Verbal Hygiene and Relational Work in Chimamanda 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. It evaluates how the practice of verbal hygiene or the lack thereof, shaped the identity of the characters in the novels. Data were purposively selected from relevant conversations and interactions in the two novels and subjected to qualitative textual analysis. The analysis reveals that verbal hygiene functions as an important interpersonal resource through which characters demonstrate respect, solidarity, consideration, affection, and sensitivity towards others. The study further shows that verbally hygienic expressions contribute to the development and maintenance of harmonious relationships and face-enhancing identity, while the absence or inadequate use of verbal hygiene may create interpersonal tension and damage a person's identity. 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 and helped form their identities in the two novels.

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, Chimamanda Adichie, Americana, Chika Unigwe, Black Sisters' Street

Introduction

The analogy of washing clothes or brushing one's teeth before presenting oneself to the world is often used to describe the impulse behind verbal hygiene: cleaning up one's language means removing spelling, syntactic and grammatical errors, and removing vulgarities and profanities, before presenting it to the world. Practicing verbal hygiene does not mean that one should be stingy with the truth; rather, it means that one should use language responsibly and sensitively.

The way a person uses language reveals something about who they are. Language does not exist in isolation; it is shaped by morality, religion, politics, culture, and education. When we speak, we are also expressing our values and beliefs. The fact that all people, across all cultures, hold norms and values about language use means that verbal hygiene is a universal human practice. Verbal hygiene is not practiced only by experts. Ordinary people, including students, parents, and community members, all engage in it. Motivations for practicing verbal hygiene include effective communication, social acceptance, and the desire for order. Errors in speech can distract listeners and break down communication, making verbal hygiene practically useful in everyday life.

Cameron (1995) illustrates how deeply verbal hygiene is tied to identity and social values. Cameron (1995) argues that the woman's concern is a concern about preserving the orderliness of the world and the integrity of the self against the forces of disorder and fragmentation. Though prescriptivism and verbal hygiene are related, they are not exactly the same. Both prescriptivism and verbal hygiene involve assessing and evaluating language use based on certain standards and norms. However, prescriptivism typically focuses on specific rules for language use whereas verbal hygiene is an umbrella that encompasses a broader range of language-related practices

like language rules, political correctness, public speaking classes, etc. These two vary in their approach to language.

Cameron (2012) notes that verbal hygiene practices cover a wide range of activities, from spelling reform campaigns and style guides to classroom accent policing and workplace language rules. These examples show that verbal hygiene is not limited to formal institutions but is part of everyday social life. Prescriptivism, a conservative and elitist form of language regulation, is just one type of verbal hygiene. As Cameron (2012) notes, it is only one version of the wider human drive to regulate, improve, and control language.

The researcher's motivation for embarking on this study is based on her personal experience in a school environment where a pupil cried when a teacher said in front of her class that she was a waste of her mother's nine months. The pupil, who was having difficulties with reading and writing, but spoke English well, pulled back and started to feel insecure and unwanted around the teacher. Her parents, on hearing of the remark, were deeply aggrieved. This experience was a very direct lesson in the power of the words of one in authority to wound a child long after the words have been spoken. The researcher was motivated to conduct this study because of this concern that parents, guardians and educators may not always be aware of the long-term impact of their words. This concern about the everyday, unexamined power of language provides the impetus for the present study, which turns from the classroom to the novel as a site where verbal hygiene can be observed in a sustained and textured way.

Conceptual Framework

The Concept of Language

George Lakoff defines language as a cognitive tool that reflects our conceptual

system and shapes our understanding of the world." Language reflects and shapes our understanding of the world. Language helps us conceptualize the world. We make language and language in turn, makes us. Charles Hockett argues that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols that enables all people in a given culture to communicate.

On language, Robins writes that:

> Any succinct definition of language makes a number of presuppositions and begs a number of questions. The first, for example, puts excessive weight on "thought," and the second uses "arbitrary" in a specialized, though legitimate, way. A number of considerations (marked in italics below) enter into a proper understanding of language as a subject: Every physiologically and mentally stable person acquires in childhood the ability to make use, as both sender and receiver, of a system of communication that comprises a circumscribed set of symbols (e.g., sounds, gestures, or written or typed characters). In spoken language, this symbol set consists of noises resulting from movements of certain organs within the throat and mouth.

In signed languages, these symbols may be hand or body movements, gestures, or facial expressions. By means of these symbols, people are able to impart information, to express feelings and emotions, to influence the activities of others, and to comport themselves with varying degrees of friendliness or hostility toward persons who make use of substantially the same set of symbols. Different systems of communication constitute different

languages; the degree of difference needed to establish a different language cannot be stated exactly. No two people speak exactly alike; hence, one is able to recognize the voices of friends over the telephone and to keep distinct a number of unseen speakers in a radio broadcast.

Yet, clearly, no one would say that they speak different languages. Generally, systems of communication are recognized as different languages if they cannot be understood without specific learning by both parties, though the precise limits of mutual intelligibility are hard to draw and belong on a scale rather than on either side of a definite dividing line. Substantially different systems of communication that may impede but do not prevent mutual comprehension are called dialects of a language. In order to describe in detail, the actual different language patterns of individuals, the term idiolect, meaning the habits of expression of a single person, has been coined.

Typically, people acquire a single language initially, their first language, or native tongue, the language used by those with whom, or by whom, they are brought up from infancy. Subsequently "second" languages are learned to different degrees of competence under various conditions. Complete mastery of two languages is designated as bilingualism; in many cases, such as upbringing by parents using different languages at home or being raised within a multilingual community, children grow up as bilinguals. In traditionally monolingual cultures, the learning of a second or other language is an activity superimposed on the prior mastery of one's first language and is a different process intellectually.

These definitions converge on a single point that is directly relevant to this study: language is a socially shared, symbolic system through which speakers accomplish more than the transfer of information. It is this social and symbolic dimension of

language, rather than its formal or grammatical properties, that grounds the analysis of verbal hygiene undertaken in Chapter Four, since verbal hygiene is, precisely, the set of practices by which language users manage the social meaning that language carries.

Characteristics of Language

Language is symbolic. Language makes use of symbols to communicate. It is a system of communication whereby people use symbols to express their thoughts, desires, ideas and feelings. Words and symbols used in language carry meaning beyond their literal interpretation. Language also uses icons and indexes to communicate. Words, symbols and indexes can have multiple meanings and meaning may be influenced by context.

Language is arbitrary. The arbitrary nature of language refers to the idea that the relationship between words, signs, or symbols and their meanings is not inherent or natural, but rather established by convention and agreement within a language community. The meaning of a word is not predictable from its form, nor is the form dictated by its meaning. Language manifests its arbitrariness in the following ways: Words don't inherently convey meaning. Word meanings cannot be predicted from their form. Also, language can be shaped by culture so that a word that is found humorous in one culture may be considered impolite in another.

Language is dynamic. Language is constantly changing and diversifying, either into new languages or converging with other languages. It is continuously in evolution and this shift is in response to various social, cultural, historical and technological changes.

Language is social. Language is a social interaction that humans use to express themselves and navigate their environment. Language plays an important role in shaping and reflecting social relationships, power

dynamics and cultural identities. Through language, people build relationships, form social connections, express their cultures, influence others and even perform functions.

Language is specie specific: Language is unique to human beings. This means that only humans possess the unique capacity to acquire, use and comprehend complex language systems.

Language is creative. Even though language contains a finite number of letters, these letters can be combined to generate infinite number of words, phrases, clauses and sentences including novel ones. Language also allows for humour, irony and wordplay. Through language, we can coin new words, innovate sentence structures, create new meanings, adapt language to new contexts and even shape discourse.

Of these characteristics, the social and dynamic properties of language are the most directly relevant here, since verbal hygiene is, by definition, a social and dynamic practice: it is the continual, socially situated work of regulating language that this study traces in the two novels.

Functions of language

Language performs several functions: it enables the sharing of information, the expression of identity, social interaction, persuasion and the expression of emotion. It is, as Goldhaber (1983) observes, a glue that holds society together and allows human beings to live as social creatures. The two functions most pertinent to this study are the expression of identity and the maintenance of social interaction, since it is precisely these two functions of language that verbal hygiene practices act upon: verbal hygiene shapes how identity is expressed and how relationships are sustained or damaged through speech.

Concept of verbal hygiene

The first and perhaps most fundamental problem in the scholarship on verbal hygiene is that scholars have not agreed on what the concept actually means or how broadly it should apply. Cameron (1995) defines verbal hygiene broadly as "any normative practice around language; including grammar guides, assertiveness training, political correctness campaigns, and style manuals." This definition, while intellectually ambitious, is immediately vulnerable to the charge that it is too broad to be analytically precise. If verbal hygiene includes everything from a grammar teacher correcting a student's comma splice to a politician using hate speech, then the concept risks losing its critical bite.

Wegner (2000) notes that "verbal hygiene is a time-honoured stream within the discourse of language that encompasses value-laden prescriptions and proscriptions." However, this formulation, as Wegner is correct in stating, renders virtually all language use, potentially, an act of verbal hygiene, and thus analytically cumbersome. The angle provided by Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) is more grounded and narrower, as it models verbal hygiene as "the application of politically, socially, religiously, linguistically, friendly and polite words to convey our opinions, ideas and views in a particular situation." This definition is much more practical but it also brings its own issues. Who determines what is considered to be friendly or polite? These are judgements that are highly culturally rooted.

The scholars base their model on the Politeness Theory of Brown and Levinson that, though significant, has been massively criticised because it presupposes universal face that fail to explain cultural diversity (Cameron, 1995). Moreover, Oguamanam and Eneremadu (2021) focuses on verbal hygiene as "a positive relational practise one

that helps to bring about peaceful relationships among characters", which is prescriptive in exactly the sense that Cameron cautions about. The irony is keen: the concept that was to criticise prescriptivism in language has come to be used in a prescriptive manner in academia.

Perhaps one of the most significant contributions that Cameron made is that she insisted on the fact that verbal hygiene debates were never about language but about power. According to Wegner (2000) "a summarisation by Cameron, language debates run issues of self-interest, which are real." The grammar controversy in England and Wales of the 1980s triggered by the Education Reform Act of 1988, which Cameron examines in some detail, is put forward as a battlefield of ideology, in which conservatives invoked the concept of correct grammar to impose class and racial divisions. Wegner (2000) states that "Cameron depicts the confusion of linguistic and moral terms - the confusion of the correct with the character and grammar with the honesty." This is a truly enlightening point, and should be approached further in future research than it has been.

However, the very stand of Cameron is not absolutely devoid of ideological suppositions. Wegner is keen to point out that in her chapter on women verbal hygiene, Cameron is inclined to subdue her personal politics over her overall intention (Wegner, 2000). Cameron is extremely critical of popular writing about male-female communication by Deborah Tannen, as he believes it does not describe difference but rather prescribes the way women are supposed to speak, and that the whole genre of self-help communication advice is a business enterprise, which conceals structural inequality. This is a valid point, but by making it, Cameron is pushed to a prescriptive stance herself: she is basically telling women (and by extension, scholars)

what sort of verbal hygiene advice is acceptable. A transition between analyst and advocate is a step that Cameron herself advises against, but she takes.

Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) encounter a similar tension. Their research seeks to investigate the role of ethnic based verbally unhygienic speech in conflict in Nigeria and they find out that there is a close relationship between poor state of verbal hygiene and hate speech, electoral violence and ethnicity in Nigeria. This is an analytically reasonable conclusion, though their model presupposes that a more polite speech would lead to less conflict, which is a causal assertion that cannot be proved empirically. Verbal hygiene may also be the symptom of underlying structural and political issues and not their cause. Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) further admit that "the key reason behind the lack of verbal hygiene in Nigeria is ethnic politics particularly during the period of election.", However, they equally propose verbal hygiene to be the remedy of ethnic politics. It is circular reasoning and it shows a weakness of the scholarship: verbal hygiene is introduced at the same time as the cause of conflict (lack of it leads to conflict) and the solution (its presence would bring about peace), but the structural conditions that give rise to conflict and speech that is verbally unsanitary in the first place are not interrogated.

Linguists engage in verbal hygiene practices mainly for two reasons: to prescribe for the general population how language should work, secondly, to describe to the general population how language actually works. Verbal hygiene is practiced by everybody-linguists, elites, professionals, lay people and even uneducated people. This is because practicing verbal hygiene is a natural skill that comes with using a language. It also signifies that a language user is competent in that language.

The Concept of Identity

The etymology of the term ‘’ Identity ‘’ from the Latin noun “identitas” emphasizes an individual’s mental image of themselves and their ‘’sameness with others’’. Identity encompasses various aspects such as occupational, cultural, religious, national, ethnic, racial, political and linguistic identities, among others. Identity is the qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance and /or expressions that characterize a person or a group. Identity emerges during childhood as children start to comprehend their self-concept, and it remains consistent throughout different stages of life. Identity is shaped by cultural factors and how others perceive and acknowledge one’s characteristics. Identity originates from traits or attributes that individuals may have little or no control over, such as their family background, culture, ethnicity, and linguistic community.

In sociology, emphasis is placed on collective identity in which an individual’s identity is strongly associated with role-behaviour or the collection of group memberships that define them. According to Peter Burke, “Identities tell us who we are and they announce to others who we are.” Identities subsequently guide behavior, leading “fathers” to behave like” fathers” and nurses to behave like “nurses.” In psychology, the term “identity” is most commonly used to describe personal identity, or the distinctive qualities or traits that make an individual unique. Identities are strongly associtated with self-concept, self-image (one’s mental model of oneself), self-esteem, and individuality. Individual’s identities are situated but also contextual, situationally adaptive and changing. Despite their fluid character, identities often feel as if they are stable ubiquitous categories defining an individual, because of their grounding in the

sense of personal identity (the sense of being a continuous and persistent self).

Empirical Studies

In 2017, Nnuta and Ezeifeka conducted research on Verbal Hygiene and ethnic politics in Nigeria: a study of selected newspaper prints and online publications. The work investigates verbal hygiene as fundamental towards achieving unity, conflict resolution and sustainable development in a linguistically, ethnically, culturally and politically diversified Nigerian society. It tries to establish a connection between verbal hygiene and persistent implosion of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and the debilitating consequences of such on virtually all strata of national development. It was found that a strong relationship exists between poor verbal hygiene, hate speech, electoral violence and ethnicity in Nigeria. This work also found out that the speeches of most opinion leaders analysed in the work are impolite and verbally unhygienic and as such impede the positive face of people from opposing ethnic groups, this constitutes serious threat to inter-ethnic relation and cohesion.

Nwabunze (2020), conducted research titled: Prevention, Management and Resolution of Political Conflicts in Nigeria: The Polite Language Approach. The work examines the potency of language in generating and resolving conflicts in Nigeria. He aimed to see how skillful and polite use of language by the political class can be an instrument in preventing, managing and resolving intergroup conflicts in Nigeria. He opines that language serves as an entry point into the cultural life of a people, their ways of reasoning and handling issues; polite and hygienic use of such language can serve as a veritable asset in handling disputes among them. The paper finds that global conflicts, with particular reference to Nigeria, can be

prevented, controlled and managed if the citizens can learn to use language constructively in a manner that does not slur and smear others. The paper also found out that inter-personal, ethnic and national conflicts can be curbed in Nigeria with skillful application of polite language in any communication event. Conclusively, the paper is of the view that the avoidance of conflict-inducing language would enhance fellowship of Nigerian citizens, rather than fellowship of race, ethnicity, religion and class in the country.

The researcher noted that previous studies focused on Verbal Hygiene in the Use of the English Language and Verbal Hygiene and ethnic politics in Nigeria, therefore, the researcher took up the present study to fill a gap in existing knowledge. In addition to conceptual issues, there are serious methodological failures in the empirical literature on verbal hygiene. Nnuta and Ezeifeka (2017) 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.

Methodology

This chapter outlines the methodology employed in conducting this research. It covers the research design, area of study, population of the study, sample and sampling technique, instruments of data collection, method of data collection, and method of data analysis. Each of these is discussed under the following subheadings.

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.*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.

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.

The Role of Verbal Hygiene in Shaping the Identity of Characters in the Two Novels

Verbal hygiene, as Cameron (1995) established, refers to "the impulse people have to regulate, evaluate, and correct language use", and it is never politically neutral. It is never free of the judgements concerning the class, the race, the gender, and the national identity. Locher and Watts (2005) define relational work as "the work people invest in negotiating their relationships," and they insist that this investment is embedded in every communicative act without exception. Crucially, their framework moves beyond Brown and Levinson's (1978/1987) politeness-centred model by insisting that relational work, in their words "encompasses the entire spectrum of the interpersonal side of social interaction" (Locher and Watts, 2008), meaning that impoliteness, silence, aggression, and resistance are all legitimate and meaningful forms of relational work.

These two frameworks, verbal hygiene and relational work, converge most visibly in Ifemelu's first significant encounter with linguistic power as a weapon, which occurs early in her American experience, in the scene with Cristina Tomas at the university front desk. The dialogue is very short, yet crushing. Cristina talks to Ifemelu in a slow exaggerated voice: "I Need You To Fill Out A Couple Of Forms Do You Understand How To Fill These Out?" According to the narrator:

> Ifemelu shrank. In that strained, still second when her eyes met Cristina Tomas's before she took the forms, she shrank. She shrank like a dried leaf."

The novel records that "Ifemelu had spoken English all her life," yet the encounter reduces her. In the weeks that follow, "as autumn's coolness descended, she began to practice an American accent."

This sequence is a textbook illustration of what Locher and Watts (2008) mean when they describe relational work that encompasses impoliteness and the exercise of social power through language. Cristina Tomas is not correcting the grammar of Ifemelu. She is conducting a social sentence, conveying her message in the form of speech pattern, her demeaning question that Ifemelu is not a part of this linguistic space as an equal. Cristina is engaging in a communicative act, in the terms of Locher and Watts (2005) to negotiate a certain type of relationship, where she is superior and he is inadequate.

It is the critical point that Ifemelu responds with. She starts to accentuate the American accent. This is verbal hygiene in its most defensive form, a modification of speech undertaken not from any desire to enrich self-expression but to avoid the social cost of sounding foreign. The accent is a form of relational work directed outward, toward the hostile social environment, but it is also work directed inward, against the authentic self. Ifemelu is working hard to transform the person she sounds like to be regarded as a human being. The investment is seen in the cost of the investment that is revealed in the course of the development of the novel.

The accent that Ifemelu employs never comes naturally. It is labour. An analysis of her speech behaviour linguistically shows that when she eventually resolves to quit it, the text characterises the accent in incriminating terms:

> The accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will... she had taken on, for too long, a pitch of voice and a way of being that was not hers

The word "creaked" does important service in this sentence. It implies something imposed, mechanical and tired of being strained by the pressure to perform. The phrase "act of will" confirms that this is not natural speech but effortful performance, the kind of relentless relational work that Locher and Watts (2005) remind us requires constant investment. The thing the novel reveals is that the investment is unsustainable just because it is constructed on self-erasure as opposed to self-expression. The accent enables Ifemelu to operate within the American social arenas, albeit, at the expense of being able to live in an integrated state of self.

It is especially telling that the phrase is a way of being that was not hers. This suggests that verbal hygiene, when imposed by social pressure rather than chosen freely, does not merely affect how one speaks but infiltrates how one exists. The thing is that to change an accent is to change the relation to oneself, to own body, to own history, to own community. The accent that Ifemelu has is not merely a phonological modification. It is an act of another identity, and the tension of acting the part spurts over into all other acts of hers.

The turning point in the language journey for Ifemelu is the day when she decides to quit the American accent, a summer day. It is almost physical in its relief with which the language of the novel tells us about this decision:

> Ifemelu decided to stop faking an American accent on a sunlit day in July, the same day she met Blaine... And so she resolved to stop, on that summer day... Her triumph was full of air. Her fleeting victory

> had left in its wake a vast, echoing space.

When she speaks at the Amtrak counter in her natural voice, she experiences something profound:

> This was truly her; this was the voice with which she would speak if she were woken up from a deep sleep during an earthquake.

This identifies natural speech with the most profound and most uninhibited selfhood. The photo of the awakening during an earthquake is not a coincidence. It causes a feeling of innocent, unperformative existence, a time when a person has no time or strength to manage relationships, when only the bare self is left. In the case of Ifemelu, her Nigerian English is her necessary self. It is not simply to change her back to her accent to recover it. It is to re-assert a coherent identity to which the American social environment had required her to repress.

Locher and Watts (2005) argue that "relational work is always about negotiating relationships." The choice of Ifemelu to re-appropriate her natural voice is not a re-negotiation of her relationship with the American society, but with her relationship with herself. It is an act of internal relational work, a decision to stop investing in a performance designed for others and to begin investing in an authentic self-presentation. This is an important dimension of their framework that is sometimes overlooked: relational work is not only directed outward toward interlocutors but inward toward the self.

Nevertheless, this reclamation is not romanticised in the text. Her linguistic precariousness is not eliminated. In case of condescension or misunderstanding, Ifemelu intends to use her Mr. Agbo Voice. This voice is a meticulously articulated, over-accurate English taught in Nigerian secondary school; it is a hybrid, a language mid-point, which is

able to negotiate between her native Nigerian accent and the requirements of the American social environment. The existence of this backup strategy confirms that verbal hygiene is never simply a matter of individual choice but is always negotiated against the expectations and power structures of the surrounding social world.

One of the most unsettling episodes in *Americanah*'s treatment of verbal hygiene is the phone call with the telemarketer. The exchange is brief: "Wow. Cool. You sound totally American."

Ifemelu thanks him. But the novel records what happens next with great precision:

> Only after she hung up did she begin to feel the stain of a burgeoning shame spreading all over her, for thanking him, for crafting his words 'You sound American' into a garland that she hung around her own neck. Why was it a compliment, an accomplishment, to sound American?

This scene is a continuation of the previous episode where Ifemelu had an experience with Cristina Tomas and before she decides to drop the American accent. It is a sort of a mirror of how much she has internalised the verbal hygiene rules of her new country, of how much she is like Ifemelu and the reader alike. Not only has she modified her speech. She has transformed her values. The first breach of that internalisation is the shame that she experiences, the starting point of the process where she later on gains back her true voice.

Moreover, verbal hygiene in *Americanah* is not limited to questions of national accent. The novel also engages deeply with the racial politics of language within American society itself, particularly through the practice of code-switching. Blaine, the Yale professor who becomes Ifemelu's partner, is one of the novel's most significant illustrations of this

phenomenon. When Ifemelu first hears Blaine speaking to his friend Mr. White, she is surprised by what she hears: “Funny how I’ve never heard you speak Ebonics before.” Blaine’s explanation is frank:

> I guess I’ve become too used to my White People Are Watching Us voice. And you know, younger black folk don't really do code switching anymore. The middle-class kids can;t speak Ebonics and the inner-city kids speak only Ebonics and they don’t have the fluidity that my generation has.

The expression “White People Are Watching Us voice” is an outstanding phrase. It recognises, with a directness that is oddly uncharacteristic of the novel in its otherwise open and honest way with race, that speech is a performance that is tune to the audience. In Locher and Watts (2008) framework, Blaine’s code-switching is relational work of a sophisticated and specifically racial kind. He is not just modulating his register as any scholar in other situations would. He is negotiating his racial identity, exhibiting a self that can be recognised and accepted by white academic peers but keeping another, more culturally grounded self to other Black situations.

It is just as important as the generational observation Blaine makes. The loss of code-switching fluency that he writes about among the younger Black Americans indicates a disintegration of linguistic identity across the lines of classes. The middle-class Black youth that do not speak Ebonics are assimilating to a language standard that has diluted a part of their cultural identity. Even inner-city, Ebonics-speaking youths are restricted by the same standard, as they are not given the register that can see them navigate into the mainstream American institutions. In both cases, verbal hygiene, whether self-imposed or socially enforced,

has consequences for identity that go well beyond speech patterns.

Locher and Watts (2005) define relational work as "the work people invest in negotiating their relationships." This is the very code-switching of Blaine: a continuous, uncomfortable bargaining between the various social worlds, each of which has its own language requirements, each of which puts certain pressures on the speaker in the identity. The price of such bargaining is the type of identity disintegration which the comment of Blaine concerning his generation suggests.

The classroom scene in which the use of the N-word is debated provides another rich illustration of verbal hygiene as a site of racial identity negotiation. The contribution made by Ifemelu to the debate is typically straightforward: "I don't think it's always hurtful. I think it depends on the intent and also on who is using it."

The response she receives is equally forceful:

> That is nonsense. If my mother hits me with a stick and a stranger hits me with a stick, it's not the same thing."

What is notable here, apart from the substance of the disagreement, is the use of the word "nonsense" as a verbal hygiene act. The person who utters that is nonsense is not merely saying that it is nonsense. They are rejecting the input of Ifemelu as less than the serious business, which they do through language to put her outside the arena of the discussion as legitimate. The reaction of Ifemelu speaks volumes: the novel documents that she stared at Professor Moore to cheque how the word nonsense had been received.

Locher and Watts (2008) include impoliteness and confrontational speech within the spectrum of relational work. The term nonsense here is an uncivil act which carries out a sort of verbal gatekeeping, a linguistic claim that certain contributions to a

discussion of race are more valid than others. The irony, of course, is that this gatekeeping occurs within a discussion about who has the right to use certain language, making the verbal hygiene of the classroom discussion recursive: the debate is about language, and the conduct of the debate is itself an exercise in the kind of power relations the participants are ostensibly discussing.

The fact that Ifemelu is a non-American Black woman makes the common thread of this debate tricky. She has not been living up to the history that the other students are making. Her perception of the N-word does not have the same roots. This is not her fault but a difference that the classroom life is not able to accommodate. The verbal hygiene of the academic debate implicitly demands that participants speak from within a particular racial experience, and Ifemelu's outsider perspective is marked as "nonsense" precisely because it does not conform to that expectation.

Language as Armour: Verbal Hygiene and Class Aspiration

The practice of verbal hygiene as a means of managing class anxiety and aspiration is present not only in Ifemelu's own story but in her observations of those around her. Of interest to the novel is how it treats Ifemelu's father. His gracious English is not recounted admiringly but with a sort of pained appreciation:

> But his graced English irritated her as she grew older, since it was costume, his armour against insecurity. He was plagued by what he lacked, a postgraduate degree, an upper-middle-class existence, and, as a result, his simulated words turned out to be his defence.

This text does a significant amount of theoretical work. It shows verbal hygiene functioning as what Locher and Watts (2005) might describe as "a form of relational work

directed not primarily at specific interlocutors but at social class structures in general." Ifemelu's father is not code switching to address a specific audience. He is acting an identity he would prefer to have, with words he is using, to fill a social place that his material situation deprives him of. His gracious English is an aspirational self, a language assertion of a status which he has not yet attained.

Costume is a significant word. It implies something used as opposed to lived experience, it implies a performance; something that can be worn and removed but not what is beneath. The fact that she comes to recognise the performative aspect of her father precisely increases his discomfort to her as she advances in age. She understands that his verbal hygiene is compensatory, a response to lack rather than an expression of abundance. Locher and Watts (2008) remind us that "relational work encompasses the full spectrum of interpersonal behaviour, including the self-presentation strategies people use to manage perceived inadequacies." Ifemelu's speech is precisely such a strategy by his father.

The same thing can be said of Aunty Uju whose high-level speech serves as a social signifier of a desire to rise in the new American environment. Linguistic performance is used by characters all over the novel to bargain with the distance between where the characters are and where they desire to be, and the identities they hold and the identities they would prefer to hold. Verbal hygiene, in all these cases, is the instrument through which that negotiation is conducted.

If verbal hygiene in *Americanah* is primarily about the management of accent and the navigation of racial identity, in *On Black Sisters' Street* it takes on a more overtly coercive form. The linguistic domination that is created by Madam is a regime of verbal rule where the women are expected to silence

their voices and instead play along with her needs. Her teaching is bitter and indisputable: “Just do as you are bid, and you will have an easy ride. I talk, you listen.”

This is relational work in the most obvious way. Using the framework of Locher and Watts (2008) that demands the examination of the entire range of interpersonal behaviour, the command issued by Madam is an act of domination using language. “I talk, you listen” does not just characterise the nature of a conversation. It establishes the conditions of a whole relationship, where Madam is entitled to talk and the women have the duty to remain silent. This verbal hygiene is prescriptive and coercive, enforced not through social pressure but through physical control.

The identity ramifications are significant. The fact that Sisi conforms to this verbal regime would define her as an individual in the world of the novel where the ethos of obedience and superficial silence is the order of the day. She does as she is told. When she is told to listen, she listens. But the novel is careful to show that this enforced verbal hygiene does not reach the interior. Her inner monologues, her thoughts, her dreams and her ambitions do not cease under the silence that Madam requires. The verbal regime is unable to completely silence the self and it is within that interior space that the real identity of Sisi lies.

The verbal command of Madam that is to be uncovered is that this investment is not always voluntary. Sometimes relational work is coerced. The women in the brothel must make an investment in a specific form of relational performance, and that which is in the interest of Madam, and not themselves. Their verbal hygiene, the silence they maintain, the compliance they perform, is work done for someone else's benefit. Linguistic behaviour of Ama is an act of willful resistance against the backdrop of verbal power of Madam. Her profanity, her

crudeness, and her unwillingness to tone down her words according to the social norms are not just the signs of coarse or vulgarity. They are a linguistic strategy, a form of relational work that asserts selfhood in a context designed to suppress it.

When Ama loses it, she says something like "Get your own fucking business!" The profanity is not accidental. Ama's vulgar language is a declaration of boundaries, an assertion that there are spaces in her life that neither Madam nor anyone else has the right to enter. Her word is non-conformist to the social structure where women, and particularly black women in the marginalised state, have to reduce their tone, dilute their statements, and act in a docile manner that they do not experience.

The switching between English, Nigerian Pidgin and local idioms by Ama gives this linguistic identity another dimension. Her words are interspersed with expressions that place her in a common cultural community, expressions that mark her as Nigerian despite the alienation that surrounds the sex work in Belgium. It is documented in the novel that there are times when her language swings between registers: "Oh, Joyce, no start all that dis so so fucking wey Ama dey use ooo. One is enough in dis house!"

This linguistic hybridity is itself a form of verbal hygiene, but one that operates against the grain of assimilation. Instead of adjusting her language to fit the standards of European or standard English, Ama uses a mixture of languages that is a part of her community, as well as herself. Her code-switching does not represent a social acceptance strategy but rather a statement of cultural identity in an environment which would rather that she be precisely nothing at all.

The linguistic enlightenment, which Joyce experiences, is brief, yet significant. She tells the other ladies: "I was not named Joyce, you know. Neither is it my real name and... and I am not even a Nigerian" (198). This

confession is preceded by an insane dusting, a real nervousness, which suggests the fear of self-exposure. This is a verbal hygiene of sorts, but a reverse. In contrast to the adoption of linguistic norms or suppression of genuine speech that is characteristic of verbal hygiene, the confession of Joyce deprives a linguistic performed identity to reveal the instability underneath. Even the name Joyce is a sort of verbal hygiene, an anglicised, socially readable subjectivity that is taken on as a tool to work and to live. Her revelation is a disruption to this performance.

Locher and Watts (2008) note that "relational work is a complete range of interpersonal communication." Joyce's confession is a deeply intimate act of relational work, one that risks the stability of her constructed identity in the service of truth. It is not that it is a comfortable or easy act of verbal honesty, as evidenced by the fact that it is accompanied by frantic physical activity. It is relational work of a costly kind, work that unsettles rather than smooths, that exposes rather than conceals. The fabricated name and fabricated nationality which Joyce has been enacting are two versions of the same process which can be observed throughout both novels: the manipulation of language to introduce a more socially acceptable, more commercially viable or even a safer version of the true self. In this sense, "Joyce" is a form of verbal hygiene, a linguistic mask worn for protective purposes.

The major distinction between the two novels is the level of coercion. In *Americanah,* Ifemelu's verbal hygiene practises are largely self-imposed or socially pressured. She is not literally pushed to speak American accent. She does so because social experiences make the price of not doing so too costly. And she finally has the freedom to recover her true voice. In *On Black Sisters Street*, the verbal regime is stricter. The "I talk, you listen" of Madam is not a social expectation but a straightforward command that is supported

with physical power. The women are not free in choosing their linguistic compliance but are forced to do so.

This difference is significant within Locher and Watts's (2005) framework because it reveals the extent to which relational work can be coerced. Their definition of relational work as "the work people invest in negotiating their relationships" implies agency, the idea that people invest actively in their linguistic performances. But *On Black Sisters Street* reveals to us what can arise when such an agency is highly limited, when the investment is forced instead of being elected. The result is a form of verbal hygiene that serves the oppressor's interests rather than the speaker's, and it is against this coercion that the women's linguistic resistance, however small and however costly, must be understood.

In *Americanah*, Ifemelu's acute observations about American speech patterns serve as a running commentary on the verbal hygiene norms of her adopted country. She observes the American disposition to be indirect:

> They did not tell them what to do: they did not say to ask somebody upstairs; they said to you that you might want to ask somebody upstairs. When you fell and tumbled, when you choked, when anything went wrong with you they did not say Sorry. They were saying Are you okay? When it was clear that you were not. And they used the word excited too much, a professor excited at a new book, a student excited at a class, a politician on TV excited at a law; it was all too much excitement.

This extended observation is a form of reverse verbal hygiene, a critical examination of the speech norms of the dominant culture from the perspective of an outsider.

In *On Black Sisters Street*, linguistic dislocation is represented in another way but it is also present. The code-switching of the women in English and the Nigerian Pidgin is not just a convenient way of dealing with a multilingual environment. It is a means of keeping hold on to a cultural identity that the circumstances of their lives in Belgium continue to endanger to break. Their language of hybridity is their own house, a linguistic place where they are identifiably themselves despite the fact that everything around their circumstances is declaring them otherwise.

Both novels are also, among other things, novels about women, and the verbal hygiene they examine is deeply gendered. The policing of female speech, the fact that women are expected to speak in specific registers and not others, is a current flowing through both texts.

Again, in *On Black Sisters' Street*, the gendered dimension of verbal hygiene is most obvious in Madam's command that the women should listen rather than speak. The cultural indoctrination that leads to this is also found in the description of the way Ama was raised in the novel. Her mother's warnings, "Do not let them touch you" and "Girls who let boys see them naked are not good girls," represent a form of verbal hygiene rooted in patriarchal cultural norms. Female behaviour is policed by use of language and defines female identity by adhering to male expectations. The "good girl" is the girl who has internalised the verbal hygiene of modesty and restraint.

The ultimate linguistic rebellion Ama eventually instigates against these norms through her profanity, her straightforwardness, her not holding back on her language, can be interpreted as a direct rejection of this form of gendered verbal policing. Her impoliteness is not just a personality trait in the framework of Locher and Watts (2008). It is a form of relational

work that refuses the gendered relational norms she was taught to internalise. Her speech contains a right to occupy space, to be heard without an apology, to show anger and protest without the mediation of feminine decency.

What this discussion has endeavoured to demonstrate is that verbal hygiene, which can be understood as the conscious regulation, modification and policing of the language use, is one of the key tools through which identity is being constructed, contested and enforced in both novels under study. In both the language is never just a means of communication. It is a place of power, a party to selfhood and a means of survival.

It is Relational Work Theory of Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) which offers the theoretical framework in the light of which these linguistic practises can be completely legible. The fact that they insist on the idea that even the speech of the characters always represents some kind of relational work and that the relational work represents the whole range of the interpersonal aspect of social interaction enables us to read not only the polite and face-saving aspects of the speech of characters but also the impoliteness, the silence, the code-switching, the profanity, and the strategic self-presentation that makes up the entire linguistic life of these characters. It is the effortful, purposeful, and even painful nature of the linguistic choices these characters make which is best described as relational work in their definition of relational work as the work people invest in negotiating their relationships (Locher and Watts, 2005).

In the case of Ifemelu, verbal hygiene is a countermeasure to social exclusion, an investment in an American accent, which makes her lose her coherent sense of self. Her final recovery of her natural voice is a kind of work of relationship towards the reclaiming of a natural identity that the pressures of

assimilation had smothered. Code-switching is a form of relational work in the case of Blaine that handles the racial identity on social frontiers, that linguistic fluidity that is achieved at the expense of the type of fragmentation his observation of his generation suggests. To the father of Ifemelu, mannered English is the armour of class insecurity, the verbal hygiene of aspiration, painful to observe so directly is the compensatory role.

In *On Black Sisters in the Street*, the antecedents of verbal hygiene are, even, greater. The verbal power of Madam is a repressive order, a type of coercive relational labour, which means that the women have to put their speech in the service of the interests of Madam instead of their own. It is on this that Ama swearing and code-switching, Sisis luxurious interior monologue, Joyces admission of self-revelation and literary aspirations of Alek all exemplify the resistant, surviving, and subversive relational work of surviving the verbal regime imposed on them. Their vehementness of language is not heroic in any sublime sense. It is the little, everyday, expensive labour of keeping oneself alive in a situation that is meant to do away with it.

The Influence of Power Dynamics Such as Racism and Classism on Verbal Hygiene Practices in *Americanah* and *On Black Sisters' Street*

In *Americanah,* the main character, Ifemelu enters the US with a Nigerian English that instantly identifies her as a stranger. Her meeting with the university registration officer, Cristina Tomas, is the scene which most clearly captures this: she is called by Tomas in an extremely slow, syllable-by-syllable, way: "You. Will. First. Need. To. Get. A. Letter. From. The. International. Students. Office. Do. You. Understand. How. To. Fill. These. Out?"

In the Relational Work Theory, the speech of Cristina can be viewed as an imposition, one

that according to Locher and Watts (2008) would be categorised as markedly impolite relational work: behaviour that exceeds what the interaction is supposed to be, indicating power difference. Cristina is not merely being careful, she is exercising linguistic power, and putting the English language of Ifemelu as imperfect and childishizing her in the process. This is verbal hygiene which is practised by racial condescension which prescribes a rule (standard American English) and penalises any variation of it by patronising accommodation.

The effects on Ifemelu are internalised and instant. She starts to perform an American accent which is an action that can be seen as a major form of relational investment according to Locher and Watts (2005) as the conscious re-engineering of one communicative behaviour to the expectations of the social power holders. In this respect, language is not a free choice; it is torn out by the racial hierarchy.

This image is intensified by the event with the telemarketer. When a caller praises Ifemelu, she feels this first as victory, when he says, "You sound totally American". However, this emotion soon breaks: "she feels the tint of a growing shame" (215), she is aware that the praise is not very valuable because this means that they will be integrated into a racially coded linguistic standard.

Relational Work Theory assists us in understanding what is occurring in this case. According to Locher and Watts (2008), relational work is never measured against a vacuum of expectations in a particular community of practise. The paradigm of racialised America is that the default standard of an American English speaker is white or white-adjacent. The Nigerian English used by Ifemelu is compared to this frame and comes up short not in terms of language, but in terms of social interaction. The shame which she experiences is an emotional residual of a verbal hygiene mechanism

which has invaded her sense of self. Her ultimate move to leave faking an American accent, that it is an act of will, that it creaked with consciousness, is, in the terms of relational work, a repossession of her natural or interactional identity, a refusal to continue putting relational labour into the act that was meant to appease white normativity.

Verbal hygiene as racial control becomes even more overt and coercive in On Black Sisters Street. The women especially Sisi are instructed by Madam to write scripts of falsehoods about themselves to the white European authorities. Madam tells Sisi to take a traumatic refugee identity:

> Look sad. Cry. Wail. Tear your hair out. Sob stories are popular among white people. They delight to hear us slaughtering one another, chopping the heads of one another in civil wars of unreasonable ethnicity. The more ghoulish the stories the better. (187)

In this case, verbal hygiene is a kind of a racial performance. The true linguistic selves of the women, their real names, language, narratives are repressed and substituted with a story that will resonate with the white European standards and stereotypes. This is the most coerced relational work. According to Locher and Watts (2005), relational work is a form of investment in negotiating relationships and such women lack any real negotiation power. The negotiation process is completely unidirectional: they have to deliver the story that the leading society desires to hear or they will be deported or even worse. Their speech is not their own, and it is stolen off a racist paper.

There is also a pressure of class on verbal hygiene in *Americanah*. Blaine, the Yale-based African-American boyfriend of Ifemelu, has a register that initially sounds admirable to Ifemelu: academic, smooth,

academic. It is not merely a personal style of his speech, but the currency of the American upper-middle class, and having it indicates membership in the upper-middle class.

When Blaine teases Ifemelu calling her a bourgie Nigerian, both parties know the connotation of the words. The word describes a performance of classes that does not only cover income or education but also ways of speaking - a verbal hygiene that is consistent with respectability, aspirational identity, or middle-class norms. This is supported by a comment of Blaine concerning code-switching: You know, the younger black folk do not really code switch anymore. The kids in the middle classes are unable to speak Ebonics and the inner-city kids are able to speak Ebonics and they lack the fluidity that my generation has. This field of observation directs the linguistic repertoire onto the class position in such a way that you can and cannot say something, how you say it, and where you say it, has become a class marker as well as an ethnic marker.

Fluency in changing between registers in relational work terms is interpreted as interactional capital in Blaine. Individuals with the ability of code-switching are in a better position to deal with relational work in the various social situations. Those who are unable are linguistically locked into their class status judged as lacking not due to the knowledge they possess but by the way they talk.

One minor yet telling instance of class based verbal hygiene can be seen in the conversation between Doris and Zemaye in Lagos:

> Don’t you just hate it how people say I want to ease myself or I am pressed when they want to go to the bathroom?... 'Bathroom' is very American. But there is toilet, restroom, the ladies. (209)

This apparently trivial difference in vocabulary is a social position negotiation, in the terms of relational work. The word desired is the indicator of cosmopolitan, educated, classed identity. to say ease myself is to be put down the ladder of classes, not because of any rational disparity of meaning but because of its social connotations.

According to Locher and Watts (2005) “the social frame of the interaction determines what is considered an appropriate or inappropriate language in all situations.” In the case of Doris and Zemaye, that frame is that of upwardly mobile Lagosian professionals and inside it, there are words that cannot be used. Here verbal hygiene is maintenance of classes.

In *On Black Sisters Street*, verbal behaviour is determined by the class and economic dependency in visceral manner. Dele, the recruiter who entices women into the sex trade in foreign countries employs language as the instrument of coercion on the basis of the classes. He is also patronising and ridiculing, uttering remarks such as; “What do you think I am? I look like ashawo to you?” (148) and I want to help you, making himself benefactor, and the women, thankful dependants who are not to speak back.

The verbal resistance by Ama, spitting on the paper and referring to him as a “stupid fuck man”, is in their framework of Locher and Watts a moment of aggressively rude relational work. It is the contravention of the expected interactional norms of the power dynamic that she is trapped in. But it is a very expensive thing: since she is vulnerable economically, she is unable to afford this opposition. The hierarchy of the classes rapidly comes back to life, and her voice is once again practically suppressed by her material circumstances.

In the house on Zwartezusterstraat, the order given by Madam, the silence and complete obedience. That's the rule of the house. Be heard, not seen" - causes the enforcement of

verbal hygiene to be clear and uncompromising. It is not a social implication, but an economic mandate and physical intimidation. In the relational work point of view, the compliance of the women is not a negotiated one but is forced and the relational investment is carried out under pressure.

The table below maps the key verbal hygiene practices in both novels against the power dynamic driving them and the relational work category they represent.

Although the burden of racial and class prescription is very heavy in both novels, characters also use language to rebel, establish contact, and rediscover identity. The blog of Ifemelu, which is formally known as Raceteenth or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black, in *Americanah*, is disrupted verbal hygiene in itself. She gives a name to what the verbal culture of the mainstream of America prefers to be nameless. Her directness on race makes her white liberal audiences uneasy, and she has captured exactly what she writes at a dinner party: We just keep the stuff accumulating in our heads, and... say that race does not matter because that is what we are told to say, to keep our nice liberal friends comfortable. The blog will not accept this nice repression. It is a willful and not an enforced contravention of the verbal hygiene standards of white middle-class liberal discourse, not imposed upon her, but adopted.

Her interaction with natural hair communities on the internet also establishes a different verbal territory, one where the language of Blackness, hair, and identity is determined by Black women instead of the white mainstream. These communities call names, full of reclaimed self-affirmation, achieve what Locher and Watts (2008) would describe as a creative production of new

relational norms within a new community of practise.

The most touching speech of verbal solidarity in *On Black Sisters Street* is the one that follows the death of Sisi when the remaining women state "We are sisters." The weight that relates to this short sentence is enormous. The women employ the language to create a connection of their own, having gone through chapters of imposed silence, theatrical enactments and even silenced voices. According to Locher and Watts (2005), relational work refers to the labour of negotiating relationships - and this announcement is another form of investment altogether: chosen freely, mutual and resistant.

In both novels, language is not merely a communication medium. It is a place of strength, a land where racism and classism are doing their daily business. How to talk, what voices to sing, what stories to recite, when to remain quiet, etc. are told to characters. These do not exist in the abstract as social forces; but are encountered in utterances, interactions, moments of shame or defiance. Conclusion

This study examined verbal hygiene in the Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and Chika Unigwe's *On Black Sisters Street*. The research is guided by the following questions: to what extent is verbal hygiene present in both novels; to what extent does verbal hygiene play a role in peaceful relationships among the characters; how verbal hygiene or the absence of it makes character or character identity; and the role of power dynamics like racism and classism in verbal hygiene practises. To answer the questions, the study adopted Locher and Watts (2005, 2008) Relational Work Theory.

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