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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# POWER RELATIONS BETWEEN COLONIAL ADMINISTRATION AND OBIERIKA CHARACTER IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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### ABSTRACT

This paper examines the exercise of power in a face – to – face discourse where participants are unequal – it is an unequal encounter between the English District Commissioner (EDC) and Obierika (O). This study aims at demonstrating how a close analysis of linguistic features in the literary text can contribute to the comprehension of power relations and ideological expressions in discourse. To bring to light the use of power between Africans and Colonialists as depicted by Chinua Achebe, the analysis concentrates on such means as the use of pronouns, speech acts, requests, modals, metaphors, and diverse lexical choices. These means have been chosen as primary tools for the analysis due to the fact that they are closely related to the three types of constraints such as constraint on content or what is said, relations, the social relations people enter into in discourse and subjects or the “subject positions people can occupy. The critical discourse analysis (CDA) was particularly devised in response to such problems. It is the main concern of CDA to study the minute details of linguistic structures in the light of social and historical situation of the texts, as it is the case in these literary texts, to display to consciousness the beliefs and values which are embedded in the language. The results have shown that, 70% of expressions used by the colonial administrator are in favour of the colonialism, the colonial administrator has interrupted Mr. Obierika and his associates several times to control their contributions while 30% of expressions used by Obierika are in favour decolonization process which, represent the resistance offered by Obierika and his men against the colonial power. On the other hand, 66.6 % of expressions used by Obierika and his group, this is particularly in the second part of the encounter, are in favour of the process of decolonization, which represent the power exerted by Mr. Obierika to control the colonial administrator. This clearly signals the shift of power, thus, it is the power of the African traditional beliefs.

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### INTRODUCTION

There are various ways in which linguistic exchanges can express unequal relations of power as it is depicted in the face – to – face encounter between the English district commissioner who represents a colonial power and Mr Obierika, Okonkwo's closest friend who represents the resistant group or rather the colonized. This is consistent with what has been stated by (Irene, 2004) that: As competent speakers people are sensitive to variations in accent, intonation, and vocabulary: most of these features locate language users at different positions in social hierarchy. However, (Irene, 2004) also stated that people are aware that a proper use of language enables them to speak with differing degrees of authority, and that their words can be loaded with different degrees of weight. As such language can be used as an instrument of coercion and constraint, language is an integral part of our social life, and a considerable part of our social life consists of routine exchanges of linguistic expressions which are adjusted to power relations. Rarely do people discern the close connection between a linguistic choice

and a certain ideology, the meaning conveyed by linguistic expressions is taken by them for granted, as natural.

It is worth noting that few studies have been conducted to study the relationship between language and power in literary texts written by post-colonial African novelists. It has to be mentioned, however, that these African novels were not only written to counter act the misrepresentation of Africa and Africans but also to correct their tarnished images portrayed in the colonial discourse by Europeans writers. This has prompted the renowned African writer, Chinua Achebe, to write '*Things Fall Apart*' to fictionalize the story of Umuofian hero, Okonkwo. This literary work constitutes the subject matter of this paper, and it is regarded by many as his master piece.

#### The study will adopt the following methods

1. The study will use this question for collecting the data relevant to the present study.

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2. To what extent can a language be used by both the colonialists and Africans to illustrate unequal power relations as depicted in Chinua Achebe's *'Things Fall apart'*?
3. Fairclough's method has been used for analyzing unequal power relation between the colonial power and the Umuofians On the basis of the above examples, we can say that power in discourse is to do with powerful participants controlling and constraining the contributions of non-powerful participants (Fairclough 2001: pp. 38-39).<sup>\*</sup> It is useful to distinguish between three types of such constraints – constraints on:

- Contents, on what is said or done.
- Relations, the social relations people enter into in discourse.
- Subjects or the “subject positions” people can occupy

This study has also adopted the overall strategy of ideology expression. van Dijk (2000:44) expresses this in a conceptual square which he calls the ‘Ideological Square’:

- Emphasize positive things about Us
- Emphasize negative things about Them
- De-emphasize negative things about Us
- De-emphasize positive things about Them

### Aims and Scope of the study

A major concern of this study is to explore how unequal power relations between Africans and colonialists are depicted in literary texts written by Chinua Achebe or rather via linguistic forms. The extract is drawn exclusively from chapter 25 which is the last chapter in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*; it is then analyzed as a particularly important genre of the power.

- This paper aims to investigate the systems of linguistic forms which are used in favour of power relation and which to a very large extent, shape a system of particular values and beliefs.
- This study is hoped to provide some insight and practical help in decoding colonial discourse, in highlighting the way the more powerful employ language in order to impose their ideas on the less powerful members of the resistant group (i.e. the colonized).

### Theoretical background

#### CDA and the present study

CDA is about discourse and the way it manifest unfair practices within society. van Dijk, Norman Fairclough and Ruth Wodak are some of the authorities of CDA. Their focus has to do with linguistic and semiotic employment that manifest power struggle within society.

Wardhaugh (2006) classifies Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) as a branch of sociolinguistics. It is believed to have originated from the critical tradition of Gramsci. It is a melting point of many disciplines (van Dijk, 1993; Dellinger, 1995; McGregor, 2004; Wardhaugh, 2006). Basically, CDA practice acts as a means of interrogating power relations in social discursive practices. van Dijk applied this theory to question the way social power is exposed within the media discourse (cf. van Dijk, 1993). In his study, he found that the dominated are usually made to feel they are in control of their destiny while the dominant group is actually in charge. In essence, the dominant ideology makes the dominated to see as correct the order of things in their society and thereby help to sustain this order. Ideology is thus a living force in structuring power relations in society. What then is ideology all about? Ideology has to do with a system of ideas that people share as the principle guiding their lives. It often directs the actions they take.

Jones (2001) notes that ideology works “at the institutional, subjective and text levels to position people in particular ways”. Making reference to van Dijk, Dellinger (1995) opines that ideologies provide the cognitive base for attitudes of various groups in the societies, which eventually furthers their particular interests and objectives. van Dijk (1993) argues that this ideological posture results from a particular form of social cognition.

Fairclough (2001 online) vows that the important relevance of CDA is that it can help analyze “the dialectical relationships between discourse ... and other elements of social practices”. As Martin and Rose (2003: 263) observe, “CDA has tended to focus on semiosis in the service of power”. This fundamental nature of CDA makes it attractive for interrogation of power structures in societies even as presented in their literature.

### RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Let us explore the exercise of power in a type of face – to – face discourse where participants are unequal. It is an unequal encounter which took place between the colonial administrator and one of the Umuofian elders called Obierika(O).

The following extract is therefore drawn from (Chinua, 1958) chapter 25 which is the last chapter in his novel entitled: *Things Fall Apart*. It is about a visit to Okonkwo’s compound by the English District Commissioner (DC) following the assassination of the court messenger by Okonkwo. The DC found a small crowd of men sitting wearily in the Obi. He commanded them to come outside, and they obeyed without murmur.

1. DC: 'Which among you is called Okonkwo?'he asked through his interpreter.
2. O: 'He is not here' replied Obierika.
3. DC: 'Where is he?'
4. O: 'He is not here!'
5. DC: The commissioner became angry and red in the face. He warned the men that unless they produced Okonkwo forthwith he would lock them all up. The

<sup>\*</sup> Fairclough, N. L. (2001) (ed) *language and Power*. London

men murmured among themselves, and Obierika spoke again.

6. O: 'We can take you to where he is, and perhaps your men will help us'.
  - The Commissioner did not understand what Obierika meant when he said '*perhaps your men will help us*'. One of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words, he thought.
  - Obierika with five or six others led the way. The commissioner and his men followed, their arms held at the ready.
7. DC: He had warned Obierika that if he and his men played any monkey tricks they would be shot. And so they went..... the only sound they made was with their feet as they crushed dry leaves.
  - Then they came to the tree from which Okonkwo's body was dangling and they stopped dead.
8. O: 'Perhaps your men can help us bring him down', and bury him,' said Obierika. 'We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming'.
  - The District Commissioner changed instantaneously. The resolute administrator in him gave way to the student of primitive customs.
9. DC: 'Why can't you take him down yourself?' he asked.
10. 'It is against our customs,' said one of the men. It is an abomination for a man to take his own life. It is an offence against the earth, and a man who commits it will not be buried by his clansmen. His body is evil, and only strangers may touch it. That is why we asked your people to bring him down because you are strangers'.
11. DC: 'Will you burry him like any other man?' asked the commissioner.
12. O: 'We cannot bury him. Only strangers can. We shall pay your men to do it, when he has been buried we shall do our duty by him. We shall make sacrifices to cleanse the desecrated land'.
13. Obierika, who had been gazing steadily at his friend's dangling body, turned suddenly to the District Commissioner and said furiously: '*That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself, and now he will be buried like a dog..*'.
14. 'Shut up' shouted one of the messengers, quite unnecessarily.
15. DC: 'Take down the body the Commissioner ordered his chief messenger', and bring it and all these people to the court.'
16. 'Yes, sah', the messenger said, saluting.

## The Analysis

One striking feature is the number of times the English District Commissioner interrupts Obierika – in (1), (3), (5), (7), and (9). I think he (the English District Commissioner) interrupts in order to 'control' the contributions of Obierika and his associates – to stop him playing any “monkey trick” as Achebe

puts it – to ensure Obierika, Okonkwo's friend will lead them (i.e. the District Commissioner and his associates to where Okonkwo is.

## In what other ways does the (DC) exercise control over Mr. Obierika and his associates?

Firstly, in the opening of chapter 25, the nature of what is going to go on in the interaction is announced to a small group of Obierika men sitting in the Okonkwo's Obi. The question posed by the English District Commissioner is indicative of this. The question reads “Which among you is called Okonkwo?” the District Commissioner asked through his interpreter.

Secondly, Obierika and five or six of his men were explicitly warned with firearms held ready by the English District Commissioner's men. They were warned not to play any monkey trick. This implies a show of power and it is very clear that, there is unequal power relation between the two groups. Moreover the presence of the English District Commissioner at '*the head of an armed band of soldiers*' is also indicative of this fact.

Thirdly, there are explicit instructions to Obierika men which are in form of W/H questions. Notice, the grammatical forms in which these questions are put.

The answers [2], [4], [6], [8] and [10].

The answers [2] and [4] constitute resistance made by Mr Obierika

To what extent Obierika resisted the English District Commissioner when he was looking for Okonkwo following the assassination of the court messenger? The answer [6] constitutes Obierika submission to the English District Commissioner. In sentence (6) the writer uses the modal '*can*' which implies possibility that comes as a result of warning made by the (DC). '*We can take you to where he is*', while the second part of the sentence that is: '*perhaps your men will help us*' implies polite request.

The power relationship is more baldly expressed in [5] and [7] where the District Commissioner used his facial expressions or rather non-verbal expressions “he became angry and red in the face” coupled with the use of the conditional clause that is “If 2”.

In terms of contents, Obierika is required to show the English (DC) where Okonkwo's body is, the social relations is the relation between the oppressor (The English DC), and the oppressed (i.e. Mr. Obierika and his associates. The occupying (subjects) the subject position of Umuofian elder or rather Okonkwo's best friend.

## The use of speech acts

Notice, some of these constraints on Mr. Obierika and his men appear to involve direct control being exercised by the English (DC). For instance all the directive speech acts (Warning and questions) in [14] and [15].

It appears that the English DC has the right to give orders and ask questions, where as Mr. Obierika and his men have only obligation to comply and answer in accordance with the subordinate relation of colonized to colonizer. However, the District Commissioner is in control, for it is the prerogative of powerful participants to determine which discourse type (s) may be legitimately drawn upon (Fairclough *ibid*).

### Request and Power

Power is also hidden in a face – to – face discourse. Fairclough (2001) states that there is a close connection between requests, and power, in that the right to request someone to do something often derives from having power. This is consistent with what has been stated by the English District Commissioner when he says that: “*which among you is called Okonkwo?*” this is a direct request which is expressed grammatically in question and it shows unequal power relationship between Obierika and his associates on one hand and the English District Commissioner on the other hand, similarly in question [8] Obierika directs a question to the English District Commissioner by saying “*Perhaps your men can help us to bring him down*”. This is a kind of power in hidden face – to – face discourse; it is the power of religious belief. This request made by Obierika is derived from having religious power. It is expressed grammatically in question hence it is ideological.

Question [9] that was asked by the District commissioner shows the cultural gulf that existed between the two groups: the colonizers and the colonized.

The District commissioner says that “*why can’t you take him down yourself*”. That is, cutting down Okonkwo's body hanging loosely from a tree. It also shows ignorance on the part of the District commissioner as far as African belief is concerned. The body of any person, who commits suicide will be buried by strangers because it is not allowed according to Umuofians tradition to touch Okonkwo's body, is evil and it is an offence against the earth.

Question [11] also shows ignorance on the part of the District Commissioner as far as the African beliefs are concerned.

Question [13] shows the demise of the greatest man in Umuofia. However, Obierika has held the District commissioner responsible for Okonkwo death by saying “*You drove him to kill himself, and now he will be buried like a dog...*”.

The pronoun “*you*” refers to the District Commissioner and his associates or rather the colonial power. And he will not have a dignified burial because it is a serious violation to African traditional belief as stated by Achebe.

Speech acts can be given relatively direct expression such as in sentences [14] and [15], for example; “*shut up!*” shouted one of the messenger to Obierika in the sentence [14] as mentioned above or rather speech acts can be given relatively indirect expression, with various degrees of indirectness as in the

sentence [6] and [8] which read as follows: “*Perhaps your men can help us bring him down*, said Obierika.

Indirect commands or requests, for instance, may occur as in the example above where the person being requested to do something is more powerful than the person asking, so the indirectness is a way of trying to mitigate an imposition (Fairclough, 2001, p. 13). Fairclough (*ibid*) states that the assignment of speech acts values is relative to situational context and discourse type

### Accent and power

Non-native speakers of English often use English with a variety of accents. This is a known fact. However, a person who uses any language with an accent can be viewed differently when it comes to power relation. The use of the English language with a different accent may locate its user at a different power position, this is in line with what has been stated by (Irene, 2002) that most of these features locate language users at different positions in social hierarchy. This is manifested in the following extract:

[15] DC: 'Take down the body, the Commissioner ordered his chief messenger', and bring it and all these people to the court.'  
[16] 'Yes, sah', the messenger said, saluting.

Achebe has produced this to highlight different accent or rather different pronunciation used by the non-native speakers of English. These linguistic features locate them at different positions in social hierarchy which gives rise to different power relation as it is the case in this unequal face-to-face encounter.

**Table 1** The number of times the English District Commissioner interrupts Obierika in the face-to-face encounter.

Description	Expressions	Frequency	Percentage
Colonialism (EDC)	[1] 'Which among you is called Okonkwo?'he asked through his interpreter.	7	70%
	[3] 'Where is he?'		
	[5] The commissioner became angry and red in the face. He warned the men that unless they produced Okonkwo forthwith he would lock them all up.		
	Obierika with five or six others led the way. The commissioner and his men followed,[*] their arms held at the ready.		
	[7] He had warned Obierika that if he and his men played any monkey tricks.		
	[14] 'Shut up' shouted one of the messengers, quite unnecessarily.'		
	[15] 'Take down the body, the Commissioner ordered his chief messenger', and bring it and all these people to the court.'		
Decolonization (Obierika)	1-He is not here.	3	30%
	2-He is not here.		
	3-We can take you to where he is, and perhaps your men will help us		
Total		10	100%

It is clear that 70% of expressions used by the colonial administrator who is the English District Commissioner are in favour of colonialism. The (EDC), has interrupted Mr. Obierika and his associates several times to control their contributions in order to achieve his goal, that is, to arrest Okonkwo or to know his where about, while 30% of expressions account for the resistance offered by Obierika and his men against the colonial power represented by the (EDC) and his associates. In short, it is clear that the powerful is controlling the less powerful, verbally and non-verbally as it is shown above. This shows clearly unequal power relation between the colonial power and the Umuofians. This result is the same as stated by (Fairclough, 2001).

**Expression of Ideology**

**Surface Structure**

The expression which indicates that *'Okonkwo will be buried like a dog'* implies that a dog has no value in the Umuofian tradition or he will not be buried according to dignified African traditions, the writer, here, has used it metaphorically and it is then an expression of ideology.

The writer has portrayed Obierika as the mouthpiece of the Umuofian people. However, it is well known that 'accented' speech of sociolects or dialects express or convey social class, ethnicity, gender or social relations as cited by van Dijk in his on line material1( Discourse analysis as Ideological Analysis). Consider the following encounter between the DC and one of his associates who is a non-native speaker of English or rather an African.

15] DC: 'Take down the body, the Commissioner ordered his chief messenger', and bring it and all these people to the court.'  
 [16] 'Yes, sah', the messenger said, saluting.

Achebe has produced this to highlight different accent or rather different pronunciation used by the non-native speakers of English which locate them at different positions in social hierarchy which gives rise to different power relation as is the case in this unequal face-to-face encounter. Moreover, commands and threats as cited in the sentence [15] presuppose relations of dominance and power.

**Lexicon**

Lexicon is a major and a well-known domain of ideological expression. For example, Mr. Obierika said that body should be cut down from the tree by a stranger. In this example, we find the general pattern of ideological control of discourse viz, a positive self-presentation of the in-group and a negative other-presentation of the out-group.

The writer, Achebe integrates words from Ibo language which is his mother tongue. For example, the word *'Obo'* which means men's sitting room is used at the opening of the extract. A reader of his novel does not find any difficulty in working out the meaning of the word *'Obi'* from the context. As such, this has branded Achebe to be viewed by many as the best interpreter of the African traditions and this linguistic feature

clearly signals the ideological expression. Moreover, the integration of Ibo words to this literary text gives it a local flavour.

**The use of 'we'**

The use of inclusive *'We'* represents Obierika, his associates and everyone else as sharing the same beliefs and perspective about the state of affairs. Consider the following extract: [6] O: ' We can take you to where he is, and perhaps your men will help us!

For further investigation, consider also the sentences: [8], [10], and [12] from the above extract. Undoubtedly, by this kind of structuring Obierika inculcates a particular vision of the World, the perspective of his beliefs and values. Hence, the use of the *'inclusive'* We implies solidarity. Moreover, this inclusive *'We'* indicates that Obierika is speaking on behalf of himself, the members of his small group, and the entire people of Umuofia. The insistent use of inclusive *'We'* signals a particular relation to the audience. That is, he is their mouthpiece, and has full mandate to speak on their behalf.

**Table 2** the number of times Mr. Obierika interrupts the colonial administrator to control him ideologically

Description	Expressions	Frequency	Percentage
Colonialism (EDC)	[9]DC: 'Why can't you take him down yourself?'	2	33.3
	[11]DC: 'Will you bury him like any other person.'		
	[8]O: 'perhaps your men can help us bring him down'. We have sent for strangers from another village to do it for us, but they may be a long time coming.'		
Decolonization (Obierika)	[10]O: 'It is against our customs.' said one of the man...	4	66.6
	[12]O: 'We cannot bury him.....'		
	[13]O: 'That man was one of the greatest men in Umuofia. You drove him to kill himself...'		
	Total		

In table (2): It is obvious that 66.6 % of expressions used by Obierika and his group are in favour of the process of decolonization, which represents the power exerted by Mr. Obierika to control the colonial administrator. This clearly signals the shift of power, thus, it is the power of the African traditional beliefs. That is, Africans have resisted the colonial power by sticking to their African beliefs while 33.3% of the expressions used by the (EDC) and his associates signal his ignorance about the African beliefs. Therefore, all these have ideological meanings. This also has been reported by (Fairclough, 2001).

**CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It is clear that Chinua Achebe good command of English language or rather his power as a writer has enabled him to use it as a tool to fight colonialism. He has also painted a balanced picture of the power relation, through his depiction of the two groups: the colonial administrator and his associates on one hand and Mr. Obierika and his men on the other hand (i.e. colonized Africans). However, Achebe has been shifting

between the two named groups: as it is clear that the first part of the Englishman - Obierika's conversation was in favour of the colonial power, and both verbal and non-verbal expressions have been deployed by the writer as means of coercion. It is clear that the powerful is controlling the less powerful, however, the power has shifted to the less powerful in the second part of the encounter; this is attributable to the power of African beliefs, which partly have strengthened the position of Africans but weakened the position of the English (DC) and his associates. The ideological meanings have played a significant role in the power shift towards the Africans. However, the colonial administrator lack of knowledge pertaining to African traditional beliefs has been manifested via linguistic structures as clearly shown in the second part of the face-to-face encounter. Finally, Achebe has painted more or less a balanced picture of power relation between the two named groups. A variety of linguistic structures has been used in favour of controlling the less powerful group by the most powerful one.

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