

A Look Back at the Linguistic Re-thinking of African Literature: A Stylistic Review

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Abstract

Today, English is the medium of official-cum wider communication in Anglophone Africa. The question of its use in African literature has a checkered history, and it has been heavily argued. In particular, the question revolves around the wisdom of using European languages-English, French and Portuguese as medium of communication in African writing. The arguments are numerous, and writers and critics have taken different positions on many of the issues raised. In this paper, I will summarize the major arguments and views, and highlight some of the basic linguistic points missed as to the nature of language in the debate. I will also articulate the ways in which linguistics can help us gain insights into the workings of literature as a profitable partner with the traditional literary criticism to douse the antagonism between English and African languages, and allay the "fear" of using foreign tongue to produce African literature. As a major component of my review, I will argue the matrix of linguistic options open to African writers within the choices being worked out in the actual creative practice in English expression. This position is from the perspective of the unfolding stylo-linguistic tapestry of Anglophone writing in English, English, a European language, being the most prominent literary language among African languages.

Keywords: African literature, European languages, linguistic options, stylo-linguistic tapestry.

Introduction

The linguistic re-thinking of African literature cropped up in 1962 at a gathering of African writers held at Makerere University, Uganda, where the question of language became a major issue within the debate of trying to define "African Literature". It was fueled up by Obiajuma Wali. Wali, writing in *Transition* 10 (1963) predicts "the dead end of African Literature on the premise of its medium of production. Wali takes the position, among other things, that "African literature as now understood and practiced [in European languages] is only a minor appendage in the mainstream of European literature" He therefore calls on the use of African languages, declaring that "the whole uncritical acceptance of English and French as the inevitable medium for educated African writing is misdirected, and has no chance of advancing African literature and culture", Wali's position met with a lot of intellectual blood-letting polarizing writers and critics into different camp of interests, making the subject of language-culture a central matter in African literary discourse. A major disciple of Wali's position is Ngugi, who declared 20 years later, his decision to write and produce his works in

his Gikuyu native language. He had since outlined his linguistic manifestoes in a publication titled *Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of language in African Literature* (1986).

The ensuing arguments and counter arguments bring to the fore the historical problem of Africa's encounter with European colonialism, in addition to the sometimes perplexing multicultural and multilingual situation of Africa. The arguments also raise such fundamental questions, among others: Is language a defining factor of African literature? What are the impulses of these arguments viz-a-viz the role of English as a means of production of cultural artifacts of Africa, from the point of view of African languages as instrument of national literature and development?

Linguistic Historicity

The issue of language in African writing, no matter the aftermath, is an incontrovertible decision of history. Twentieth-century Africa is largely a product of nineteenth-century European commercial, political, Cultural and linguistic vandalism, and by the time Europe packed her bags and baggage and physically left Africa, new politico-cultural matrices had emerged which

continue to define and make African historicism in the image of the atrocities unleashed by Europe, into the twenty-first-century. With a stroke, one can say that Ngugi's linguistic temper (Ngugi, 1986), an uncompromising one for that matter, is an extended anti-colonial cultural imperialism, an enterprise which finds ample space within postcolonial literary theorizing. It can also be seen as part of recovery and recuperating efforts by African writers after the colonial rupture of the organic history of Africa. Following (Ogundele, 2002), it is also an argument that gives the literature grounds from which to reject and rise above the circumstances of its birth. Within the divide of the debate, Achebe is commonly quoted as representing the liberal point of view. While acknowledging the wisdom of Ngugi's linguistic "mau mau"^{iv} project of abrogation,

Achebe admonishes:

[...]it (English) came as part of a package deal that included many other items of doubtful value, especially the atrocities of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us no, in rejecting the evil, throw out the good with it.

Achebe's conclusion suggests appropriation and reconstitution of English in African literary creation:

I [Achebe] have been given this language and I intend to use it...but I feel that the English will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African Surrounding.

Achebe's position underscores Bamiro's observation that in Achebe's view, language is mobile contrasted with Ngugi's which sees language as embodiment of unchangeable ideological values. In addition, Achebe "considers that the history of European colonization represents an irreversible factor in contemporary culture and political organization in spite of Ngugi's correct observation that the use of English seems to continue to promote the cultural hegemony of Europe in Africa and its neo-colonial grip (Irele, 1981), bemusing the unfortunate linguistic condition of African writing, provides a catalogue of obstacles which may make Ngugi's prescription yet unworkable, among other things,

he cites the impossibility of producing the literature in a common language, the restriction on wider communication and doubt about the educated African who possess facility in both African and European cultures. Irele believes that "It is possible for a borrowed language to be so internalized by a community as to become totally identified with it. Irele concludes that "Achebe's re-appropriation of English to place it at the service of an African vision has established the possibility of this norm". Irele therefore concludes that he does not see why we should condemn the literary achievement of African writers on the ground of its medium of foreign tongue. Ashcroft (1989) recognizes African writing in European languages as an imposition of colonial history, and that the continued use of these languages without a process of linguistic subversion is an acknowledgement of European cultural dominance. He posits that:

The crucial function of language as a medium of power demands that post-colonial writing defines itself by seizing the language of the center and re-placing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of English involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the process of recapturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege (37).

Ashcroft goes on to propose a post-colonial linguistic theory, which he calls "The Creole Continuum" based on the fusion of languages within the polyglossic speech communities of the Caribbean. Quoting Jean D'Costa (1983:252), Ashcroft describes the linguistic situation thus:

"The [Caribbean] writer operates within a polydialectal continuum with a Creole base. His medium, written language, belongs to the sphere of standardized language which exerts a pressure within his own language Community while embracing the audience of international standard English" (Ashcroft: 43).

Chinweizu (1983) also rejects the linguistic orientation in African writing which does not subvert the lofty' position of English and make Africa's cultural signifiers the touchstone of literary composition. He hedges his argument on

the premise of Eurocentric criticism which sees African writing in European languages as belonging to English literature as a whole, a criticism which refuses, in Chinweizu's words, "to draw a distinction between European national literatures and no-European literatures in Europeans; between English as a language used in literature by many outside the British nation and English letters as a body of works of the British nation" (9).

The critical climate of language in African writing bears the trauma of colonization, the loneliness of westernized psych and the guilt of betrayal. This psychological portrayal seems to define Ngugi's linguistic agony and his solidarity with, in his words "While we were busy haranguing the ruling circle in a language which automatically excluded the participation of the peasantry and the working class in the debate, imperialist culture and African reactionary forces had a field day. This proletarian Marxist impulse seems an outburst of Ngugi's frustration at the inability to mobilized the 'masses' through his writing in English against the neo-colonial forces of African political elite. Mbele^{vi}, while acknowledging the force of language to communication ideals and sentiments intended by the writer, questions the efficiency of language to faithfully run this errand, pointing out the indeterminate meaning of words, which poses serious problems for writers as well as readers. This observation poses the contrast that could be argued between "understanding" and "entertainment" as Mbele goes further to posit against Ngugi's claim that the masses now enjoy his works because, in his (Ngugi) estimation, they understand the message, quoting Jonathan Culler who remarks that "Literary works, like most other objects of human attention, can be enjoyed for reasons that have little to do with understanding.

Mbele debunks Ngugi's claim, saying that it is problematic, and one would want to support this view because using one's language to address one's native audience does not bring about automatic understanding. Understanding meaning in literature as a processed second order text requires some level of intellectualism, and we cannot be sure of the intellectual acumen of Ngugi's masses! Adeeko (1998) pigeonholes the different interests into "pragmatist" and "nativists"

groups. He articulates the view of the pragmatists who believe that semiotics or culture which elaborate worldview in conjunction with other cultural signifiers will seem to highlight the difference of a geopolitical order much more than the language. This, as he opines, is the position that language itself is a verbal material, and it is only called upon to run the assignment of projecting that cultural worldviews. Again, for the pragmatics, "Literatures... are not languages but linguistic embodiments of cultural patterns". The nativists hinge their argument on the singular factor of the bloody conquest of Africa which imposes the language and privileges of European culture. They therefore seek cultural decolonization of African agency. Adeeko draws the curtain on his remarks which suggest the unavoidable continue cohabitation of native and foreign tongues, pointing out that:

In posting dependence Africa, the languages and cultural forms introduced during the colonial era retain dominant because the hegemonic structures that were devised for maintaining conquest have not been dismantled. If the posting dependence culture is to fulfill its promise adequately, it has to pay greater attention to the native conventions of signification (22).

Similar to Adeeko's pigeonholing is Mazrui's relativism and universalism groupings^{vii}. The views of relativists is similar to that of the nativists while the opinion of the universalists is not different from that of the pragmatists. However, Mazrui locates his argument within the fold of linguists, represented by Whorf, Sapir and Noam Chomsky, he draws attention to various notions of the nature of language of which the most important is that grammar embodies the nascent form of a cultural metaphysics and that each language is encoded with a the sneak particular mode of thought, a metaphysics that affects speaker's experience at the level of perception...that speakers of different languages will map the world in different ways...the linguist's task is to work out the fragments of a notional grammar...to determine the semantic associations by means of which it is translated into a cultural worldview (41).

This argument seems to suggest that language is a tabula rasa which has no life of its own until it is moulded from its raw verbal form

and called upon to embody the semiotics and concretize the momentum of literary creativity to convey the sensibilities, intent, ambition, thoughts, and worldview of the speech community it is commanded to serve. Mazrui's overriding argument is that indeed Europeans did contribute to the development of African languages contrary to the popular belief, and that European regarded this as crucial to capturing the African soul, in which case African languages furthered the ends of colonialism, while at some other points the colonized used European languages to their own advantage. Such linguistic equation, it seems, weakens the nativists' argument.

Imperatives of Anglophone African Writing

From this scenario, It is easy to discern the concerns of African writers and critics. The African writer is placed in an ambiguous difficult linguistic position. At the level of conception, he uses his African language and calls to service his European language to externalize his ideas. The writer must convey his African experiences and reality in a language embodying foreign sensibilities and retain African authenticity. In doing this, his recast of English must correlate to matter of fidelity for all his audience, it must be intelligible, be faithful to sociological fact and the beauty and exigencies of creation. For the writer English remains an "operative linguistic medium" which he uses to transfer his linguistic realities, and therefore must be made to meet the imperatives of his African conditions. The African writer must "talk back" in order to debunk centuries of slander and misrepresentation of African life and literature (Chinweizu 1983, Ashcroft 1989 and Osundare 2002). Because, the African writer's world has been affected by different histories, both of his geopolitical entity and others, he desires to communicate internationally and repudiate, on his own term, his postcolonial condition and truncate, in his polemics of language, the privilege position of English.

Within the linguistic ambivalent relationship with western literary tradition, which the violent contact with Europe sets up, and the ethos of culture-nationalism lie the imperatives of aesthetic and political commitment of the African writer. He must continue to seek cultural and

political relevance through the fusion of the lingo and patois of English for communication, without which he becomes an alienated quantity. The African writer is also constantly conscious of the pedagogical implications of his language in the African classroom viz-a-viz the use of the language as L2 and what it can become in the process of being reworked for literary production. The African writer seeks to work within a language option which best meet all these demands and for the meantime, his creed of art must remain a nationalistic project because the socio-political problems on the home front are enormous within the postcoloniality of Africa, and this will continue to challenge the writer's relevance and the credo of his being.

Linguistic Conditions of African Writer

The simulacra of African reality is furnished by her cultural heterogeneity and contact with Europe. The African text is a synthesis of that reality. This reality is defined in terms of the many languages and different homogeneous "nations" and cultures within each of the countries in Africa. For instance, Nigeria has about 25 languages, which seem to suggest different nations along linguistic lines. The arbitrary amalgamation of these ethnic nations into countries of Africa is a bastardization carried at the infamous Berlin Conference of 1884-5 in Germany by European nations. This linguistic-ethnic milieu is a minus for the possibility of reaching a wider audience by a writer who uses one of the African languages. By the theory of language acquisition and the facts of language contact, the African writer is essentially a bilingual user of language, (Obiechina, 1990:53). He uses his first language, generally mother tongue, and English. By this token, he is affected by the idiosyncratic features of bilingualism located within the geolinguistic border of his native speech community, which he would naturally carry into his writing. Such things as code switching, code mixing, code borrowing among others are parts of the linguistic strategies at his disposal. It is also a fact of language that a language that crosses its border to another loses the 'purity' of its ancestral home, and it is infested, somehow, with linguistic and cultural behaviour of its new home. In this case, the English the Africa writer uses will likely be African languages - flavoured-

English. African writing has achieved international reaching in the medium of English, for decades now, it has overcome what predicted Wali predicted in 1963. However, one is in doubt of its ideational success within the space of its primary audience in Africa, and as critics have rightly pointed out only a handful of the population 'use' English. One important point being missed in this regard is the important reconstitution of English, being embodied by writers and critics alike, is being called out by the so-called masses of the population at the socio-economic arena of use. Thus, the African writer should be aware that there are categories of users of English and among these are illiterate users, uneducated users, educated users, near-native Users and native-like users. A careful study of the evolution and characteristics of each category and how it contributes to the reworking of English will be one of the new and profitable ways opening for African writing in English expression.

Theorising: Stylo-Linguistic Options

My discussion here demands a cursory look at linguistics-literary criticism controversy. For long literary criticism and linguistic analysis have met and clashed on the territory of 'style'. In talking about "text", style is preferred by the literary critic, while the linguist opts for "stylistics". To the linguist, the literary text is a piece of used language and it is not different from any other text. To the literary critic, the literary text cannot be analyzed as a category of formal meaning because a literary text is a semiotic unit. The residue of these controversies is the confusing meaning of style and stylistics, and the meaning of style and stylistics" depends on the perspective of the definer and not the subject it refers to (Adejare 1992). The situation is compounded by whether there is such thing as "literary language". The linguist does not believe there is, but that language literature is a language variation which linguistics has the resources to study. However, the traditional literary critic sees linguistics as cerebral activities while literature is an emotionally felt experience. The literary critic agrees further that language is an agent of tracking and transferring that emotion, but that, like chemical catalyst, It remains unchanged for it to communicate yet another, possibly different affective experience. All these issues are

well argued and articulated in (Chapman 1973, Fowler 1971, Crystal 1969, Halliday 2002 and Dressler (ed). 1977). While the methodological insights gained from general linguistic practice may be useful in statistical categorization of formal meaning in literature, it is not efficient in accounting for meaning making of texts of different literary orientation, particularly of the kind of African writing. On reading Ngora's *Stylistic Criticism and the African Novel* (1982), his proposal is not different from the generalist linguistic study of text. While Ngora provides us with the signposts of linguistic practices of African writer, he runs short of how the African writing means. Understanding the nature of the African text is a major step in a linguistic analysis of how the Anglophone African writing means.

The fundamental assignment of the African writer is how to make his meaning mean—the projection of his African worldview, his reaction to the view, his reaction to the development around him and what he is trying to contribute to knowledge and civilization. He must simultaneously do this, assuming, sustaining and protecting his identity at the same time. His medium is more in English, at the present, than in African languages. However, African languages. However, in spite of all the misgivings of using foreign language, African writing in English provides one of uses of language in literature; constant experimentation with codes within the purview of the craftsmanship of African writer, conscious of his linguistic imperatives, creates newness of language, producing literary works of African semiotics bilingualism a crafted into English for global accessibility. Between the "extreme" case of Tutuola's linguistics (Collins 1969, Afolayan 1971 and Owomoyela 1999) in his *The Palm-wine Drinkard* (1952) and the 'linguistic innovation' of the 'new generation of Anglophone African writers represented by Niyi Osundare, Ojaide and Anyidoho's poetics (Ojaide 1996:59), Ojaide and Obi 2002), the history of the linguistic paradigm shift in the African tropes could be told. This 'telling', some of which occupied the debates on the language question in African literature, finds mentioning and identification in African literary criticisms of which the following are some: (Obiechina 1990, Ashcroft 1989, Nkosi 1981, Newell 2006). The changing linguistic atmosphere

started with the 'illiterate' English of Tutuola which Afolayan (1971), using SFL, has analyzed as "Yoruba English": 'Tutuola' English is 'Yoruba English' in the sense that it represents the expression of either Yoruba deep grammar with English surface grammar, or Yoruba systems and/or structures in English words". Tutuola's linguistics received both commendation, e.g. Chinweizu (1983) and condemnation, e.g. Owomoyela (1999:100), referencing other critics. Okara's Ijaw-based transposed English in *Voice* (1964) is often compared with Tutuola's English but, that it is a deliberate creative linguistic craftsmanship of Ijaw idiom Ngara (1982:39-41) in contrast to Tutuola's innocent "Yoruba English".

A major cause in the linguistic shift also is the charge of linguistic difficulty obscurantism against early postindependence writers like Soyinka, Ammah, Okigbo and Clark. Soyinka is particularly singled out as representing this group. Soyinka's trial finds illustration in an article titled *Words of Iron, Sentences of Thunder: Soyinka's Prose Style* Osundare (1983). In it Osundare analyzed the difficulty of Soyinka, highlighting his dense metaphors, coinages, lexico-syntactic invention, unusual ellipsis and his meaning making strategies. Adejare (1992), using aspects of systemic (Functional) Textlinguistics theory, has since analyzed Soyinka's works, discussed his linguistic idiosyncrasies as Soyinka literary Idiolect, rooted in Yoruba idiom and semiotics. Apart from Ama Ata Aidoo of Ghana, Rotimi and Osofisan of Nigeria whose dramatic works, in their use of language is deeply a synthesis of English and Ghanaian Ewe, and Nigerian Yoruba respectively, the language of Achebe's works is generally being acknowledged as what English can be made to become in Anglophone African writing, making English to "carry the weight of his Achebe's Igbo Nigerian) experience". Osundare, Anyidoho, Chinweizu, Ojeide among others seem to have reinvented English in their African languages and brought their art of poetry into "the market".

In all, I have observed and identified the major signposts and inner attributes of meaning making in Anglophone African writing to be translation; as aesthetic feature, Adejare (1998:19), ubiquitous presence and use of proverbs which draws attention to language and to

its referent, and it should be seen as 'texts', text incorporation as second order textlets, linguistics of bilingualism, transposition of languages and linguistics codes, pragmatics of names, naming and name calling, lexico-semantics invention and coinages and the linguistics of audience and contexts. This creative impulse is an ebullient linguistic creativity, and a linguistic analysis should be seen as an expedient stylo-linguistic theoretical option; one is optimistic in its potential to further authenticate African aesthetic authority, given the level of the debate and criticism on the language question. In this, one is more sanguine about the possibility of a linguistic-culturalist collaboration for the development and fortunes of Anglophone African literature, and redeem it from the occidental mimetic charge.

Theoretical Possibility

Understanding the nature of the African text is a major step in linguistically approaching Anglophone African writing. It is also crucial to understand the stages of meaning processing in African literature. Systemic (Functional) Textlinguistics Theory, an offshoot of Halliday's Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL) (1961) offers us one of the most efficient ways of doing all this. Systemic linguistics is a post 'neo-Firthian linguistics' developed by Halliday. Systemic linguistics considered language as polysystemic. This means language has meaning which is ordered. The interest of SFL is to connect various linguistic mechanisms which a language manifests to both the functions and the social contexts of the language. SFL identifies three linguistic levels: substance, form, situation or context. Substance, being the ingredients of language having phonic and graphic substances for speech and Writing respectively. Form, having lexis and grammar is the organization of the substance into recognizable bits of a given language. The situation category explains that a piece of language becomes meaningful by a consideration of the relevant 'contextual meaning'. Within this category are the sub-categories of thesis, immediate situation and wider situation. The systemic model also recognizes the basic unit, class, structure and system (Tomori, 1977). These categories inter-relate for well-formedness in terms of rank, delicacy and dependency SFL posits that English

has five grammatical unit with each having its own structure. Moreover, this units are hierarchically organized on a scale- grammatical scale. The mechanisms of each of the unit operate within a system. The inter-relatedness of these units is in the fact that each unit made up of another below it on a grammatical rank scale. Let us use (Eggins, 1994) to concisely summarize the systemic model as envisage language, text, and text as literature:

Language is modeled as networks of interconnected linguistic systems from which we choose make the meanings we need to make to achieve our communicative purposes. The product of a sequence of choices is a text, and the choices realized in text are themselves realization of contextual dimensions, including specific situational configurations, cultural conventions and ideological positions. Language is thus modeled not just as a resource embedded in social and cultural context, but as a resource through whose use we are appropriate *continually constructing, maintain and defining what constitute meanings in possible contexts in our culture.* (307)

Systemic textlinguistic approach to criticism of literature envisages the text as a unit or language that has been used in "specific context" by ad text producer to communicate meaning-message (Adejare, 1992). The concept of text is an artifact of a writer's choices within his *facility and performance* of language. Emphasis is on 'facility and performance' because that is where the language creativity of the African writer lies, beyond linguistic competence. Indeed *performance* far outweighs competence in literary production because this is the context in which language is used as articulator of meaning in social interaction and projector of ideological lineages. The linguistic stridency of performance within the second order text of literature strives to assign meaning and provides conditions for its interpretation. The existence and identification of "literary language", which has been a major source of argument between linguists and traditional literary critics, should be determined on whether the text is a prime or second order text.

Semantics reigns at prime order level while pragmatics holds at second order level, with semantics as complement. Situational factors determine where a text belongs. The literary text is

"naturally a second order text because it is a fictionalization of real world experience, and as Adejare points out, this means it has three levels of primitive order, prime order and second order for meaning making and projection of message. The African writing in English is a bilingual text, it is a second order text. Consequently, the attendant features of the writer's bilingual linguistic 'heretics', his linguistic craftsmanship and cultural backgrounds determine the semiotic frames with which the inner attributes of his writing can be decoded and understood. Indeed, the African writer's semiotics is crucial for the interpretation of his work, not language as such. On this, one can hazard to say that language is not a 'maker, it is a 'carrier, not 'experience', it a 'form, being conceived (language) as a tabula rasa open to semiotic manipulations for text making and concretization of experience. This elaboration is supported by Adejare's view that "The English form [any language form at all used or encountered in any context [including African writing in English] may employ English or Yoruba or Kikuyu or any tradition for that matter] semiotics for its textual meaning". Literary Textlinguistics combines the "WHAT" (of traditional criticism) and HOW" (of linguistics) of meaning in text (Eggins, 1994:309). Finally, as a summary of the analytical and evaluative goals of SFL on the authority of Halliday quoted by Eggins (309): the linguistic analysis may enable one to say why the text is, or not; an effective text for its own purposes-in what respects it succeeds and in what respects it fails, or is less successful (Halliday 1985: xv-xxi). "It (Textlinguistic assumes an interpretation not only of environment of the text, its 'context of situation' and 'context of culture', but also of how the linguistic features of a rtext relate systematically to the features of its environment, including the intentions of those involved in its production" (Halliday 1985:xv-xvi).

It is within this understanding that we can begin to argue the linguistic orientation of Anglophone African writing to understand and appreciate its inner metabolisms, and what determines its growth and identity, not necessarily on the rather adversary epic-like arguments that have raged for many decades now, becoming timeless, suppressing the germane recognizable body of traditions and 'nationalisms' to which this poetics is tethered.

Conclusion

In my response, I have tried to highlight the arguments on the language question in African literature, including reasons advanced and positions taken by opposing writers and critics. In doing this, I contextualized the different views within the understanding of the nature of language and linguistic description of "text" as literature, drawing out why productive to think of a stylo-linguistic theoretical option in collaboration with traditional literary criticism to analyze the African text. With this as a necessary background and context, I propose Systemic Literary Textlinguistics as a sub-category of Halliday's SPL to analyze African writing in English expression, laying out its promising characteristics for text explication, and in particular, for discovering and understanding the "inner features" of this literature, which would seem to serve as signifiers of its identity and signposts of its meaning making, in spite of its diverse linguistic historicity. And so, finally, when the questions are asked: What is Anglophone African literature? We can point to a group or unmistakable artifacts within the community of Africa. What are its codifying features? We can point to its semiotics which engender its identity and distance. What are its staying power? We can point to its inner metabolisms and its ebullient linguistic creativity, and who is its audience? We can point to the world-the world, after all, as they say, is a global village!

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