

## **An Evaluation of Verbal Hygiene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah***

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### **Abstract**

The work investigates verbal hygiene in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and how the practice of verbal hygiene or the lack thereof, shaped the relationships of the characters in the novel. It tries to establish a connection between verbal hygiene and the quality of relationships that exist among characters in the novel. Data were collected using purposive sampling technique from the novel, *Americanah*. This is to enable the researcher collect quality data that are of most relevance to the study. The collected data were analyzed textually through the lens of Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson. It was found that verbal hygiene is very much present in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah* and that the practice of verbal hygiene helped the characters to build relationships that are peaceful and harmonious. This work also discovered that the words of some characters analysed in this work are verbally hygienic and aimed at enhancing the positive face of other characters. This contributes immensely to some of the characters having a strong positive face. The researcher recommends that verbal hygiene be taught as early as literature is introduced to pupils in schools to enable people who do not have the privilege of acquiring higher education to learn the importance of being verbally hygienic as this will help them become better parents, teachers and citizens.

**Key words:** Verbal hygiene, Prescriptivism, Identity, English language

## Introduction

Verbal hygiene refers to man's itch to meddle in matters of language. Whether it is to prescribe how language should be or to describe how it actually is, to praise linguistic conformists and to correct or scold linguistic deviants, man has always meddled in the affairs of language.

Verbal hygiene is practiced commonly and among diverse people from diverse backgrounds. Anytime you think about language in an evaluative way or have an opinion on how language should be used, you are practicing verbal hygiene. Verbal hygiene is a phrase coined by British linguist Deborah Cameron to describe "the urge to meddle in matters of language: that is, the effort to improve or correct speech and writing or to arrest change in a language. Verbal hygiene is also known as prescriptivism or language purism. It also has to do with using polite, politically, culturally, and socially acceptable and error free language to express ourselves. When editors edit works to conform to a preferred standard, they are practicing verbal hygiene. When a teacher corrects a student's use of language, that teacher is practicing verbal hygiene. When a parent corrects his or her child's use of language, that parent is practicing verbal hygiene. The idea of verbal hygiene is the idea that, just as you wash your clothes before putting them on, brush your teeth, bathe and dress up before presenting yourself to the world, that's how you should clean up your language before presenting it to the world.

Cleaning up your language means removing spelling, syntactic and grammatical errors from your language and removing vulgarities

and profanities from your language before presenting it to the world.

Practicing verbal hygiene does not mean that one should be stingy with the truth. Rather, it means that one should use language responsibly and sensitively.

There are a number of motivations for practicing verbal hygiene:

First, it helps to facilitate effective communication by making sure the listener is not distracted by errors.

There is also commercial motivation. Having one variety of language as the standard variety that everybody reads and understands makes it easier for publishers to maximize profit as they print one variety for all their customers.

Thirdly, verbal hygiene also appeals to the desire for order and the fear of chaos. Language helps us order our world. Rules are used to ensure orderliness in language and also in society. Therefore, to obey linguistic rules is to maintain order not just in language but in our world and to violate linguistic rules is to cause chaos in language and sometimes, in real life. The history of verbal hygiene aligns with other more general historical developments.

In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, verbal hygiene movements were championed by disempowered groups and its main focus was to help these disempowered groups get access to public discourse. Thus, women at the Seneca Falls conference in 1848, a land mark of organized feminism in the United States of America, passed a resolution condemning the taboo on female public speakers. At the same time, chartists in England battled for the right to

speak and present petitions to parliament. Around the world, former slaves and colonized peoples campaigned for access to literacy. In the twentieth century, verbal hygiene began contesting the terms of public discourse.

“It is no longer enough that the descendants of slaves, Chartists and suffragettes should be permitted to speak: they are not content to speak in their masters' voices, according to conventions laid down within traditions that excluded them. Indeed, the new advocates of what has come to be called 'political correctness' are putting pressure on the masters to change their own tune.” (Cameron 1995) In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, a lot of things have changed. There has been a revolution in technology, academia, religion, politics and society at large. Verbal hygiene is no longer mainly practiced by elites and scholars. In fact, the level of diversity that verbal hygiene discourses enjoy now is unprecedented. Technological revolutions have made it possible for people from diverse backgrounds and different parts of the world to participate in verbal hygiene discourses and make their contributions. Now, words fly in minutes and feed backs are generated within minutes too. There are new challenges too. One of them is the impact of technology on the spellings of language users especially students. People now shorten words as they like:  
 Lol: Laugh out loud  
 OMG: Oh my God  
 BRB: Be right back, etc.

The rise of Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) people and movements has put new pressure on society and by extension, language. There is a push on religion, culture, politics and language to widen their hands in order to accommodate these new set of people.

Now, some men identify as women, some of them transition to become women (have female sex organs), while some do nothing beyond getting a new ID card that shows their new identity and preferred gender. Some scholars argue that women are now losing competitions not to fellow women but to men who identify as women. From running to swimming to boxing, the stories are the same. Men also experience this kind of challenge from women who transition to become men but women feel the impact more because men are naturally stronger than women.

Some feminists are responding to these challenges.

According to JK Rowling, In the UK, women are reaching out to each other across party lines, concerned about the erosion of their hard-won rights and wide spread intimidation. In June 2020, a magazine published an article with the headline, "Creating a more equal post- COVID-19 world for people who menstruate.

JK Rowling, the author of Harry Potter responded with the following tweet:

""People who menstruate.' I'm sure there used to be a word for those people,"

"Someone help me out. Wumben? Wimpund? Woomud?"

In an interview on Britain's Channel4News, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie had this to say about the cis women vs trans women

conversation: “When people talk about, ‘Are trans women women?’ my feeling is trans women are trans women.”

She opined that while trans women face tremendous oppression and must be supported, we should also be able to acknowledge real differences between transgender women and women who are not transgender, without suggesting that one experience is more important or valid than the other.

In Nigeria today, the LGBTQ community has started popping up with some men like Bob Risky, Jay Boogie, Noni Salma identifying as women. This could be a sign of the shape verbal hygiene discourse in Nigeria may take in future.

Against this backdrop, this study investigates Verbal hygiene in Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*, with a focus on how the practice of verbal hygiene or the lack thereof, shaped the relationships of the characters in the novel.

There’s a growing body of researches on verbal hygiene: Nzekwu and Nnuta (2014), Nnuta and Ezeifeke (2017), Nzeakor (2018), Nwabunze (2020). These researches were carried out on politics in Nigeria and using verbal hygiene as a tool to unite Nigeria. These studies offer valuable insights. However, little or nothing has been done on examining verbal hygiene in African prose of Nigerian descent and that is what this work is set to accomplish.

### **The Concept of Verbal Hygiene**

Verbal hygiene is a phrase coined by British linguist Deborah Cameron to describe what she calls “the urge to meddle in matters of language.”

Verbal hygiene is a way of making sense of language, and through language, of the world. (Cameron, 1995) Allyson Jule defines verbal hygiene as “a way to make sense of language and represents a symbolic attempt to impose order on the social world” (*A Beginner’s Guide to Language and Gender*, 2008).

Beyond using language, human beings assess and evaluate the language they use. Verbal hygiene is also known as prescriptivism or language purism. It involves using language that is grammatically correct, inclusive and polite. We speak to communicate and to achieve other goals. Language can be used to incite crises, to destroy, and to humiliate. Language can also be used to make peace, nurture and nourish and to uplift. Verbal hygiene is about using language to do the later. We cannot talk about social cohesion without talking about verbal hygiene. When we use languages that abuse, belittle, and exclude we run the risk of causing tension or division in our political, religious and social communities. Practicing verbal hygiene does not mean that one has to sacrifice the truth at the altar of civility nor does it mean that one should be dishonest or stingy with the truth. No. Instead, it means that one should say the truth in a polite and sensitive way. It means that one should use language responsibly. Cameron (2012). Opines that verbal hygiene refers to motley collection of discourses and practices through which people attempt to clean up language and make its use conform more closely to their ideals of beauty, truth, efficiency, logic, correctness and civility. Verbal hygiene offers a window onto wider anxieties about social order, moral conduct, and cultural identity. Cameron (1995). Every society has its ideals of goodness, logic, correctness and civility and most people strive to bring their language to match these ideals. They assess their language and try to

improve it, correct their writing or speech, accept linguistic changes that align with their individual and societal ideals and protest linguistic changes that oppose those ideals. Verbal hygiene practices are inevitable and common to all language users. These practices may be carried out to criticize deviant or incorrect language forms and to impose standards. Both linguists and lay people have strong ideas about how a particular language should sound, look and work. Cameron (1995). What people think about language is often a reflection of what they think about the world. Cameron (1995). "Our norms and values differ", argues Cameron, but "what remains constant is that we have norms and values" Cameron (2012). Linguists engage in verbal hygiene practices mainly for two reasons: 1. To prescribe for the general population how language should work. 2. To describe to the general population how language actually works. Verbal hygiene is language clean up and involves cleaning up our language- removing grammatical errors, vulgarities and profanities from our speech before presenting it to the world. It also involves using language in an inclusive and sensitive manner. Verbal hygiene is practiced by everybody- linguists, elites, professionals, lay people and even uneducated people. This is because practicing verbal hygiene is a natural skill that comes with using a language. It also signifies that a language user is competent in that language. Examples of verbal hygiene are: 1. Insisting on using language that is correct and standard. Eg. Insisting on saying "whom" instead of "who" in formal contexts. Correcting someone for saying "ain't" or "gonna" as improper English. 2. Using language that is politically correct. The means using language that reflects empathy, fairness and justice. Eg. Saying "person with a disability" instead of "disabled person" to show sensitivity.

3. Using words that are unbiased and stereotype free Eg. Instead of saying "Everyone should submit his book", one may say: "Everyone should submit their book" in order to avoid gender bias. In the same spirit, one may say "firefighter" instead of "fireman". Other Examples include: Avoid, Forefathers, house maid, business man, clergyman, police man, spokesman, weatherman. Use instead: ancestors, housekeeper, business person, member of the clergy, police officer, spokesperson, Weather reporter.

4. Placing a particular accent and language variety over others. Eg. A teacher correcting a child's pidgin or regional dialect to conform to standard English. A bank asking its workers to adopt a "neutral" or standard accent or English. Most ESL teachers teach their students English that is globally acceptable.

### **The Concept of Identity**

Identity is the qualities, beliefs, personality traits, appearance and /or expressions that characterize a person or a group. Identity emerges during childhood as children start to comprehend their self-concept, and it remains consistent throughout different stages of life. Identity is shaped by cultural factors and how others perceive and acknowledge one's characteristics. The etymology of the term "Identity" from the Latin noun *identitas* emphasizes an individual's mental image of themselves and their "sameness with others". Identity encompasses various aspects such as occupational, cultural, religious, national, ethnic, racial, political and linguistic identities, among others. Identity originates from traits or attributes that individuals may have little or no control over, such as their family background, culture, ethnicity, and linguistic community. In sociology, emphasis is placed on

collective identity in which an individual's identity is strongly associated with role-behaviour or the collection of group memberships that define them. According to Peter Burke, "Identities tell us who we are and they announce to others who we are." Identities subsequently guide behavior, leading "fathers" to behave like "fathers" and nurses to behave like "nurses". In psychology, the term "identity" is most commonly used to describe personal identity, or the distinctive qualities or traits that make an individual unique. Identities are strongly associated with self-concept, self-image (one's mental model of oneself), self-esteem, and individuality. Individual's identities are situated but also contextual, situationally adaptive and changing. Despite their fluid character, identities often feel as if they are stable ubiquitous categories defining an individual, because of their grounding in the sense of personal identity (the sense of being a continuous and persistent self).

### **The Concept of Language**

Many definitions of language have been proposed. Henry Sweet, an English phonetician and language scholar, stated: "Language is the expression of ideas by means of speech-sounds combined into words. Words are combined into sentences, this combination answering to that of ideas into thoughts." According to Robins and Crystal, language is a system of conventional spoken, manual (signed), or written symbols by means of which human beings, as members of a social group and participants in its culture, express themselves. This means that language can be spoken, signed or written. The American linguists Bernard Bloch and George L. Trager opine that language is a system of arbitrary vocal symbols by means of which a social group

cooperates. This means that language enables cooperation between social groups. According to Bloomfield, the totality of the utterances that can be made in a speech community is the language of that speech community. This implies that a speech community is linguistically tied and that language exceeds idiolect. According to Sapir (1921) Language is a purely human and non-instinctive method of communicating ideas, emotions and desires through a system of voluntarily produced sounds. This means that language is specific to the human species as animals cannot speak language. It also means that language is non instinctive, so, the act of communicating using language is not done instinctively. According to Saussure (1916). Language is a system of signs consisted of the signifier and signified. This definition is focused more on how language is used to represent objects that exist in the physical world. Words are the signifier while the objects they represent are the signified. For example, the word 'apple' is a signifier while apple fruit or tree is the signified.

According to Haliday 2002, language is a system of meaning, a semiotic system. George Lakoff defines language as a cognitive tool that reflects our conceptual system and shapes our understanding of the world." Language reflects and shapes our understanding of the world. Language helps us conceptualize the world. We make language and language in turn, makes us. Man, and language are inseparable. It is through language that we recognize other peoples' feelings and emotions, which therefore helps us to appreciate our society and our multifarious languages. Akujobi (2019)

Language helps us communicate, share information, express our identities and emotions.

It is a glue that holds society together and makes it possible for man to live his full potential as a social animal.

Akujobi (2015) posits that language is a universal human trait and has universal human properties that are unique to the language of human beings, which can be spoken or signed.

### **Empirical studies**

This is a review of works that have been done on verbal hygiene. In 2014, Nzekwu, Ifeanyi Jackson conducted a research on Verbal Hygiene in the Use of the English Language: A Tool for Unity, Conflict Resolution and Sustainable Development in Nigeria. The problem that led to the study was the verbal wars that ensued between Igbo and Yoruba ethnic groups sparked off because of the condemnation of Obafemi Awolowo and some humanitarian issues raised by Chinua Achebe. In his bestselling autobiography, *There was a country: A personal history of Biafra*, Nzekwu (2014) posits that even though freedom of speech is guaranteed for all citizens, it has been abused by Nigerian leaders who capitalize on this opportunity to achieve their selfish and hateful agenda. The research found out that the major cause of poor verbal hygiene in Nigeria is the heterogeneous nature of Nigerian society. Nigerians tend to be divided among ethnic, political, religious, social and even economic lines. In 2017, Nnuta and Ezeifeke conducted a research on Verbal Hygiene and ethnic politics in Nigeria: a study of selected newspaper print and online publications. The work investigates verbal hygiene as fundamental towards achieving unity,

conflict resolution and sustainable development in a linguistically, ethnically, culturally and politically diversified Nigerian society. It tries to establish a connection between verbal hygiene and persistent implosion of ethnic conflicts in Nigeria and the debilitating consequences of such on virtually all strata of national development. It was found that a strong relationship exists between poor verbal hygiene, hate speech, electoral violence and ethnicity in Nigeria. This work also found out that the speeches of most opinion leaders analysed in the work are impolite and verbally unhygienic and as such impede the positive face of people from opposing ethnic groups, this constitutes serious threat to inter-ethnic relation and cohesion. The researcher noted that previous studies focused on Verbal Hygiene in the Use of the English Language and Verbal Hygiene and ethnic politics in Nigeria, therefore, the researcher took up the present study to fill a gap in existing knowledge.

### **Methodology**

This study employed a qualitative research design to investigate the level of verbal hygiene present in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*. Qualitative research design is a research approach that focuses on gathering and analyzing non-numerical data to gain a deeper understanding of a research question. The researcher chose this research design because it enables the researcher to delve deeper in analyzing gathered data. For data analysis, the study adopted Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

## Data Presentation and Analysis

### Extract 1:

*“My beautiful princess!” Chief said to Kosi and hugged her, pressing her close; Obinze wondered if Chief had ever propositioned her. It would not surprise him. He had once been at Chief’s house when a man brought his girlfriend to visit, and when she left the room to go to the toilet, Obinze heard Chief tell the man, “I like that girl. Give her to me and I will give you a nice plot of land in Ikeja.”*

*“You look so well, Chief,” Kosi said. “Ever young!”*

*“Ah, my dear, I try, I try.” Chief jokingly tugged at the satin lapels of his black jacket. He did look well, spare and upright, unlike many of his peers who looked like pregnant men.*

*“My boy!” he said to Obinze.*

*Chief to Obinze “My boy!”*

*“Good evening chief,” Obinze shook his hand with both hands, bowing slightly.*

### Critical Discourse Analysis:

Textual Level: The pronoun “My” implies ownership and authority.

The noun “Princess” while affectionate, is also infantilizing. It frames Kosi as a delicate subordinate who does not have a say. The expression “hugged her, pressing her close,” sexualizes the encounter and blurs the line between platonic affection and dominance.

The sentence “Obinze wondered if Chief had ever propositioned her.” Signals that chief might have at least entertained the thought of making a direct or indirect sexual offer to Kosi prior to this encounter.

The fact that Obinze heard chief make this offer to his visitor: “I like that girl. Give her to me and I will give you a nice plot of land in Ikeja.” Shows that Chief is absolutely capable of doing what Obinze imagined. This also frames chief as a habitual womanizer.

Chief calls Obinze “My boy!” “My” signals possession and “boy” signals hierarchy and paternalism. Chief did not say “My man!”, instead he said “My boy!” This address situates Obinze as inferior and reinforces chief’s social and economic power over Obinze.

“Obinze shook his hand with both hands, bowing slightly.” This further reinforces the fact that Obinze is lower than chief in social hierarchy. He also depends on Chief for much of his economic and social capital.

Kosi’s response: “You look so well, Chief, Ever young!” shows gendered politeness and deference. She adopts the complement-exchange pattern often expected of women to maintain social harmony.

**Discursive Practice:**

The conversation mirrors elite patronage-based interactions in Nigerian society. Chief is the wealthy patriarch while the rest are his dependents. Chief's language shows an informal,

Kosi and Obinze's responses show linguistic accommodation to power. They engage in verbal hygiene- regulating their speech to show politeness, respect and even restraint within unequal relations.

Kosi's "Ever young!" is verbal hygiene. She performs this linguistic politeness in line with societal expectations of femininity- smoothing male ego, avoiding confrontation, and maintaining decorum.

Obinze's deferential tone (bowing slightly) reflects masculine verbal hygiene. It is true that Obinze and Chief are from the same culture (Igbo) and in the Igbo culture, elders are highly respected. The Igbo society equally respects achievement and success and crowns titles based not necessarily on age but on achievements. There is also that industrious nature of the Igbo tribe. Obinze, being Igbo, values chief's relationship with him so much, hence he performs respect toward power (bowing slightly, shaking with both hands) in order to preserve peace and social order.

hierarchical social intimacy. By calling Kosi "My Princess" and Obinze "My boy", he simultaneously personalizes and subordinates them.

moral compromise. Language operates here as a mechanism of power maintenance:

Chief's speech exemplifies linguistic domination. He uses endearments and commands to assert authority.

Kosi's verbal politeness reproduces gendered verbal hygiene (in Cameron's sense): she regulates her own speech to align with expectations of femininity—soft, flattering, and non-confrontational—thus maintaining social decorum.

Obinze's deferential reply embodies class verbal hygiene, where lower or less powerful individuals conform linguistically to social superiors to preserve harmony and avoid offense.

The exchange therefore exposes how verbal hygiene functions ideologically—it sustains patriarchal and hierarchical structures by prescribing what counts as "proper" or "respectful" speech within class and gender relations.

**Social Practice**

The excerpt is embedded in a socio-cultural system marked by class hierarchy, patriarchy, and

*Extract 2:*

*“Darling, kedu ebe ino?” His wife Kosi always began her calls with those words: where are you? He never asked where she was when he called her, but she would tell him anyway. I’m just getting to the salon. I’m on Third Mainland Bridge. It was as if she needed the reassurance of their physicality when they were not together. She had a high, girlish voice.*

## Critical Discourse Analysis:

Textual Level: “Darling” signals intimacy. “Kedu ebe ino?” implies emotional care but also surveillance and control. The fact that Kosi “always” began her calls with “where are you?” shows that her questions are not motivated by love and care alone but also by a deep-seated insecurity and fear of losing her husband to another woman.

*“He never asked where she was when he called her, but she would tell him anyway.”*

This implies that Obinze is secure in his marriage. The fact that Kosi would “tell him anyway” even when he is not interested in knowing her way about, shows that Kosi has a weak personality and is emotionally dependent on her husband.

*“It was as if she needed the reassurance of their physicality when they were not together.”* This further portrays Kosi as weak, insecure and emotionally dependent.

Obinze’s silence (not asking where Kosi was) could signal masculine detachment. It can also mean that Obinze is unbothered about the possibility of losing Kosi to another man.

**Discursive Practice:**

This exchange draws from social discourses of culture, gender and marriage.

Kosi’s repeated question reflects the discourse of wifely attentiveness and the cultural expectation that women should be the emotional pillar of their home. They are also expected to maintain physical awareness of their husbands’ movements. So, if a man is missing for instance, the first person to ask his whereabouts is his wife.

Kosi’s responses: “I’m just getting to the salon... I’m on Third Mainland Bridge” encode linguistic surveillance. She’s willing to narrate her location as a means of affirming her fidelity. In Igbo land, it is a taboo for a married woman to cheat on her husband. Married women who commit adultery are given varying degrees of punishment depending on the part of Igbo land their husbands come from. It is important to mention that the Igbo traditional culture does not forbid a man from cheating on his wife nor does it punish such act. The man is not only free to cheat but also free to marry as many wives as he can take care of. Kosi knows this, hence her self-reporting and insecurity despite her extravagant beauty.

**Social Practice:**

From a sociocultural perspective, the passage reflects Igbo cum Nigerian marital norms and patriarchal discourse around emotional labour.

**Extract 3:**

*The girl's bag was on the floor, open, clothing fluffing out. Kosi stood beside it, holding up, at the tips of her fingers, a pack of condoms.*

*"What is this for? Eh? You came to my house to be a prostitute? The girl looked down at first, silent, then looked Kosi in the face and said quietly, "In my last job, my madam's husband was always forcing me."*

*Kosi's eyes bulged.*

*She moved forward for a moment, as though to attack the girl in some way, and then stopped.*

*"Please carry your bag and go now-now," she said.*

*The girl shifted, looking a little surprised and then picked up her bag and turned to the door. After she left, Kosi said "Can you actually believe the nonsense darling? She came here with condoms and she actually opened her mouth to say that rubbish. Can you believe it?"*

*"Her employer raped her so she decided to protect herself this time," Obinze said.*

*Kosi stared at him. You feel sorry for her. You don't know these house girls. How can you feel sorry for her? He wanted to ask how can you not but the tentative fear in her eyes silenced him. Her insecurity, so great and so ordinary, silenced him.*

**Critical Discourse Analysis:**

Women are expected to invest in their marriage emotionally and this investment is often demonstrated through constant care and communication, even nurturing. Men's emotional distance is not scorned but rather normalized as strength.

**Textual****Level:**

The description—"The girl's bag was on the floor, open, clothing fluffing out" conveys disarray and vulnerability. The girl's honesty and openness contrasts with Kosi's conceit and moral performance.

- Kosi holding up, at the tips of her fingers, a pack of condoms, disgust and moral distance. It is as if morally, Kosi is pure and high above while the girl is filthy and way beneath her. The phrase "at the tips of her fingers" signifies moral contamination, as if both the condom and its users are impure. Kosi's rhetorical question — "You came to my house to be a prostitute?" functions as a moral accusation disguised as inquiry. The interrogative form heightens her dominance while denying the girl's voice or agency.

Kosi's "*these house girls*" signals social othering. The plural generalization stereotypes the domestic worker class as

deceitful or immoral, erasing individuality

and humanity.

### **Discursive Practice:**

Kosi draws upon patriarchal moral codes that equate female respectability with sexual purity. The “madam-house girl” relationship between Kosi and the girl echoes the classed hierarchy typical of Nigerian domestic spaces where the host and the house girl belong to two different classes. Kosi refuses to believe the girl not because her story lacks credibility but because she belongs to a class that is inherently untrustworthy.

Obinze’s line — “Her employer raped her so she decided to protect herself this time” — introduces a counter-discourse of empathy and justice. But by allowing Kosi’s insecurity to silence him, he participates in maltreating and silencing the girl.

Social Practice: It echoes patriarchy and moral policing. This episode exposes how women internalize patriarchal norms, becoming enforcers of those norms in the name of moral cleanliness. Language becomes a tool through which women regulate their and other people’s behaviour in line with societal expectations.

### *Extract 4:*

*She had, in the years since they got married, grown an intemperate dislike of single women and an intemperate love of God. Before they got married, she went to service once a week at the Anglican church on the Marina, a Sunday tick-the box routine that she did because she had been brought up that way, but after their wedding, she switched to the House of David because, as she told him, it was a Bible-believing church. Later, when he found out that the House of David had a special prayer service for keeping Your Husband, he had felt unsettled. Just as he had when he once asked why her best friend from university, Elohor, hardly visited them, and Kosi said,*

*“She’s still single,” as though that was a self-evident reason.*

### **Critical Discourse Analysis:**

Textual Level:

The expressions “*intemperate dislike of single women*” and “*intemperate love of God*” juxtapose moral piety with social prejudice. The repetition of

*“intemperate”* (excessive) signals extremity.

“tick-the-box routine” encodes that Kosi went to Anglican church not out of personal conviction but because it was a path and a routine her parents handed to her. The Anglican church also signifies a moderate look on life and a life that is not restless. On the other hand, “Bible-believing church” marks a performative shift toward stricter moralism and an attempt to be a good wife.

*The clause:* “She’s still single” presupposes that single women are not allowed to visit married people and that married women see single women as a threat to their marriage.

*The phrase “special prayer service for keeping Your Husband”* is a linguistic expression of patriarchal anxiety — a codified verbal hygiene practice meant to regulate women’s behaviour and ensure marital submission and fidelity.

### **Discursive Practice:**

This is a blend of verbal hygiene, marital discourse and religious discourse. House of David having a prayer for married women “Keeping Your Husband” is a familiar ideology among Nigerian Christians especially the Pentecostals. Women are charged with the responsibility of preserving their marriage through loyalty and fidelity to their husbands and constant prayer for their husbands and family.

By not allowing her best friend, Elohor, to visit her, Kosi implies that she has something precious (marriage) which Elohor should be jealous of and that if given the chance, Elohor might snatch her husband. She presupposes that marriage will be Elohor’s problem now and that if given the chance, Elohor will betray her and steal her husband. She does not want to acknowledge the fact that Obinze is a full-grown man and that if anything like that happens, it’ll be because Obinze approved of it.

Many pastors often warn women to drop their single friends once they marry because the single friends may ruin their marriage.

It is also believed that husbands are scarce so wives should protect their husbands to avoid losing them.

To maintain their home and be a good wife, many married women are advised not to keep friends. There is the common belief of how women are their own worst enemy.

So, by switching to House of David church and attending “Keeping you husband” prayer, and pushing away Elohor, Kosi is trying to be a good, godly wife and to meet up with the expectations of her society and her religion.

### **Social Practice:**

It demonstrates how women internalize patriarchal verbal hygiene — disciplining their talk, relationships, and even spiritual

expressions to uphold the institution of marriage. It also reveals how religious discourse sanitizes and legitimizes patriarchal power. In Nigeria, both in culture and in Christianity, a woman is considered a failure if she is of marriageable age and is unmarried but a man is not considered a failure in the same circumstance because he can always get married and have children. Society teaches the female folk that men are the price and that irrespective of a woman's other achievement, if she doesn't have a husband of her own, she

has failed. Christianity adds that divorce is a sin so a divorcee can go to hell fire because of it.

Society pushes women to be insecure and then turns around and milks their insecurity.

#### Extract 5:

*During her first year in America, when she took New Jersey Transit to Penn Station and then the subway to visit Aunt Uju in Flatlands, she was struck by how mostly slim white people got off at the stops in Manhattan and as the train went further into Brooklyn, the people left were mostly black and fat. She had not thought of them as "fat", though. She had thought of them as "big," because one of the first things her friend Ginika told her was that "fat" in America was a bad word, heaving with moral judgement like "stupid" or "bastard" and not a mere description like "short" or "tall". So she had banished "fat" from her vocabulary.*

#### Critical Discourse Analysis:

##### Textual Level:

Here, Ifemelu performs verbal hygiene by banishing word "fat" from her dictionary because it connotes moral judgment and made Americans feel bad.

"fat" is described as "heaving with moral judgment," suggesting that in American discourse, the word does not only describe

body size but has negative connotations like laziness and lack of discipline.

Ifemelu uses "big" as a euphemism for fat and this helps her maintain politeness and avoid offense.

"banished" signals internalized regulation which shows she has made the decision to consciously censor herself in order to be polite and not cause offense.

#### Discursive Practice:

This reflects Cameron's argument that people engage in verbal hygiene as a way to perform social and moral propriety.

Ifemelu learns from Ginika who has already been acculturated into American norms- that America's linguistic landscape is very different from Nigeria's and that words carry ideological weight in America.

By substituting "fat" with "big," Ifemelu tries to align her language with the discursive expectations of political correctness in American society.

## Extract 6:

**Social Practice:**

It represents a linguistic manifestation of ideology, a way of shaping perception through language. It also underscores the intersection of race and body image: Ifemelu notices that the “fat” people are mostly black, suggesting that American verbal hygiene around body size is racially charged. The linguistic taboo around “fat” mirrors the Western beauty ideal, which equates thinness with virtue and health. The fact that Ifemelu learns this rule in America and not in Nigeria reveals that verbal hygiene can be culturally specific.

*Laura had brought a magazine. “Look at this, Ifemelu,” she said. “It isn’t Nigeria, but it’s close. I know celebrities can be flighty but she seems to be doing good work.” Ifemelu and Kimberly looked at the page together: a thin white woman, smiling at the camera, holding a dark-skinned African baby in her arms, and all around her, little dark-skinned African children were spread out like a rug. Kimberly made a sound, a hmmm, as though she was unsure how to feel. “She’s stunning too.” Laura said. “Yes, she is,” Ifemelu said. “And she’s just as skinny as the kids, only that her skinniness is by choice and theirs is not by choice.” A pop of loud laughter burst out from Laura. “You are funny! I love how sassy you are!”*

*Kimberly did not laugh. Later, alone with Ifemelu, she said “I’m sorry Laura said that.”*

**Critical Discourse Analysis:****Textual Level:**

The white celebrity is at the centre of the magazine, drawing the main attention to herself. She is “smiling at the camera” which portrays her as a beautiful and cheerful benefactor. The “dark-skinned African children” are left in the background. “spread like a rug” shows that the children are many, poor and that their humanity is not fully respected as they are seen as something that can be stepped on “rug”.

- This shows that the children are objectified and subordinated. Ifemelu’s

response: “And she’s just as skinny as the kids, only that her skinniness is by choice and theirs is not by choice.” Creates a contrast in Laura’s narrative and foregrounds inequality. It also dismantles moral veneer (false outward appearance) of charity by introducing the discourse of privilege and agency.

**Discursive Practice:**

This exchange reflects the production and negotiation of meaning within a racially charged social context.

Laura’s discourse reproduces a kind white savior narrative- a common Western ideological construct that frames Africa as helpless and White individuals as saviours.

Ifemelu resists and punctures this narrative by re-signifying the image, exposing the unequal power relations that buttress “charitable” acts.

### **Social Practice:**

The exchange exposes how colonial ideologies persist in contemporary media through visual and linguistic patterns that position Africa as a site of suffering and whiteness as saviourhood. With Ifemelu’s response, she disrupts this ideological order, introducing a counter discourse that demands recognition of agency, inequality, and systemic privilege.

#### **Extract 7:**

*Next Sunday at a thanksgiving service, the garlands would hang around the thick neck of Chief Omenka and the smaller necks of his family members. He had donated two new vans to the church. “Join that group, Ifemelu,” Sister Ibinabo said.*

*Ifemelu folded her arms, and as often happened when she was about to say something she knew was better unsaid, the words rushed up her throat. “Why should I make decorations for a thief?”*

*Sister Ibinabo stared in astonishment. A silence fell. The other girls looked on expectantly. “What did you say?” Sister Ibinabo asked quietly,*

*offering a chance for Ifemelu to apologize, to put the words back in her mouth. But Ifemelu felt herself unable to stop, her heart thumping, hurtling on a fast-moving path. Chief Omenka is a 419 and everybody knows it,” she said. “This church is full of 419 men. Why should we pretend that this hall was not built with dirty money?”*

### **Critical Discourse Analysis:**

#### **Textual Level:**

In this text, we observe a war between the truth, morality and social conformity.

The expression: “*thick neck of Chief Omenka*” and “*smaller necks of his family members*” use physical imagery to symbolize greed, excess, and privilege.

The “thick neck” connotes gluttony and power.

“*Garlands*” which is a symbol of honor, here, ironically is used to decorate corruption and this decoration is carried out by the church.

Ifemelu refers to chief Omenka as a “thief” and this portrays him as

*someone who steals public funds and uses it to enrich himself and his family. He appears to be a politician without honour but the church honours him anyway because he supports them financially.*

*Ifemelu describes Chief Omenka as “419” (slang for fraudster,) which further paints him as corrupt.*

We see power dynamics in Ifemelu’s dialogue with Sister Ibinabo.

Sister Ibinabo’s order — “*Join that group, Ifemelu*” — assumes compliance within a hierarchical religious order.

Ifemelu’s “*Why should I make decorations for a thief?*” disrupts that hierarchy through moral and linguistic resistance.

The repetition of “*Why should we...*” and “*everybody knows it*” frames Ifemelu’s speech as collective moral awareness suppressed by institutional silence.

The “*astonishment*”, “*silence*”, and “*expectant looks*” show that language regulation happens not only through words but through social atmosphere — through gaze and silence as disciplinary tools.

The church is implicitly indicted in the corruption of society because how come it is the church which is seen as the custodian of morality and the collective conscience of the Christian community that is now, not only rapporting with Chief Omenka but also honouring him in the presence of the congregation?

### **Discursive Practice:**

Within the church setting, the discourse constructs respectability through ritual (thanksgiving, garlands, donations) and language of piety, masking moral decay.

The church functions as a site of ideological reproduction where wealth—regardless of its source—is sanctified through ritual.

Sister Ibinabo embodies the regulatory voice of religion, enforcing conformity and moral silence through verbal expectations of politeness and decorum.

By asking Ifemelu “What did you say?” and offering her a chance to apologize, Sister Ibinabo offers Ifemelu an opportunity to perform verbal hygiene, to clean up her language.

Ifemelu’s refusal to submit to this linguistic purification is an act of anti-

verbal hygiene—a deliberate contamination of polite discourse with moral truth.

### **Social Practice:**

This exchange reflects broader Nigerian socio-cultural realities and ideologies:

Chief Omenka symbolizes the corrupt Nigerian elite who launder ill-gotten wealth through religious donations, and seek social legitimacy through religious endorsement.

The church's acceptance of such donations shows how religious discourse legitimizes economic immorality, revealing an intertwined system of power, money, and morality.

Women like Sister Ibinabo act as enforcers of verbal propriety, expecting deference and silence. Ifemelu's linguistic rebellion challenges gendered expectations that women should be "respectful" and "modest" in speech even when truth is at stake.

The church's discourse performs *verbal hygiene* by sanitizing corruption through pious language—garlands, thanksgiving, donations—all linguistic forms that cleanse the immoral through ritual.

Ifemelu's refusal to submit to this linguistic purification is an act of anti-verbal hygiene—a deliberate contamination of polite discourse with moral truth.

By being brutally honest in the church— a place governed by politeness and decorum, Ifemelu exposes and destabilizes a linguistic order that values surface piety over moral piety.

### **Extract 8:**

*Every morning, Ifemelu's mother prayed for The General. She would say, "Heavenly father, I command you to bless Uju's mentor. May his enemies never triumph over him!" Or she would say, "We cover Uju's mentor with the precious blood of Jesus!" And Ifemelu would mumble something nonsensical instead of saying "Amen." Her mother said the word "mentor" defiantly, a thickness in her tone, as though the force of her delivery would truly turn The General into mentor, and also remake the world into a place where young doctors could afford Auntie Uju's new Mazda, that green, glossy, intimidatingly streamlined car.*

### **Critical Discourse Analysis:**

#### **Textual Level:**

Ifemelu's mother's repeated use of the term "mentor" is ironic and euphemistic. It conceals The General's romantic and economic involvement with Auntie Uju, masking immorality with a socially respectable label.

Saying "mentor" with a "thickness in her tone" signals that she's aware that she's lying and with

that awareness comes some kind of moral wrestle as she fights with her conscience.

Expressions like “Heavenly father, I command you” and “precious blood of Jesus” evoke faith, religious fervour and spiritual authority. The mother’s language merges religious power with social aspiration.

The mother’s prayers are both imperative and performative (“I command you to bless”), showing confidence in her speech as a tool to shape divine and social reality.

Ifemelu “mumbling something nonsensical” contrasts with her mother’s linguistic certainty, signaling disapproval of her mother’s actions and skepticism toward both religious and social conventions.

The “green, glossy, intimidatingly streamlined car” symbolizes material aspiration and class mobility—both desired and morally rationalized through religious language.

### **Discursive Practice:**

The mother produces a discourse of religious moral justification to legitimate socio-economic ambition. Her language transforms a morally ambiguous relationship (Uju and The General) into a

narrative of divine blessing and mentorship.

Ifemelu, as listener, resists this discourse. Her refusal to say “Amen” and her silent parody of prayer represent a counter-discourse—skepticism toward both linguistic hypocrisy and the performative sanctification of corruption.

The text blends religious, moral, and economic discourses.

### **Social Practice:**

Here, we have a web of religious, patriarchal, and socio-economics discourses in Nigeria.

The mother’s language reflects Nigeria’s socio-religious culture, where Christianity often intertwines with the desire for material progress and social validation.

“Mentor” becomes a linguistic tool of social sanitization—transforming an illicit affair into a morally acceptable relationship through the power of naming.

Ifemelu’s mother’s insistence on the term “mentor” is an act of verbal hygiene: she consciously “cleanses” language in order to control moral perception and uphold a socially acceptable narrative. This act mirrors how language is used to maintain social order: moral contradictions are linguistically smoothed over to protect respectability.

### **Findings**

The analysis of these transcribed excerpts from *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie

show that verbal hygiene is not incidental but structurally embedded in the language of the book. Drawing on Critical discourse Analysis (CDA), the following interlocking patterns emerged:

1. There is a high level of presence of verbal hygiene in *Americanah*.

The work demonstrates that language use is consciously monitored, corrected, and negotiated, reflecting the characters' awareness of linguistic norms and societal expectations. Acts of verbal regulation occur across various social and cultural contexts, illustrating how individuals attempt to align their speech with standards of appropriateness and politeness. We also see that verbal hygiene is a phenomenon that takes place daily, not only at grand public events but in common activities and in the privacy of our homes. For example, both Kosi and Obinze engage in verbal hygiene in their marriage.

The findings indicate that verbal hygiene in *Americanah* is not limited to prescriptive correction of language but extends to broader social behaviors concerning identity and belonging. For example, Kosi is Obinze's wife. She carries that identity joyfully and she plays her role in line with what is expected of a wife in such a patriarchal society and that includes among other things, guarding the peace of the home. This explains why she is shying away from challenging Obinze and constantly cleaning her language to make it polite and more polite if polite is not enough.

2. The practice of verbal hygiene contributes significantly to peaceful relationships among the characters in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*.

The study finds that the practice of verbal hygiene contributes significantly to peaceful and harmonious relationships among the characters. Through careful speech regulation, characters promote understanding and minimize interpersonal tension within both Nigerian and American settings.

When Chief gave Obinze and Kosi a mysogenistic, infantilizing and subordinating countenance, rather than confront Chief, they practiced verbal hygiene in order to avoid conflict and maintain peace. Kosi even complimented him: "You look so well, Chief, Ever

young!" As a result of this, Obinze retains his relationship with Chief with its numerous benefits.

Ifemelu's mother refuses to refer to the General as Auntie Uju's lover because the love is illicit. She insists that the General is Uju's "mentor" as if a linguistic sanitation would be enough to turn General into Uju's mentor. She does not reprimand Uju for dating General but instead uses verbal hygiene to influence the narrative. As a result, she enjoys a peaceful relationship with Auntie Uju.

Sister Ibinabo and the church will not punish Chief Omenka, a corrupt politician who is also a member of the church. Ifemelu refers to Chief Omenka as a "thief" and a "419" and says everybody knows this. So, in the church, it is common knowledge that Chief Omenka is a man without honour. But he is also a generous benefactor of the church so the church decides to honour him anyway. As a result of this and as a result of the church being polite in their relationship with Chief Omenka, they retain their relationship with Chief Omenka and continue to benefit from him.

It is important though, to point out that Ifemelu is one female who refused to carry the burden of always being polite. She is kind and aware of the power of language. She participates in Verbal hygiene when necessary. For example: After she relocated to America, she banished “fat” from her dictionary after Ginika explained that in America unlike in Nigeria, it is a word heaving with moral judgment. She refuses to participate in verbal hygiene when the aim is to cover truth, embellish immorality and make it appear tolerable.

Noteworthy too is the fact that Kosi who is a traditional woman raised to uphold patriarchal values loses her husband to Ifemelu. Kosi is raised to value being liked over authenticity, cater to the fragile ego of traditional men who believe women should not hold strong opinions or challenge them. But Ifemelu is the kind of woman that challenges a man. Obinze knows that and chooses her over Kosi despite Kosi’s agreeableness and exceptional beauty. The clear message the narrator is trying to pass is that modern women should prioritize authenticity over likability.

## Conclusion

This study concludes that verbal hygiene is a prevalent and influential linguistic phenomenon in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*. The analysis demonstrates that the regulation and negotiation of language serve as crucial means through which characters construct and express their identities within diverse social and cultural contexts. Verbal hygiene in the novel operates as both a personal and social practice—one that

reflects the characters’ desires for acceptance, respect, and belonging, while also revealing the ideological pressures that shape linguistic behavior.

The findings confirm Deborah Cameron’s (1995) assertion that verbal hygiene is an inevitable aspect of language use, rooted in the human impulse to monitor and reform communicative practices according to perceived standards of correctness, morality, and social order.

In essence, Adichie uses linguistic behaviour in *Americanah* to expose the complexities of cultural hybridity and the politics of self-presentation. The study thus concludes that verbal hygiene in the novel is not merely about language correction but a profound commentary on the social, ideological, and emotional dimensions of communication. It reveals how individuals navigate competing linguistic norms to achieve harmony, assert agency, and redefine identity in a world that is diverse and globalized.

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