# Re-Englishing Africa

## From Linguistic Decolonization through Ethnotextuality to Globalectics

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*To Henry Tourneux, with heart-felt apologies for writing in English*

**Résumé :** Après un détour par les politiques linguistiques de deux états-nations africains comme le Nigéria et l'Afrique du Sud, j'examine la manière dont ces politiques ont trouvé écho dans les stratégies déployées dans le roman d'expression anglaise émanant de ces deux pays—de la méthode de l'après-indépendance (ou post-Apartheid) qui consiste à « écrire avec un accent » en passant par l'ethnotextualité, signe avant-coureur de linguicide des langues autochtones, jusqu'au retour de l'anglais dans l'arène sociale et littéraire et la pratique de la traduction au sein d'une utopie globalectique.

**Mots-clés :** politiques linguistiques, ethnotextualité, linguicide des langues autochtones, pratique de la traduction, utopie globalectique

**Abstract:** After a short examination of language policies in two sample African nation-states, Nigeria and South Africa, I focus on the way language policies have been refracted in the African novel in English in these two countries, from the post-independent (or post-Apartheid) practice of "writing with an accent" through ethnotextuality, which obliquely signals the demise of indigenous languages, on to the re-Englishing of literature and the practice of translation within a utopian globalectics.

**Key-words:** language policies, ethnotextuality, demise of indigenous languages, practice of translation, utopian globalectics.

The world's 184 independent nations contain more than 5,000 race or ethnic groups, and more than 12,000 diverse cultures. There are an estimated 7,000 different languages spoken around the world, 90 per cent of them used by less than 100,000 people (Kymlicka, 1995). Most of these independent nation-states and of the world's languages have had their history shaped by colonialism. In a world that is increasingly

reputed as "flat" because of its interconnectedness, the African Continent has particularly been under siege, as evidenced in global linguistic asymmetries in translation, language hierarchization, and challenges to two-way global cultural flows.

I here propose to discuss the vexed relationship between linguistics and literature in English, a language imported to the African continent through trade and then colonization, and which seems to be thriving in its neo-colonial garb. Before tackling African literature in English, which I hold as refracting developmental linguistics, I will focus on language policies in two target countries in sub-Saharan Africa: Nigeria and South Africa.

## 1 Language Policies: The Return of English

Despite post-independent and current efforts at linguistic and literary decolonization, African indigenous languages do not have the place they deserve in the Constitutive Act of the African Union, if only because of the sheer number of their speakers and the ostensible truth that students steeped in mother-tongue education combined with English as a subject perform better than those with fewer years of mother tongue education and earlier transition to English (Alidou 2006). According to Article 25 of the Constitutive Act of the African Union (2000), the "working languages" of the Union of 53 African countries and all its institutions "shall be, if possible, African languages, Arabic, English, French and Portuguese."[1]

In the 2003 protocol on amendments adopted in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia and then in Maputo, Mozambique, the phrase "working languages" was replaced by "official languages" and the order in which these official languages were presented was as follows: "Arabic, English, French, Portuguese, Spanish, KiSwahili and any other African language." The original phrase – "if possible" – which Nkonko M. Kamwangamalu had called "the escape clause" (Kamwangamalu, 2016, p. 140)[2] was eradicated and replaced by "any other African language," and KiSwahili and Spanish were added.

Despite such an amendment giving "any other African language" an optional place of choice, national constitutions such as the Nigerian one (1999, amended in 2010) cautions in Chapter 5, Section 55 on "Languages" that "the business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, Hausa, Ibo (note the colonial spelling, my addition) and Yoruba *when adequate arrangements have been made therefor* [sic]."[3] The part I have italicized may also be considered as yet another "escape clause." In his Keynote address at the Nigerian Millennium Sociolinguistics conference at the University of Lagos, Nigeria, Aye Bamgbose lamented the fact that an indigenous language like Yoruba was deemed capable, if used in the House of Assembly, "of demeaning and reducing the intellectual capacity of legislators" (Bamgbose, 2001). By further likening language to a currency, Bamgbose also paved the way for the idea

[1] http://www.achpr.org/files/instruments/au-constitutive-act/au_act_2000_eng.pdf. Accessed 23 June 2018. For the protocol on amendments, see https://au.int/en/treaties/protocol-amendments-constitutive-act-african-union. Accessed 23 June 2018.

[2] However, Kamwangamalu had changed the syntax of the original clause: the phrase he uses is "African languages *if possible"* rather than "if possible, African languages, Arabic…." I assume he gave a twist to the original syntax to back up his argument about the general neglect around the use of indigenous languages.

[3] See https://nigerian-constitution.com/chapter-5-part-1-section-55-languages/ Accessed 25 June 2018.

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of language as a commodified good whereby, in the capitalistic law of supply and demand, the more it can buy, the greater (Bourdesian) 'symbolic power' it will have on the linguistic market place (Bourdieu, 1991).

Following upon this mercantilization of language, Kamwangamalu makes a case for "prestige planning," predicated on the idea that "the indigenous African languages must be vested with tangible material advantages if their speakers are to view them as a commodity in which they can invest" (Kamwangamalu, p. xvii, p. 174). Because of globalization and the innate association of English with technology, it holds sway over the linguistic market in many African countries which bank on its capacity for self-advancement and economic viability. South Africa is no exception.

With the new 1996 South African Constitution, the nation's nine indigenous languages—Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, siSwati, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, isiXhosa and isiZulu—were raised to the status of official languages alongside English and Afrikaans. However, upon closer scrutiny, it turns out that the language section 6 of the definitive new Constitution of 1996 is much shorter than the more promising section 3 of the 1993 Interim Constitution and that this reduction might confine indigenous languages to regional development and adversely affect their national development. As Kamwangamalu points out in an earlier article, "When 2+9=1: English and the Politics of Language Planning" (2003), this pessimistic outlook is reflected in this unusual equation. '1' is the one English at the expense of Afrikaans and the above nine African languages, which are likely to face the fate of the Koesan (Xhoisan) and Indian languages, that is, attrition and eventual death.[4] Along those lines, the 2012 Amendment to Section 6 mentions that "WHEREAS section 6 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, provides for 11 official languages of South Africa; [it] recognises the diminished use and status of indigenous languages and requires the State to take practical and positive measures to elevate the status and advance the use of indigenous languages."[5] Despite this wishful thinking, the elementary Township schools, where indigenous languages are used as media of instruction, are gleefully emptied of their most promising students, who join the Model C schools, formerly whites-only schools where "English is the sole medium of instruction" (Kamwangamalu, 2016, p. 168).

## 2 Writing with an Accent: Post-Independent Euphoria

These mitigated language policies in Nigeria and South Africa and the relative supremacy of English became as if refracted in African literatures in English, especially in the immediate aftermath of independence and decolonization. Indeed, when "the Empire writes back to the centre," to use the Australian postcolonial troika's famous phrase inspired by Homi K. Bhabha (Ashcroft, Griffiths, Tiffin, 1989; 2002), it does

[4] This is a possibility despite this other clause: "A Pan South African Language Board established by national legislation must – (a) promote, and create conditions for, the development and use of – (i) all official languages; (ii) the Khoi, Nama and San languages; and (iii) sign language; and (b) promote and ensure respect for – (i) all languages commonly used by communities in South Africa, including German, Greek, Gujarati, Hindi, Portuguese, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu; and (ii) Arabic, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages used for religious purposes in South Africa."

[5] See https://www.uj.ac.za/corporateservices/languageunit/Documents/USE\%20OF\%20OFFICIAL\%20LANGUAGES\%20ACT.pdf Accessed on 28 June 2018.

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not so much "write back" with a vengeance as 'with an accent,' [6] by creatively using a postcolonial English that topples the discourse conventions of the former colonial power and thereby inscribing indigenous languages within the text. The methods used to *write with an accent* and to convey post-independent ideological variance cover a myriad of devices, which I have covered in *The African Palimpsest* and which I have designated by the loose term – "indigenization" – and, more specifically, by "relexification" (Zabus, 2007).

I would now like to turn to a literary moment within four years of Nigeria's independence to illustrate the fate of an indigenous language like Ijọ, which, along with other West African languages, make up a quarter of the world languages. In Nigerian Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* (1964), English constantly suggests Ijọ, Okara's mother tongue. Okara does not translate in that he does not aim at recoding the original according to the norms of the target-language; he indigenizes; more specifically, he relexifies, as in this example:

> "Shuffling feet turned Okolo's head to the door. He saw three men standing silent, opening not their mouths. 'Who are you people be?' Okolo asked. The people opened not their mouths. 'If you are coming-in people be, then come in.' (Okara, 1964, p. 26).
>
> "Shuffling feet turned Okolo's head to the door" is from the Ijo:
>
> *Sísírí sìsìrì wẹnibuòàmọ Òkòló tẹbẹ wàimọ wáríbuọ dìamẹ**
>
> Shuffling moving-feet Okolo's head turned door faced (Zabus, 2007, p. 138)

Such morpho-syntactic innovations as the postponement of the verb or of the negative can be traced to Ijọ syntactical patterns. The syntax is here so altered that a counter-value system is created that jeopardizes the English logocentric relation between word and referent, signifier and signified. If we follow Okara, we could venture to say that today is a "making-people-handsome day" that makes people happy and laugh with a "laughing surface water laugh." (Okara, 1964, p. 70, p. 36).[7] Relexification is thus, as I have defined it in *The African Palimpsest*, "the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon" (Zabus, 2007, p. 112).

Ironically, it could be argued that this experiment in relexification helps recirculate English in that the African tongue falls prey to a textual glottophagia by which English "devours" the African etymons and morphemes, which now function as the linguistic debris of a minor language condemned to orality. Along the same lines of mutual cannibalism, those who posit English as a Killer language and predict that by 2100, 90% of the world languages will be dead or on death row (Skutnabb-Kangas,

[6] "Writing with an accent" is also how the Iranian-born, American writer Taghi Modaressi described his "translation" from Farsi into English of his own Persian novels such as *The Pilgrim's Rules of Etiquette* (1989). Phrases like "nobody chopped any chives for him"; "dust be on their heads"; "trying to be the bean in every soup"; or "he didn't possess any more than a sigh" clearly suggest another language than English and hint at the author's double legacy – Farsi and English.

[7] Okara's coinages or lexico-semantic innovations may also reflect an earlier form of English in that they obliquely refer to the way Old English or Anglo-Saxon might have developed without the Norman conquest, presumably by compounding.

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2000) voice their distrust of English in English so that these propounders of linguistic human rights soon become tangled up in an inevitable dialectics.

The "ethno-text" (Zabus 1991; 2007) also testifies to the mutual cannibalism or discursive glottophagia, which is endemic in relexification. As defined in *The African Palimpsest*, the "ethno-text" is that which is grafted onto the European-text with the aim of conveying a culture-specific ethnicity, "in an attempt to recapture traditional speech and atmosphere"; it is made of "discursive elements ranging from rules of address, riddles, praise names and dirges to the use of proverbs" (Zabus, 2007, p. 147-148). It can also encompass greeting formulae, insults, and other culturally bound formulae. In that respect, *Arrow of God* (1974) is, in Chinua Achebe's oeuvre and, possibly, in the whole corpus of African Europhone fiction, the novel that has the largest number of (relexified) proverbs: 129. The ethno-text, like relexification, is definitely part of de-Englishing strategies inherent in twentieth-century postcolonial literature; writing with an accent was part of the euphoria characteristic of the post-independent will to unloose tied tongues. But can one write with an accent in a tongue that has been cut off?

## 3 Ethnotextuality and the Demise of Indigenous Languages

When turning to the South African novel in English at a similar historical moment, that is, at the dawn of the Post-Apartheid era, we note a shift from a protest literature of powerlessness to a literature of struggle in English marbled with other South African languages. Vicki Briault's book *Emerging Traditions: Toward a Postcolonial Stylistics of Black South African Fiction in English* (2011) delineates this shift and sheds light on South African non-white writers' resisting stylistics. The book looks like a companion piece to *The African Palimpsest*; yet it behaves like an unwieldy companion, as if we were not travelling on the same road. Indeed, even if West African countries and South Africa share the same harrowing history of slavery, dispossession, and colonization, none of these West African countries, whether they were subjected to British Indirect Rule or French assimilation policies, experienced the legal straightjacket that the Apartheid regime (1948-1994) foisted upon the Black African population. Indeed, until the end of Apartheid, the number of non-white writers was infinitesimal, even though whites only represented about 10% of the population.

While both the West African authors examined in *The African Palimpsest* and the indigenous South African authors discussed in *Emerging Traditions* meet half-way through the similar techniques of contextualization, cushioning, code-switching, and the use of pidgins, the tooling and honing of the English-language weapon to present an indigenous worldview is less sharp in South African than in Anglophone West African texts. Indeed, no South African strategies involving deep lexico-semantic or morpho-syntactical transformations are deployed with the will to textual violence that obtains in a Nigerian text such as Okara's *The Voice*. Ethnotextuality is, however, present through "cushioning."

As a case in point, indigenous South African novelist Zakes Mda's *The Heart of Redness* (2000) resorts to ethnotextual devices as an attempt to depict in English the cultural traditions and performances of the amaXhosa, the Southernmost Bantu-

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speaking people, who inherited their click consonants from the Xhoisan. As the novel shuttles between the great Xhosa cattle-killing of 1856-57 and the year 1998, it taps into the South African story-telling tradition, which can be traced back to Tsiqwa, Creator and source of all narrative. The diglossic character of the novel is such that the many isiXhosa words in the text provide a directory of Xhosa culture whereas the speech world of this English-language text is a southern Nguni one.

*The Heart of Redness* makes ample use of "cushioning," a strategy that consists in tagging an explanatory word or phrase in English onto the African word. There are many illustrious antecedents to this method. Achebe, for instance, made ample use of the explanatory tag in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), of the type "*obi* or hut," where the Igbo word *obi* is flanked by an English word that, not always successfully, "explains" the African term to the non-Igbo reader (Zabus, 2007, p. 177). In *The Heart of Redness*, some isiXhosa terms, especially those pertaining to gender roles, are cushioned with a parenthetical translation, as in a Glossary, except that these tags are embedded in the very texture of the narrative: *xhego* (an old woman); *intombi* (a young woman); *makoti* (a daughter-in-law). Or a cultural practice such as *ukukrexeza* is cushioned by the parenthetical "(having lovers outside marriage)." Similarly, Xhosa traditional dress such as *amahomba* is tagged with "(those who look beautiful and pride themselves in fashion)." So are the circumcision rites involving *abakhwetha* (the initiates), or rituals such as *ukurhuda* in which sacred enemas and emetics are administered. Significantly, these ways of "shadowing" cultural artefacts and practices (Zabus, 2007, p. 174) are contained in what Jacobs (2002) has identified as the dialectic between *ubuqaba* ('backwardness and heathenism') and *ubugqobokha* ('enlightenment and civilization'). These indigenous words pepper the text the way in which Indian novels simmer in curried English; they provide local flavor to the dish but do not take away the idea that the dish is indeed the main dish. Ethnotextuality or the insistent grafting of an African-language ethno-text onto a text in a dominant language may thus augur the demise of indigenous languages. Nama, an indigenous South African language, like Xiri, has resisted linguistic genocide but is confined to dialogues, as in Zoe Wicomb's *David's Story* (2000).

Otherwise, no method will ever revive the mostly extinct 'Khoesan' languages.

If isiXhosa fares well in the South African novel in English, it does so residually, in filigree, as in an implicit hierarchization of languages. Mda's 'split-tone song'-style novel returns us to the metonymic gap between English and the isiXhosa words that 'stand for' the colonized culture. Bill Ashcroft has argued that "language variance is a synecdochic index of cultural difference which affirms the distance of cultures at the very moment in which it proposes to bring them together" and later, that "the most fascinating and subtle aspect of the transformative function of post-colonial writing is its ability to signify difference, and even incommensurability between cultures, at the very point at which the communication occurs" (Ashcroft, 2003, p. 76, p. 81). Beside this subtle deferral between the distant and the near, a (contact) language like Nigerian Pidgin (ẸnPi) in Nigeria or Sheng in Nairobi point even more concretely beyond Ashcroft's conjectures to the simultaneity of the distant and the near; the distant and the near travel in the same linguistic circles.

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Unlike, say, Ẹ̀nPi, which has become the L1 of the Nigerian Delta region's locutors, the South African creoles and pidgins such as Fanagolo, Tsotsitaal or Flaaital, and Iscamtho do not have official status, and there are no novels written in Tsotsitaal or a Creolized form like Nguni-Sotho. Conversely, one can speculate on the possible convergence of Black South African English and White South African English (Briault, 2011) while evoking the recently identified phenomenon of People's English.

## 4 Re-Englishing Literature, Translation, and Globalectics

In its overreach, English is like a spider weaving a global Web of dominance over the mummified corpses of the people's *lingua franca*. Moreover, English may, in some cases, appear race-neutral or beyond ethnicities. To take an example from outside of Africa, English was de-emphasized in favor of Malay (*Bahasa Melayu*) after Malaysia's independence in 1957. Article 160 of the Constitution, which affirms special rights for the Malay population, defines a Malay as "a person who professes the religion of Islam, habitually speaks the Malay language, conforms to Malay custom" and is domiciled in Malaysia (Art. 160 sec. 2).[8] However, as Michelle O'Brien has aptly put it, "English remained the language of education and domestic administration for a ten-year transition period to help train the future overseers of the new postcolonial nation and was positioned as an ostensibly race-neutral medium since it did not 'belong' to any of Malaysia's three dominant racial groups" (O'Brien, 2017). For the Malay female writer Shirley Geok-Lin Lim, "Malay [is] an abjected mother-tongue" (qtd Gunew, 2004, p. 60), for Malaysia is the home to "too many names, too many identities, too many languages" in Malaysia and Singapore against what she reads as "canonical English literature's relatively univocal approach to identity construction" (Lim, 2001, p. 20, p. 16). And she favors that univocity.

That univocity has also been construed as a form of monolingualism, which is accompanied, especially in award-winning novels as a form of linguistic exhibitionism. Zeroing in on millennial, prize-winning Indian authors like Aravind Adiga, Jumpha Lahiri, Monica Ali, and the later Salman Rushdie, Anjali Pander is bold in registering the new, twenty-first-century forms of linguicide (Pandey, 2016). By deploying and marketing token multilingualism and other covert forms of forfeiture in these authors' works, Pandey argues that they further help hierarchize languages at the expense of Indian 'minor' indigenous languages. By deluding us with comfortable notions of 'hybridity,' such authors contribute to 're-Englishing' our post-global, 'flat'-worldist era, thereby sounding the death-knell of planetary linguistic diversity.

Moreover, the fate of indigenous languages, flattened as they are by pressure from stompy English feet, can also be observed in the mapping of postcolonial literatures. "African" literature is still too often reduced to the body of texts produced in the metropolitan languages for the consumption of western and western-educated minority readerships. As a result, Anglophone or Francophone African literatures are still quantitatively more studied than the literature in the 2000 or so African indigenous languages. What is more, African-language literatures have a role to play in the

[8] See http://www.agc.gov.my/agcportal/uploads/files/Publications/FC/Federal\%20Consti\%20(BI\%20text).pdf. Accessed 2 July 2018.

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self-representation of all African citizens and in the shaping of multiple sub-national identities (Briault 2011).

Hindi scholar Harish Trivedi has also vented his frustration with the many Indigenous languages of the world that remain untranslated. He writes: "Those of us who are still bilingual, and who are still untranslated from our own native ground to an alien shore, will nevertheless have been translated against our will and against our grain" (Trivedi 2005). Kenyan writer and activist Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is famous for having translated his own works from Gĩkũyũ into English, the most celebrated being his novel *Devil on the Cross* (1982). This decision resulted from his call in 1969 for the dissolution of the English Department in Nairobi, when English identity was to be ousted by a pristine Kikuyu identity. As in a conspiracy theory, his rallying cry made in 1969 along with his colleagues Henry Owuor Anyumba and Taban lo Liyong was concurrent with the publication of Eric Auerbach's seminal 1969 essay on "Philology and Weltliteratur," which was to launch the discipline of World Literature, a discipline that now (cl)aims to oust the postcolonial.

It is therefore no wonder that Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's 2012 call for Globalectics starts with an endorsement of Auerbach's pronouncement that "our philological home is the earth, it can no longer be the nation" (Auerbach, 1969, p. 1). Globalectics stresses the interconnectedness of time and space in the area of human thought and action. The "globalectical imagination" entails a move away from monolingualism, monoliterature, and monoculturalism and away from the "view of literatures (languages and cultures) relating to each other in terms of a hierarchy or power." Hence the globalectical imagination "assumes that any center is the center of the world" (wa Thiong'o, 2013, p. 42). The image Wa Thiong'o favors is not the rhizome but the "network" of global "giving and receiving," which is best rendered through the practice of translation, which he heralds as "the language of languages" (wa Thiong'o, 2012, p. 61). Indeed, translation is an activity that immediately problematizes what Hong Kong-American critic Rey Chow has called "the ontological hierarchy of languages" (Chow in Bowman, 2010, p. 155).

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o however concedes that an obstacle to the implementation of this globalectical network is the "hierarchical schema … between the written *versus* the oral, literature *versus* orature" (wa Thiong'o, 2012, p. 62), "orature" being a term coined by Ugandan linguist Pio Zimiru and heralded as the root of all global cultures. Even if "cyberorality" is on the rise and may produce a "cyberorature" (wa Thiong'o, 2012, p. 84), globalectics is utopian. It remains that languages are inexorably hierarchized, and if they are thought to be equal, some of them are definitely more equal than others.

Wa Thiong'o provides a binary, Marxist reading of the oral African native acting as bondsman to the European "writing Master" but these days are bygone (Wa Thiong'o 2012, p. 63). Africans are now Masters of the improvised postcolony and they are responsible for the rightful implementation of language policies on the African continent.

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