

**POLITICAL INDEPENDENCE WITH  
LINGUISTIC SERVITUDE:  
THE POLITICS ABOUT LANGUAGES IN THE  
DEVELOPING WORLD**

**SAMUEL GYASI OBENG & BEVERLY HARTFORD (EDITORS)**

*Foreword by Amos Sawyer, Former Interim President of the Republic of Liberia*

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## FOREWORD

This book addresses questions of fundamental importance to the democratization and development initiatives of developing countries. Can processes of democracy and development be sustained without true participation of citizens? For many former colonies, independence is yet to yield empowerment of their populations. Institutions of governance remain over-centralized and power relationships asymmetrical. In Africa, there are many countries in which an unacceptably high percentage of the population do not read or write the official languages in which their governments do business. It would be an exaggeration to talk about the existence of an open public realm in such countries. People cannot perform as citizens and become the engines of their own development processes if their capacity to engage in public discourse and improve upon their development processes is limited due to the fact that their access to information is hampered because they lack literacy in the language in which they think, give meaning to their environment and chart roadmaps to strive to attain their hopes and aspirations. Being a citizen in the true sense of the word goes beyond receiving benefits from the state and paying taxes to the government. A critical difference between subjects and citizens revolves around the capacity to participate in governance. Participation means more than being mobilized in animation and praise-singing groups or engaging in superficial and uninformed discourse. It requires knowledgeable discourse and responsible contestation by members of society. Literacy and the availability of literature in local and national languages can enhance empowered participation.

The failure of many developing countries to adequately address the challenges discussed in this book should be of concern to all of us who work for the entrenchment of processes of democratization and development in developing countries. Because language policies are of fundamental importance and can spark emotionally charged debates, initiatives in addressing them need not be left entirely to governments. Communities of scholars in developing countries must be prepared to also play a role ensuring that such critical questions are raised and that discourses about them generate more light than heat. This book throws a challenge to policy makers and policy analysts, and to all intellectual and social entrepreneurs to search for creative ways to deepen the processes of empowerment of peoples of developing world by developing and strengthening policies and programs having to do with indigenous, local and national languages. The contributors and editors of this volume deserve our profound thanks.

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*Chapter 6*

**"MY AUDIENCE TELLS ME IN WHICH  
TONGUE I SHOULD SING." THE POLITICS ABOUT  
LANGUAGES IN AFRICAN LITERATURES**

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**INTRODUCTION**

The politics of literary language is a perennial concern of post-colonial African critics and thinkers. The African continent being a multi-lingual space, the choice of the language of authorship signifies the writers' relationships with the people for whom they write and their broad assumptions about the nature, meaning and the function of language and literature. Mainstream African writers have allocated themselves the roles of being educators and sharpeners of the consciences of their communities. This is the crux of Chinua Achebe's (1975) argument that the novelist is a teacher and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's (1972) assertive statement that writers are sensitive points of their communities. For these roles to be effectively played, writers have to communicate in languages that can be read and understood by their readers. African writers are caught up in a linguistic labyrinth. With more than 2000 indigenous languages and a handful of former colonial languages, they are called upon by their responsibilities as writers and their commitment to the African cause to write in languages that communicate meaningfully to their readers. Do these authors use indigenous languages or opt for erstwhile colonial languages?

The purpose of this chapter is to narrativize how African writers, essayists and critics have conceptualized and presented their disputations and sentiments on the language issue. I want to propose that many of the arguments that are raging among writers as to which languages are appropriate for writing African literatures fail to take cognizance of specific ideological pressures and motivations that have been placed on the shoulders of writers from particular locations. By taking into consideration ideological underpinnings involved in the choice of language, it is possible to demonstrate that language situations exhibit a lot of heterogeneity and complexity. The use of former colonial languages does not automatically

lead to homogenous reactions and results in every other situation. Similarly, the employment of indigenous languages may not equally and simultaneously provide viable solutions and responses to the diverse cultural, economic and technological problems that face different parts of the African continent.

Notwithstanding the fact that the diversity of opinions in the politics of the languages of African literatures is healthy, a framework or a set of frameworks that could be employed to conflate, understand and appreciate this diversity is not forthcoming. It is the intention of this chapter to demonstrate that latent and particular ideological interests and socio-linguistic insights are able to provide coherent, empirically plausible and logical explanations as to why writers choose to use certain languages, or even more specifically, why certain registers within individual languages turn up over and above others. Before this point is investigated, however, the identification and description of the main points of contention within authors, critics and essayists in regard to the language issue in African literatures is in order.

## INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES PROPONENTS

I designate indigenous languages proponents as those critics and thinkers who strongly support the use of African languages in the writing of African literatures. Among these critics and thinkers are Obi Wali (1963), Abiola Irele (1981), Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986, 1998), Chinweizu (1983) and Gabriel Ruhumbika (1992). Obi Wali (13-15) insists that African writers writing in English or French are merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to "sterility, uncreativity and frustration". Obi Wali's indignation is due to the fact that the use of European languages devalues the literatures that are written in the languages of the people who inhabit the African continent. Following in the footsteps of Obi Wali, Wole Soyinka (1971) has once suggested that a single African language, Swahili be adopted for Africa South of the Sahara and all the future writing be done in that language. Soyinka's statement comes at a time when the East African community is at its zenith and when the main players on the East African political scene are toying with KiSwahili as the regional official language. The apparent success of the East African community at the time was seen as a metonym of what was later to become pan Africa. It is in this context that Soyinka extends this wish to a continental level.

In a seminal essay entitled "African Literature and The Question of Language," Abiola Irele (1981) discusses what he calls the linguistic dilemma that African writers face in having to write in former colonial languages to express their ideas, experiences and emotions. His arguments are full of circumlocutions and ambiguities, which are not so much a symptom of the weaknesses of the discussion as an indication of the intricate nature of the issues under consideration. One of Irele's concluding remarks is far from optimistic:

We cannot feel that we are in full possession of this literature (African) so long as it is elaborated in a language that does not belong to us in an immediate and original way (45).

Irele's pessimism is aggravated by the fact that he believes that it is not possible for the African writer to reach the deep recesses of what he calls the African ontology without using an African language. Abiola bases his argument on Whorf (1956). According to Whorf, the

structure of human language influences the manner in which human beings understand reality and behave with respect to it. Whorf goes back to the thinking of the French mystic and Hebrew scholar, Fabre d' Olivet who proposed that certain Hebrew letters and combination of letters contained mysterious, fundamental root-ideas. From Olivet's work, Whorf abstracted that the content of thought in language influences the process of thought. Seen in the context of particular languages, this implies that differences in the structures of languages are associated with actual differences in ways of perceiving and conceptualizing. Differences in thought would, as a result, be revealed through comparing different language structures. It is within this linguistic theoretical framework that Abiola Irele mounts his powerful argument in favor of African languages: ]

For even if it is true that all languages are systems whose reference to reality is arbitrary, there is a naturalization of particular languages to specific environments which plays an important role in the process by which they not only come to signify but to achieve a correspondence with the total configuration of the perceived and experienced reality within the environment (50).

Irele's contention is that the use of European languages denaturalizes African experiences and leads to the alienation of African authors who attempt to capture them.

Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1986, 1998) is perhaps the most persistent writer and thinker in the pursuit of the African centered linguistic ideal. He maintains that it is through writing in their indigenous languages that African authors will be able to speak with and for their people. Ngugi refers to the process by which African artists will change their modes of linguistic communication from European to African as the decolonization of the African mind. To Ngugi, language and mind are inseparable and unless Africans liberate themselves linguistically, they will not do so mentally and in other areas of social and economic life. In practice, his creative works since *I will Marry When I Want* (1982) all written originally in his native Kikuyu, are a product of this argument. Ngugi has cast and recast the subject matter of this theme in many and varied presentations and documents. The latest call to my knowledge on African writers to compose their works in their indigenous tongues is found in *Penpoints, Gunpoints and Dreams* (1998). In this work, Ngugi compares the practice of African writers' use of European languages with Caliban, a Shakespearean character's employment of the language of his detractor, Prospero, in his quest for self-determination. Ngugi uses the names of Caliban and Prospero as allegorical expressions of the colonized and the colonizer respectively.

The story of Caliban and Prospero is in its pristine form dramatized in Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1987). Prospero teaches Caliban his language for the purpose subduing him. Consequently and subsequently, Caliban becomes so enraged at being maltreated as to utter:

You taught me language, and my profit on't is I know how to curse. The red plague rid you for learning me your language (1987:46).

Thus Caliban turns Prospero's worldview upside down by employing Prospero's own tongue to fight for freedom. Ngugi recontextualizes Caliban in a colonial situation with modifications that take into account his theory of language. His point is that the use of colonial languages such as English and French for purposes of liberation was good. But he laments about the fact that African writers turned a temporary expediency into a permanent

necessity. As a result, they became developers of European languages to the neglect of the languages of their own people. Ngugi states:

Prospero does not have to learn Caliban's language in order to get to know the secrets of the land. ----. Caliban learns Prospero's language and spies against himself. ---- He becomes the unwitting accomplice to what happens later- the Atlantic slave trade and plantation slavery (1998:80).

The foregoing passages represent the typical theoretical position of supporters of "authentic African literatures", and by extension the linguistic means of transmitting those literatures. To the proponents of this line of argument, Africa will continue to wallow in colonization so long as its writers persist in creating their works in former colonial languages.

Various versions of Ngugi's arguments are to be found in Chinweizu and others' *Towards the Decolonization of African Literature* (1983), Kofi Anyidoho's "Language and Development Strategy in Pan African Literary Experience" (1992) and Gabriel Ruhumbika's "The African Language Policy of Development: National Languages" (1992). While Chinweizu and others, and Anyidoho argue that African languages and conceptual frameworks born of homegrown epistemologies should be at the forefront of the quest of African people's creative and productive self, Ruhumbika asserts that African languages are the only languages through which thriving African literatures are possible. The self-contained dignity and value of the culture of a people is at the basis of the arguments of supporters of indigenous languages in writing African literatures. To this end, the moral assumptions of this posture are attractive. Yet, even if there is a political and sentimental correctness on the part of critics who vouch for indigenous languages, they tend to belittle points contact among languages where differences could lead to positive results. Moreover, most of them are not realistically sensitive to the multi-lingual situation within the African continent and the tensions that sometimes flare up among African languages themselves when they come in contact. Lastly, their argument assumes a unilinear development of societies and an essentialist attitude of identity. It is as if for them there is some unchanging and essential content to any identity, which is defined by either a common origin or a common structure of human experiences.

## NON- INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES PROPONENTS

The proponents of the alternative view subtitled above are not ethically committed to the use of African languages in their writing although they are not necessarily opposed to it. Chinua Achebe's essays, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975) and *Hopes and Impediments* (1988) are representative of this perspective. Achebe is acutely aware of the alienating effect of the African writer's use of a foreign language. It is in his opinion, a betrayal of one's ancestral roots and identity. There is, therefore, an inherent crisis in the African writer's choice of another's language.

However, although the choice of a foreign language is an undeniable danger, Achebe contends that it also offers another opportunity precipitated by the crisis. Thus, the use of a foreign language is in direct response to a problem without purporting to solve the problem in all its ramifications. According to Achebe, African writers can remold the English language

creatively, adapt it to their unique circumstances and employ it meaningfully. As a matter of fact, persists Achebe, some European languages have been on the African soil for so long that they can no longer be regarded as foreign.

In direct response to Obi Wali, Achebe (1975: 99) points out that African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic. To the contrary, they are by-products of the same processes that led to the formation of the new states of Africa:

I feel the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African environment (1975:103).

Like Chinua Achebe, Ken Saro-Wiwa (1992:152-157) does not support a reductionist approach to the linguistic choices in writing African literatures. According to Saro-Wiwa, African writers should respond experimentally to the linguistic needs of their readers. In his words:

I myself have experimented with three varieties of English spoken in Nigeria: pidgin, rotten and standard. I have used them in poetry, short stories, essays, drama, and the novel. .... That which is best and which is most popular is standard English expressed simply and lucidly (1992: 157).

Saro-Wiwa also alludes to the tensions that often crop up among African languages. He is deeply apprehensive of the fate of African languages that are represented by minority speech communities. An official policy, he observes, favoring writing in African languages could result in the extermination of some languages given the logistical difficulties involved in publishing and reaching out to the readers. Citing Ngugi wa Thiong'o's case in particular, Saro-Wiwa points out that had Ngugi not build a name through writing in English, and were he not coincidentally a member of a numerically strong linguistic group, he would not have been as successful as he appears to be with his Kikuyu theatrical and novelistic experiments. Saro-Wiwa fears that there may well be internal colonization in Africa of minority by majority linguistic groups.

In sum, the strong point of the supporters of the use of European languages in writing African literatures is that they see in the use of these languages a dynamic and fluid attempt by African people to conflate categories of experiences and knowledge as these categories respond to the emergencies of particular and changing historical and geographical situations. The choice and use of European languages could be seen as sites of shifting centers. In choosing to write in foreign tongues, the African writer is deferring in a deconstructive sense a previous center in preference for a new one and in the process, practicing a new form of self-determination. The new center may come from the African people's reconstruction of some of their own realities and also from using patterns of organization that originate outside their native culture.

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## THE MERITS AND DEMERITS OF MUTUAL EXCLUSIVENESS

As the previous passages clearly demonstrate, both the supporters of indigenous languages and of the former colonial languages in the expression of African literatures pose important questions and provide insightful responses. Whereas the former are inspired by a genuine desire to isolate and describe specific identities and self-definitions of African peoples, the latter are preoccupied with fluid identities and self-definitions that emerge whenever human beings interact with other human beings and other circumstances. Supporters of indigenous languages work on the premise that people can build institutions and express their innermost desires through their indigenous languages. The same people could be rendered extinct should they abandon their customs and the various languages through which those customs are enunciated. This attitude promotes the view that languages evolve, develop subjectively and get naturalized in particular environments for the purposes of naming those environments in many and varied ways.

On the other hand, supporters of European languages are pragmatic, pointing out that their choice and employment of those languages is not out of context. Not only are they able to reach a broad spectrum of readership but they have also reinvented foreign languages to fit their unique circumstances. At the core of this position is the view that any language is learnable and can be used flexibly to express the creative impulses of a given community. In Achebe's case for example, although he uses English words to write some of his works, his speech is actually Nigerian and Ibo.

The problem that emerges from the statements of the proponents of the two main theoretical positions identified and discussed above is that they tend to ignore the ideological and socio-linguistic home environments that compel or motivate authors to privilege certain linguistic choices over others. Ken Saro-Wiwa's example of an indigenous language, which is spoken by a small population, is instructive in that it is a pointer to the complex issues that obtain in language situations.

There are other instances whereby just as foreign languages could be used for domination and exploitation, indigenous languages could equally emerge as counter-productive forces in the development of a community. ESKIA Mphahlele has responded to Obi wali's assertions referred to at the beginning of this chapter by saying that the latter's assumptions are polemics that may in fact lead to retrogression. Without mincing words, Mphahlele argues that the use of African languages in modern creative writing must await their development to meet the needs of systematic, analytic contemporary thought (1963:7-9). To some African scholars, this pronouncement hinges on the heretical and alienation to the extreme. Mphahlele is a South African and his statement seen against the backdrop of the South African apartheid system in which black populations were cordoned off in "homelands" to "develop" at their own paces as separate nations using indigenous languages, his position is ideologically understandable and logical. A sensitive writer, critic, or activist would hardly fail to discern the conspiratorial scheme of apartheid system to consign black populations of South Africa to technological deprivation and underdevelopment. Here, then, the encouragement by governmental programs and institutions to use indigenous African languages is both unpatriotic and counter-productive to the very owners of indigenous languages.

However, in other cases the backlash could be a blessing in disguise. This happens to be the case of KiSwahili language. There is no doubt that the post-colonial Tanzanian

Government under the stewardship of Mwalimu Julius Nyerere adopted KiSwahili as the official and national language of the country. Yet, although many contemporary speakers of KiSwahili are proud to parade its nationalistic characteristics and roles, only a few seem to acknowledge and articulate the fact that some of the initial factors that led to its rise and success are mired in colonial and racist hegemonic structures. Al-Amin Mazrui attests:

The German approach denied the colonial subject any access to the language of the colonial master. This policy contributed significantly to the consolidation of Swahili language in what was then German East Africa (1992:92).

The Tanzanian case shows that *Caliban*, the colonized, did not have to learn the language of *Prospero*, the colonizer. As a matter of fact, there are many cases where Prospero wrote grammars and dictionaries in the language of Caliban.

This appears to be situation in Belgian Congo where Christian missionaries of Flemish origin favored the use of smaller vernaculars over a lingua franca such as Lingala. The missionaries argued against lingua francas because those lingua francas borrowed freely from adjacent languages and to the missionaries, this was a testimony to the fact that they would lead to moral decay and alienation. Yet as Michael Meeuwis points out (1999: 381-386), the missionaries made these decisions on the basis of Flemish nationalism, which they developed during their earlier years in Belgium. Meeuwis states that the Flemish missionaries who happened to be the majority in the Congo sympathized with a movement back home which had arisen in the Flanders and demanded equal linguistic rights in a society dominated by French language and culture. Flemish nationalism was projected on the Congo and applied to develop small indigenous languages of the colony. This historical accident is unlike the fears of linguistic domination that punctuate Saro-Wiwa's assumptions discussed earlier.

## LINGUISTIC CONTEXT AND IDEOLOGY

The foregoing discussion demonstrates that it is necessary for debaters on the languages of African literatures to pay particular attention on specific linguistic contexts and ideological issues that obtain in every communicative situation on its own merit. By putting into consideration linguistic and ideological factors, it is possible to demonstrate that supporters of indigenous languages and non-indigenous languages within the current debate do not represent mutually exclusive positions. To the contrary, they are negotiating with ways of communication according to the social situations they find themselves in, and according to the ideology they subscribe to consciously or unconsciously.

Fasold (1987) points out that from the sociological standpoint, language is chosen on the basis of abstract social structures and institutional domains. Institutional domains determine which language variety is appropriate for particular contexts and they include factors such as location, topic and participants. Simon Herman (1968) observes that some users of language find themselves in overlapping situations that call for the use of various languages simultaneously and alternately. It is on the basis of such theoretical orientations that researchers such as Obeng (1997) argue that speakers use language functionally to fulfill interests dear to them; and when those interests change, language choice and usage also changes.

Closely related to the linguistic contexts are ideological determinants of language choice and use. Eileen Julien (1989, 1992) argues that language and discourse privilege certain forms of social relations. It is in the nature of institutions and states, she states strongly, to create discourses appropriate to their existence and purpose. Based upon this observation, she concludes that rather than justify the writer's choice of language aprioristically, it is more logical and empirically plausible to identify and discuss social relations that make writers privilege certain linguistic and by extension, generic choices over others. Languages in communication are products of ideological intentions and these intentions are often hidden and signify and imply the larger visible social and economic relationships that exist among speech communities or even within a single speech community.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR THE LANGUAGES OF AFRICAN LITERATURES

The implications of linguistic contexts and ideology to the understanding of the diverse opinions on the languages to be employed in the expression of African literatures are indispensable in that they facilitate a realistic and practical assessment of the language situation in Africa rather than formulate normative assertions, which no matter how grand, will not undo the existential circumstances in which African languages find themselves. Looked at in their specific locations, the mutually exclusive positions that seem to characterize the debates on African languages and literatures exemplify a desire to simplify an otherwise very complex situation. These positions should be seen as complementary attitudes towards a highly heterogeneous and hybrid context. Just as a single language is a conglomeration of a variety of social codes, so also the existence of juxtaposing linguistic systems present the co-existence of master codes within a community.

African literatures tend to exhibit these syncretism, integrations, inter-cultural and intra-cultural reconstitutions of their linguistic domains. Writers have employed languages to reflect these linguistic domains. Even if some languages may not enjoy a vibrant written tradition, they fulfill important functions in the communities in which they are spoken. This, then, explains the diversity of writings emerging from the African continent. In the Nigerian situation there are various levels of writing:

Soyinka ---- is committed to an international audience. He must therefore choose an international in his case English ----. John Pepper Clark is content to be a letter writer for his characters. Let them speak to him in the native language and he will render their words and thoughts into English---- Femi Osofisan has defined his audience as university students and the English language is commensurate with these campus republicans ( Abah,1987:487).

Another Nigerian playwright, Segun Oyekunle explains why he chose to write his play *Katakata Sofahead* (1983) in Pidgin English:

The huge growth of ethnically mixed cities and easier travel at village level meant the practical usefulness of pidgin continued . For the "sons of the soil" returning home after periods of work, pidgin was a mark of group identity and in this context, a prestigious language --- What I have done in this play is to take advantage of the dynamism and creativity of pidgin, a spoken language free from any established literary conventions, as

a medium capable of bridging the gap between the popular and the elitist theatre in Nigeria (1983: v-vii).

This linguistic situation is the reason that is perhaps the reason that makes Karin Barber (1995: 3-30) to correctly argue against a needless binarism in the debate on the languages of African literatures. Barber identifies and discusses diverse socio-linguistic contexts that call for specific linguistic choices. My observation is that even die-hard supporters of indigenous languages often find themselves traversing on heterogeneous linguistic spaces.

In the spirit of furthering the cause of African languages, Ngugi wa Thiong'o as we have observed earlier, decided from the early 1980s to write all his creative works in Kikuyu. Yet the dominant trend that is increasingly emerging in Ngugi's writing is that he is becoming more of a writer of non-fiction than fiction (Williams 1999:141). Ngugi's essays are written in the most eloquent and elegant English. Is not the choice of language in this regard determined consciously or unconsciously by socio-linguistic reasons, the fact that the essays are addressed to readers other than those who have Kikuyu reading competence?

Besides, the essays are carefully crafted to be allegories of fictions that are otherwise inaccessible to readers in the original language. The essays elaborate and amplify the fictional world of Ngugi's characters. Were Ngugi to write everything in Kikuyu, including the essays, readers would still access it through translations in the same way they have accessed *I will Marry When I Want*, *Devil on the Cross* and *Matigari*, among others. As justifications and summations of his fictional world, essays stand an equally good chance or even better, of developing an epistemology of a people in an original language as are the fictional works. In any event, in contemporary deconstructive parlance, the boundary between the essay and imaginative literature is very thin. My considered opinion is that Ngugi's double-sidedness in the choice of language is logical, practical and realistic. The choice indexes the various socio-linguistic situations that the writer often finds himself in.

Achebe is often compared with Ngugi because of their contrasting views in regard to the language issue (Anyidoho, 1992). Despite the fact that the two writers are similar in allegorizing their fictional works through the essay, Ngugi has written more essays than Achebe. The following section examines Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1959) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Matigari* (1989) whose political and literary significance is increasing by the day. Through analyzing these works, it is possible to show that the ideological climate of the day and socio-linguistic choices that the authors make enable them to communicate their messages effectively.

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### **Things Fall Apart (1959) and Matigari (1987)**

*Things Fall Apart* (1959) by Chinua Achebe and *Matigari* (1987) by Ngugi wa Thiong'o represent contrasting attitudes towards the use of languages in African literatures. In my view, however, the two works play complementary and relevant roles in the historiography of African literatures. Achebe's intention is to teach his readers both African and non-African about the value of African cultures. From *Morning Yet On Creation Day*, Achebe clearly sums up the social and historical context of *Things Fall Apart*, which in turn, influences the choice of his linguistic medium.

One of Achebe's basic intentions in *Things Fall Apart* is to react to British modernist texts such as Joseph Conrad's *The Heart of Darkness* and Joyce Cary's *Mister Johnson*. He criticizes how European artists have perceived African cultures and African personalities. At the same time, Achebe is concerned with telling about African cultures for what they are and informing fellow Africans about the strengths and weaknesses of those cultures. Consequently, his audiences are diverse but they are assumed to understand the English language. Achebe thus makes a linguistic choice that subscribes to his underlying intentions, and these intentions are projected in the way various characters are depicted. A few examples from *Things Fall Apart* will demonstrate that Achebe's initial linguistic choice is appropriate to his purpose.

### *The District Commissioner in Things Fall Apart*

The last part of *Things Fall Apart* is a typical example of how Achebe addresses different socio-linguistic domains in the novel. We are given to understand that on realizing that his potential prisoner has committed suicide, the District Commissioner changes from a resolute administrator to a student of African anthropology, which Achebe sarcastically calls "primitive customs" (207). The Commissioner instantly proceeds researching into the customs of Africans using those who are around the suicide scene as his informants. The ultimate statement he makes after a few minutes of rudimentary cross-examination are revealing:

The story of this man who killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him, perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph at any rate. There was so much else to include and one must be firm on cutting out the details. He had already chosen the title of the book after much thought: *The Pacification of the primitive Tribes in the Lower Niger* (208-209).

Achebe adapts the title of the District Commissioner's book from titles of already existing books by A.G. Leonard (1906) and G.T. Basden (1966) respectively. These books, *The Lower Niger and Its Tribes* and *Niger Ibos*, represent definitive ideas of how the British governed their colonies through indirect rule. The policy required knowledge of the customs of the people to be ruled. Colonial officers collected a lot of information from different ethnic groups. Yet, this information was not used to understand the colonized. On the contrary, their cultures and practices were often misrepresented. It is in this vein that Achebe reacts to the fictional District Commissioner's "big research and writing project".

The District Commissioner's statement presupposes Achebe's motives outside of *Things Fall Apart*. Achebe inserts an ironic point of view into the mouth of the District Commissioner. The irony stems from the District Commissioner's ostensive commitment to a quasi-scientific objectivity, which is ultimately belied by his deep-seated, ingrained racist views. While the Commissioner's view may sound obvious to some readers, it has broad implications for the writer's choice of language. Achebe aims at talking with multiple audiences at the same time.

Eventually, the dialogue that the Commissioner has with the villagers is meant to satirize the colonial administrator himself for attempting to summarize *Things Fall Apart* in just one paragraph. The stereotypical way in which the administrator freely expresses himself makes

him a general representative of an entire group of people. Basing on the sentiments of the Commissioner, we can see in retrospect why Achebe describes in detail the various aspects of the culture of his people. This is done precisely to undo the Commissioner's eventual and final statement. The intended readers of the novel are strongly evoked and suggested in the action of the novel itself.

### ***"The Second Coming" in Things Fall Apart***

Achebe takes the title of his novel from the first part of Walter Butler Yeats' poem "The Second Coming". That part reads:

Turning and turning and turning in the widening gyre  
The falcon cannot hear the falconer;  
Things fall apart; the center cannot hold;  
Mere anarchy is loosed upon the world.

The above quote is an epigraph of *Things Fall Apart*. Its presence establishes an inter-textual linkage between Achebe's and Yeats' worlds respectively. To understand *Things Fall Apart*, one is called upon by analytical necessity to understand the controlling idea of the poem.

A close reading of "The Second Coming", which refers to Western civilization's decadence shows that the poet is concerned with demonstrating that no civilization remains static and evolves forward towards perfection. A civilization must be destroyed from within and without. Yeats insists that as society is regenerated, the forces of regeneration inevitably subvert the previous structural forces that gave the society its stability. The falcon's loss of contact implies human beings separation from ideals that have made them able to control their lives. The state of affairs that emerges from Yeats' poem is that of hopelessness.

Achebe constructs *Things Fall Apart* along similar lines. According to his narrative, the destruction of civilizations as conceived by Yeats applies to African civilizations as well. Achebe's method is to talk about his own culture and Western civilization at the same time. But he uses Yeats' poem to counter charges by Western writers that Africa does not have a history and a civilization. The same poem is used in juxtaposition with *Things Fall Apart* to show that the coming of colonialism and Christianity marks the end of an eventful era in Africa. The very forces that stand for Western civilization are turned upside down for they are responsible for the destruction of another civilization. Yeats writes his poem in reaction to apostasy, a nameless pagan religion that is replacing Christianity. On the contrary, in *Things Fall Apart*, it is the so called pagan gods which are being replaced by the Christian God. Through contesting the Western narratives about civilization, Achebe carves for himself a vantage point from which to intervene in the histories of other places. Achebe thus privileges his discourse in order to better ideologically contest the Western concept of civilization. And he chooses to write in the English language because he is addressing Africans and Europeans who understand English. Achebe is also interested in teaching his own literate people about their cultural values. As a result, he finds himself in overlapping socio-linguistic situations in which he is talking to different people epistemologically.

## The Background to *Matigari*

The background leading to the authorship of *Matigari* aids the reader to understand the linguistic choice the author makes. *Matigari* was originally written in Kikuyu, one of the forty Kenyan languages (Mbaabu, 1978). Kikuyu is widely spoken, being the language of the largest ethnic group in the country. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, its author, is a member of this community. A self-confessed defender of the rights of the poor majority, his life has been characterized by perpetual clashes with the political establishment. *Matigari* is set in the post-colonial era, when the role of the writer has changed from that of agitator for independence to that of rebel against the excesses of the post-independence political elite. This role calls for the strategic use of the pen.

For Ngugi, this means writing in a language that he himself and his readers are competent in. It is also an ideological statement in that it underlines his firm belief that indigenous languages are viable vehicles for liberating people from ignorance and injustice. *Matigari's* preoccupation is to sensitize a section of Kenyans to the realization that the task of changing their fate lies with themselves. Because of its ideological orientation, *Matigari* was written for an aural audience. It is intended to be read aloud, where some people would read to groups and crowds of eager listeners. Reading aloud was seen as a pedagogical strategy that would mobilize people to practical action. The book, like its predecessors is programmatic for literate Kenyans from other ethnic communities. If they write similar messages in their first languages, thinks Ngugi, then countrywide political consciousness would be achieved. In any event, earlier educational policies in Kenya favored instruction in mother tongues in lower primary schools, thus rendering the majority of Kenyans literate. *Matigari* was a kind of political tract that was supposed to be replicated in other parts of the country.

The socio-linguistic situation of the country favored Ngugi's program in unique ways. Most politicians in the country sell their propaganda and political agendas in their first languages. The Head of State referred to in *Matigari* has a tendency to regurgitate his address in KiSwahili after delivering it in English. The Churches, in the pursuit of indigenizing Christianity, have translated major religious texts in indigenous languages. In particular, the Catholic Church has its messages read in all parishes in the languages understood by parishioners from the respective parishes. *Matigari* is effective because its writer operates within an enabling socio-linguistic environment. One of the dominant genres that Ngugi employs to communicate his ideas is the radio news broadcast. The fictional broadcasts that he creates blend with public knowledge to the extent of making the novel contemporary and hilariously satirical. By rendering the book in Kikuyu, Ngugi simply obeys both a linguistic and an ideological imperative.

## THE NEWS BROADCASTS

The Kenyan news is broadcast in KiSwahili, English and ethnic languages. By using news broadcasts in *Matigari*, Ngugi exploits a speech genre that some of his readers are conversant with and can relate to. For the Kikuyu speaking readers, the news strikes them as very familiar. However, they would soon notice that the writer is making fun of the political elite while simultaneously inciting the public to take action against them. Ngugi's linguistic

competence enables him to frame different power relations within the broadcasts and at the same time, privilege the point of view of people who are traditionally disempowered. A cursory glance at one such new broadcast bears this out clearly:

This is the voice of Truth... All gatherings of more than five people have been banned by a decree of His Excellency Ole Excellence. No explanations were offered for the ban. But it is known that university students were going to demonstrate outside the British and American Embassies in protest against the continued Western military and economic aid to the South African apartheid regime. His Excellency Ole Excellence said that a friend in need is a friend indeed (7).

The "Voice of Truth", referred to above is a sarcastic label for the Voice of Kenya, which in the early 1980s was notorious for pedaling rumors and falsehoods. The head of state's dictatorial tendencies are shown in decrees he gives out; they are uncontested. The president is called "His Excellency Ole Excellence" to testify to his infallibility. Ole is a Masai word which means "son of". Yet, despite the apparent infallibility of the president, rumor subverts his "Truth". Through cleverly interpolating his point of view in the official news broadcasts, Ngugi makes nonsense of the role of the radio in Kenya. This resonates well with public knowledge thus making *Matigari* speak to the Kenya public in a revolutionary voice.

The fact that Achebe writes *Things Fall Apart* in English and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o writes *Matigari* in Kikuyu does not necessarily mean that these works represent contrastive linguistic attitudes. Achebe and Ngugi address very specific issues and they employ linguistic choices appropriate to their topic and audiences. Achebe's audience is composed of both Africans and non-Africans. That is why his work overtly draws on African traditions as well as European literary tropes. His choice of English as a medium of creative writing is linguistically determined and also inspired by his desire to use the novel as a medium of education.

On the other hand, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o is addressing an African readership that speaks one particular language. As a result, his images and allusions are not as trans-local as Achebe's. Ngugi is concerned with sensitizing the Kenyan post-colonial readers as to their dispossessed and disinherited position economically and culturally. At the material time when *Matigari* is written, Kikuyu language does this for the writer effectively. Ngugi linguistic choices can be equally fluid as demonstrated in *The Trial of Dedan Kimathi* (1977). Although the play is written in English, there are large doses of KiSwahili to show to show that Africans communicate with Europeans in KiSwahili.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined the issue of language in the authorship of African literatures. Some thinkers support the use of indigenous languages while others support the use of former European languages. Notwithstanding the fact that each camp of thinkers has its merits and demerits, it is unnecessary for them to maintain mutually exclusive stances. Through insights gained through identifying the role of ideology in linguistic relations and through invoking socio-linguistic approaches to the study of language, it is demonstrated that both supporters of

indigenous languages and the supporters of former colonial languages can work in a complementary way and serve the interests of various socio-linguistic domains.

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