

## **An African Condition in a European Tradition: Chinua Achebe and the English Language of Native Narratives**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper intends to investigate the passage from orature to literature in Africa, and the problem of the language used, in the context of the work of the Nigerian novelist and critic Chinua Achebe, whose novel *Things Fall Apart* (1958) is considered as the first African novel. The problematic dialogism that engaged the African writer with canonical literate traditions evokes the difficulty of writing an African history and narrative while the records are missing, for the Africans did not have a written tradition. It is true that writing about an oral society that did not know writing sometimes turns into a syncretic account, but the African writer is also faced with the paradox of representing the experience of *oral* societies using the colonizer's *literate* language. Accordingly, we are led to question: how can such fiction do justice to the colonized culture? While this paper admittedly tries to figure out how the worldview in oral societies is cyclic since the past and the present are fused, it invites new perspectives by highlighting the empowering effects orature has had on African writers who learnt to revisit their oral tradition and make out of it their emancipating and decolonizing project.

**Key words:** decolonization, indigenization, notarization, Nigerianization, orature

### An African Condition in a European Tradition: Chinua Achebe and the English Language of Native Narratives

In his latest book, the Trinidadian novelist Naipaul (2010) argues that in Africa “the absence of a script and written records blurs the past [...] the oral story gives them only myths” (p. 28). With JanMohamed (1983), we also understand that writing engenders “a sense of change of the human past as an objective reality available to casual analysis, and of history as a broad attempt to determine reality in every (diachronic) area of human concern and this in turn permits a distinction between ‘history’ and ‘myth’ ” (p. 280). By allowing one to register events, to archive them for long periods, and to recall them in their original forms, writing consolidates a dense past and helps raise historical consciousness within the society, while the possibility of an easy access to a dense past enhances more sophisticated analytic tools. Oral cultures, on the other hand, are unable to develop an awareness of historical change, not because they are racially and culturally inferior but because they lack the archive. “The inability of oral cultures to document this past in a systematic and detailed manner, of course, means that they are dominated not by a *historical* but a *mythic* consciousness [The *emphasis* is added]” (JanMohamed, 1984, p. 24).

Adopting this point of view, one is forced to recognize Chinua Achebe’s double-anxiety. The first is the African novelist’s consciousness that his role in the society is to create new forms through which African culture can be justly represented. The second is the (im)possibility of an African literature in forms and a language borrowed from the European colonizer. In seeking new forms for African literature, Achebe and his literary peers may escape from the area of colonialist literature, but there is one overriding question: can an African culture, articulated in a European language and using European forms, really remain African? Since the upheaval in stigmatizing and suspecting any non-European trying his/her hand at writing in a European language, Eurocentric criticism believes that European languages are still the bearers of civilization to the bush. When Achebe started writing, it was not sure that a British audience would tolerate the ‘misuse’ of the English language by African writers. In this way, Achebe’s narratives could only be suspected as an anxious attempt to recover a lost, pre-colonial, identity. The second problem, which lends some credence to Chinua Achebe’s critics, e.g. Griffiths (1978), arises when the African writer tries to adapt the episodic and non-sequential structure of the oral tale to the linear structure of the written form. Griffiths (1978) recommends that “these adaptations must be *away* from rather than *towards* this as the norm” (p. 12). In an oral society, the characters can be fierce in verbal communication in terms of the oral culture in which they function. But because the medium they are given is a written English, their capacity to voice their counter-story is blunted. In an oral society, some words take on a material significance in contrast to their more restrictive figurative meaning when they are written down (Izevbaye, 2012, p. 65).

Prior to colonization African culture had been handed down from generation to generation using proverbial sayings, myths, and stories. Hence, Achebe tells us in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), “among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (p. 7). More significant, perhaps as an example of the importance of oratory in African culture, Africans maintain that the law comes out of the mouth

of the elders who were the libraries of the society, and oral tales were its books (Griffiths, 1978, p. 12). The perpetuation of history and tradition used to be fulfilled by the griots and the community's elders, but the European invasion ruptured this continuity. Therefore, the role of the modern African writer has been considerably modified since it was practically impossible for him to stretch the model of his precursor the griot. Furthermore, the conditions in which an oral tradition was produced and received have changed since the introduction of literacy. The target is not the same, as the postcolonial writer now admits a Western readership, and Achebe's decision to write in English constructs "a secure, intelligible position for a Western reader to occupy" (Sugnet, 2001, p. 74).

However, most African writers maintain their predecessors' role in educating people with nonetheless a tendency to preserve the oral tradition. The majority of them maintain that the annihilation of Africa's oral culture comes with the colonialist introduction of literacy. The African writer exhumes his ancestor the orator with the difference that he uses, cunningly, European tools and languages. The originality of African writings stems from their relationship with African oral literatures, for although the debt of African writing to the oral tradition has been difficult to prove, there has been considerable scholarship on the continuity and the alternating roles of the two genres. Some African critics, e.g. Awoonor (1973: 88-9), go as far to assert that there is no new or emerging African writing, only a continuity of a centuries-old literature. Achebe did not arrive on the stage of African literature from a vacuum. He continued a rooted tradition of orature. *Things Fall Apart*, for example, is a novel where, as Obiechina (1993) states it, "vital aspects of oral literature are absorbed into an emerging written literature" (p. 123).

The establishment of an African literary tradition has become the main preoccupation of many African writers during the heydays of independence movements. It is true that before African writers gain epistemological independence, they had been at first unable to detach themselves from the canonical tradition, finding themselves obliged to mimic the European model. But they adopted the methods and the languages of the canon in order to write back to it. Before the publication of *Things Fall Apart* in 1958, the dominant view was that African – any non-European, non-Eurocentric, in fact – writings were conventional in their adoption of the traditions of the European genres. Most African writers at the time have taken as their precursors canonical writers, yet starting from the 1950s the English critic Lorna Sage has described the direction of what was happening in English literature as *centrifugal*: "Much of what's significant is written with 'elsewhere' very much in mind; written, in a sense, *from elsewhere*" (Rushdie, 1982, p. 8).

African writers have been accused of abandoning their African languages in favour of more prestigious and dominant languages. Many critics, e.g. Sartre (1963) and Griffiths (1978), have denied the existence of such hybridity insisting that metropolitan literature is rooted in a European tradition and that it cannot be delocalized to Africa. Jean-Paul Sartre (1963) detected the irony in the ex-colonial's literature writing in French: "an ex-native, French-speaking, bends that language to new requirements, makes use of it, and speaks to the colonized only" (p. 10). According to this stance, what comes to be called 'peripheral' literature in English still cannot shake the solid basis of metropolitan tradition. At its best, this has resulted in what Zabus

(1992) has labelled 'schizo-texts' "in which the African language is latent and the European language is manifest, in which there is almost a Manichean opposition or power relation between the mother tongue and the other tongue" (p. 119). Sullivan (1991) is also for the view that "historically constructed forms, written literature in general and the African novel in particular, even as they forge new structures of defiance in new English languages and old African languages, acknowledge their roots in the writer's psyche colonized by other texts" (p. 105). Sullivan's Bakhtinian reading suggests that "African writers who use English are aware that their language is already populated with the political, social, and literary intentions of their colonial teachers, but they compel it 'to serve [their] own new intentions, to serve a second master'" (Sullivan, 1991, p. 102). For, according to Bakhtin (1934), all words are born in response to other words and languages, "the internal politics of style (how the elements are put together) is determined by its external politics (its relationship to alien discourse). Discourse lives, as it were, on the boundary between its own context and another, alien, context" (Bakhtin, 1934, p. 284). Achebe also found himself on the crossroads of discourses but also forced to use the available platform of colonialist and Eurocentric literatures and the language used in the process in order to revise the history of Africa. Critics who invited postcolonial writers to abandon European languages and forms are alive to the association of the small-scale literature produced in Africa with the absence of a literary tradition rooted in the continent, for, as Eldred Jones (1968) says, "it has been shown that several African authors that a work can be written in a European language and still convey something of the African experience in artistic form" (p. 71).

The African writer must strive to recuperate African aesthetic forms – mainly orature – that might corroborate the European literary tradition he had already acquired. Achebe escapes the pitfall by writing narratives thoroughly intertwined with English language and literary tradition. His writings try to link the idea of the nation, the concept of a common national culture, and the quest for a national narrative away, but not completely cut off, from the canon, hence engaging a dialogue in an area where there was only a monologue. The African writer should also strive to gain the recognition that although the language used is English, the recorded experience is purely African, and thus it may change the language and forms and come up with an 'African English' – "an english" (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p. 8) – totally different from what the metropolitan reader may expect. The different cultural background of African writers, 'Third-Worlding' English, may indeed urge metropolitan writers to revisit, maybe change, forms and therefore consolidate a new English literature defined by its hybrid nature. In fact, Achebe takes issue with those Western critics whose reactions swing erratically between considering the African writer a distorted image of the European writer and dismissing the former's capacity to establish a tradition. According to Achebe (1975b), they have done no more than scratch the surface of what African literature can offer:

The latter-day colonialist critic [...] sees the African writer as a somewhat *unfinished European* who with patient guidance will grow up one day and write like every other European, but meanwhile must be humble, must learn all he can and, while at it, give due credit to his teachers in the form of direct praise or, even better, since praise sometimes goes bad and becomes embarrassing, manifest self-contempt [*emphasis added*]. (p. 69)

Although some mainstream critics are still resisting the admission of postcolonial literature in the canon, an increasing number of works by those ‘unfinished Europeans’ coming from Africa, the Caribbean and Southeast Asia were crawling upon the centre, extending year by year the possibility of a hybrid English literature. In the words of Rushdie (1982),

Now, thanks to the imagination of the 1950s, 1960s, these new literatures are arriving in Britain. And it may be that English literature will benefit from the presence in these islands of observers with beady eyes and without Anglo-Saxon attitudes. It’s possible to argue that Britain needs decolonizing too; that too many of the old imperial attitudes – jingoism, xenophobia a sense of automatic moral superiority in all things – still lie, just below the surface, in British culture and even in “English” English. The condition of black people in Britain leads one to believe that the British, having lost one Empire, choose to import another. (p. 8)

The African writer’s struggle to establish an African tradition goes hand in hand with his endeavour to define a language for that tradition. In *The Empire Writes Back* (1989), the book’s triad argue that “one of the main features of imperial oppression is control over language. The imperial education system installs a ‘standard’ version of the metropolitan language as the norm, and marginalizes all ‘variants’ as impurities” (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p. 7). Thus, when the African writer snatches English away from its ancestral home, not only does he deconstructs the language of his former colonizer, he more importantly dispossesses him of a necessary and major tool in colonialist rhetoric. The adoption of a twisted English, what James Joyce has once called “jinglysh janglage” (Joyce, 1939, p. 275, n. 6), turns to be the colonial’s way for expressing his true identity. The postcolonial writer deliberately started “writing with an accent” (Zabus, 1996, p. 34) to signal his detachment from his colonizer, thereby reaching out to what *The Empire Writes Back* coined “abrogation” and “appropriation” (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p. 37-8).

In *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952), Frantz Fanon believes that “to speak a language is to appropriate its world and culture” (p. 21); it is, above all, to assume the culture of that language, and to support the weight of its civilization. And whenever the colonised people deal with the language of the colonizer they are confronted with the culture of the mother country. “The more the colonized has assimilated the cultural values of the metropolis, the more he will have escaped the bush. The more he rejects his blackness and the bush, the whiter he will become” (Fanon, 1952, pp. 2-3). The European colonizer will admit the “humanity” of the colonized insofar as he recreates himself in the image of his colonizer by adopting a European language. How do African writers get Caliban to talk back to Prospero using Prospero’s own language without allowing that language to degenerate into a pidgin understood only by Caliban? In what language must Caliban engage in the dialogue and speak back to Prospero – in the still oral and illiterate African language or in a European language full of prejudices and misconceptions? If he decides to speak back in a European language, how can he avoid being like the voiceless African characters represented in Western narratives? How can he replace words and concepts that have no equivalent in European languages?

George Lamming has dealt with the cultural bearings of language in Shakespeare's well-known colonial text, *The Tempest*. According to Lamming, Caliban, after having been colonized by language, and excluded by language, stands for Prospero's proselyte to 'civilization'. Caliban will be admitted to civilization only if he recreates himself in the image of Prospero by adopting the 'civilized language.' The mastery of the 'civilized language' is Prospero's way of measuring distance between him and his servant Caliban (Lamming, 1960, p. 15, p. 110). Lamming's view should not surprise us since his novel *Water with Berries* (1971) rewrites Shakespeare's *The Tempest* by subverting the power dynamics between Prospero and Caliban: the latter corrupts his master's narrative through the celebration of impurities, underlying how Otherness disturbs the authority of colonial narratives through redefining English identity and language. According to Brown (1976), "these findings are not really new. The European's ethnocentric definitions of 'language' and 'civilization' have always been fairly self-evident. In presenting Caliban as a brutish savage without a language (and civilization) of his own, *The Tempest* remains faithful to the philosophical assumptions of Shakespeare's culture" (p. 131). The European language, however, becomes Caliban's means of cultural revolution against Prospero's use of the 'civilized language' as a means of exclusion. George Lamming's reading asserts that Caliban's revolt in *The Tempest* "highlights Shakespeare's character as a distorted image of the ex-colonial. The skill of Prospero's language has rendered Caliban 'aware of possibilities' " (Lamming, 1960, p. 109) and ready to transform linguistic impurities into stains soiling English purities.

Against the backdrop of *The Tempest*, an African novel like *Things Fall Apart* (1958) attributes the white man's failure to understand African customs to his ignorance of African languages: "Does the white man understand our custom about land? How can he when he does not even speak our tongue?" (p. 166) Using the same tactic, the African writer alters the European language, and "Christen[s] the language afresh" (Lamming, 1960, p. 118) in order to translate and help regain his pre-colonial culture. As early as *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, Achebe advocates the use of English because of its capacity to reach a wider audience. But this English, no longer a communicative device but an area of cultural and ideological debates, can be reworked to speak in an African voice and remodelled to hold an African culture. Linguistic variance is therefore turned into a site for ideological variance. The rehabilitation of Standard English with African variants can be identified within the deliberate "code-switching"<sup>1</sup> Achebe enacts. In a conversation with Phaniel Egejuru (1980), Achebe says:

From the moment I decided to tell this story and played around with the forms or words to use, I quickly came up with a different kind of English, different from the kind of English that a British or American writer would use. And I think the beginning of this English was already there in our society, in popular speech. There was already a development of it in the Nigerian English. The English language seems quite capable of this kind of extension. That's another thing. I am not sure if it is so in French. English is open to that kind of thing. And I think we haven't the last say in how English is used. I think there's the possibility for a lot more Africanization or Nigerianization of English in our literature. (Egejuru, 1980, p. 49)

For Achebe, the use of English is necessary in the process of writing back to colonialist rhetoric: “I feel that 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 full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings” (Achebe, 1975a, p. 62). The African writer needs an English which reproduces, in its new forms, African rhythm, syntax, proverbs, culture and history, hence creating what Rushdie has called, in his iconic newspaper article “The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance” (1982), an “independent or denationalized English” (p. 8). According to Mercer Cook (1969), “taking the white man’s language, dislocating his syntax, recharging his words with new strength and sometimes with new meaning before hurling them back in his teeth, while upsetting his self-righteous complacency and cliché, our poets rehabilitate such terms as Africa and blackness, beauty and peace” (p. 52). The African writer, forcing the language of the colonizer to carry the weight of the colonized culture, performs the double-function of regaining his indigenous culture and hurling back the colonizing one. Ngugi (1986) may then be right when he urged “injecting Senghorian ‘black blood’ ” into the foreign languages’ “rusty joints” (p. 7). The African writer is more than ever required to transfuse the English language with his African culture and find what Osundare (2002) has called “the tunnel between two tongues” (Osundare, 2002, p. 115-31) though narrow and suffocating, allows discovery and freedom for “the language between” (Osundare, 2006, p. 3). As against the argument that African writers cannot write as finely in English as their metropolitan precursors, Achebe provides the example of Joseph Conrad, a Pole who became one of the finest writers in the Great Tradition.<sup>ii</sup> Nonetheless, for Achebe the African writer must not aim at using the same English as his canonical precursor.

My answer to the question: *Can an African ever learn English well enough to be able to use it effectively in creative writing?* Is certainly yes. If on the other hand you ask: *Can he ever learn to use it like a native speaker?* I should say: I hope not. It is neither necessary nor desirable for him to be able to do so. The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. 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 an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience. (Achebe, 1975a, p. 61)

Achebe indigenized the English language and reproduced African oral tradition in written texts. He began to nativize (‘Africanize’ and ‘Nigerianize’) his English as early as *Things Fall Apart* (1958). At first, maybe out of consideration of his postcolonial status and in order to reach out to a European readership, he introduced Igbo words with their English translations:

The elders, or *ndichie*, met to hear a report of Okonkwo’s mission. (p. 12)  
 His own hut, or *obi*, stood immediately behind the only gate in the red walls. (p. 13)  
 He had a bad *chi* or personal god, and evil fortune followed him to the grave. (p. 17)  
*eze-agadi-nwayi*, or the teeth of an old woman. (p. 33)  
*jigida*, or waist beads. (p. 67)  
 This man told him that the child was an *ogbanje*, one of those wicked children who, when they died, entered into their mothers’ wombs to be born again. (p. 73)

Using Igbo words in the English text allows the Western reader access to the cultural heritage of this Igbo society. To familiarize the reader with these words, Achebe first introduces the words with their closest counterparts in English, then left with the Igbo word alone. For example, the first reference to a hut, without the Igbo word *obi*, is on page five, then on page thirteen we move to “hut, or *obi*,” then on page twenty-nine we have *obi* alone. Similarly, on page fourteen, Achebe uses “personal god” to refer to one’s *chi*, then we have “*chi* or personal god” on pages seventeen and twenty six. The next references are to *chi* alone. It is equally important to note that some words in English belong to Africa e.g. yam, palm wine, and medicine-man. Other English words take on a different meaning in Africa. ‘Evil Forest’ is a spirit; the only “royal” thing is yam, the king of crops. A python is a sacred spirit addressed as “Our Father”; a “bother” means a kinsman; a “son” is a younger, untitled, member of the clan. The “Mother” is one’s land. It is thus part of the decolonizing project to use words in a different way from their dictionary meanings.

*The Empire Writes Back* asserts that in postcolonial texts “untranslated words do have an important function in inscribing difference. They signify a certain cultural experience which they cannot hope to reproduce but whose difference is validated by the new situation. In this sense, they are directly metonymic of that cultural difference which is imputed by the linguistic variance” (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p .52). More significantly, these untranslated words confront the European reader with the linguistic and cultural difference of the Igbo. The very presence of Igbo linguistic forms in a postcolonial text written in the language of the colonizer outlines “a cultural space” which is “left unfilled.” It is this ‘absence’ which “establishes a silence beyond which the cultural Otherness of the text cannot be traversed by the colonial language. By means of this gap of silence the text resists incorporation into ‘English literature’ or some universal literary mode” (Ashcroft et al, 1989, p .53). Taking the examples above, Achebe’s untranslated words, proverbs, and similes are a ‘cultural gap’ not because they cannot be rightly translated into the cultural experience and linguistic tradition of the Western reader but because they become, to borrow words from Bhabha, ‘the sign of the inappropriate’, a sign of cultural difference, which characterizes decolonizing projects. As such, this cultural difference turns into a site of resistance to incorporation into metropolitan literature. This method makes English, not only a direct conveyor of African culture, but more importantly the indicator that explains African culture, and metonymically signals cultural difference. It is here, as Booth (1981) argues, “that Achebe’s skill in handling ‘clean’ English, and his stylistic restraint stand him in good stead [...] The style possesses a dispassionateness which neither condemns nor attempts to excuse” (pp. 80-1).

Another important aspect of Achebe’s language is his extensive use of Igbo proverbs in order to give a local flavour to his narrative. The proverbs are perfectly embedded in the speeches of the elders who incarnate experience and wisdom. Again, Achebe provides Western readers with an immediate context around the proverb. He first introduces the general principle the Igbo proverbs entail, then the proverbs themselves, followed by their various varieties. For example, the proverb: ‘a toad does not run in daytime for nothing’; Achebe contextualized the proverb to provide the Western reader with an area of immediate explanation around it:

Ogbuefi Idigo was talking about the palm-wine tapper, Obiako, who suddenly gave up his trade.



‘There must be something behind it,’ he said, wiping the foam of wine from his moustache with the back of his left hand. ‘There must be a reason for it. A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing.’ (Achebe, 1958, p .20)

The next references to the proverb do not include explanations, and it is no more contextualized. Now the reader is so familiar with the proverbs that Achebe needs only hints to refer to them. Rather than translating the Igbo Proverbs into English equivalents, for example “a toad does not run in the daytime for nothing” rather than “There is no smoke without fire” and “Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch also” instead of “Live and let live” (Onwuemene, 1999, p .1061), Achebe allows the reader what Lovesey (2010) calls “a kind of Berlitz Guide to Ibo, Ibo Made Simple” (p. 128). It is a carefully structured “Ibo Survival Guide” (Lovesey, 2010, p .128), which allows easy access to Ibo key-concepts and linguistic markers, useful to take the Western reader back to the pre-colonial Africa. The accumulation of these meanings gives the reader “insider knowledge” (Lovesey, 2010, p. 128), a sort of a guidebook or a map of African culture. According to Durix (1987), “by placing the reader at the centre of this traditional community, [Achebe] forces him to acknowledge its cultural specificities, its conceptions of time and social organization, its strength and weaknesses at a crucial period when Christianity and Western influences are about to upset the precarious balance” (p. 6). Such a method is indeed effective in preventing the Western reader from using culturally misleading interpretations. For example, “the transliterated proverbs,” JanMohamed (1984) argues, “reintroduce into the language a kind of figurative, analogical element that has gradually been displaced by the scientific-empiric consciousness that favours precision based on literalness” (p. 37). *Things Fall Apart* addresses both African and Western audiences. The novel can be read as an insider’s account of his Igbo culture and also as an attempt to explain African culture to a Western readership. Clearly, by writing in English, Achebe intends his novels to speak to Western reader, but it also intends to raise awareness among Africans, especially the awareness that they must provide their version of the story.

Achebe’s recording of these proverbs is enhanced by the need to regain the glory of Igbo oratory. He uses proverbs as a means to convince his Western readers that Africans have an authentic linguistic code distinct from all that can be corroborated by European languages. The proverbs are smoothly used in conversations between African characters, and it is here that Achebe Africanizes English and remodels it to engage the dialogue he seeks between Africans and Europeans. He advocates that a proverb and its metaphors are acquired through years of experience, a fact that denies the temporality of the African experience. Furthermore, these proverbs usually have hidden meaning beyond the most obvious one, and their perception needs a deep philosophical decoding. This is, it seems, Achebe’s way to convey the African’s thoughtful insights. The Igbo words and proverbs scattered throughout the novels do not only refer to notions that do not exist in English, but are also used to give Achebe’s English a local habitation (‘nativization’). The reader, Western in this case, is invited to understand these words and proverbs in their context and therefore, in the words of Durix (1987), “he will be forced to become aware of a foreign reality which he must accept as different. Language encourages the reader to leave his natural propensity for ethnocentrism” (p. 47). As such, Achebe invites his reader to become a kind of a co-author or what Paul Zumthor (1983), though in another context, has called a listener-author (auditeur-auteur): “ ‘amateur éclairé’, à la fois consommateur et

judge” (p. 232). Achebe, in this sense, recreates a space in which the reader participates in the narrative and to which he/she adapts his/her attitudes. Without explanation, the reader is placed in Igboland. Achebe’s ability to at once write an African novel that refutes Western rhetoric and yet admit Western readers has been conceived of as one of Achebe’s great accomplishments.

In *Arrow of God* (1964), Achebe liberated himself more. Igbo words are left untranslated, while Igbo customs and traditions are rarely explained. The Western reader is left to detect the meaning from the context: “His ikenga, about as tall as a man’s forearm and having two strong horns, jostled with the faceless okposi of the ancestors black with the blood of sacrifice, and his short personal staff of *ofo*. One of the rough, faceless *okposi* belonged to Nwafo” (Achebe, 1964, pp. 6-7). The gap between the words *obi* and hut is also a gap between two worlds, Europe and Africa, which are forcefully brought to clash. To underline the uniqueness of each world, Achebe chooses to leave Igbo words untranslated. They are very disturbing in the English text. The implication is that the African world cannot be incorporated in the English context. The African world cannot be rightly and objectively translated. Kortenaar (1995, p. 35) provides a relevant example of this mistranslation. The glossary at the end of the novel translates the word *iba* as fever. The kind of mistranslation, hence misinterpretation, that Kortenaar invokes manifests itself well with Robert Wren who tried to provide a reasonable scientific explanation to the phenomenon. *Iba*, Wren (1980) argues, “is a symptomatic term, most frequently applied to the jaundice-like fever that accompanies a malaria attack. The association with jaundice arises from the fact that both jaundice and malaria attack the liver” (pp. 31-2). According to Kortenaar, on the other hand, Achebe left the word untranslated because the word ‘fever’ would have referred, as with Wren, to a sickness that can be diagnosed, then treated with medicine. In Igboland, however, *iba* is a manifestation of one’s spiritual disorder. When his/her *chi* disapproves his deeds, it punishes him with *iba*. Okonkwo is born with a bad *chi*. Throughout the novel, Achebe had occasions to depict the meanings of that concept in the entire portrayal of Okonkwo’s life, especially through the Igbo philosophy that “a person’s fortunes in life are controlled more or less completely by his *chi*” (Achebe, 1975c, p. 98).

In *A Man of the People* (1966), Achebe liberated himself more and more by writing whole dialogues in Pidgin English:

People wey de jealous the money gorment de pay Minister no sabi say no be him one de chop am. (p .16)

I no kuku mind the katakata wey de for inside. (p .16)

I no go tell you lie girls for this una part sabi fine-o. (p .17)

E fool pass garri ... Which person tell am no bobby them de take do the thing? (p.67)

Instead of continuing to be an interpreter of Africa to Western readers, Achebe chose to turn to his people and write for them. To quote Lindfors (2009), “Achebe’s decision to use untranslated Igbo and unadulterated pidgin in his fiction is evidence of a significant change in his orientation as a writer” (Lindfors, 2009, p. 44). What gives Achebe uniqueness among other African writers is this ability to try out new techniques and a special prose style using the English language. His anglicized African characters will never use the same English as the other European characters. Achebe invented what Lindfors has called “an African vernacular

style,”<sup>iii</sup> a forging of English into a syntax that enhances the use of Igbo, his native tongue. This is what comes to be termed ‘relexification’: “a more radical method of inscribing language and ideological variance in a text in that it forces English to carry the weight of the colonized culture and attempts to convey indigenous concepts, thought-patterns, structures, and rhythms, and even linguistic features of the mother tongue” (Zabus, 1996, pp. 35-6). Lindfors provides an example from *Arrow of God* (1964), when a chief priest explains to one of his sons why it is necessary to send him to a mission school.

I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who not befriend the white man today will be saying had we known tomorrow. (Achebe, 1964, p .55)

In his essay “English and the African Writer” (1965), Achebe shows that he could have written this passage in a different style:

I am sending you as my representative among those people – just to be on the safe side in case the new religion develops. One has to move with the times or else one is left behind. I have a hunch that those who fail to come to terms with the white man may well regret their lack of foresight. (p .30)

Achebe comments: “the material is the same. But the form of the one is *in character* and the other is not. It is largely a matter of instinct, but judgment comes into it too” (Achebe, 1965, p. 30). Achebe’s use of “an African vernacular style” includes proverbs and similes that work to contextualize his novels in their African setting. Indeed, one of the hallmarks of Achebe’s English is the use of similes drawn exclusively from an African environment. As the setting changes, so does his narratological technique. This is most evident if we compare – as does Lindfors (2009:54) – similes in his novels set in Africa (village novels) and those set partly in the metropolis (urban novels).

Okonkwo’s fame has grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan. (Achebe, 1958, p .3)  
It was like pouring grains of corn into a bag full of holes. (Achebe, 1958, p .22)  
It was as if water had been poured on the tightened skin of a drum. (Achebe, 1958, p. 46)  
He grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season. (Achebe, 1958, p. 49)  
his eyes were red and fierce like the eyes of a rat when it was caught by the tail and dashed against the floor. (Achebe, 1958, p .59)

However, in a novel such as *No Longer at Ease* (1960), similes are adapted to the setting of the novel and its readership:

...as a collector fixes his insect with formalin. (Achebe, 1960, p .1)  
...swivelling their hips as effortlessly as oiled ball-bearings. (Achebe, 1960, p. 18)  
...like a giant tarmac from which God’s aeroplane might take off. (Achebe, 1960, p. 24)  
...like an enchanted isle. (Achebe, 1960, p. 28)

In the end, Achebe, like many postcolonial writers, developed new techniques fashioned to remodel English in order to incorporate his ex-colonial experience. In Achebe's work, the Western reader is the outsider whom Achebe enlightens in the way of the villages, its mythology and oral tradition. The reader is led to question his expectations. Achebe's use of the English language and literary forms must be seen in the context of his endeavour to create a dialogue between colonialist literature, on the one hand, and postcolonial writers on the other. Faced by a centuries-long negation of Africa, and motivated by a strong desire to herald an African tradition, Achebe sets to rewriting history from the perspective of the colonized, using the methods of the colonizer. A novel like *Things Fall Apart* is able to do justice to African cultures especially by "deterritorializing the English language" (JanMohamed, 1984, p. 37). African ways and modes of narration are valorized in a way that offers a space in which African writers can be "authentically African in English" (Dasenbrock, 1985-6, p. 316).

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#### Endnotes:

<sup>i</sup> Carol Myers Scotton and William Ury define code-switching as "the use of two or more linguistic varieties in the same conversation or interaction. The switch may be for only one word or for several minutes of speech. The varieties may be from genetically unrelated languages to two styles of the same language. [...] Our general hypothesis is this: code-switching occurs because at least one speaker wishes to redefine the interaction by moving it to a different social arena. There is, therefore, a relationship between (a) the linguistic code used and (b) the social meaning of the interaction," "Bilingual Strategies: The Social Functions of Code-Switching," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 13 (1977), p. 5.

<sup>ii</sup> I am referring here to F. R. Leavis's influential book *The Great Tradition* (1948), in which Leavis names Joseph Conrad, Jane Austen, George Eliot, and Henry James as the greatest, somehow the only, novelists in English worth reading. Conrad, the Pole, being a great 'English' novelist, ushers in Achebe's argument.

<sup>iii</sup> Bernth Lindfors, "African Vernacular Styles in Nigerian Fiction," *CLA Journal* 9 (1966): 265-73. For a detailed discussion of Achebe's vernacular style see also Gerald Moore, "English Words, African Lives," *Présence Africaine* 54 (1965): 90-101; Ezekiel Mphahlele, "The Language of African Literature," *Harvard Educational Review* 34 (Spring 1964): 298-305.

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