

Writing in Dialogue

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Dialogue in its strict sense is communication between two persons but in a novel, a short story, a play or a poem; it is a conversation or spoken part of a text.

Writing in dialogue as opposed to monologue has a number of advantages:

- 1) It provides variety in a piece of writing. If a piece of writing begins in monologue, it can branch out to a dialogue and then back to monologue like in this example taken from “Spoiling It” a short story by Cecil Foster in the Toronto Review of Contemporary Writing Abroad:

“Her question about when I would leave seemed to challenge my claim. It implied I was no longer seriously considered to be at home on this Island and at best, my status was akin to that of a divorced family member inclined to overstay a welcome

‘You are looking good,’ she continued, ‘living overseas is good for you, although I see a few white ones cropping up here and there on your head.’

‘That’s because I’m wearing my hair short,’ I said, ‘otherwise you’d see even more grey.’

‘I know what you mean,’ she said, brushing back her hair with her palms. ‘I noticed recently that I’m getting a white hair or two myself. But you know, you look good compared to some people we were at school with. I ran into Sylvester King, remember him, a few days back and would have passed him in the street if he didn’t call out to me. Well, I guess, all of us ain’t young anymore’

As she pulled back the hair and stretched the skin on her forehead, she looked more attractive, showing a glimpse of the young girl I had met in the first year of independence.”

- 2) Dialogue also allows for the inclusion of other characters in the narrative. This is illustrated by an extract from a short story by Sammy Oke Akombi:

“Akouna went towards the mirror, stood near it, face to face with a true reflection of himself. He could not believe it, He had not seen what he had expected to see. Instead he saw a miserable-looking man with a worn flabby face, and gully-like wrinkles running down his cheeks. To make matters worse, there was an ugly sitting right in the middle of his forehead. His moustache was so unkempt, he could not believe it grew out on the very upper lip of a human being.

“This can’t be a true reflection of me, he murmured and turned round. He looked again into the mirror and asked:

“Is this a true reflection of me?”

“Yes, it is,” his wives answered simultaneously.

“Yes, you say?” he questioned angrily.

“No,” they responded in unison.

“No, it can’t be. It can’t be me. I can’t be as ugly as that,” he said stamping his feet on the ground and at the same time turning away from the mirror.

“No you can’t be as ugly as that,” the woman chorused.

3) Writing in dialogue is a tool which the writer uses to make the characters reveal a great deal about their personalities through their speech. Consider these two women who each approached a marriage counselor for a similar problem:

Woman A: Good morning sir. Are you the gentleman in charge here?

Counselor: Yes madam, what can I do for you?

Woman A: I’d like some advice concerning a row I had with my husband last night.

Woman B: Hi, are ya the guy in charge here?

Counselor: Yap, what’s it you want?

Woman B: Sorry to say this but I gotta brute of a husband. I’d like you to say what I should do. He’s right on my nerves I wanna get his arse off my back.

Question: Which of these two women is dressed in a long skirt and which is dressed in a short skirt that exposes her navel?

In writing dialogue, one very important point is that the very first word a protagonist speaks should reveal his or her character. You find this expressed in the responses of the counselor.

Dialogue is predominantly a verbal act and therefore a lot of paralinguistic options are used to complement and reinforce communication. In written dialogue such options are indicated by phrases such as: “he frowned,” “she nodded,” “she said smiling.”

Another dimension is the fact that dialogue has to relate with the mood and current linguistic trends of the community. In Cameroon for example, people express themselves in French, English, and Pidgin as well as their native languages and generally a discussion includes a mixture of all of them. For example:

A: Why are you brooding like an ashawo who had no client last night?

B: My brother lef mi. Na affair nkap.

For a Cameroonian audience, this piece of dialogue is intelligible, but speakers of English in other countries would find it incomprehensible; so, as a writer it becomes a problem when my audience exists outside of my locality.