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CODE-SWITCHING AND THE ROLE OF INDIGENOUS IGBO EXPRESSIONS IN ADICHIE'S IMITATION

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of code-switching and indigenous Igbo expressions in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story Imitation. It argues that Adichie's strategic incorporation of Igbo into English narration functions as a linguistic tool for negotiating cultural identity, diaspora, and gender dynamics. Drawing on Shana Poplack's (1980) model of code-switching, the study highlights how intra-sentential, inter-sentential, and tag-switches contribute to the preservation of indigenous voice within a global literary framework. Through close textual analysis, the paper demonstrates that Igbo phrases in the story do not disrupt comprehension but rather enrich the narrative by conveying intimacy, asserting cultural belonging, and resisting linguistic erasure. Ultimately, the study concludes that Adichie's code-switching reinforces the inseparability of language and identity, affirming Igbo as a vital component of postcolonial expression.*

Introduction

Language plays a crucial role in articulating cultural identity, particularly within diasporic and postcolonial contexts. In contemporary African literature, code-switching emerges as a stylistic and sociolinguistic strategy through which writers navigate multiple worlds. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's short story *Imitation*, from *The Thing Around Your Neck* (2009), exemplifies this dynamic by embedding Igbo expressions within an English narrative frame. Through terms like *oga*, *kwanu*, and *rapuba*, Adichie not only indexes Nigerian cultural realities but also affirms the resilience of indigenous identity amid displacement. Scholars have argued that code-switching, far from being random, is a patterned linguistic practice that conveys solidarity, resistance, and authenticity (Ross 112). In this sense, Adichie's narrative voice becomes a site where English and Igbo intersect to dramatize the tensions of migration, marriage, and identity.

Code-switching is not a marginal phenomenon but a central feature of Nigerian English literature, reflecting Nigeria's complex multilingual situation. Nigerian creative texts often deploy code-mixing and code-switching as rhetorical strategies to localize global languages and assert cultural ownership (Adenugba 56).

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Adichie's *Imitation* continues this tradition, situating Igbo phrases within English syntax in ways that highlight both intimacy and estrangement. For instance, when Amaechi, the house girl, speaks in Igbo-inflected English, her linguistic style contrasts sharply with Nkem's more Americanized register, dramatizing class and cultural hierarchies. These linguistic shifts are not merely ornamental; they provide insights into power relations, gender expectations, and cultural negotiations. In this way, the text demonstrates what has been described as the "linguistic double consciousness" of diasporic characters who oscillate between languages in search of authenticity (Abood 44).

A striking feature of *Imitation* is how code-switching functions as an emotional marker. Igbo expressions often surface at moments of heightened emotion, particularly anger or intimacy (Bianco 244). This is evident in the story when Amaechi uses Igbo interjections to scold or emphasize a point, signaling cultural proximity even as she occupies a subordinate role in the household. Similarly, Ijemamaka's gossip about Obiora's infidelity is peppered with Igbo idioms, which both affirm shared cultural codes and intensify the sting of betrayal. For Nkem, whose assimilation into American life is symbolized by her polished English, the reintroduction of Igbo in dialogue disrupts her sense of order and stability. This interplay suggests that indigenous language is bound to emotional truth, while English often functions as the language of social performance.

The significance of code-switching in *Imitation* also lies in its role as a tool of resistance. Adichie's use of indigenous words "lends authenticity and disrupts the hegemony of English" (Ross 118). This disruption matters because the story is set against the backdrop of migration, where Nkem's displacement in America parallels her estrangement from her husband. The insertion of Igbo expressions destabilizes the seamless flow of English and reasserts the presence of a cultural identity that refuses erasure. For the diasporic reader, this may evoke nostalgia, while for the global reader, it signals the limits of translation and universality. In this sense, code-switching embodies the politics of language in postcolonial literature, where choice of tongue is never neutral but always ideologically charged.

The social function of code-switching in *Imitation* can be understood in relation to the speech communities represented. Code-switching often reflects "community norms and the negotiation of social identities" in multilingual contexts (Anieke and Igwedibia 77). In the story, the use of Igbo among Nkem, Amaechi, and Ijemamaka reflects shared cultural belonging, but it also indexes hierarchy and familiarity. When Amaechi uses Igbo with Nkem, she speaks from a position of cultural intimacy, even though she is socially subordinate. Conversely, Nkem's tendency to remain in English suggests her alienation from her linguistic roots. This dynamic highlights how language choices construct social positions within diasporic families and communities.

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Another key dimension of Adichie's strategy is the gendered aspect of code-switching. In *Purple Hibiscus*, Adichie often allows female characters to slip into Igbo as a way of resisting patriarchal silencing (Fazakas 2024, 91). A similar pattern is observable in *Imitation*, where the women's conversations, full of Igbo interjections and idioms, form a counter-discourse to Obiora's absent but dominating English voice. While Obiora tells stories of Nigerian art in polished English for the benefit of his American colleagues, the women at home rely on Igbo-inflected expressions to affirm solidarity and critique male authority. In this way, code-switching becomes a gendered act—a linguistic assertion of women's voices in private, domestic spaces.

Furthermore, the narrative rhythm of *Imitation* is shaped by the alternation between English and Igbo. The juxtaposition of two languages produces a "stylistic texture" that reflects Nigeria's hybrid linguistic environment (Inyima 82). The italicized Igbo phrases interrupt the smoothness of English narration, producing moments of pause and reflection for the reader. These disruptions not only emphasize the cultural embeddedness of the characters but also dramatize the contrasts between Nkem's American setting and her Nigerian consciousness. By doing so, Adichie mirrors the fragmented identity of diasporic subjects whose speech oscillates between linguistic codes.

The motif of imitation is further amplified through linguistic play. Adichie's diasporic characters often "imitate Americans" by modifying their linguistic behaviors, yet they revert to Igbo when authenticity is required (Abood 47). In *Imitation*, Nkem embodies this duplicity: she is a woman who speaks and lives in English-dominated America but whose deepest anxieties and yearnings surface in Igbo. The story thus suggests that the adoption of English may be necessary for social mobility, but it is insufficient for articulating the fullness of personal and cultural experience. Code-switching here reveals the limits of imitation and affirms the need for rootedness in indigenous expression.

From a stylistic perspective, Adichie's selective use of Igbo in *Imitation* reflects what has been described as "the stylistics of nativisation" (Ononye 68). Unlike wholesale translation or overuse of local terms, Adichie's strategy is economical: she introduces Igbo words sparingly, yet each one carries cultural weight. For instance, *kwanu* is not merely a casual greeting but a performative marker of intimacy and recognition. Its presence in the text resists easy equivalence in English, forcing readers to engage with the cultural logic embedded in the word. This stylistic technique elevates Igbo from the margins of oral conversation to the center of literary discourse.

A related issue is the politics of accessibility. Code-switching risks alienating non-Igbo readers who may find untranslated words opaque (Bianco 245). However, Adichie's strategy in *Imitation* demonstrates confidence in the reader's ability to infer meaning through

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context. Rather than catering exclusively to Western audiences, she privileges the authenticity of Nigerian speech patterns. This aligns with postcolonial literary traditions in which the use of indigenous languages affirms cultural autonomy. By embedding Igbo in the narrative, Adichie challenges the linguistic imperialism that often demands English-only storytelling.

Moreover, code-switching in *Imitation* functions as a marker of memory and belonging. Diasporic narratives often tie language to the reconstruction of home (Ngongkum 32). In Nkem's case, the Igbo expressions evoke a homeland she no longer inhabits but cannot entirely leave behind. They remind her of the communal networks, gossip, and domestic routines of Lagos that contrast with the loneliness of her American home. Language, therefore, becomes a bridge between spaces—a thread that connects the diaspora to its cultural roots.

The interplay between English and Igbo also underscores the multiplicity of Nigerian identity. Nigerian cultural expression thrives in plurality, where indigenous languages coexist with English without erasing each other (Adenugba 59). *Imitation* embodies this reality: rather than subordinating Igbo to English, Adichie allows the two to exist in tension and dialogue. This balance reflects the lived experience of many Nigerians who navigate hybrid linguistic landscapes daily. The story thus becomes both a literary and sociolinguistic document of Nigeria's multilingual identity.

Ultimately, the code-switching in Adichie's *Imitation* is more than a stylistic flourish; it is integral to the story's exploration of authenticity, identity, and displacement. The presence of Igbo in an English-dominated narrative embodies the contradictions of diasporic life—the tension between assimilation and rootedness, imitation and originality. Code-switching in African literature asserts linguistic agency and cultural pride (Ross 120). By weaving Igbo into *Imitation*, Adichie affirms that true cultural identity cannot be fully imitated or replaced. The linguistic hybridity of the text becomes a metaphor for the complexity of diasporic existence, setting the stage for deeper analysis of the story's themes.

Theoretical Framework

This study adopts Shana Poplack's Model of Code-Switching as its theoretical framework, given its relevance to bilingual speech and structural linguistics. Poplack's work, first articulated in 1980, remains foundational in understanding the patterned nature of code-switching. She proposed that code-switching is governed by systematic grammatical rules, not by linguistic incompetence or confusion. According to Anieke and Igwedibia, Poplack's model provides crucial insights into "the structural and functional dimensions of Igbo-English code-switching," showing how speakers manipulate linguistic boundaries to achieve communicative goals (Anieke and Igwedibia 77). This makes the framework particularly useful in analyzing how Adichie integrates Igbo phrases into English discourse in *Imitation*.

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Probably one of the most important contributions of Poplack is the division of code-switching into three: intra-sentential or switching within a sentence, inter-sentential switching or switching between sentences, and tags (switching to discourse fillers or using interjections). All these differences are necessary to literary analysis as they enable recognition of the stylistic burden of every switch. In her own text on how to tame a wild tongue, Gloria Anzaldua manages to persuade her audience by influencing their identities, categorizing them into one of the three types of identity that Barboza also applies, in her analysis (Barboza 91). Likewise, in Imitation, the use of phrases such as kwanu is applied through tag-switches, and through longer utterances one can identify cuts between sentences that support the issue of cultural intimacy.

In addition to grammar, the model proposed by Poplack suggests the sociolinguistic reasons under which code-switching occurs, such as signalling a sense of solidarity, enacting cultural identity, or seeking power relations. Bayarmagnai notes that the insights provided by Poplack show that multilingual speakers use switching as an identity and belonging-reflection style of communicating (Bayarmagnai 64). In Adichie's story, Amaechi's use of Igbo signals her closeness to home culture, while Nkem's reliance on English reflects her Americanized distance, illustrating how linguistic choices map onto questions of diaspora and alienation.

Poplack's Equivalence Constraint further explains how code-switching tends to occur at points where the grammatical structures of two languages align. This minimizes communicative breakdown and facilitates fluid transitions. Sahni notes that this principle is particularly significant in bilingual literary texts because it allows authors to embed local expressions without disrupting the syntactic flow of English (Sahni 108). Adichie exploits this flexibility, inserting Igbo expressions into English narration in ways that remain accessible to both Nigerian and global audiences.

Lastly, the ideological aspects of code-switching are also seen to be illustrated by the Poplack model. Naheed further points out that switching in postcolonial literature does not simply refer to the linguistic selection but it is a narrative way that claims the local identity against the linguistic hegemonies. It is pertinent to Imitation, in which the retention of Igbo words in an English text attempts to resist the cultural erasure to which international markets often subject their texts. Contextualizing her character's speech within the context of Poplack, Adichie reinvigorates the space of Igbo within a global language.

In sum, the theory described by Poplack, coupled with current practices in Igbo-English and other languages, as well as studies touching on bilingualism, offer a powerful way of evaluating *Imitation*. It assists in explaining not only how Adichie mixes Igbo into English sentences, but also why these shifts are important to identity, intimacy, and resistance. With this framework, the analysis can now be conducted by understanding the structural, social, and

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political functions of code-switching in the story of Adichie.

Textual Analysis

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation*, from *The Thing Around Your Neck*, is a story that dramatizes the struggles of cultural displacement, gender roles, and marital betrayal. Language is central to these tensions, and Adichie deploys code-switching into Igbo to highlight intimacy, cultural grounding, and resistance. The Igbo phrases scattered throughout the text are not decorative; they perform crucial social and emotional functions. Through them, Adichie constructs a layered narrative where language itself becomes a marker of belonging and alienation.

One of the most striking examples is the use of "kwanu", a common Igbo discourse particle. It is deployed in *Imitation* as an interjection that conveys both familiarity and emotional nuance. Within the framework of Poplack's tag-switching, *kwanu* functions as a cultural anchor in dialogue, signaling solidarity and shared identity. As Anieke and Igwedibia observe, tag-switches like this are powerful because they "carry pragmatic weight without disrupting the syntactic structure of English" (Anieke and Igwedibia 80). When Amaechi uses such expressions, she situates herself firmly within the Igbo communicative world, even while the narrative unfolds in English. This creates a double-layered discourse where the cultural intimacy of Igbo pierces the dominant English frame.

Similarly, the recurring term "oga", used to address a master or boss, encapsulates both respect and social hierarchy. Its retention in Igbo rather than English equivalents such as "sir" is telling. By using *oga*, Adichie underscores the entrenched class dynamics of Nigerian society, which persist even in diasporic contexts. Bayarmagnai explains that bilingual speakers often switch codes to reinforce social distinctions and contextual meanings unavailable in one language alone (Bayarmagnai 67). In *Imitation*, *oga* functions as a linguistic marker of class relations, situating Obiora in a position of authority over domestic workers, while simultaneously reminding the reader of cultural norms that persist across borders.

Another example is "rapuba" (meaning "leave it" or "forget about it"), which surfaces in Amaechi's exchanges. This intra-sentential switch reflects what Sahni calls the *Equivalence Constraint*—the point at which grammatical structures of two languages allow seamless transition (Sahni 110). The insertion of *rapuba* into otherwise English sentences demonstrates the fluidity of bilingual discourse, while also imbuing the utterance with emotional resonance. Unlike its English equivalents, the Igbo command carries cultural familiarity and an intimacy that highlights Amaechi's role as both insider and subordinate.

Code-switching in *Imitation* also marks emotional intensity and cultural authenticity. As Barboza notes in her analysis of identity and bilingualism, speakers often revert to their native tongue when expressing anger, intimacy, or deep emotion (Barboza 94). This is

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evident in the story when gossip about Obiora's infidelity is conveyed through Igbo idioms. The linguistic shift signals that betrayal and marital conflict are not just private issues but culturally embedded ones. The choice of language intensifies the accusation, rooting it in Igbo communal discourse rather than abstract English detachment.

Moreover, Adichie uses Igbo expressions to challenge linguistic hierarchies and resist total assimilation into English. Naheed emphasizes that in postcolonial texts, code-switching is often a form of "narrative resistance, preserving indigenous identity within global discourse" (Naheed 54). This resistance is palpable in *Imitation*, where Igbo words remain untranslated, compelling readers to either learn their meaning or accept their opacity. By refusing to flatten the language into English equivalents, Adichie validates Igbo as equally expressive and authoritative. This aligns with what Ross identifies as Adichie's strategy of "placing the Igbo tongue on the same pedestal as English" (Ross 117).

Thematically, these switches expose the cultural dissonance between Nkem, who lives in America, and those who remain in Nigeria. While her speech patterns lean toward standardized English, reflecting her diasporic assimilation, Amaechi and other Nigerian characters embody an Igbo-English hybridity that feels rooted and authentic. This contrast reveals Nkem's alienation from her cultural base and dramatizes her fragile position in a marriage that itself feels foreign. Poplack's model helps explain this: inter-sentential and intra-sentential switches in Amaechi's speech emphasize her cultural continuity, while Nkem's lack of Igbo markers reflects estrangement.

In addition, Adichie employs Igbo to index communal values that cannot be fully captured in English. Words like *oga*and *rapuba* are deeply embedded in Nigerian social relations, connoting respect, hierarchy, and familiarity in ways that English lacks. Sahni argues that such switches "open up semantic fields unavailable in monolingual discourse" (Sahni 113). Thus, when these expressions appear, they carry cultural knowledge, invoking collective memory and shared experience.

Ultimately, Adichie's use of code-switching in *Imitation* dramatizes the struggle of maintaining cultural authenticity in a diasporic space. Each Igbo expression is a refusal to allow English to fully dominate the narrative. Through linguistic hybridity, Adichie exposes the fractures of migration, the contradictions of identity, and the politics of gender and power. The Igbo words scattered throughout the story function as cultural signposts, reminding readers that beneath the veneer of American suburbia lies the enduring heartbeat of Igbo tradition.

Conclusion

Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Imitation* demonstrates how language operates as more than a communicative tool; it is a marker of identity, belonging, and resistance. By embedding Igbo expressions within an English narrative, Adichie foregrounds the

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sociolinguistic realities of diasporic Nigerians and underscores the cultural weight that language carries. Code-switching in the story is not arbitrary but deliberate, serving to preserve intimacy, convey untranslatable meanings, and index social hierarchies.

The dissection based on Poplack model of code-switching indicates that the Igbo snippets in *Imitation*, whether tag-switches like kwanu or intra-sentential shift like rapuba serve to indicate patterned and purposeful nature of bilingualism. In these switches, the practice of code-switching is again reinforced to be known and understood as not a deficiency, but a rule-governed linguistic system. They also point to the sociolinguistic purposes of bilingual speakers, i.e. to find solidarity, express cultural identity, or resist assimilation. In Adichie, Igbo is added to English not only to appear natural in the context of speech but also to create a symbolic domain through which to survive around displacement.

More to the point, *Imitation* employs language to stage those themes about diaspora, gender and negotiation of culture. The differences between the home and abroad are exposed in the contrasting cases of assimilation into American English wherein marks the character Nkem as contrasting to the Igbo-English of characters such as Amaechi. Igbo switches serve as a reminder of communal values that remain in the diaspora, as they root the story to its Nigerian cultural context. The non-translation of these Igbo words by Adichie has in a way forced the international readers to recognize the existence of these words which makes Igbo successful in the universal literature.

To sum up, code-switching in *Imitation*, as an initiative of Adichie, turns language into a problematic issue and a stylistic tool at the same time. Through the language of English and Igbo, she manages the tensions of diaspora, ensures the survival of the indigenous voice, and questions the gendered politics of cultural identity. The narrative turns out to be not only an excursion into betrayal and uprooting of the marriage but also a hymn to linguistic duality (which may be seen as one of survival) and declaration. Finally, Imitation confirms that language cannot exist apart from identity and that in the world of world literature Igbo (along with English) also speaks powerfully about origins, background, and residence.

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