationship. The concept of verbal hygiene is a term most closely associated with Cameron (1995) which refers to the prescriptive norms and practices surrounding language use, often manifesting as explicit instructions about correct speech, unspoken cultural assumptions about linguistic appropriateness, and institutional mechanisms that regulate expression. In short, verbal hygiene asks: who gets to speak, how, in what form, and with what consequences for deviation?

Research Question 1

The Level of Presence of Verbal Hygiene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*

To answer this question, the study adopts Locher and Watts's Relational Work Theory (2005, 2008). This theory offers a discursive approach to politeness that goes beyond polite behaviour alone. It covers the full range of interpersonal interaction, including rudeness, silence, and coercion. Using this framework, verbal hygiene is not just a matter of good manners. It is a lens through which we can see how language is used to build, maintain, or break relationships. Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) define relational work as "the work people invest in negotiating their relationships." In both Americanah and On Black Sisters' Street, verbal hygiene operates across three levels: direct, implicit, and institutional. Each of these levels is clearly present in the novels, as shown in the analysis that follows.

In *Americanah*, the encounter between Ifemelu and Cristina Tomas at university registration is a pointed illustration of direct verbal hygiene. The hyperbolical speech of Cristina, syllable-by-syllable, is not a gesture of assistance, but an evaluation: "I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?"

The answer to this, given by Ifemelu, is straightforward: "I speak English." The response that Cristina gives is worse: "I bet you do. I just don't know how well." The relational work being performed here, in Locher and Watts's (2005) terms, is one of relational positioning: Cristina invests in a relationship that places her as linguistic arbiter and Ifemelu as suspect. It is the physical effect that Adichie describes in her prose with such devastating simplicity: She shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf." This is verbal hygiene operating as psychological diminishment (language policed not for communicative efficiency but for social control.)

The classroom debate on the N-word in *Americanah* offers a more formalised site of direct verbal hygiene. Professor Moore puts

the discussion in a cautious manner: "Among the things I would like us to discuss is how we are portraying the history in popular culture and the use of the N-word is definitely a significant aspect of that. What follows is a sustained negotiation; precisely the kind of relational work Locher and Watts (2008) describe. It is one in which students debate not just the word itself but who has the right to say it, in what contexts, and with what consequences. One of the students argues: I do not believe that it needs to be used in movies as in this case, people who should not use it can use it and cause some other people feelings. Here, verbal hygiene is not simply imposed from above; it is actively constructed and contested in dialogue. The classroom is turned into a discursive space where the language norms are negotiated publicly, showing that language norms are not as solid as they might be.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, direct verbal hygiene is more authoritarian. The woman controlling the females in her household, the control of Madam is, in essence, a control of their voices:

"Silence and total obedience. That's the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard. Capisce?" (102)

And again: "I talk, you listen. You understand?" (102). These are not prescriptions regarding politeness; these are the system of domination. Relational work here, as Locher and Watts (2005) would argue, is invested not in maintaining a relationship but in eliminating the other party's capacity to participate in one. Communication is diminished to one-way communication. Brother Cyril similarly exercises direct verbal hygiene through religious prescription: "Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (109). Here, the weaponisation of language is a moral code, biblical, authoritative, absolute, and it does not control

only speech but also body, conduct, and silence.

Table 1: Overview of Verbal Hygiene Presence in *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street*

Novel	VH Category	Presence Level	Key Instance
Americanah	Direct	MODERATE–HIGH	Cristina Tomas policing Ifemelu's English at university registration
Americanah	Implicit	HIGH	Ifemelu's deliberate abandonment of her adopted American accent
Americanah	Institutional	HIGH	Mandatory class participation graded as part of final assessment
On Black Sisters' Street	Direct	HIGH	Madam's command: "Be seen, not heard" as a rule of the household
On Black Sisters' Street	Implicit	MODERATE	Sisi's practised smiles concealing her grief and inner life
On Black Sisters' Street	Institutional	HIGH	Immigration office interrogation regulating how stories must be told
On Black Sisters' Street	Direct	HIGH	Brother Cyril's religious prescription: "Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (109) , language weaponised as moral authority controlling body, conduct, and speech

Direct Verbal Hygiene: Explicit Language Policing in Both Novels

The most visible form of verbal hygiene is the direct kind: explicit instructions, corrections, and condemnations of how language is or should be used. This form is abundant in both novels, and it is most likely to be elicited in the areas of social power: in classrooms, families, workplaces, and religious institutions.

Table 2: Direct Verbal Hygiene and their Relational Effects

Novel	Speaker / Actor	Textual Evidence	Relational Work Effect
Americanah	Cristina Tomas	"I. Need. You. To. Fill. Out. A. Couple. Of. Forms. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?"	Diminishes Ifemelu; positions her as linguistically inferior
Americanah	Professor Moore / Students	"Why was 'nigger' bleeped out?" , classroom debate on the N-word in film	Formal negotiation of language norms; exposes racial boundaries of speech
Americanah	Doris (editor)	Critique of Ifemelu's writing as "too snarky"; demand for "wholesome" tone	Enforces corporate-acceptable voice; marginalises authentic expression
On Black Sisters' Street	Madam	"Silence and total obedience. That's the rule of the house. Be seen, not heard. Capisce?" (102)	Eliminates relational agency; speech becomes a controlled privilege
On Black Sisters' Street	Brother Cyril	"Thou shalt beat him with the rod, and shalt deliver his soul from hell" (109)	Religious authority fused with linguistic control; compliance enforced
On Black Sisters' Street	Ama's Mother	"Girls who let boys see them naked are not good girls" (155)	Cultural verbal hygiene regulating gendered speech and self-expression

Implicit Verbal Hygiene: The Rules Nobody Announces

Perhaps the most pervasive form of verbal hygiene is the implicit kind. These are the unspoken rules on how to talk, which feelings to act, what accent will indicate that it is part of the group, and when it is the only safe mood. They do it, as Locher and Watts (2008) would acknowledge, by the silent building of social expectation as opposed to the proclamation. For the characters in both novels, implicit verbal hygiene is both inescapable and exhausting.

Adichie is a very keen critic of these standards. In *Americanah*, Ifemelu observes

the politeness in the culture of American English:

> They avoided giving direct instructions: they did not say ‘Ask somebody upstairs'; they said 'You might want to ask somebody upstairs.' When you tripped and fell, when you choked, when misfortune befell you, they did not say 'Sorry.' They said ‘Are you okay?’ when it was obvious that you were not.

This observation shows how the norm of politeness-through-indirectness functions as a form of verbal hygiene: it regulates emotional directness, softens communication to the point of meaninglessness, and excludes those who were not socialised into its logic. In the case of Ifemelu, the immigrant, these are unspoken rules, which she did not negotiate, but were rather a part of the furniture against which she bumped into. Locher and Watts (2005) notes that “relational work is always a negotiation, but a negotiation requires both parties to know the terms. Ifemelu often did not. This is further advanced in the blog post on the topic of racialised communication norms.

Ifemelu writes:

> You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area. It is called the black nod. It is a way for black people to say ‘You are not alone, I am here too.’ ... In describing black women you admire, always use the word ‘STRONG’ because that is what black women are supposed to be in America.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, implicit verbal hygiene operates through the women’s trivial discussions and sometimes through unspoken norms. Living under the same roof, same career, same life of uncertainty, these women are still strangers to each other: “They have never roused each other up to learn anything about them deep” (197). The silence between

them is not a character failure, it is a survival strategy, an unspoken agreement that there has to be depth between them, and depth can only be found in trust, and trust is a luxury in their world. The true story is revealed in the inner world of Sisi: "she smiled, yet beyond the smile her regrets were increasing bigger and bigger" (204). As Locher and Watts (2008) note "communicative acts always embody some form of relational work; in this instance, the relational work is the exhausting labour of saying less than you feel."

Table 3: Implicit Verbal Hygiene, Unspoken Norms and Their Effects

Novel	Type of Implicit Norm	Manifestation in Text	Character Affected
Americanah	Cultural indirectness	Americans say "You might want to ask somebody upstairs" instead of direct instructions	Ifemelu , excluded from unspoken rules she was never taught
Americanah	Racialised speech performance	"You must nod back when a black person nods at you in a heavily white area" , blog post	Black characters generally , policing of racial identity through gesture and language
Americanah	Accent as identity performance	Ifemelu adopts, then abandons, an American accent: "the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will"	Ifemelu , self-regulation of voice to gain social acceptance
Americanah	Emotional lexicon regulation	"They overused the word 'excited,' a professor excited about a new book..." , observed norm of expected enthusiasm	Ifemelu , outsider perspective on prescriptive American emotional language
On Black Sisters' Street	Enforced relational superficiality	"They have never stirred one another enough to find out anything deep" (197)	Sisi, Joyce, Ama, Chisom , shared silence as survival strategy
On Black Sisters' Street	Suppression of grief	"She smiled, but behind that smile her regret grew bigger and bigger" (204)	Sisi , internal verbal hygiene; emotional self-censorship

Institutional Verbal Hygiene: When Systems Regulate Speech

Beyond individual encounters and unspoken norms, verbal hygiene is deeply embedded in institutions such as in universities, workplaces, churches, immigration offices, and the media. Such institutional forms of linguistic control represent some of the most effective, precisely due to the fact that it is supported by authority, policy and consequence. They do not simply imply how a person should talk, but they put it in to practise by system of grading, employment, and asylum decisions, and economic sanctions.

The obligatory attendance policy of classes in the university is one of the most eloquent examples in A*mericanah*. The school glorifies a specific way of speaking, which is common, assertive, outgoing speech, and punishes the lack of it. Ifemelu reflects:

> "She was uncomfortable with what the professors called 'participation,' and did not see why it should be part of the final grade; it merely made students talk and talk"

As an immigrant student still calibrating herself to American academic culture, this institutional norm felt like a verbal hygiene demand she had not been prepared for. In Locher and Watts's (2005) terms, the institution is performing relational work on behalf of a particular communicative norm, one that prioritises a specific cultural style of verbal participation over all others. Outcasts who do not conform to that style are not merely silent, they are punished by an institution.

The magazine environment in *Americanah* extends institutional verbal hygiene into the media space. The editorial content that Aunty Onenu controls, which requires wholesome

language and safe profiles, can be viewed as the most institutionalised form of linguistic gatekeeping. The rejection of Ifemelu as being too snarky in her writing is not the individual taste of Doris but an imposition of institutional voice. The institution has pre-approved language that Ifemelu must generate language that depicts a comfortable, sanitised image of the lives of women. The excluded information such as honest anger, critical analysis, authentic voice, etc. make up what verbal hygiene has deemed unacceptable.

Perhaps the most politically pointed institutional verbal hygiene in *Americanah* appears in the diversity workshops Ifemelu is invited to address. The workshops are meant to be, in theory, an honest race talk, but Ifemelu soon realises that she has to write what they wanted to hear and shun the more extreme or truthful writing of her blog. The workshop is a performative space in which racial verbal hygiene is enforced through the expectations of a white, liberal institutional audience. Authentic speech is replaced by institutionally palatable performance. Locher and Watts (2005) recognize situations like this as relational work constrained not by genuine mutual negotiation but by structural power.

In *On Black Sisters' Street*, institutional verbal hygiene appears most starkly at the immigration office. The procedural language of fingerprinting, photographing, and interrogating is itself a form of verbal hygiene. The process demanding that Sisi present her story in a particular, institutionally legible format is evidence to this. The bureaucratic experience demands compliance not only of the facts but also narrative form. The story of Sisi, written in her first person, is not necessarily qualitative. What Locher and Watts (2008) would characterise as an "asymmetric relational dynamic" is the tone of scrutiny and disbelief the officer with which the linguistic

expression of some respects is deemed credible.

Moreover, the church in *On Black Sisters' Street* is an equally potent institutional site of verbal hygiene. The sermon of the Ghanaian pastor where he states "By the end of the month, money will know your names" (216) - and the attacks on "evil daughters of Eve", introduces the language of religion as a means of regulation. The congregation is not called upon to negotiate; they are supposed to take, internalise and do the language that the institution offers. This is verbal hygiene in its most totalising institutional form: the regulation not just of words but of belief.

Table 4: Institutional Verbal Hygiene and Impacts on Characters

Institution	Novel	Regulatory Mechanism	Textual Evidence	Impact on Characters
University	*Americanah*	Mandatory participation grading	"She was uncomfortable with what the professors called 'participation'... it merely made students talk and talk"	Ifemelu feels penalised for cultural communicative difference
Media / Magazine	*Americanah*	Editorial tone control	Writing dismissed as "too snarky"; demand for "wholesome women's magazine" content	Writers must self-censor to fit institutionally approved voice
Diversity Workshops	*Americanah*	Scripted performance of race discourse	Ifemelu must "say what they wanted to hear" and avoid the truthful content of her blog	Authentic speech replaced by institutionally palatable performance
Immigration Office	*On Black Sisters' Street*	Bureaucratic narrative control	"First we have to take a picture of you... took fingerprints... stamped her inked fingers" (145)	Sisi must conform her story to institutional expectations or be disbelieved
Church	*On Black Sisters' Street*	Sermon-based moral language enforcement	"By the end of the month, money will know your names" (216); condemnation of "evil daughters of Eve"	Congregation expected to receive, internalise, and

				repeat approved language
Sex Work Economy	*On Black Sisters' Street*	Debt bondage as language suppression	"Every month you go to the Western Union and transfer the money to Dele" (152)	Financial coercion enforces silence; dissent is linguistically and physically impossible

Taken together, the evidence from both novels reveals that verbal hygiene is not a peripheral or occasional feature of either text. It is structural. It structures the social worlds that the characters are in and defines their most personal experience of selfhood. In Locher and Watts (2005) framework, "relational work is the effort people invest in negotiating their relationships through language." Both *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* dramatise what happens when that negotiation is severely constrained like when verbal hygiene leaves little room for authentic expression that characters must choose between speaking truly and speaking not to offend or surviving socially.

Verbal hygiene as seen in *Americanah* is primarily a racialised and cultural phenomenon. The passages of American spaces which Ifemelu goes through is the passage through the stratum of the registration desk, the American rule of indirectness, the racial scripts of black social life, and the institutional requirements of academia and media. Each layer does its own relational work, positioning Ifemelu as an outsider who must continuously learn, perform, and often resist the verbal hygiene demanded of her. The interpersonal aspect of social interaction as Locher and Watts (2008) suggest is the whole gamut of politeness to coercion - and Ifemelu is exposed to almost the entire range of it.

On the other hand, *On Black Sisters' Street* presents verbal hygiene in a darker register. The women in the novel are not merely

outsiders trying to cope with a new culture; they are also in structures of debt bondage, religious control, immigration bureaucracy, that does not give them even the most fundamental right of relations, the right to talk. Madam's "Be seen, not heard" is not just a household rule; it is a totalising verbal hygiene that renders the women communicatively invisible. When subjected to Locher and Watts (2005) terms, it can be considered a radical failure of relational work. This is because what is obtainable here is an investment in abolishing one party's right to participate in the negotiation instead of negotiating a relationship. The silence that is imposed on Sisi and the other women is not just a plot device, but it is the state of their exploitation.

The level of verbal hygiene present in both *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street* is high across all three of its dimensions: direct, implicit, and institutional. In *Americanah*, implicit and institutional verbal hygiene dominate, weaving themselves through every layer of Ifemelu's diasporic experience. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, direct and institutional verbal hygiene are most prominent, reflecting the more overtly coercive world the women inhabit. The novels, in combination, provide a multi-textured account of the control, negotiation and resistance of language.

Summarily, what Locher and Watts's Relational Work Theory (2005, 2008) enables us to see is that verbal hygiene is never merely about language; it is always about relationships and the power structures that shape them. When Cristina Tomas slows her speech to interrogate Ifemelu's competence, she is doing relational work of the most diminishing kind. When Madam tells us to shut up, she is not controlling words she is wiping out a human being. When Ifemelu drops her American accent, she is reasserting the relational right to articulate herself.

According to both novels, language is among the central fields where identity, dignity, and power are battled. By reading them through the framework of verbal hygiene and relational work, we discover not just how their characters speak but why , and what it costs them to speak truly.

The Absence of Verbal Hygiene in Both Novels

While the examples discussed so far show verbal hygiene as it is practised, both novels also contain many moments where verbal hygiene is clearly absent. These are times when careless, rude or hurtful words are spoken and go unchallenged and unpunished. The absence of verbal hygiene, as well as its presence, provides a more complete picture of the way language functions in the social worlds Adichie and Unigwe create.

One obvious lack of verbal hygiene in *Americanah* is when Curt, in anger, calls Ifemelu a “bitch” when he finds out she cheated on him (Chapter 31). The novel tells of how Curt used the word like a knife and how the word came out “sharp with loathing.” No apology, no correction, no recognition of the word’s hurtfulness. The story just chronicles the hurt it inflicts on Ifemelu, who is left crying. This is the reverse of verbal hygiene: language that is used most carelessly and woundingly, and which has no social mechanism to soften or correct it.

The other is when Aunty Uju is insulted in public by The General's family, who tell her to get out of the house, calling her a “common harlot” and “prostitute” (Chapter 6). The yelling is loud, abusive and intentionally embarrassing and occurs in the presence of Aunty Uju's young son, Dike. No character in the scene tries to improve or soften this language. This is an example of the lowest form of verbal hygiene: language used solely to denigrate another person, and in front of a child.

Another example is when Ifemelu's American roommate, Jackie, is complaining

vociferously that “we're not her fucking parents” (Chapter 15). This thoughtless and disrespectful comment is overheard by Ifemelu, and contributes to her feeling of being unwelcome and judged. Another minor, but significant, example of the lack of verbal hygiene in the novel is the use of profanity in a way that is meant to irritate, but no one is considered, and no effort is made to determine how it will affect them.

In *On Black Sisters' Street* there are even more remarkable examples of the lack of verbal cleanliness, frequently accompanied by scenes of extreme cruelties. The worst is the verbal assault on Efe by Titus's wife when Efe tells Titus that he has fathered his wife’s child (61-62). The wife calls Efe “Useless girl” (61), “Ashawo” (61), “Useless goat” (61), “Shameless whore” (61), and “useless idiot” (page 61), and curses her with the words “May a thousand fleas invade your pubic hair” (61). During this attack, the man who fathered the child, Titus, does not say a word and goes on eating. In the scene no one corrects the wife's language. It is one of the most obvious instances of unregulated language, of the most unhygienic language, in either novel, and used to humiliate a young woman who has already been wronged.

The women often use profane and crude language amongst themselves without correction throughout On Black Sisters' Street. Ama's frequent cursing, for example, “Where is my fucking mascara?” The other women pass by without comment the following: “Fuck off” (8), “Fucking shitheads, that's what they are” (97). This is a family where there is no verbal hygiene among the women, whereas Madam enforces strict verbal hygiene from above. The lack of correction among the women, and the presence of harsh control among Madam, indicates that verbal hygiene in this novel only goes in one direction: from the powerful to the powerless, but not from the powerless to the powerful.

All of these examples demonstrate that the lack of verbal hygiene is not just the reverse of having it. Verbal hygiene is lacking in both novels at times of intense emotion (anger, jealousy, desperation, grief) and is most likely to be lacking in those who have the least power (children, women, people in difficult situations). Verbal hygiene is sometimes used by those in power to control others. If it is not there, the language has a direct impact and this impact is not usually recognized or addressed in the story itself.

Table 5: Instances of the Absence of Verbal Hygiene in Both Novels

Novel	Speaker	Textual Evidence	Location	Effect
Americanah	Curt	Calls Ifemelu a “bitch” in anger, with no correction or apology	Chapter 31	Leaves Ifemelu in tears; ends the relationship on a note of verbal cruelty
Americanah	The General's relatives	Shout abusive words such as “common harlot” and “prostitute” at Aunty Uju	Chapter 6	Public humiliation of Aunty Uju in front of her young son
Americanah	Jackie (roommate)	“We’re not her fucking parents”	Chapter 15	Adds to Ifemelu’s sense of being unwelcome and judged
On Black Sisters’ Street	Titus's wife	Calls Efe “Useless girl,” “Ashawo,” “Shameless whore,” “useless idiot”	Page 61, 62	Severe humiliation of Efe; no one corrects the language
On Black Sisters’ Street	Ama	Habitual profanity such as “Fuck off” and “Fucking shitheads”	Pages 5, 8, 97	Passes without correction among the women; shows lack of shared verbal standards

Research Question 2

The Contribution of Verbal Hygiene to Peaceful Relationships Among the Characters in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe’s *On Black Sisters’ Street*

In Americanah, verbal hygiene is most visible through Ifemelu's relationship with the English language itself. When she gets to America, she undergoes a linguistic change, she learns to confuse consonants and mellow out the vowel sounds so that she does not

sound Nigerian but rather American. This, Adichie calls it creaked with consciousness (192), a tiring and self-conscious work. When a telemarketer informs her, that she sounds so American, Ifemelu first receives this as a win, but "she quickly feels the tint of a growing shame that comes with this little victory" (194).

This scene shows the process of negotiating the relational identity that Locher and Watts (2005) refer to as negotiating identity by using language. The accent is not merely a phonetic choice; it is relational work, an attempt to reduce social friction and make interactions smoother. However, as Locher and Watts (2008) remind us, "relational work is never one-sided and always carries costs." The language performance separates Ifemelu not only with her true self but also with the real relationship that is based on true friendship. It is a reclamation of identity and the conditions of her relationships when she finally decides to quit faking the American accent (192).

The clash of verbal hygiene practices across cultures also shapes Ifemelu's interactions with Aisha, the Senegalese braider. The way Aisha speaks is defined by Mariama as the manner of a real market woman, "who is not susceptible to the cosmetic niceties of American customer service" (21). Partly Americanised Ifemelu anticipates a friendlier and more polite register. Neither woman is being rude by her own cultural standards; both are simply practising different forms of relational work. The incongruence, though, produces unease and alienation, which proves that proper relational behaviour, as presented by Locher and Watts (2008), is always a matter of context and a locally agreed-upon standard, and there is no universal standard.

Additionally, verbal hygiene can also damage relationships when it slides into evasion. Obinze's vague explanation to Ifemelu that

he needs "responsibility about what I need to do" (483) is verbal hygiene in its most damaging form. He tries to cushion a bitter reality and deal with the relationship aftermath of a tough choice. But even the evasiveness fails to save Ifemelu; they cut her even deeper since she is deprived of the clarity she requires. This illustrates an important insight from Locher and Watts (2005): relational work that prioritises self-protection over genuine communication can destroy the very relationships it claims to manage.

Equally, the accusation is issued when Ifemelu criticises the way of life of Ranyinudo, who leaves the Nigerian culture of polite indirectness, when she accuses him of "being judgmental" (447). Relational work, when it becomes culturally misaligned or judgmental, fractures rather than fortifies bonds.

In Unigwe's *On Black Sisters' Street*, verbal hygiene operates under far higher stakes. Language is not a social tool to Sisi, Ama, Efe, or Joyce, it is a survival mechanism. Silence emerges as one of the most powerful forms of verbal hygiene in the novel. "The women do not scream or cry when Sisi dies. Rather, there is a thoughtful silence that runs throughout the house" (236). Joyce thinks how bizarre this is and notes that:

> such news should be accompanied by shrieks and tearing clothes... Noise. Loud yells. Something. Anything but this silence that shuts up on you, you do not even have to pull your sleeves to get attention (37).

But it is not emptiness in this silence. It is a group thing, an unwritten rule not to unravel around the loss. Locher and Watts (2005) define relational work as all the effort people invest in managing their relationships, and this silence is precisely that.

Furthermore, coded language and euphemism have a similar purpose. When Ama is contemplating her situation, she puts her situation in perspective: “I get food, I have a roof over my head, I have a life. I can't be greedy” (98). She never identifies the despair under these words as it may break the thin veneer of the home to name it. This is verbal hygiene in the service of relational survival. Locher and Watts (2008) would recognise this as the less visible but equally important side of relational work, namely the management of what is not said and the careful suppression of expressions that might destabilise shared existence.

Ama’s verbal sparring with Dele also reveals how relational work operates in conditions of powerlessness. She strikes out at him with words, “Stupid fuck man. What do you think I am? I look like ashawo to you? (136) but then proceeds to walk off without arguing. This is not merely emotional release; it is a calculated piece of relational work. She defends herself by use of words and refuses to take the conflict to a level where she may lose her life. The entire range that Locher and Watts (2008) outline is present: the explosion is rude by most definitions, but there is certainly a relational objective.

Verbal hygiene in this novel can also be seen to be utilized as a tool of oppression. The way Madam tells Sisi to do things is unsubtle and dictatorial:

> My dear Sisi, here you have nothing to ask questions. You simply do it as you are instructed and you will have a free ride. I talk, you listen. You understand? (102).

This order puts relational negotiation to rest. It is coercive and not collectivist, it dictates silence. Locher and Watts (2008) argue that relational work encompasses impolite and rude behaviour as fully as polite behaviour, and Madam’s command is a clear example: it

is relational work in the service of power, not peace.

Again, the fight between Ama and Sisi over cleaning the bathroom, ignited by suppressed resentments, escalates into physical conflict. Ama's subsequent regret reveals the permanent cost of mismanaged language: “If I had known she was going to die, I'd never have fought with her, I swear” (94). Joyce’s admission that “I was not named Joyce, you know. It's not my real name” (149) adds another layer. The assumed name protects her but also creates emotional distance, a form of self-concealment that fosters mistrust. As Locher and Watts (2005) note, relational work involves ongoing negotiation, and Joyce's concealment makes that negotiation permanently incomplete.

Verbal Hygiene and their Relational Outcomes

The table below maps the key verbal hygiene practices in both novels to their relational outcomes, as understood through Locher and Watts's Relational Work Theory.

Novel	Verbal Hygiene Practice	Example from Text	Relational Outcome (Locher and Watts)
Americanah	Accent performance / code-switching	Ifemelu adopts an American accent (192)	Fosters acceptance initially; fractures authentic selfhood (2005)
Americanah	Cultural indirectness vs. bluntness	Ifemelu’s clash with Aisha at the braiding salon (21)	Cultural mismatch strains the interpersonal relationship (2008)
Americanah	Evasive language / verbal hedging	Obinze’s vague explanation to Ifemelu (483)	Intended to manage conflict but causes deeper emotional hurt (2005)
Americanah	Judgmental / culturally misaligned speech	Ifemelu criticises Ranyinudo: “You sit there and judge everyone” (p. 447)	Fractures friendship; breaches expected relational norms (2008)
On Black Sisters' Street	Communal silence as mourning	Women grieve Sisi in silence (37, 236)	Fosters solidarity; unspoken relational agreement (2005)

Novel	Verbal Hygiene Practice	Example from Text	Relational Outcome (Locher and Watts)
On Black Sisters' Street	Coded language / euphemism	Ama: "I can't be greedy" (98)	Manages fragile peace; suppresses destabilising truths (2008)
On Black Sisters' Street	Controlled verbal outburst	Ama confronts Dele then withdraws (136)	Asserts agency while avoiding escalation; full spectrum of relational work (2008)
On Black Sisters' Street	Enforced silence / linguistic control	Madam silences Sisi: "I talk, you listen" (102)	Oppressive; breeds resentment and emotional isolation (2005)
On Black Sisters' Street	Concealed identity / assumed names	Joyce: "I was not named Joyce" (149)	Protects individual but creates mistrust and fractured intimacy (2005)

Both novels demonstrate that verbal hygiene is never merely about manners or correct usage. It is a constant and often invisible labour, what Locher and Watts (2005) describe as "the work people invest in negotiating their relationships." In *Americanah*, Ifemelu navigates race and identity through careful linguistic performance and, at times, deliberate refusal to perform. In *On Black Sisters' Street*, four women use silence, code, euphemism, and controlled outburst to hold themselves together in conditions of profound vulnerability.

In both texts, verbal hygiene fosters peaceful connection when it respects the relational context of those involved. It fractures relationships when it enforces silence, masks truth, or prioritises self-protection over genuine engagement. The presence of verbal hygiene in these novels is not incidental; it is structural. As Locher and Watts (2008) remind us, "every communicative act embodies some form of relational work", and Adichie and Unigwe both show that the quality of human relationships depends, in no small part, on the quality of the language used to sustain them.

Broken Relationships and the Absence Verbal Hygiene

The findings under Research Question 1 showed several instances where the absence of verbal hygiene damages relationships beyond repair. The last time Curt uses the word “bitch” in *Americanah* (Chapter 31) is when he breaks off his relationship with Ifemelu. No attempt at repair, no apology, no softening. At this point, the relational work described by Locher and Watts (2005) that is required to sustain a relationship is completely neglected and the relationship is terminated.

In *On Black Sisters’ Street*, the verbal attack on Efe by Titus’s wife destroys any possibility of a relationship between Efe and Titus or his family. The terms “Useless girl”, “Ashawo” and “useless idiot” (61-62) are not relational work in the sense of Locher and Watts (2008). They are a complete rejection of relationship, a statement that Efe and her child are not worth talking to with any care. Titus' silence during the attack indicates that he has also separated himself from any relational responsibility.

The examples show that if there is no verbal hygiene at all, relationships do not just deteriorate, they can even disappear. This reinforces the idea that, although imperfect or imbalanced, verbal hygiene is a necessary component in maintaining relationships. When it's completely gone, it's not just a tough time in the relationship, it's the end of the relationship.

5.2 Conclusion

This study aimed at analysing the use of verbal hygiene in *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters Street*, as an analytic tool of Relational Work Theory introduced by Locher and Watts (2005, 2008). The research has demonstrated that verbal hygiene is not a minor or an incidental issue in either novel but one of the core mechanisms of negotiating social power, individual identity, and human relations. In both writings, there is no such thing as neutral language. It is in a continuous process of doing relational work positioning speakers, managing impressions,

enforcing norms, and in certain instances, resisting them.

It is shown in the study that verbal hygiene is a broad spectrum, as politeness and the politic at one end, and the rude and the coercive at the opposite end, and that this spectrum is directly related to the social structures of racism and classism that structure both novels. Characters that follow the verbal hygiene norms imposed on them pay a high price to their identity and wellbeing. The characters that do not conform to these norms risk a lot in terms of social and economic costs. What the two novels eventually attest to, however, is that discovering a personal voice- the true not performed, freely chosen language of self-identification is not solely a linguistic accomplishment but a human one. Relational work, according to Locher and Watts (2008) is that "work that people put in negotiation of their relationship" and the most fundamental of their relationships as we see in both Adichie and Unigwe is the relationship that one has with oneself.

Thus, this research is part of the expanding literature on verbal hygiene in African literature and it confirms the significance of examining the language not only as a system of signs but also as a place of social life.

5.3 Recommendations and Suggestions for Future Studies

From the findings of the present research, it is suggested that at all levels, educators should include the issues of verbal hygiene in literature and language classes to attract attention to the influence of language choices on speakers and people who hear them. Caregivers and parents should also be sensitised on the psychological effects of use of rude and impolite language in the long term, especially with regard to the identity and self-esteem of children.

Future research can be used to expand this study to other African literature written by

other authors to determine whether gender influences the representation and experience of verbal hygiene. Relational Work Theory could also be applied to the studies of the political discourse in Nigeria where the verbal unhygienic behaviour of the public figures has remained to have severe social outcomes. A comparative analysis between the African diasporic literature and the literature written in the African continent can also bring into view some important details as to how migration and displacement exacerbate the demands of verbal hygiene.

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