

A Conceptual Analysis of Benjamin Kwakye: Why Accent Matters for Migrants?

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ABSTRACT

The pull and push factors of globalisation not only has increased the flow of technology, men power and resources but also the easy flow of different languages across the world wide. The migrants entering the host land frame their identity based on ethnic, religious, cultural and linguistic grounds. In the multicultural era, the people face the challenges of communication barrier as they belong to different nations having different linguistic sense and taste. Accent plays a vital role in the social ties of the migrants since identity, culture and language are inseparable. The research study focuses on how the migrants perceive the language of the host land. The accent of the nonnative speakers differs from the native speakers by their foreign accents and pronunciation of the foreign language which determines the identity and knowledge of the migrants. There creates a bias and discrimination based on the accent of the migrants or the nonnative speakers and the differentiation which plays a significant role in the identity construction of the migrants. The research aims to explore the role of accent of migrants in their social inclusion and self-identity through the lens of Benjamin Kwakye, the contemporary African writer. Kwakye's trilogy displays the necessity of exploration of social, economic and psychological challenges faced by the migrants in the global window.

Keywords: accent, pronunciation, alienation, social exclusion and foreign.

Introduction

Communication is the powerful weapon to disseminate one's own ideas and establish a good rapport with the existing society. Language acts as a medium of knowledge in delivering the message and the knowledge of the individual and hence the proficiency particularly, the

proficiency of host language is crucial for the migrants. Accent is defined as “a variety of speech differing from other varieties in terms of pronunciation (including intonation), and which identifies a speaker in terms of regional origin, social standing and, possibly, ethnicity” (Swann & et al. 3). Accent and pronunciation are tagged with one’s back ground and associates social relations of the individual. However, the individuals who are native have acquired the language in their infancy and so they have the command over the language with no efforts. But when the individuals who are displaced from the other countries have their own sense of native language. It seems not an easy task to acquire the foreign language appropriately like the natives. Being easily understandable by the migrants as well as the natives is a greatest challenge affecting the life of the migrant in the host country. Language is recognised both as the communicative tool as well as the identity determiner of the migrant.

Literature Review

Chimamanda Adiche's *Americana* has talked about the identity struggles of the protagonist Ifemelu. Adichie has described how the semantic composition of words sounded in different cultures. In *Dominicana* by Angie Cruz, the protagonist Ana undergoes forced marriage and migration where she struggles to learn English and new cultures to assimilate with the American society. *A Concise Chinese-English Dictionary for Lovers* is the first novel written in English by Xiaolu Guo, a Chinese-born British writer. The novel discusses about the immigratory experiences of a Chinese girl Zhuang who falls in love with the British Sculptor. The author highlights the challenges involving culture and language in the migration. The Chinese girl struggles to make up the relationship with British Sculptor because of the lack of the English language skills. In the book of *The Good immigrant* consisting of collection of 21 essays by BAME writers, the essay “Namaste” by Nikesh Shukla comments on the discriminatory life of immigrants and has spotlighted the disparities based on race, language and culture. The literature review states the challenges of the migration and the research study aims to project the role of accent in the identity formation and how it posits as a major challenge in constructing their life in the host land. Benjamin Kwakye’s trilogy talks about the migratory challenges through his protagonists and explains how the migrants struggle to fix their identity and life. And also, aims to discuss how accent is related with the western ideology and analysed as new form of racism.

Research Analysis

In the first novel of trilogy, *The Other Crucifix (TOC)* the protagonist Jojo displaced from Ghana to America to have his higher education. In Ghana, Jojo's academic record was impeccable. He was an active student and he was good at speech and received a standing ovation from the crowd for his wonderful speech and confidence. Through his academic record he got admission to the University and he headed towards America on a partial scholarship. But the way of language speaking of English made him to choke the situation in the airport. He couldn't understand the speaking way of English in the airport and so he couldn't communicate properly. "After repeated attempts in slow English, I managed to communicate my problem to an airport official who directed me, in English I found difficult to understand, to the appropriate gate" (Kwakyee, *TOC* 4). He was stuck in the airport and hadn't eaten as he couldn't interact with the airport members. The hustle and shuffle confused him as he was uncertain about his days in America. Still, he had the hope that the native Americans would understand his English. "I soon realised that the English spoken here wasn't my English" (Kwakyee, *TOC* 8).

The protagonist Jojo couldn't comprehend the accent of the native speakers. According to Edward "accent is generally understood as a unique mode of sound production in a spoken language that is influenced by a person's geographical origin, social status, or mother tongue" (as quoted in Dollmann et al.). Unable to comprehend, Jojo replied yes when the airhostess enquired whether he wished to eat chicken or pasta. Later he realised and he insisted the flight attendant to repeat the question. "Accent aside, the quickness with which the words were spoken and the slang that dotted expressions required patient decoding" (Kwakyee, *TOC* 8). The incidents at the airport emotionally exhausted the spirits of Jojo. Without the proper deliver of the message, he felt some sort of strange emptiness and he began to submerge his mind to escape from the strangeness. "Familiarity. Where was mine?" (Kwakyee, *TOC* 9). Foreign accents isolate the subject from the native and it would lead to categorisation of ingroup and outgroup members or native and nonnative speakers. Yet, he had his hope of getting education from the land of opportunities where he could find his familiarity and develop himself with the other students of different nations.

Jojo admitted "Communication, once so easy, continued to be an issue as Americans still spoke too fast for me and overused slang" (Kwakyee, *TOC* 21). The author wants to convey the readers about the challenges to be faced by the migrants by the language issues apart from the shades of ethnicity, race, culture and religion. In the global space it seems normal for the people to move across borders and happens to meet people of different communities, languages

and sociological background. Beyond the communicative purposes the language plays a major role in the identity construction of the migrants in the host land. Identity can be seen as the feature that facilitates the self-expression of one-self that describes the peculiarity of the individual to the others. Instead of distinguishing the individual from the others the construction of identity based on ethnicity, culture, race, language discriminates the individual from the society. The research traces the identity construction of the protagonist of the novel *TOC* who tried to blend his linguistic culture in America.

The psychological tensions began to fill up the minds of Jojo, trying to adjust the American cultures. He hadn't expected such sorts of culture shock in America. He was confident about his skills in English knowledge and also, he had read so much about America and had seen many American films. But he was "finding it difficult to understand the American accent, especially American slang" (Kwakyee, *TOC* 26). He struggled to go with the accent of the Americans "especially had a problem with the way 't' almost sounded like 'd' and 'a' almost sounded like an 'e' – man was almost pronounced as men. Oh my!" (Kwakyee, *TOC* 21). The linguistic intonation is developed from the environment to which he is exposed to and have spoken mostly in the early part of the individual life. Jojo had been stemmed under African linguistic grounds till his adult stage and so he had acquired the accent based on African linguistic intonation.

Similar instances could be traced in Adichie's *Americanah* where Ifemelu pressured herself with the demands of linguistic patterns to fulfil her social and economic needs along with her Igbo identity. Ifemelu was stuck with "the blurring of the 't', the creamy roll of the 'r' the sentences starting with 'so' and the sliding response of uttering 'oh really'" (Adichie 175). Ifemelu was terrified to pronounce the words as it seemed different from the American accent. Kwakyee also points out the accent discrimination faced by the immigrants like Adichie. Jojo was not able to pronounce the words with the accent with the natives did. But "my otherness seemed to weigh on me: my manner of speech, the penchant of so many either to ignore me completely or show over curiosity, the use of slang and phrases I didn't know, the request to repeat my words..." (*TOC* 31). He felt alienated. The accent might shed its negative impact on the nonnative speakers. Moreover, the author highlights that the accent is a only a part of the proficiency of language including syntax, vocabulary, grammar etc. Carlson and McHenry affirm the undeniable fact is that "individuals with a perceived accent are given lower employability ratings" and so they are regarded only suitable of lower status jobs (as quoted in Dollmann).

“Due to globalization, accent may soon cue ‘foreignness’ more than skin colour” (Sumantry and Choma). The intentional or the unintentional judgements stereotype the individuals and the individuals feel inferior when the stereotypes pervade. The nagging sense of separateness was felt by the protagonist Jojo. He realised the discrimination “is not proclaimed but finds its place somewhere in the psyche and somewhere else deeper still: somewhere spiritual, so debilitating, so passively wounding” (Kwakyee, *TOC* 31). Even though he felt alienated, he determined to develop his skills to be American part. Jojo continued his studies in America and took all his efforts to assimilate and to shed the otherness. Later he met Fiona, an American whom he fell in love. He liked her because he was much impressed by “her accent and the way she carried the English language” and decided to settle in America through Fiona (Kwakyee, *TOC* 147). Towards the end of his graduation programme, campus interviews and recruitment of corporations were conducted. Jojo “signed up for several interviews but never got a job offer” (Kwakyee, *TOC* 149). He was devastated. He could understand what was happening and why he couldn’t get job while all his friends were recruited. “Why, when my grades were better than at least eighty percent of the class?” (Kwakyee, *TOC* 149). Gluszek and Dovidio reports “speakers with nonnative accent are considered less intelligent, less loyal, less competent and of lower status and face both prejudice and stereotypes” (as quoted in Chakraborty 59). The research analyses such bias is purely constructed socially by the dominant attitude to show off their high ethnocentric status. The social construction excludes the nonnatives as outsiders and the native members as insiders. Thus, the migrants are automatically excluded from the dominant insights of the insiders by creating the inferiority based on the accent in addition to the race, class, sex, ethnicity etc. Accent has been framed as a new filter to limit the job opportunities of the migrants by controlling the mechanism of settling migrants.

Fiona encouraged Jojo by arranging a seat for him in the Law school. In the Law school also, he faced the same difficulty. “The diction was obscure... I thought I’d mastered the English language appreciably well, but this was something else. It was like a new language: the language of the law” (Kwakyee, *TOC* 167). He had to work for more hours to understand language of the law and the cases. In spite of his hard work, he was humiliated in the class for his accent and diction. Throughout his course of his study, he struggled with the usage of language. So, he was excluded from his class particularly by the professors who handled him. But Jojo didn’t give up. One day or the other day he believed that he would attain his goal. In the final selection of his job for an interview “I had to sit through request upon the request to

repeat what I'd just said" (Kwakyé, *TOC* 216). The interviewers asked to repeat the words of Jojo whatever he spoke and they pulled their faces as an acknowledgement of humiliation and unfavourable evaluation of his nonnative accent. His rejection for his accent proves his rejection for his identity. He was not selected for any of those interviews as the interviewers credited his accent and pronunciation rather than his educational qualifications. Tajfel and Turner (1979) proposed the model of Social Identity Theory (SIT) which explains how the large social groups construct the relationship using the psychological process. Seeking the status and positiveness for the ingroup by holding the negative thoughts about the outgroup with the aid of social prejudice and discrimination is the foundational aspect of the dominant social hierarchy (as quoted in Harwood). The dominant group continues to maintain their dominance by stereotyping the stigma. The research admits that the accent has been adapted as a means of manner and social inclusion or exclusion. In *English with an Accent* the author reports that even in the awakening of strict anti-discrimination laws, "language and accent have become an acceptable excuse to publicly turn away, to refuse to recognise the other or acknowledge" (Lippi-Green 67). The accent bias weakens the financial status of the migrants and they have to rely on the others for their survival in the host land. Kwakyé elucidates that the protagonist Jojo had to depend on his wife Fiona for his financial needs and so he could not question against her. The power of dominance fell in the hands of Fiona as Jojo couldn't stabilise self-identity and had to suppress his thoughts.

In the second book of Trilogy *The Count's False Banquet (TCFB)* Kwakyé paints the work life of Jojo where he was facing the same accent bias that too after getting the Green Card and in the third book of the Trilogy *The Three Books of Shama (TTBS)* he discusses the later part of Jojo's life including the life of his children until his death. Kwakyé describes the life of the migrants and the future generations of the migrants through Jojo in his trilogy. The legal system of America had legalised Jojo as the citizen of America by providing the Green card status. But still he was driven in the society and in the work, place stating the reason of his poor accent of English. Thus, accent has become the key to the migrants' professional success and set accent as intelligibility. He got his job not in the Law concern due to the lack of his accent. The Count Tutu, the undocumented immigrant requested Jojo to rescue him from his deportation. Since Jojo was also an African, Tutu believed he could get him out of the case. Initially, Jojo hesitated as he was not an Immigration Lawyer and later, he decided to argue for his fellowmen. At the court once again, Jojo faced the same accent discrimination. His arguments didn't sound to the court as the discrimination dumbed their ears. Accent bias

converges with the institutional racism as it obstructs the path of the nonnatives or who are considered to be as the others. The protagonist of *The Count's False Banquet* expressed the discrimination that pervaded over the American society. He felt that English wasn't consistent. His language and accent were dismissed "as less valuable differences in intonation, pronunciation or syntax. And here we were both contending with the authority that looked different... want to humble us" (Kwakye, *TCFB* 486). Jojo had taken all his efforts to modify his accent and so his accent was different from the Ghanaian origin. Tutu introspected "The accent united us also divided us...Jojo's accent was Ghanaian, yes; still that overlay of an American accent that clouded the Ghanaian one" (*TCFB* 486). Thus, the local traditions are influenced by the power dominance.

The research article focuses on the economic deprivation of the migrants based on the accent bias. Jojo had his graduation at the law school but he was hired at the machine and papers at the Corporate Compliance. In the Corporate the other members got their promotion but Jojo remained at the Staff Attorney level for more than fifteen years. His loss of self-respect and confidence was irrecoverable and "I received neither a pay raise nor promotion" (Kwakye, *TTBS* 194). Jojo had his extra classes to develop his communicative skills. Jojo felt that his command and fluency had increased comparatively. The head of the marketing company said to Jojo "I can't understand what you're saying" (Kwakye, *TTBS* 186). The manager called the other officials by shattering the confidence level of Jojo demanding someone to explain to him in clear English. The ideological aspects of native speakers as superiors as intelligible and nonnative speakers as unintelligible or inferior creates the binary relationship reminding the stratum of colonial practices suppressing who is considered to be the others. The author highlights the discrimination and puts forth the question by probing the readers about the difference between English and clear English and what is considered to be as standard accent and who set the norms. The research article titled "Accent, Standard Language Ideology, and Discriminatory Pretext in the Courts" affirms Kwakye's opinion by stating "prejudiced listeners cannot hear what a person has to say, because accent, as a mirror of social identity and a litmus test for exclusion, is more important" (Lippi- Green). The modern or the neocolonial form of slavery of the accent bias spreads the ideology that the Westerners are superiors and their version as the standard to be followed, automatically delineating the others as low.

The segregation of the society members as ingroup and outgroup members based on the accent indirectly routes to the racial segregation which insists the similar sort of discrimination and alienates the people. The categorisation of the native speakers and the

nonnative speakers accomplishes the racial stratification thus the skin colour is replaced by the accent of the individuals. Except the skin tone every sort of accent discrimination reinforces the power relations between the natives and the nonnatives, workers and the employers, host and the migrants. It has been observed “accent and racism are not two separate issues in labour migration” (Ramjattan). The accent bias in the workplace and social institutions generalises the unintelligible status instilling the inferiority in the minds of the migrants thereby maintaining the colonial relationships in the invisible spread of accent. The migrants are in psychic state of improving their accents to improve their fluency to get opportunities. As a result, the migrants are caught in the web of power hierarchies by adapting and directing the world towards western cultures and strive hard in maintaining white supremacy.

Research findings

The research has dealt with the social, psychological and economic challenges faced by the migrants due to accent-based discrimination. Accent has been employed as a methodology or a tool to categorise the society in to ingroup and out group members with reference to the ethnicity. The research has shed its light on the negative evaluation of the native speakers upon the nonnative speakers. The prejudiced individuals are legitimising the discrimination by glitter of standardisation.

Conclusion

Instead of using the accent as means of toning the language, it has been exploited as a test of social identity of exclusion. The legal protection towards the accent bias is not possible as it gels up with the social hierarchy and ideology. It seems difficult to trace and separate the bias. Accent bias is understood as the hidden installation of racism maintaining the dominant status. There is a plenty of scope of the future research to delve in the aspects as binary or dominant ideology suppresses the humanity even in the global window.

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