# Language, Literature and the Community: A Semiotic Analysis

**By**

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## Abstract

It is the thrust of this paper to have a semiotic analysis of language, literature and the community. Language and literature thrive in the community and their various means of communication through the verbal and non-verbal processes. Language and literature transmit ideas, thoughts, feelings' and most importantly information from one person (usually a sender or source or initiator) via an encoding process to the receiver (decoder) and meaning is effectively achieved as interlocutors understood one another. In literature for instance, symbols are used by writers and these symbols have communicative values on the reader and the community generally. These symbols are semiotic signs. The aim of this paper is to evaluate the communicative significance of language and literature in the community from a semiotic perspective. Therefore, the paper adopts the descriptive method of analysis and this paper is aimed to the semiotic theory. Consequently, the paper highlights the different views and points on how language and literature affect the community. It is true that with the sort of technological utopianism that characterises language and literature, there has been a lot of positive impact on the community, especially as it tends to cure the community's social and political ills. This paper recommends by positing that the ability to network, gain knowledge, and/or find communion within language and literature is the social glue that binds formerly isolated individuals into a community.

**Keywords:** Language, Literature, Community, Semiotics, Analysis.

## Introduction

Over the years, language and literature have been studied within the realms of semiotics – as a means of communication (verbal/non-verbal) and literature – as a form of metaphorical language or figurative expression. The community cannot be separated from language and literature because they impact both negatively and positively on each other at different perspectives. Semiotics is generally referred to as the science of signs and a sign is anything that can be used to represent or stand for something else. Signs denote, characterise or symbolise and convey linguistic value as a language generally. Rheingold (1973) postulates "that community in cyberspace has burgeoned in part due to a public lament over the disappearance of informal public spaces in our real existence… who are attracted to virtual community by means of interacting with other people on a completely novel level" (p.5). The virtual communities are groups of people linked by their participation in computer networks; and people in virtual communities share many of the characteristics of people in ordinary communities.

Viewed from this, language and literature serve both the real and virtual communities to be built and sustained. This agrees with what Oldenburg (1991) refers to as "the last of the three essential place in people's lives: the place they live, the place they work and the place they gather for conviviality" (p.209). Hence language and literature can be likened to a neighbourhood salon or coffee shop where people visit friends for conversation – whether idle chat or spirited debate about philosophical or political issues; for gathering information on subjects ranging from child birth and care to medicine or for supporting members of the community. Modernity has established a culture in which language (literatures) remains the interactive sphere of existence.

## Community Literature

Literature as language in use makes people get through the day in the community. Literature enables participants join and become involved with the express purpose of re-establishing a social bond. In reviewing community literature as it relates to the internet, Jones (1995) uses Effrat's notion of community, which has three principles components:

Community as solidarity institutions;

Community as primary interaction; and

Community as institutionally distinct groups.
Community in literary parlance is predicated on the common beliefs, interests, knowledge, and information apart from physical space. It consists of social networks and social interaction and no longer a "where".

Therefore, literature sees the need to conceptualise community as a complex of social relationships, which has not been sufficiently explored. These communities would be people with common interests and goals. This view of community differs from traditional views of community sociology, as that of "locality based on action" which emphasises geographic area alone.

**The Concept of Community**

The concept of community was first popularised by Ferdinand Tonnies, a Nineteenth century German sociologist. Similarly, Howard Rheingold stands at the forefront of the field of study into virtual communities. His book, *The Virtual Community* was published in 1993. His subsequent writings were on the phenomena of community. But the questions are: what does a community really mean and what are its basic underlying tenets? And can we call an electronic coming together a community in the real sense of the word?

As already referenced, Tonnies used the term "Gemeinschaft" for community: a representation for an ideal social collectiveness that governs society, one in which a foundation is formed on sentimentality, familiarity, and emotional ties. Forming an opposition is "Gesellschaft", or a community based upon calculated rationality, personal interest and indifference to traditions.

It is correct to say that a community exists within a social system, in the same vein; literature is situated in a social system. However, in literary world, there is community inside community. There is the real community from which authors create the works and there is the literary community peopled by characters in the fictional world. Tonnies' work also caused thinkers like Hawthorne, Emerson, and Thoreau to illustrate the domination of the individual spirit by industrialism, which they saw as an unchecked danger.

**The Effects of Literature on the Community**

The issue of how literature affects communities can bring about many different points of view. Everyone sees life itself differently, and that is the same when it comes to literature. Each individual that reads a story (novel) or piece of poetry is affected by it differently and therefore they respond to it and affected by it differently. In return, the community itself is affected by literature differently. However, there is still a common ground that we all must walk on before reaching the last page of a book or line of a poem – we must all begin at the beginning.

The community has been affected by language and literature for ages. Since the first page of language and literature was written, it has affected the community. When book were first introduced into the world, they were not accepted by the community that well, because many people did not even have the pleasure of knowing how to read. Once people were taught how to read, their interest grew and the community was affected by authors' historical stories, fantasies, fictions, and stories of their own live. The domino effect has been occurring for hundreds of years and will continue to affect those in the future. These stories are presented in language and literature. This story has affected the community by giving people who feel that they are lost and have no hope, the faith to believe, that there is hope beyond the negative thing that they are facing.

In language and literature communication, any object, concept or word which is not limited to a single meaning could be interpreted to be a symbol. It is one of the areas or aspects of semiotic studies or semiotics. On the other hand, it could also be a literary device which uses words, people, marks, locations, abstract ideas or concepts to represent something beyond the surface meaning or literal level meaning. Kiesler (1986) elaborates the impact of communication on community thus:

> When communication lacks dynamic personal information, people focus their attention on the message rather than on each other. Communicators feel a greater sense of anonymity and detect less individuality in others than they do talking on the phone or face to face. They feel less empathy, les guilt, less concern over how they compare with others, and less influenced by norms (p.48).

**Language and Literature in Community as a Cultural/Literary Semiotics**

Over the years, the origin of language as well as the first language ever spoken by mankind has been a concern to philosophers and linguists such as King James of Scotland (1473-1513), Suessmilch (in 1754), Johann Herder, the German philosopher, Philip Lieberman, among others (Adesanya 2002, Pp.33-36). After the above period, came another period where there was a quest among variationists to account for the origin of linguistic diversity and why there are linguistic diversity amongst language(s). In an attempt to justify the above leads us to what J. K. Chambers called 'the Babelian Hypothesis'. This hypothesis according to Chambers (1995) is derived from the Bible (apologies to those who do not believe in this holy book) in Genesis.11:1-9 which claims that some three millennia ago, there was only one language with a single dialect. According to Chambers, the Babelian Hypothesis holds that God imposed linguistic diversity on mankind as a punishment for its hubris. "Because the tower reached so high as to challenge God's authority, God took away the basis of the people's power, their ability to communicate perfectly with one another" (p.208).

Judging from characters' postulation in the Babelian Hypothesis, it is apt that language and literature play significant roles in the community; not losing sight of the fact that literature uses language to communicate. Plato believed that words have to have the meaning they have, it follows that they can have no other meaning and moreover that no other word can possibly have that meaning. Consequent upon this, language and literature impact on the community semiotically.

Cultural semiotics is the study of culture as a symbol or semiotic system that impacts on the community. This kind of research treating symbols or the semiotics system as having meanings is not only a cultural academic perspective, but more importantly, it involves the definition of the essential characteristics of culture. Note that culture is an element in the community. On the other hand, semiotics literary criticism, also known as literary semiotics is the approach to literary criticism informed by the theory of signs or semiotics, tied closely to structuralism pioneered by Ferdinand de Saussure, was extremely influential in the development of literary theory out of the formalist approaches of the early twentieth century.

The cultural semiotics in a way is a close resemblance with social semiotics that is a branch of the field of semiotics which investigates human signifying practices in specific social and cultural circumstances, and which tries to explain meaning – meaning as a social practice.

Semiotics, as originally defined by Ferdinand de Saussure is "the science of the life of signs in society". Social semiotics expands on Saussure's founding insights by explaining the implications of the fact that the "codes" of language and communication are formed by social processes. The crucial implication here is that meanings and semiotic systems are shaped by relations of power, and that as power shifts in society, our languages, literatures and other system of socially accepted meanings can and also change. According to Ohia and Anyaeneh (2010):

> There is depth of peculiarities of language use in literature that are warm and display in relation to the level of cultural literacy of both sexes in the community to which they belong. Thus, it is obvious that in literary language, the male idiolect is characterised by proverbs, maxims and universality; articulating their cultural literacy, the expansiveness and freedom of male world (p.2).

In this averment, Ohia and Anyaeneh expand the frontiers of literary language advancing the choice of words for the males and females in the community, thereby creating gender borders in the community.

By semiotic stance, language and literature in the community have both political and linguistic implications. The weight of representation is high and invokes political value as when members of the legislative assembly at local government, state and federal levels are send to stand in or speak on behalf of the people or the community of constituents. "By contract, 'represent' as in to denote, to characterise or to symbolise conveys linguistic value as in language generally. This is because language is used to denote the world or aspect of it" (Udumukwu 2021, p.191).

We can take for instance, yam. As an agricultural produce, yam has the primary significance of serving as a source of food in the community. But beyond this primary category, yam can form a part of the sign system in a cultural context and acquires extended forms of significance in an agrarian community. In Achebe's

*Things Fall Apart*, for instance, yam becomes a part of the cultural system of signs and serves as a sign of wealth, dignity, and masculinity.

Thus, we are given the account of a young man, Okonkwo who has desired to become a wealthy farmer in the community of Umuofia. In Order to accomplish this goal, he becomes a farmer and has in his possession rich barns of yam. Little wonder in Ogba kingdom of Rivers State, yam is a sign of masculinity and predominantly grown by the male. Therefore in Ogba, yam has been literally "drained" of its natural and original significance as a source of food and extended and imbued with secondary significance as in redefining social relations in Ogba. It is then a taboo for women to cultivate yam according to Ogba tradition.

It follows that semiotics in literature will involve an account of the semiotics of a literary text especially a narrative text. The narrative text because it refers to something else other than itself; something in the community where it is set, it refers to the network of relations, cultural and ideological, in its context. The objective of the semiotic approach is to understand the intricate combinations of the text as an independent entity, with distinct aspects and categories and to explain how they interplay of categories in the text helps us to understand the text as a form of representation. Language is the primary means and the vehicle for literary expression, hence there is a distinction between language of everyday communication and the language of literature as earlier highlighted. It is language that conveys what is concrete expression in the community and what is possible in literature. Language is exclusive preserve of humans. Without language, it will be difficult for humans to live and interact in the community.

Humans use language to convey and receive information in the community. It is an important means of communication. Given the importance of language, different scholars have tried to define language in varied ways. John Lyons quoting Edward Sapir writes that "language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas emotions and desires by means of voluntarily produced symbols" (p.3). From the foregoing, it is only humans that have the innate ability to use language effectively, using symbols which are consciously produced. Consequently, in order to function well in everyday living, one needs to be functional in the language or languages of a given speech

community. Human life is, in fact, interwoven with language and communication as language is not just part of use but defines us. Moreover, speech remains the primary way humans express themselves through language (O'Grady and Archibald, p.1).

However, in using language, politeness comes to play. Politeness across cultures generally includes elements of correct situational use of language, deference and considerations of others. Hakoff (1975) says that "politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction" (p.64). Since the English language is rule governed, it is expected that interactions in the language follow the rules to avoid grammatical and attitudinal errors. When and where these rules are neglected, the utterances so-produced are most likely to be unacceptable conventionally.

Moreover, bearing in mind that English language is the tool for education, it is expected that one who is educated should as well be cultured. Culture and communication can be said to be inseparable as the former in this context not only dictates who talks to whom about what and how the communication but also helps people encode messages and their meanings. With regard to the English language use in community, there ought to be compliance with the rules of communication, to avoid misplacement of issue and priorities.

English language like scientific invention could help a great deal, to improve the dare condition of the community in terms of development. The United Nations millennium declaration of September 2000 addresses the crippling poverty and multiplying misery that grip many areas of the world which Nigerian communities are included. The MDGs are set to make life easier for people and the English language is a tool for its implementation. But it is no gainsaying the fact that Literature-in-English also explores basic human feelings such as love and ambition; great literature of any age in Nigeria community is still enjoyed for its story and expressive language to advance education in the country.

**English Language/Literature Promoting Education Development and Economic Empowerment**

English language/literature helps to achieve the MDGs such as to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality and empower women; reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. The English language/literature has continued to serve as a medium of research development, teaching and education in the various geopolitical zones in Nigeria which in turn improves the local communities. "English is the domain of education especially in literature; it has served most to express Nigerian world-view. It lives through the writings of various national novelists, poets and playwrights. In Nigeria, English/literature has contributed immensely and most profitably to education and development" (p.194).

In this way, English language/literature has proved to be catalyst of nationalist aspirations. For instance, Nigerian Literature-in-English brings the country and other Anglophone countries in the sub-sahara and the world much closer, in sharing of educational experience as they narrate their lives through Literature-in-English and this has a positive impact on the nation's economy thereby touching the lives of community/rural dwellers. This paper also suggests that since English and Literature share common similarity, the learning of English should go alongside literature. In corroboration, Maduka (1994) describes literature as "that which encodes values which guide the challenges of civilisation in modern world" (p.17).

Therefore, English as a cross disciplinary subject serves as a vehicle for literary expression and when properly used through the instrumentality of literature, it facilitates the acquisition of modern technology that serves both the urban and rural communities. In a similar vein, Balibar and Machery (1989) point this out clearly: "the work of literary production depends on the existence of a common language codifying linguistics, both for its materials and for its aims insomuch as literature contributed directly to the maintenance of common language" (p.62).

English language/literature has become a veritable tool for national interaction and integration in the community. Our emotions are really ignited by the language which we write with and the literature we read, with the result that the reality of English/literature makes us feel the immediacy of situation and that of others. English language/literature in all ramifications is a venture of human development in the sense that the acquisition of the English language/literature is the acquisition of economic, educational, political, technical and vocational knowledge because the English language/language of literature is the language of pedagogy through which all these are impacted. It is a catalyst to the rapid economic development and social progress.

**Conclusion**

The English language/literature is a means through which we can inculcate a sense of commitment to the total community, helping our children to accept the values appropriate to our kind future. By reading the English language/literature, we are learning and comparing our cultures, and through it will send messages, inculcate virtues and destroy vices that are inimical to our economic development. In line with this Ochoma (2021) notes that "language is a resource with which human beings structure and organise their experiences. Language acquisition and learning are therefore of particular importance for the process of humanisation and socialisation of every individual in a community (p.39). It is a very important factor in the intellectual development of a man; thus the enviable pride and position it occupies, proficiency in the use of the English language/literature enhances the personality of the user and makes him popular, sociable, sound and above all confident in his immediate environment/community.

**Recommendations**

This paper therefore recommends that since the English language/literature is exploited as a mode of culture, it opens a new vista on its importance on the issues of commitment and social change; hence it should be used effectively to harness the full potentials of community development. The panacea to the problem of education is the use of the English/literature. The study of the English/literature will achieve our desired social change in the community and increase the relatively low level of education. As the content of literature is part of the community with a symbiotic link/relationship between the literary work and the community,

efforts should be advanced on the study of the English language/literature as any deviation will impinge on literacy in general terms. It is our relief that if these recommendations presented in this paper as the way forward for English language/literature in the community are adopted, the outcome will be tremendously fine.

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