

THE USES OF ENGLISH

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Translated from the Yoruba by the author

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It was a small village of about twenty-five houses with thatched roofs. Only the mission house, the school, and the church had corrugated iron roofs. It was a peaceful location in the middle of the agricultural belt that surrounded what was called Ibadanland.

There was a young man called Depo who had a wife called Asunle. No day passed without a noisy quarrel in their household. It was always more or less a shouting match because Depo always threatened his wife ferociously but he never really beat her. Asunle would maintain a safe distance and shout alarmingly, as if her life were in danger. Depo always looked annoyed and embarrassed. He seemed to be crying for help and salvation. His wife apparently enjoyed every bit of it; she would shout and curse to attract attention. Their neighbours would cry almost in unison: "There they go again!"

Asunle accused Depo of being obstinate and inconsiderate. Depo would insist on eating particular types of food at odd hours and always drank too much palm wine afterward. These habits were becoming intolerable to his wife. Some people thought that it was Asunle who was too defiant. She was always ready to pick a quarrel. She could, at will, turn the smallest domestic encounter into an irritating exchange. She would struggle like a wild cat as she was being restrained, and hurl invectives at her husband in an endless exasperating stream that would make the peacemakers shout, "But that is enough!"

Elders in the village started looking for a solution. They spent long hours debating all relevant points, but no one suggested a divorce. Elders never did. At last Depo's close friends suggested what they thought was a foolproof plan: he should marry a second wife! With a co-wife in the household, they thought, Asunle would be forced to become more sensible. So, Depo and his friends

began the anxious search; Asunle never seemed to worry. At last Atoke, the would-be second wife, was identified in a big village several kilometres away. Elders promptly proposed and received a favourable reply, including the consent of the girl herself. The ceremonies were performed, and even Asunle played her part as senior wife to her credit. The village heaved a sigh of relief, hoping for peace at last in Mr Depo's household. But if the villagers were right in expecting peace after the marriage, they were naive in thinking that other problems would not arise. It turned out that the battle lines only shifted from between husband and wife to between wife and co-wife. In their positive estimation of the new wife's character, villagers were grossly misled by her good looks. She was young, tall, and shapely, with a rich crop of hair, which she used to plait in beautiful, elaborate styles. There was a moderate gap between her upper front teeth and she smiled a lot. But beneath that alluring visage lay a sarcastic turbulence, amply fuelled by a sharp tongue and an artful, dramatic disposition. In spite of Asunle's notorious, wily truculence, she could not duplicate half the repertoire of Atoke's creative acerbity. No one could tell whether Depo's choice of Atoke as second wife was by cruel accident or a calculated search for someone who would be more than a match for Asunle.

Trouble started when Atoke refused to duly acknowledge Asunle's superior position in the household. By tradition, it was Atoke's duty to cook for the whole household and it was Asunle's right to tell her what to cook, when to cook it, and how much. But Atoke refused to be ordered about by anyone. She would only cook for herself and her husband. Asunle was therefore forced to continue cooking for herself and her two children, Olu, a little boy in his third year of school, and Lara, a mere toddler. Before Asunle had realised it, Atoke's monopoly of their joint husband was complete. Atoke cooked the tastiest of foods, which endeared her all the more to Depo, who had by now learned to tap palm wine, most of which he consumed himself. The after-supper scenes between Depo and Atoke were enviable pictures of marital happiness. But Asunle was being excluded from it all!

The children adjusted quickly to the new domestic situation. Lara, the little girl, took to Atoke instantly, like a fish to water. She would follow Atoke everywhere in spite of her mother's attempts to restrain her. It was to Atoke's credit that she too liked Lara. She would carry her on her back; she would play little games with her. Lara preferred to join her father, Depo, and the new wife at mealtimes. She would sit in her father's lap, and be indulged. Olu, the schoolboy, stuck by his mother Asunle.

Soon Asunle could no longer endure the marginalisation. She accused Depo of encouraging defiance on the part of Atoke, who was openly trampling tradition. But the gauntlet was taken up not by Depo, who was by then almost permanently inebriated, but by Atoke, who was not prepared to lose her favourable position. Rowdy quarrels quickly re-erupted in Depo's household and eventually regained their original position as the village's primary source of entertainment to the chagrin of elders and the delight of young ones.

Villagers were expecting Asunle to re-enact her past performances and promptly put the new wife in her place, but the very first public encounter left no doubt that Asunle was in trouble. Actually it was Asunle who fired the first salvos: three or four missiles of invective. Her style was to quickly boil over and assail her adversary with verbal abuse, gesticulating wildly. She would then refuse to go off the boil for a long time. She would make unpleasant remarks about her enemy's looks and behaviour. When the opponent was her husband, she shone like a lone star.

When Asunle started this first fight, Atoke remained very calm. She came out of the house and stood outside. Asunle followed her. A small crowd was already gathering, attracted by Asunle's usual noise. Then Atoke asked Asunle to stop bleating like a sheep and wait for some response. At first she calmly agreed with Asunle on all the unpleasant remarks she had made about her bodily features and behaviour. But she proceeded to demonstrate how all her own shortcomings would pale in comparison with the degree of ugliness of Asunle's features and the awkwardness of her behaviour. She even gave a few examples.

Atoke was more sophisticated than Asunle. To Atoke, lips were not just thin, they had to be compared with a common phenomenon that would sharply paint the picture of incongruity. For example, Asunle's lips were as thin as a palm wine seller's drinking calabash! Her eyes were as sunken as a brook almost obscured under an evergreen bush. In other words, whereas Asunle would stop at just ridiculing an ugly part of the body, Atoke would go further and liken the part to some funny phenomenon. In addition, while Asunle's performances were angry and trumpet-tongued, Atoke's were calculated, spiteful, and expressed with great fluency. The truth soon became too apparent to be ignored. Asunle was no match for the great Atoke. Overnight a new champion had wiped out all the records of a long reigning heroine. It was too bitter a pill for Asunle to swallow. Part of Atoke's advantage was that she came from a very big village where she had been exposed to greater variety in

the art of vituperation than Asunle who had lived all her life in small villages. As the new wife's reputation spread, gossip was making the old wife's life unbearable. For the first time Asunle was not too keen to pick a quarrel. But these were trying times for the household as quarrels increased. One morning, Asunle discovered that there was no water in the family pot. Normally she would have called on Atoke to go to the river and fetch some water, but she wanted to avoid any confrontation so early in the morning. So she picked a pot and ran to the river. When she returned, she did not pour the water into the big family water pot. She gave some to Olu to wash himself and get ready for school; she was also going to give Lara her morning bath and use the remaining to prepare breakfast for herself and the children. But while she was busy washing Lara in the backyard, Atoke took the remaining water, poured it into a cooking pot, and placed it on the fire to cook her own breakfast. When Asunle came back and discovered what had happened, she was furious. She wanted to know what gave Atoke the idea that she, Asunle, the senior wife, had become her errand girl to fetch water for her to cook food. Atoke just smiled, stoked the fire, and sat calmly without making any comment.

The situation boiled over! Asunle picked up a small pestle and pushed the clay pot over. It overturned and broke, emptying its contents into the fire in a whirl of smoke and ashes. Atoke shot up and grabbed Asunle's clothes. They started a noisy struggle. Little Lara started to cry. Depo ran in from the backyard where he had gone to wash his face. He struggled to separate the fighters. Asunle pushed him off energetically and he fell. But he struggled up instantly. He forced himself between them. Atoke went out of the house followed by Asunle, and a grand performance of verbal abuse started in front of the house. The usual crowd gathered and seemed to be saying this time, "Not again!"

Both wives were equally angry and worked up. They reeled off abuse in a frenzied battle of wit and hate. Atoke had better control of her performance. Asunle was too angry to be effective. Atoke's performance was therefore entertaining. Atoke looked at Asunle, shook her head, and said, "Do you ever observe how you carry your body when you move about? You push that heavy mouth of yours forward like a timid stray dog venturing onto a dance floor." The audience would have applauded, but the elders suppressed all response, except a few muffled chuckles. Asunle had virtually lost her voice. She was going to dry! The villagers' sympathies instantly returned to her. An elderly lady came forward and shouted angrily at the two women. "What on earth do you think you are doing? Can't you see? People are laughing at you! Is this

the kind of report you want sent back to your parents? Shut your mouths and go inside, now!”

The two ladies stopped shouting and went into their house. But the damage had been done to Asunle’s reputation. She had been humiliated. She went into her bedroom and cried. Depo had to take Olu to school to explain why he was coming so late that morning.

Asunle knew she had to do something to redeem herself. After some hard thinking, she smiled and carried on with the day’s chores. Depo took his machete and went to the farm. The two ladies were not speaking to each other. That morning little Lara stayed with her mother.

It was two o’clock when Olu came home from school. Asunle had prepared a good lunch for him. He was eating hungrily because he hadn’t had breakfast. Asunle sat watching him dotingly. Then a conversation began:

“Olu, my dear son.”

“Yes, mother.”

“How was school today?”

“We learned Bible stories and did arithmetic.”

“Have you been learning any English?”

“Oh yes! We have learned a lot of English! Let me show you my book.”

“No, no! Don’t worry. But you’ll do something for me.”

“An errand? You want to write a letter? Let me wash my hands.”

“No, it’s not a letter, but go and wash your hands.”

Olu washed his hands and sat beside his mother.

“Now mother, what do you want me to do for you?”

“You said you have been learning some English?”

“Yes, we have learned a lot of English. Look at this book. Everything inside it is English!”

“Really!”

“Oh, yes!”

“But can you insult someone in English?”

Olu hesitated a bit and said, “Well, yes! Oh yes! It is possible. There is so much English in my head!”

“Well then, you remember how that stupid Atoke abused me in the morning? Now I want to show her that I tower above her in social standing. I have a son who can insult her in English! So, I want you to go to her now and insult her roundly in English.”

Olu stood up calmly, tucked in his shirt, and adjusted his belt. He dashed to his bag and quickly checked something in his book. He nodded satisfactorily and marched smartly to face Atoke who was just entering the house. Olu stood right in Atoke's way, and Atoke was forced to stop and wonder.

Then Olu simply asked, "Why were you abusing my mother in the morning?" The confrontation was unexpected, and it momentarily disorientated Atoke. But she quickly regained her balance. She shouted at him. "Shut your dirty mouth! Has your mother run out of ideas?"

Olu then moved a few steps back and with arms akimbo he started to speak English knowing full well that Atoke would not understand.

He said, "*What is this?*"

Atoke was taken aback. "What is he talking?"

Olu responded, "*It is a basket.*"

Atoke concluded that Olu must be insulting her in English. She warned mother and child: "If you want to abuse me in English, you'll get into trouble. And I hope you are listening, careless mother?"

Olu moved farther back before throwing another English missile:

"*What are you doing?*"

Atoke was annoyed now. "I am warning you, you little rat."

Olu just fired on: "*I am going to the door.*"

Atoke said, "This is a good-for-nothing boy!"

Olu continued. "*Sit on the chair. What are you doing? I am sitting on the chair.*"

Atoke said, with a lot of hatred in her voice, "That stupid English you are speaking will be the death of you."

Olu would not be deterred: "*Where is your book? It is on the desk.*"

Atoke then said, "I know that my God will surely throw back all those curses on your ill-fated head!"

At that point Asunle felt the need to protect her son. She had been sitting down, enjoying her son's special performance with tremendous pride. She now stood up to defend Olu: "Don't curse my son, shameless woman. His intelligence is a gift from God. I know you can't understand."

"There is nothing to understand," Atoke retorted. "You think he can succeed where you have failed? Where a calabash fails to bail out enough water, there is no job for the basket. It is one more step down the road to perdition for mother and child."

A big noisy quarrel ensued between the two wives, and a crowd quickly gathered. Now Olu had absolutely gone wild with English! He was reeling off original verbal insults in special English:

“Go to the door. What are you doing? I am going to the door. Put the basket on the table. Where is the basket? It is on the table.”

The crowd grew bigger. Olu walked up and down the crowd, the left hand in his pocket, and the right held aloft as he nodded his head to emphasize the importance of each verbal missile in English!

Villagers tried to settle the quarrel. Atoke complained that Asunle had started asking her son to insult her in English! An elderly man wondered whether little Olu had acquired enough English to insult anyone. Before the man finished talking, Olu started rolling out his English again.

“What is this? It is a window.”

When Atoke heard the word *window* she flew into a rage. Unfortunate coincidence! Yoruba had borrowed the word *window* from English and its meaning had been extended to describe gaps in teeth. Atoke shouted, “Did you all hear that? Is it right for this luckless little rat to ridicule the gap in my teeth?”

After more bitter exchanges villagers succeeded in pacifying the fighters. An old man shouted at Olu to quiet down, and he shut his frivolous mouth.

The oldest woman in the crowd wanted to know how Atoke, who never went to school, knew what Olu was saying in English. Atoke narrated how the fight started and reminded them that they were all witnesses to Olu’s ridicule of the “window” in her teeth.

All this noise had attracted the attention of a teacher from the mission house. As the teacher approached, Olu cleverly went into hiding. Villagers sought the teacher’s opinion on Olu’s knowledge of English. When another pupil in a higher class who witnessed part of Olu’s performance explained what Olu had been saying to the teacher, they both burst into laughter. When the teacher explained it all to the villagers, everyone laughed.

The old man sighed and remarked: “This lack of English is a big embarrassment.”

The teacher wanted to see Olu, but the little scholar had disappeared.

Noticing the improved atmosphere, little Lara quietly walked to Atoke and held on to her shawl. Atoke looked at her, smiled, and picked her up. The little girl smiled too. There was a gap in her tiny set of teeth.

Atoke laughed and said, "Well, look what we have here! I am not the only one with a window!"