

# Narrating Identity using the Colonizer's Language: The Case of African Literature

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## **Abstract:**

Literature is about people, their society, their culture and their institutions. But it is also, and especially, about language, the medium through which the people's society and culture are expressed. Hence, to talk about literature is to talk about language; however, this simple assertion becomes problematic when it is applied to the situation of African literature written in European languages. For this reason, this form of literature occupies a unique position. The present paper shows the role that language plays, has played positively or negatively in an attempted contribution, maintenance and strengthening of national cohesion and identity. Language as a communicative system varying among different populations is commonly acknowledged to function as an important symbol of group identity, stimulating a sense of solidarity among communities sharing a single variety of speech; and is sometimes deliberately manipulated to create feelings of belonging.

Since independence, the issue of African literature written in European languages has been debated without any implicit agreement among African writers. After several meetings, the Commission on literature recommended translations into autochthonous languages, wherever possible, of works by African writers in French, English, Spanish and so on (Achebe, 1996: 231)

The views of Nkrumah, Fanon and Nyerere seem important while dealing with the issue of the restoration of African languages as an indispensable part of African liberation. In his speech, "Ghana is Born", Nkrumah saw the use of European languages as one of the problems compromising the freedom, equality and independence of African countries. He thus suggested,

It is essential that we do consider seriously the problem of the language in Africa. At present such is the influence of Europe in our affairs... far more students in our universities are studying Latin and Greek than studying the languages of Africa. An essential of independence is that emphasis must be laid on studying the living languages of Africa for, out of such a study will come simpler methods by which those in one part of Africa may learn the languages of those in all other parts" (1961: 102)

Here, Nkrumah not only saw the danger in the use of European languages in African affairs, but he also stressed the importance of the linguistic factor in African unity. Comprehending language as a result of culture and thought process, the Europeans, Fanon noted assaulted African languages to impose those of Europe on the African people (1967: 18).

Although there is no simple solution to such a problem, we cannot afford to disengage ourselves from the ontological assumptions underlying the debates. The discourse must not simply seek to harmonize the arguments but to place the debates in the context of the following questions: what is language? What is the primary objective of the users of language? Does the use of European languages bring the writer close to his people or create an alienation from his people?

This article takes a critical look at African literature in European languages. According to Berghe, language is the vehicle of culture (1963: 22). But as Ngugi explains, "every language has a dual makeup; it is both a mode of communication and a bearer of culture. It also represents the collective memory bank of people's historical experiences and is a product of human beings communicating with one

another. As Asante (1984:12) further explains, “it is through the language with which “we first acquire our consciousness; it is also “the essential instrument of social cohesion”, as well as “the fundamental element of liberation.”

Language is also inseparable from thought. People’s ideas and images of the universe and reality, manifest themselves in the spoken and written word. Language, then, is the essential instrument of social cohesion that provides a community of people with the understanding of their reality. Hence, the user of language is more at home when he communicated in his own language.

The views of Achebe and some African writers, however, do not acknowledge the incongruity in the use of European languages in African literary expressions. Achebe’s theorem is that it is a misnomer to view African literature as one unit. What he sees are ethnic and national literatures. The former is expressed in the indigenous African languages, while the latter, resulting from the colonial set up, is communicated through European languages.

His argument is that colonialism gave Africans “a language with which to talk to each other” and that “if it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them tongue for singing” (1996: 381). Because, historically, Africans found themselves placed in this linguistic situation, the African writers started to write in the language of the colonizers without considering all the implications involved in the use of such language. Although the use of a foreign tongue may look “like a dreadful betrayal and produce a guilty feeling”, there is no other choice, Achebe stated, “I have been given the language and I intend to use it”, he concludes (384).

In their zeal to destroy the stereotypical images of Africa and to project their African worldview, these writers may have considered the colonial language as mere tools or means to achieve their objectives. As Roland Barthes points out, however, “le langage n’est jamais innocent” since a people’s social, political, and cultural institutions are reflected in their language.

If one considers what has been written on the language question in Africa, one realizes that the emphasis has been on the attitude of the African writer vis-à-vis the European language rather than on the creative use of the language. In fact, the classical question consisted in asking if writing in the language of the colonizer was problematic for

African writers or if they felt comfortable in using this language. Jacques Chevrier was able to observe:

It seems the attitude of the writer towards a language that is not his mother tongue rests on certain ambivalence: a mixture of love and hatred, acceptance and rejection, which clearly accounts for the feeling of struggle with the language that is sometimes caused by reading the works of francophone writers.

Although, Chevrier's observation is pertinent, it directs the reflection only onto the ideological aspect of this linguistic question. What has been neglected is essentially how the European language is re-appropriated and given expression in the imagination of the African writer.

Achebe proposed that the African writer should "aim at fashioning out" the foreign English language in a manner "that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost" (Achebe, 1996: 383). The question we may ask is, why go through such laborious tasks when the African writer already has his own language? In his response, Irele points out that the "attachment of our modern literature and culture to the European languages is at odds with the facts of African life". It is, therefore, doubtful of such literary works can be said to carry fully the reality of African experiences (1990: 45).

Clearly, Achebe's use of the English language in literary expression is a conscious decision on his part. This was manifested in Egejuru's interview with him on the question of his audience. "Anybody who wants to read...I no longer think of any particular group of people...Anybody who is interested in the ideal I am expounding is my audience", he explained (Egerjuru, 1980: 19). His neglect to keep in mind an African audience – in this case, the Igbo in particular – thus leads to what Okpaku described as "hodge-pode literature which is supposedly universal, but without serious meaning to any particular audience".

Achebe's position that language is not a crucial generator of cultural values and "cannot alone be relied upon to supply literary

criteria” fails to acknowledge the character of language as a carrier of culture and as a means of communication.

Another important question to ask is whether a given language is capable of perfectly expressing a foreign culture. More specifically, is a foreign culture capable of translating in an entirely satisfactory manner an imagination that has its roots in an alien culture? These questions are very pertinent to African literature and the language situation in two ways: on the one hand, the ability of the writer to perfectly master the Western language in which he or she writes and, on the other hand, the ability of the Western language to translate the specific structures of the African imagination.

A novel like Nazi Boni’s Crépuscule des temps anciens (1962) perfectly reveals this unconscious shift. Nazi is considered to be one among the West African francophone novelists, “celui qui témoigne le mieux de la difficulté mais aussi de la volonté d’utiliser une langue qui tente d’exprimer de façon satisfaisante l’imaginaire de son ethnie qu’il entendait valoriser” (80) ‘the one who testifies best to the difficulty but also the will to use a language that attempts to express in a satisfactory manner the imagination of his ethnic group’.

Nazi Boni’s writing is therefore an attempt to use the African word in French. For this reason, he also attempts to translate forms, speech and thought patterns which come from a long African tradition. It is therefore not surprising that some writers later became clearly aware of the problems with which Nazi Boni was trying to come to terms. In Anglophone Africa, Gabriel Okara has tied theoretical reflection to the linguistic problem that confronts the African novelist in the practice of writing. In his essay “African Speech...English Words,” Okara explains:

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is

using as his medium of expression. I have endeavoured in my works to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expressions. For, from a word, a group of words, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people. In order to capture the vivid images of African speech, I had to eschew the habit of expressing my thoughts first in English. It was difficult at first, but I had to learn. I had to study each Ijaw expression I used and to discover the probable situation in which it was used in order to bring out the nearest meaning in English. I found it a fascinating exercise. (15)

Okara's remarks are clear. If one wants to benefit from African culture, if one wants to express the African imagination, one cannot put aside the African language in favor of an academic European language. Okara has tried systematically to adapt the European language to the African reality. Furthermore, he has tried an almost literal translation of his language into English and the result of this can be seen in his novel The Voice. One need not to understand Ijo to understand that in this novel the mother tongue influences and disrupts the English language. What Okara has done is to let the Ijo language speak in the English language, as is evident from the following passage:

Shuffling feet turned Okolo's head to the door. He saw three men standing silent, opening not their mouths. "Who are you people be?" Okolo asked. The people opened not their mouths. "If you are coming in people be, then come in." (26)

In the main, The Voice is written in this way. Indeed, there are passages where standard English is written. However, when Okara makes his characters speak or think, he pushes them to literally translate

their language. His writing is a conscious attempt to use the words and expressions in the way he has chosen to use them.

In attacking and deconstructing the syntax of English through the translation of Ijo, Okara seeks to free the African text from its foreign domination. Thus, those African writers seek a way of giving prominence to the African word in their African text. What is common to these writers is a form of translation that takes place from the African language into the European language. For, as Georges Ngal asserts, it is the African language that give form and meaning to modern African writing in European languages:

S'il faut chercher une spécificité, disons une particularité de l'écrivain africain, c'est que son écriture est travaillée, fécondée par sa langue maternelle d'abord et par les langues africaines. Les romans...ne peuvent être compris avec profit que si l'on connaît le contexte linguistique de ces romans. Certains passages, les noms des personnages...sont une traduction... (118-19)

If one has to look for a distinctive characteristic or feature of the African writer, it is because his writing is shaped or enriched first of all by his mother tongue and then by other African languages. The novels...can only be really understood if one knows the linguistic context of these novels. Certain passages, and the names of some characters...have been translated...

Thus, literature cannot be separated from the language and culture that defines it. If, therefore, culture cannot be separated from language, how does thought translated from one's language to a foreign one retain one's cultural and aesthetic value in literary expression? How do Achebe's cultural thoughts, for instance, achieve authentic literary form in the English language, if the English language that transmits the image of the African world is foreign?

It follows that the African writer communicating in his mother tongue is not simply a matter of pride, dignity, politics, and emotional

feelings. Fundamentally, it is a matter of communicating in a language understood by his audience and of the enrichment of the language.

The fact is that African writers write with their constituencies in mind. Those who denied themselves the advantages of bearing in mind an African audience, many African writers have sought to make themselves intelligible to the Western audience. They spend countless time explaining indigenous expression in parentheses at “the expense of artistic qualities,” which tend to make them boring to the African reader, who as an African does not need all that description of his culture”.

Creative writing in which the researcher can resort to “back translations” to achieve lexicon equivalence or correct translations of words and phrases to another. Transportation of thought from one language into a totally different regional language can be a problem for the writer. Camara Laye noted that, if an African writer has a phrase to illustrate that something is white in an African language, and the book is published in England, he would be forced to say something like: it is “as white as snow”. But snow as we know is foreign to an African who has never seen it. Therefore, those African writers only think of the structure of the language (Egejuru, 1980: 35).

Despite the mastery of the French language, Senghor also acknowledged this problem in his interview with Egejuru. In writing poems, he found that there is “a sort of disparity between the poem as it sounded in my imagination and the poem, which is written down”. Therefore, “it is necessary to have a literature in African languages”, he intimated (Egejuru, 1980: 34). This affirmation points to the dislocation of the African writer from his authentic aesthetics through the use of the European language as his medium of communication.

Such creative works are “fast becoming a factor of the division between the ‘learned’ elite and the masses, and between the urban centers and rural communities. Africans may need French and English languages for communicating with the outside world and for gaining access to Western knowledge, but as Nketia says,

We certainly need our own languages  
for access to African civilization and  
humanism, to the treasures of the African past  
in which we can rediscover our identity, our



spiritual awareness, our sense of pride and our dignity...overshadowed in the colonial past... these languages were used not only for ordinary social intercourse but also for entertainment, for judicial proposes and for the rituals and ceremonials that characterized the African way of life. (Quoted in Kennedy, 1973: 13-23)

Accordingly, using African languages in literary expressions will also contribute to the growth and enrichment of the languages, just as Shakespeare and his contemporaries did for the English language.

Hence, any discourse on African literature and the language question ought to be linked to African agency; it also has to take into account the dual character of language – communicative tool and culture – as Ngugi has established. Thus, if we cannot determine the future of our culture without controlling our language, it becomes incumbent on the African writers to learn to communicate to the African people in their own languages.

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