

Re-evaluating Mutual Intelligibility and the Language of Contemporary African Literature in a Globalised World Order

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Abstract

The emergence of different schools of language of contemporary African literature has necessitated the re-evaluation of the scope of the readership of the literature in a changing world. This paper re-evaluates the positions of the three identified schools of language of African literature and takes a stand with and attempts a justification of the evolutionist school which it favours to deliver the ideas and preoccupations of African writers and their literary offerings to global readership. The paper relies on both experiential evidence of its three researchers who have an average of nineteen years of reading and teaching English language and African literature, as well as findings from analysis of secondary sources and views of critics on the subject under examination to arrive at its conclusions. It adopts the functional theory of language to advance its perceptions of linguistic realities in considering which language contemporary African literature should adopt if mutual intelligibility among the consumers of the literature should be attained. The scope of the paper is limited to re-evaluating and analyzing critical receptions of the three schools of language and making informed opinions based on historical and prevailing factors that enable mutual intelligibility and effectiveness of literary language. On method of research, the three contributors shared aspects of the research among them, each concentrating on one school of language after which the lead researcher synthesized the outcomes of the research, blending the findings and implications into a presentable whole, as well as producing the introduction to the paper and its conclusion. The paper posits that the experimentalist school which promotes variations of the chosen language should be adopted because it has the implication of appealing to global readers of literatures.

Keywords: Language, African Literature, Global readership, mutual intelligibility, functional theory, re-evaluation

Introduction

The pervading question of mutual intelligibility and language of contemporary African literature is essentially a product of the historic colonial experience by the African continent which largely left makers of the literature in a dilemma over which language it should be written to accommodate global readership: colonial European or any of the indigenous African

languages. The geographical and multi-linguistic entity known as Africa is home to "approximately seven hundred African languages" (Dathorne. 2), which underscores the impossibility of using one indigenous language in writing African literature if both African people and some other world literate populations should read and apprehend the diverse rich values of the literature. Given that African literature is the imaginative recreation of

the African experience - past and present - and a potential tool for the projection of utopian social visions of the writers, among other functions, it seems logical to argue that the literature should be written in African languages. But can all literate Africans and world readers understand one indigenous African language? Can the other linguistic groups in Africa and other interest groups outside the continent concede to the use of one indigenous language in the literary expression of the African experience to the detriment of their own languages? If European languages should come to the rescue, which European language should be appropriate? Is it English which, according to Parupalli Rao (2019), has emerged as a global language in the twenty-first century. The foregoing posers, among others, form the backcloth against which three major schools of thought on the language problem in African literature have emerged; these include what Okara sums as “the neo-metropolitans, the evolutionists/experimentalists, and the rejectionists”(11). The emergence of those schools has over the years posed a serious threat to the creation of an African literature that effectively communicates the African experience to global readership. This paper responds to and attempts a resolution of that threat and gap.

This paper re-evaluates the positions of the schools of language on the literature and takes a stand on and attempts a justification of the one it favours to deliver the ideas that preoccupy African literary creators and their literary offerings to readers in a globalised world order. The paper relies on both experiential evidence of the researchers who have an average of nineteen years of reading and teaching African literatures, as well as findings from analysis of secondary sources on the topic under examination to arrive at its conclusions. It adopts the functional theory of language to advance its perceptions of linguistic realities in considering which language contemporary African literature should adopt if mutual intelligibility among the consumers of the African literature should be attained. The scope of the paper is limited to re-evaluating and analysing critical receptions of the three schools of language and making informed opinions on choice of appropriate model. On method of research, the three contributors shared aspects of the research

among them, each concentrating on one school of language after which the lead researcher synthesized the outcomes of the research, blending the findings and implications into a presentable whole, as well as producing the introduction to the paper and its conclusion.

Literacy, Functionality and the Language of Literature: An Overview

For the purpose of this research, a reader is conceived as a literate person with the ability to make meaning out of given texts or other reading matters and situations towards problem-solving. Given that functionality is a key factor in considering the effectiveness of any reading experience, we appropriate the functional theory of literacy to explain our position in this research. Otagburuagu (2007) submits that the functional theory is all about significance and purpose of literacy. If literacy is geared towards problem-solving, the ultimate reader of African literature could be said to be influenced by one or more of the functions of literature. The researchers would want to assume that most readers are driven by reasons other than the traditional entertainment function of literature. Offormatta avers that “functionality is the ability to transfer knowledge gained from scholarship to solve one's or society's problems” (12). We may ask: which society's problems are the readers of African literature most likely seeking solutions to? We cannot pre-empt the exact function driving the reader, we can only believe that the reader reads a text which language they can understand. So, the writer of African literature who wishes to be read should be guided by the need to communicate effectively with target readers and to generate wide readership of their works, they have to choose a language or vary language to suite such readers. Ngugi emphasizes that: “Language, any language is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture” (13). It follows that whatever language the writer of African literature who wants to be widely read chooses to write in should communicate the values of the work as a literary construct to readers in an evolving world.

African Literature and its Schools of Language

The re-evaluation of the cantankerous question of language in African literature approximates a critical examination of the standpoints of its

schools. It is necessary to recognize that African literature is largely an aspect of African culture and that the literature partly seeks to express and disseminate the cultural sensibilities of African peoples. Writing on *The Nigerian Novel and the Problems of Communication*, Taiwo posits: "the attempt to protect Nigerian Culture, past and present, and describe the realities and conflict of modern life in the Nigerian novel, poses many problems of communication which each author has tried to solve in his particular way" (46). The emergence of some schools of thought on the language question is symptomatic of the search for a solution to the language conundrum by African writers and critics of their works. It is against this background that three schools have emerged, which Okara identifies as "the neo-metropolitans, the evolutionists/experimentalists, and the rejectionists" (11).

The neo-metropolitans favour the use of European languages such as English, French or Portuguese in writing contemporary Africa literature. Okara observes that "the neo-metropolitans believe, for example, that there is no problem at all in the use of the English Language as our medium of expression. Our Africaness will show anyhow, since a leopard never changes its spot" (11). Adrian Roscoe apparently warns the neo-metropolitans that there is a problem in the use of European languages in writing African literature since such a literature would no longer be seen as African. Roscoe argues that "if an African writes in English, his work must be considered as belonging to English letters as a whole, and can be scrutinized accordingly" (10). This is a signal for the African creative writer who wishes to incorporate African cultural flavour in their literary works of art to look inwards, to utilize their own language in their creative writing enterprise. This further leaves the writer of African literature seeking global audience in a dilemma. Apparently intervening to save the situation, Booth James asserts that, "in Nigeria, as in most of Africa then the choice for the writer is between his vernacular and his European second language. The use of either imposes limitations in expression and audience unknown to the fortunate British writer in his virtually monolingual culture. The use of an indigenous language allows full expression of the writer's Africaness, but reduces

his audience, sometimes drastically. The use of English involves adaptation to a second language, but gives access to the widest audience both inside Africa, (among the more highly educated only) and outside" (65). This extends the debate by laying bare the demerits of the two options before the writer of the literature: using European languages or African languages. Those who opt for African languages make up the rejectionists, having rejected the European languages courted by the neo-metropolitans like Cyprian Ekwensi.

The rejectionist school of thought expresses total disregard for whatever advantages accrue to the writer or audience of contemporary African literature written in any European language. This school, which has the late Obiajunwa Wali and Ngugi Wa Thiong'o as proponents argue that only African languages are suitable for the literary creative re-enactment of the African experience. Reacting to the outcome of the Makerere Conference on African literature in 1962, Obi Wali rejects the use of European languages in writing African literature; he describes such literature as lacking 'any blood and stamina' (13), and maintains: "literature after-all, is the exploitation of the possibilities of language" (14). He further opines that until African writers who are obsessed with foreign languages" and their western midwives accept the fact that any true African literature must be written in African languages they would be merely pursuing a dead end, which can only lead to sterility, uncreativity and frustration" (14). Obi Wali's opinion was to exert great influence on African writers on the time; his thoughts seemed valid, what with several comments in favour of the use of indigenous African languages. For instance, John Paden and Edward Soja observes that "in Africa, writers are using English, French and vernacular languages. In the long run, it may be the vernacular literature which will come to be regarded as the truly African literature"(347). Perhaps, Paden and Soja considered the cultural implications of continuing to write African literature in foreign languages. Obsessed then with his tenacious hold on the use of African languages in writing African literature, Ngugi Wa Thiong'o believes strongly that "language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and carrier of culture "(13); he argues that the continued use of

foreign languages in writing African literature makes devastating assault on African culture. He asks: "by continuing to write in foreign languages, paying homage to them, are we not on the cultural level, containing that neo-colonial tradition?" (94). Thus, he rejects the use of foreign languages in writing African literature, for he sees it as cultural slavery, the slavery of the thoughts and **experiences of the African**. From 1977, he ceased to write his works in English, preferring his native Kikuyu language. Ironically, most of his works have since been translated into English, a pointer to the shortcomings of the rejectionist school of thought! Assessing Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's stand on the language issue, Okara writes: "By rejecting 'metropolitan' languages Ngugi wa Thiong'o believes he is dealing a final blow aimed at eradicating cultural imperialism from the continent of Africa and thus getting closer to the goal: cultural freedom" (14).

In promoting the experimentalist/revolutionist school of thought on the language question, Okara emphasises the impossibility of adopting any one indigenous language in writing contemporary African literature for global readership. Okara writes: suggestions have been made over and over again for a language for Africa and its literature. At a conference in Tanzania, Swahili was suggested as such a language. I do not think this suggestion went beyond the thundering shouts of applause, the hand clappings and foot stampings with which it was acclaimed. It died with the last sound of the applause. The sudden realization of the immensity and complexity of the problems, which would have to be overcome before its implementation kitted it. But like an Ogbanje the idea is born again and again tauntingly at conferences, but only to die again and again with a mocking smile playing on its lips" (15). The futility of recognizing any of the African languages led to the birth of the evolutionist or experimentalist school.

The Evolutionists/Experimentalists and the Question of Wide Readership

Okara relates that the evolutionists/experimentalists school has "one burning purpose: to evolve a way in which to make the English Language express the totality of the message of African culture in their works"

(16). This agrees with Chinua Achebe's position that "the African writer should aim to use English in a way 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. He should aim at fashioning out English, which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience"(61). Chinua Achebe demonstrates this in his novels, as in *Things Fall Apart* in which he transliterates - a linguistic experimentation that involves the use of English words to capture the writer's native speech nuances such that the writer thinks in their native language but writes in a foreign language such as English. Many African writers have used foreign languages such as the English Language and French to render African speech rhythms in contemporary African fiction in a unique manner that makes the language of their works accessible to global readers. John Povey (2013), for instance, has acknowledged the uniqueness of the English language of the contemporary African novel. Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* remains an enviable classic illustration of the possibility of English carrying African experiences without sacrificing the thought processes and linguistic heritage of Africans. Okara makes English to carry the speech rhythms of the Ijaw ethnic nationality, just as Saro Wiwa uses English to capture his native Ogoni speech patterns in *Sozaboy*. A similar tendency dominates the novels of Amos Tutuola, T.M. Aluko, among others. The evolutionist school has given rise to variation of language in African literature. For instance, Julius Ogu observes that "Four basic variations in the use of English are discernible in the fiction of Nigerian novelists. There is Achebe's transliteration device of using Standard English while retaining a regional touch (Igbo). Then we have Aluko's Yoruba/English switching with a heavy load of influence and interference of the mother tongue (Yoruba). Amos Tutuola's use of the English Language with a complete disregard of its semantic and syntactic rules constitutes the third variation. Cyprain Ekwensi adopts the style of extensive use of registers with little or no interference of the mother tongue and this gives us the fourth and final variation" (79). However, plausible as the transliteration option sounds, the rejectionists insist that: "an African writer who thinks and feels in his own language must write in that language" (Wali.14). But Achebe insists that

transliteration approximates "...a new voice coming out of Africa, speaking of African experience in a world-wide language" (61). The case for experimental use of language in contemporary African literature to reach a wide readership is, therefore quite strong given the glaring implications of utilizing either any African language or European language in creating the literature which borders on limited readership due to linguistic handicap of readers outside a writer's linguistic group.

Conclusion

Any analysis or evaluation of the contending schools of language in contemporary African literature must consider Africa's debt to colonialism and colonial languages if a lasting solution to the problem could be found. The colonial factor tacitly explains why African writers cannot stick to African languages alone if they must be heard, read and understood by not only their fellow Africans, but also by foreign consumers of their literary products. This explains why Chinweizu, Jemie and Madubuike state, "We would like to call an end to the debate over the use of western languages by African writers. The use of these languages is a part of the problem of contemporary African culture. Ideally, African literature should be written in African languages. But the same historical circumstances that presently compel African nations to use western languages as their official languages also compel African writers to write in them. Until those historical circumstances are changed, it is pointless debating whether or not to use these western languages in our literature" (242). For the troika, the problem of language in contemporary African literature would persist as long as the 'historical circumstances' that gave birth to the use of foreign languages by African writers remain. The fact that those historical circumstances are rooted in slavery and colonialism confirms the impossibility of a change, for Africans can never be totally decolonised.

The researchers' findings and stands are consistent with the foregoing position; it is clear that it is impossible for Africa to totally divest itself of the colonial garment which comprises its culture of which language is an indispensable part. The researchers therefore align with the

evolutionists/experimentalist school of thought, more so as our experiences as readers and teachers of African literature and its language have shown that varying the language not only assures mutual intelligibility, but also enables writers to accommodate diverse situations and characters, as well as capture African speech idioms for the global reader. So, the African who wishes to write in a foreign language should do so, but they should consciously deploy their chosen linguistic medium, whether English, French or Portuguese, to reflect African speech patterns, especially weaving African oral traditional forms into their art. This way, the African identity of his work would be assured, and he would attain a measure of mutual intelligibility between both his fellow literate Africans and readers of world literatures in global languages such as English.

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