
Journal

Journal of African Cultural Studies

Volume 30, 2018 - Issue 2



Contemporary Conversations: Is English an African Language?

# English is an African language – Ka Dupe! [for and against Ngũgĩ]

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Pages 133-147 | Published online: 18 Aug 2017

Published online: 18 Aug 2017

Download citation

https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2016.1264295

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ABSTRACT

In a radical departure from the orthodoxies of postcolonial African cultural and linguistic nationalism, the paper calls for acceptance of English as an African language with a central argument that insists that all languages widely used in Africa ought to be classified as either indigenous or non-indigenous. This argument rests on a vigorous critique of what the author identifies as the principle of absolute autochthony as the only determinant of which languages are African and which are not. As the most eloquent and influential proponent of this principle, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is the central focus of the paper with regard to both the positive and negative aspects of his ideas and positions on the language question in colonial and postcolonial Africa.

KEYWORDS: Ngũgĩ, language debate, Achebe

Ko si ede t'olorun ko gbo (There is no language that is unintelligible to God)

Yorùbá aphorism of vintage idealist metaphysics of language

There is no language which is more of a language than another language.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, "The Politics of Translation: Notes Towards an African Language Policy"

The diversity of African languages is evidenced by their populations. In total, there are at least 75 languages in Africa which have more than one million speakers. The rest are spoken by populations ranging from a few hundred to several hundred thousand speakers. Most of the languages are primarily oral with little available in written forms [My emphasis]

John Mugane, "Introduction to African Languages", Program Website, The African Language Program at Harvard

Where one thing stands, another thing will stand beside it. (Chinua Achebe (from an Igbo proverb))

## 1. Ka Dupe: reading Ngũgĩ against Fanon and Achebe, and going beyond them

I welcome the invitation – and the opportunity – to respond to Ngũgĩ's paper in writing if only because when it was first delivered at Harvard as the Neville Alexander Lecture for 2016 on 19 April, even though Ngũgĩ acoustically heard the short commentary that I made on his lecture, he apparently did not ideationally hear me at all, not in the least! My verbal commentary that Ngũgĩ did not 'hear' on that occasion is almost exactly the same commentary that I am making here at a greater length and in the medium of writing. However, it would be insincere of me not to confess that my stance in the present context is significantly more vigorous and in some respects, more deliberately 'strategic' than the generally mild and friendly tone of the 'unheard' commentary after the lecture that Ngũgĩ gave on 19 April. Nowhere is this strategic

but non-adversarial stance more inherent than in the title of my commentary, ‘English is an African language – Ka Dupe!’

A literal, uncomplicated translation of the Yorùbá phrase ‘ka dupe’ would be ‘let us give thanks’. But this ignores or erases the complex etymological and discursive uses and history of the phrase. Such ‘history’ would begin from the phrase’s liturgical use in traditional Òrìṣa worship with regard to giving thanks to the gods and the ancestors for life itself; it would then go through the invocation of the phrase and its many variant forms both in common, everyday use and in weighty philosophical discourses on the phenomenon of unearned grace in human existence; and it would perhaps end in contemporary ludic usages of the phrase that entail a corrosive bitterness in expressing ironic ‘thanks’ for the reversals, defeats and tragedies we sometimes encounter in the course of individual or collective human life. Against this profuse etymological background, each instance of the use of the phrase would alert the knowing and sophisticated listener or reader to be on guard, to detect which particular contextual semantic register is intended – straightforward and uncomplicated expression of thanks; ironic imputations that cast a pall of doubt on the act of giving thanks; or densely ambiguous and perhaps even undecidable intimations in which expressing or receiving thanks might be unhinged from any referential subject or object.

In choosing a title for this response to Ngũgĩ’s lecture, I tried to think of a word, a phrase, a trope in the English language that could do the work of ‘ka dupe’ in relation to the declarative statement that ‘English is (now) an African language’ but completely came up short. This left me no choice but to resort to our phrase, ‘ka dupe!’ In other words, the declaration that English is an African language now is the fundamental basis of my commentary on Ngũgĩ’s paper, but only in close relation to this complexly allusive and elliptical Yorùbá phrase could I make this declaration, this claim. English words like ‘hurray’, ‘amen’ and ‘halleluiah’, no matter how lexically inflected with an extra word or phrase to indicate irony, could not even begin to evoke the contextual ambiguities and indeterminacies of ‘ka dupe’. But how does this all relate to Ngũgĩ’s powerful, persuasive and wide-ranging observations, reflections and claims in his paper, ‘The Politics of Translation: Notes Towards an African Language Policy’?

English is a foreign language that was never, is not now, and never shall be an African language: that is the unstated but rigorously authorizing thesis of Ngũgĩ’s paper. Note that though linked, this thesis is quite separate and distinct from the claim often made that English – like French and Portuguese – was forcibly imposed on Africa and Africans through politically, linguistically and epistemologically violent colonial–imperial conquest. In other words, far beyond the irrefutable thesis of the imposition of English on Africans through colonial conquest, there is the distinct thesis or claim of absolute, originary autochthony in determining which languages are African and which are not. One of the most telling instantiations of the rigid operation of this principle of absolute autochthony is the fact that though Ngũgĩ can and does talk of ‘Europhone African writers’, he absolutely never speaks of ‘Europhone African languages’ since,

based on the principle of absolute autochthony as the only determinant of which languages are African and which are not, there cannot be such languages.

The fundamental basis of my response to Ngũgĩ rests on a critique, indeed a refutation of this principle of absolute autochthony. As indicated in the title of this piece, I declare, against Ngũgĩ, that English (and French and Portuguese) can no longer be described or classified as a foreign language in Africa; it is in fact now an African language. However, almost at the same moment and with the same breath with which I say this, I immediately bracket this declaration with all the ambiguities, all the contradictions and indeterminacies of that appropriated Yoruba phrase, 'ka dupe'. English is now an African language, I argue, precisely in the same manner in which it is now an Indian, Irish or Australasian language. In all these nations or regions of the world, English has not only been around for centuries now, it is a leading language in virtually all areas of life – the economy; education; politics; science and technology. If this is the case, there must be a compelling reason, a reason beyond disputation, to continue to label English a foreign language in these countries and regions of the world; and this is absolute autochthony.

Absolute autochthony in the attachment of languages to specific nations and regions of the world has a power of appeal to people around the world that we do not sufficiently recognize. For instance, though Ngũgĩ is indisputably the most insistent exponent of the thesis in the African context, he speaks for almost everybody who has ever taken a position on the language question, including even those like Chinua Achebe who famously took a strong stand against Ngũgĩ when the disputation first erupted in the early 1960s and peaked in 1984 with the publication of Ngũgĩ's book, Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature (1986 Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. 1986. Decolonizing the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Literature. London: James Currey. [Google Scholar]). For instance, in staking his own position, Achebe had declared: 'Theatricalities aside, the difference between Ngũgĩ and myself on the issue of indigenous or European languages for African writers is that while Ngũgĩ now believes that it is either/or, I have always thought that it was both' (2009Achebe, Chinua. 2009. The Education of a British Protected Child: Essays. New York: Doubleday. [Google Scholar]). Note that as different as his position was from Ngũgĩ, Achebe was, it seemed caught on the horns of the dilemma that the Kenyan writer had more or less powerfully set up, this being the proposition that the choice was between indigenous African languages and languages which, being European, were foreign languages that were not and presumably could never become African languages. I contend that we continue to be trapped and fixated by the terms of this dilemma precisely because its heuristic and highly emotive base in absolute autochthony has never been challenged. My comments in this piece are fundamentally based on a direct challenge to this unstated but widely accepted thesis, one that remains unchallenged partly because it has never been clearly or explicitly stated, but also by the fact of its rigid enforcement by what appears to be the seemingly unassailable authority of Ngũgĩ's claims and positions on the language question. I arrived at this 'ka dupe' position through a reading of Ngũgĩ in the light of the revolutionary theories of Frantz Fanon and some ideas of Achebe. Permit me to briefly explain what I mean by this claim.

Without ignoring the originality of Ngũgĩ as a thinker in his own right, it is important, however, to note that the central theoretical framework of his paper is derived from Fanon. In other words, it is Fanonist – but with a twist. For it was Fanon who first theorized that all colonizers in the modern period act exactly the same way in imposing their languages, cultures and values on peoples and nations they colonize while simultaneously waging a total war of devaluation on the languages and cultures of the colonized. Fanon arrived at this proposition by asking – and answering – a deceptively simple question: How does a colonizing group behave? It testifies to the genius of Fanon that though he had posed the question in the specific context of the colonization of Algeria by the French, the answer that he gave to the question has, without any exceptions, been validated in every instance or location of modern colonialism. So far, Ngũgĩ in his paper (published here in this same collection of the journal) in particular, and in all his writings on the language question in general is completely Fanonist. However, Fanon also asked – and answered – another question: The peoples who are colonized, how do they behave, how do they react to colonization? This is where Ngũgĩ departs substantially, if not completely, from Fanon. By the way, the most relevant texts of Fanon for this discussion are the article, 'Racism and Culture', that was first given as a speech at the famous Negro Writers and Artists Conference in Paris, 1956, and was subsequently published in the collection of Fanon's (1961Fanon, Frantz. 1961. The Wretched of the Earth. New York: Grove Press. [Google Scholar], 1967Fanon, Frantz. 1967. Toward the African Revolution. New York: Grove Press. [Google Scholar]) writings titled Toward the African Revolution, and the third chapter of his magnum opus, The Wretched of the Earth titled 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness'. In what way(s) does Ngũgĩ depart from Fanon with regard to the issue of how all colonized peoples respond to colonization?

Famously, Fanon gave an outline of the response of the colonized in three stages namely, a first stage of total assimilation and/or imitation of the language and culture of the colonizer; a second stage of a nativist revolt against and total rejection of the language and culture of the colonizer; and a third and final stage of a revolutionary revolt in which all the weapons and means necessary for success are deployed, including sources from the language and culture of the colonizer. Most readers and even ardent followers of Fanon have ignored a crucial warning that Fanon gave with regard to the second stage: it tends to harden and become fixated into a more or less permanent opposition to and rejection of the language and culture of the colonizer. While it could plausibly be argued that in the uncompromising stand that he took in Decolonizing the Mind, Ngũgĩ corresponded completely with that hardening, that sclerosis of Fanon's second stage, his subsequent and present ideas and positions present us with a more complex profile. Meanwhile, Achebe's 'middle ground' rejection of Ngũgĩ's either/or option in the choice of language between indigenous and European languages and his choice of 'both' would seem to indicate that the Nigerian author is more 'Fanonist' than Ngũgĩ. But the matter is not that simple and one indication of this is the fact that our discussion, our critique ought to start with Fanon himself before we extend it to Ngũgĩ.

It is of course widely known that Fanon's three stages derive from Hegelian dialectics and correspond to the three 'moments' in the historical unravelling of the dialectic: first, a thesis; second, the antithesis to the thesis; third and finally, the synthesis that arises from the confrontation of the thesis by the antithesis. Famously, Jean Paul Sartre (1964Sartre, Jean Paul. (1964–1965). "Black Orpheus." The Massachusetts Review 6 (1): 13–52. [Google Scholar]–1965Sartre, Jean Paul. (1964–1965). "Black Orpheus." The Massachusetts Review 6 (1): 13–52. [Google Scholar]) also applied this Hegelianism to his analysis of Négritude in his celebrated essay, 'Orphée Noir' ('Black Orpheus') that served as the Introduction to Senghor's famous anthology of Négritude poetry published in 1948. In that essay, Sartre had confidently identified Négritude as a 'second stage' in which cultural and political nationalism would lead to a self-transcending historical process of universalization that was a 'third stage' destined to end all racial particularisms, all cultural nationalisms. Although Fanon did not take this Sartrean route of universalization in his theorization of the response of the colonized to colonization, his warnings that the 'second stage' should not be allowed to harden and last for too long was pretty close to Sartre's schematic or abstract dialectics. To his credit, Fanon did bring concrete and unfolding events in the historical process to bear on his warnings about the second stage. This is especially true of that seminal third chapter of The Wretched of the Earth, 'The Pitfalls of National Consciousness'. But it is equally true that there was an unquestionable 'outsider' dimension to Fanon's theorizations, expressed in its most notable dimension in the fact that he came from the Caribbean and thus was not exactly a 'native' in the African colony.

Ngũgĩ is of course a 'native'. And so was Achebe. And so, by the way, is this writer. Of course, I am bracketing the term here to indicate that I am not using it in the literal sense in which a people, a plant or an entire ecosystem could be said to be 'native' to a place. Rather, I am using the term in the very specific and loaded sense of the colonial process of being nativized. Seen in this light, Ngũgĩ's theoretical departures from Fanon rest fundamentally on the weight that he places on nativization: in a searing sense, for him, we are still fundamentally in Fanon's first stage even if, paradoxically, Ngũgĩ is anything but nativist in his ideas and positions on the language question – as I intend to demonstrate presently. This is indeed the complexity, the aporia in Ngũgĩ's position: in a move that more or less abolishes the dialectics of history and replaces it with an unrestrained empiricism, he invests Fanon's 'first stage' with the psychic weight of an unchanging 'original sin'; but in his ideas and 'solutions' to the language problem, he is resolutely anti-nativist. But let us not ignore the fact that Ngũgĩ leaves no space none at all, for writers and intellectuals who accept Fanon's promptings to move beyond or athwart the second stage to embrace all means and resources necessary for Africa's liberation in an ever changing historical process. Writers like Chinua Achebe, whose rejection of the either/or option in favour of 'both', is nothing if not Fanonist in a manner that Fanon himself could not have been existentially. Achebe did not formally reject the criterion of absolute autochthony as the determinant of which languages are African and which are not; however, I think he was pretty close to it. We, on our own part, must now embrace it, as we shall see in the concluding section of this commentary. Before we get to that section, there are a few other issues with which to

engage, the next one being my claim, resolutely against Ngũgĩ, that English is (now) an African language.

2. English in Africa: history, historicity – and catachresis

The standard justification for English in Africa, for an African English is well known, perhaps on account of it being one of the constitutive cultural foundations of postcoloniality. Its most important features can be succinctly stated: English is a national lingua franca that serves as a 'link language' for and between all the indigenous languages of the nation; it is the effective, or perhaps even preferred, language of official administrative, judicial, commercial, scientific, and technological transactions and operations. As decisive cultural and political markers of postcoloniality, these features are not unique to Africa but occur nearly everywhere in the former colonies of the British Empire; it is, however, the case that they are more decisive in their African incarnations. To these features can be added a few others that do not have their origins in the historic experience of colonization: English is the most widely used language for writing on our continent; and beyond this in terms of speaking as distinct from writing, English is also the most widely spoken language in Africa, if we combine first-language speakers with second-language users as a consolidated pool. These are all important factors surrounding the influence of English in Africa, but for my purposes in this commentary, I wish to go beyond them to aspects that I consider more decisive, aspects that Ngũgĩ has never considered at all in any of his ideas and positions.

And so, I think, first, of extraordinary documents of political philosophy and constitution-making like the South African Constitution, the Arusha Declaration and the Ahiara Declaration by the Biafrans during the Nigerian-Biafra war, all in English (the South African Constitution and the Arusha Declaration are also in indigenous African languages) and I see that English in these documents is a medium, indeed a linguistic weapon working for Africans on the African continent. Also, I see innumerable works of creative writing, scholarship, journalism and jurisprudence in English, written by and for Africans, many of them of inestimable value to the prospects of Africa and Africans in the modern world. Because he has just passed away and I am in deep mourning about his demise, I cite here the example of the scholarship of the Nigerian theorist, scholar and critic of oral literatures, Isidore Okpewho, all of them in English: The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance (Columbia University Press, 1979Okpewho, Isidore. 1979. The Epic in Africa: Towards a Poetics of the Oral Performance. New York: Columbia University Press. [Google Scholar]); Myth in Africa: A Study of Its Aesthetic and Cultural Relevance (Cambridge University Press, 1983Okpewho, Isidore. 1983. Myth in Africa: A Study of Its Aesthetic and Cultural Relevance. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press. [Google Scholar]) and Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony and Identity (Indiana University Press, 1998Okpewho, Isidore. 1998. Once Upon a Kingdom: Myth, Hegemony and Identity. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press. [Google Scholar]). These were all groundbreaking works of scholarship that brilliantly corrected long-held intellectual biases against the heritage of myth and orature in and of Africa. Ngũgĩ has (in)famously claimed that

all works by Africans in ‘foreign’ languages of the order of excellence of Okpewho’s scholarship are only and merely helping to promote and develop those ‘foreign’ languages. This is absurd because in the end, Okpewho’s scholarship, though of immense value to scholars around the whole world, was and is, first and foremost, of great value to Africa and Africans. At any rate, English was in no way ‘foreign’ to Okpewho, both personally and in the larger context of the history and historicity of English on our continent.

On this idea of the historicity of English in Africa, I have in mind here a pioneering book with a rather (appropriately?) longish title: Two Centuries of African English: A Study and Anthology of Non-Fictional Prose by African Writers Since 1769. The book was written by Professor Lalage Bown (1973Bown, Lalage. 1973. Two Centuries of African English: A Study and Anthology of Non-fictional Prose by African Writers Since 1769. London: Heinemann Educational Books. [Google Scholar]) of the University of Lagos and was published in 1973. In some of the anthologized and chronologically ordered entries in this book, the reader can see some items that clearly indicate that English was very foreign to the writer(s) while in other items, only an arbitrary and externally imposed conception of foreignness would lead one to say that the given writer found English a foreign language. My point here with regard to the example of Isidore Okpewho is that he comes in the long line of this evolving historicity of English on its way to becoming an African language that only a total disregard for history of the order of Ngũgĩ’s principle of absolute autochthony would ignore or even deny.

From the sublime to the banal, and from the elevated to the mock-absurd: on its way to losing its foreignness in Africa, English in our continent has produced a rich and extensive discursive order of playful, ironic or ludic meta-commentary on the very idea of its being foreign. In other words, in this phenomenon, the very idea and reality of the foreignness of English is made an object of signification. In his paper, Ngũgĩ makes much of pervasive cultural acts of racial and linguistic self-abnegation in which Africans unable to pronounce English words and sounds correctly on account of ‘interference’ from the pronunciation patterns of their mother tongue are savagely mocked. He even has a term for this act, one invented by his son, the writer and scholar, Mukoma wa Ngũgĩ. The term is ‘shrubbing’; it is a neologism formed from the word ‘shrub’ considered as a sort of synecdoche for ‘bush’, the master trope of unalterable African savagery in the discourses of colonialist racism. On this account, ‘shrubbing’ means to so mangle the putative civilized elegance of English that the savagery of the ‘bush’ comes to infect and degrade the language of the foreign conquerors. Well, consider the existence in Nigeria of many popular comic shows on radio and television in which the main attraction is the colourful murder of the English language. The most celebrated of the comedians in this tradition is the so-called Chief Zebrudaya Okoroigwe Nwogbo, alias ‘4:30’ of the comedy series titled ‘New Masquerade’ that ran on national television in Nigeria for 10 years between 1983 and 1993. Zebrudaya was so profuse in his malapropisms, his overall catachresis, that one is forced to ponder for a while on catachresis in both the colonial and postcolonial contexts.

Catachresis is the term for a notable misuse of language; it is the mark of a figure of speech whose deployment is overstrained, a mixed metaphor that obfuscates rather than clarifies meaning or the word that clearly does not belong in the context into which it has been placed discursively. It occurs far more often than we realize in all languages, sometimes even with the most gifted users of language. If this is true of every language, it becomes magnified in languages that have either been imposed on non-native speakers or have travelled far from their homelands through trade and the exchange of cultural and linguistic capital. In the case of colonially imposed languages, catachresis is often a bitter reminder of the original 'sin' of colonization long after the historic event. If this is the case, its extensive and deliberate appropriation turns what is deemed naturally or 'racially' catachrestic – as in Ngũgĩ's example of 'shrubbing' – into its opposite, becoming in Hegelian terms a negation of the negation. I do not know about Kenya and East Africa, but there is a long tradition in West Africa of catachresis being deliberately and wilfully turned inside out and inverted so as to signify on the foreignness of English, together with the presumed superiority that this confers on English in relation to the indigenous African languages. It is a tradition with a very ambiguous history of past and present uses and meanings. Let me give a brief illustration of this observation.

Long before Zebrudaya and 'The New Masquerade', a tradition of deliberate and wilful signification on the foreignness of English had surfaced in West Africa, from The Blinkards (1916) of the Ghanaian dramatist and Pan African thinker, Kobina Sekyi to This Is Our Chance (1956) by James Ene Henshaw (1964Henshaw, James Ene. 1964. This Is Our Chance in Children of the Goddess and Other Plays. London: London University Press. [Google Scholar]), and from Ken Saro-Wiwa in Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English (1985Saro-Wiwa, Ken. 1985. Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English. Port Harcourt: Saros Publications. [Google Scholar]) to Uzodinma Iweala, Beasts of No Nation (2005Iweala, Uzodinma. 2005. Beasts of No Nation. New York: Harper Collins Publishers. [Google Scholar]). In all of these texts and others like them, in the mouths of a character or a group of characters, or indeed the entire linguistic universe of plays, novels or poems, the text is pervaded by skilful and transformative use of catachresis. The result is that we get a distinct sense that though in Africa English may have strayed far from its own autochthonous homeland, it has become a language that the 'locals' have domesticated through a therapeutic 'containment' of the errors and slippages that always seem to lie in wait for non-native users of the language.

Sekyi's The Blinkards (1974Sekyi, Kobina. 1974. The Blinkards. London: Heinemann Educational Books (AWS 136). [Google Scholar]) is particularly brilliant in this respect. Based on an early twentieth-century West African appropriation of the English dramatic form of the comedy of manners, this riotously funny play divides its dramatis personae into three groups: social-climbing and deracinated elites who in dress, attitudes and language imitate what they imagine to be English upper class values and manners but are actually grotesque parodies of the originals; wealthy African cocoa farmers and businessmen who imitate the imitators of imagined British haute couture; and African nationalists attired as a matter of principle in resplendent Ghanaian robes who speak in Fanti, even though they have the requisite education

to speak the Queen's English. The second group of characters, comprising the imitators of imitators, have the highest number of manifestations of the Ngũgĩ's' 'shrubbing' solecisms, but they are sympathetically portrayed by Sekyi and at the end of the play they abandon their imitativeness of imagined British linguistic and social upper class values and practices. Thus, this play in particular more or less effectively reveals that the 'shrubbing' thesis of the Ngũgĩ's pertains to a phenomenon whose historic and cultural roots are not in administrative colonialism (whose region of location was West Africa) but mostly in settler colonialism and its legacies in Kenya and East Africa. (More on this point at the concluding section of this paper.)

This is precisely the point at which to address those aspects of Ngũgĩ's explicit claims and implicit presuppositions that seem to read the necessary response to colonialism, neocolonialism and neoliberalism differently from Fanon. However, there is one more step to take before this critique and this entails an appreciation of Ngũgĩ in his own right. Indeed, I draw the attention of the reader to the bracketed subtitle of this piece – 'For and Against Ngũgĩ' – as a mark of the deeply ambiguous nature of this commentary on Ngũgĩ's Harvard lecture. For on the one hand, there is a big and hugely consequential disagreement with many of both his explicit claims and implicit assumptions and, on the other hand, there is also a genuine approval, indeed a celebration of many of Ngũgĩ's ideas and projects on the so-called language question in Africa, with regard to both the particular paper to which I am responding and, more generally, the positions that the Kenyan writer and thinker has staked over the last few decades. First then, we go to 'For Ngũgĩ' before we return in the concluding section of this essay to 'Against Ngũgĩ'.

3. For Ngũgĩ: uncompromising idealism in the promotion of indigenous African languages

Call him a romantic idealist if you wish, but Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o is one of the last great thinkers/activists who remain unshaken and unshakeable in their advocacy for the survival and development of all the threatened languages and cultures of the world. The second epigraph for this commentary – 'there is no language which is more of a language than another language' – does not in the least reflect the actual terribly hierarchical and unequal state of affairs between the languages of the world, especially now at this historical moment. And yet, this simple but deeply moving declaration is a fundamental article of faith for Ngũgĩ as a language rights activist and thinker. He has made contact with and become solidary with many indigenous language rights movements in the world. He is a robust, witty and canny theorist of ethnocide, this being a war of extermination not directly on the physical existence of a people but on their language, their way of life, their mode of being-in-the-world-with-others, to use a Heideggerian term. Irish Gaelic linguistic nationalists have invited Ngũgĩ to share with them his views and positions on the situation in Africa and other parts of the world. In the specific African context, Ngũgĩ is unquestionably the greatest advocate for rational and progressive state policy and action for the promotion of indigenous African languages against the indisputable advantages of languages of European derivation like English, French and Portuguese. Of especial noteworthiness is the fact that Ngũgĩ has no illusions, no blinkers

regarding the scale of the problem that he and other language rights activists face. This is perhaps due to the fact that though he has worked long and hard on the problems and challenges that advocates of the development of indigenous African languages have confronted without seeming to have made much progress, in place of an understandable disillusionment, Ngũgĩ has shown a resilience that can be described in the symbolic terms of the resilience of the long distance runner. In this respect, it is notable that of recent, Ngũgĩ has found a stable and indeed growing cadre of young African and African Diasporic writers and scholars ardently inspired by his views and his example. If the problems and challenges will not go away, neither will Ngũgĩ and his passionate and committed followers relent in their efforts.

There is also the extraordinarily significant fact that Ngũgĩ is no conservative, rearguard nativist in his advocacy for the development and promotion of indigenous African languages, as most linguistic and cultural indigenists tend to be – in Africa and virtually all the other regions of the world. Of the many symbols and objects of the claims constantly and perennially used to validate both a unique presence in the world and the right to have that presence sustained in perpetuity, none is as emotive and as open to primordial sentiments as language. Much of Ngũgĩ's writings on the language question in Africa unapologetically show all the indications of this tradition. However, both in theoretical and practical terms, Ngũgĩ's analyses of and positions on language have been shaped by an uncompromising opposition to imperialism and its local, comprador political and cultural supporters at the same time that he has courageously struggled with and on the side of workers, farmers and both the rural and the urban poor. In other words, his opposition to the dominance of English may seem to be based on strong indigenist grounds but he has consistently linked his language positions to actual struggles on the ground in his native Kenya and other parts of the world. In this, he is avowedly a historical materialist whose ideas about the relationship of language to power, hierarchy and hegemony are closely shaped by his praxis as a writer, dramatist and translator. His general praxis and some of his positions sometimes stray far from nuanced, rigorously materialist perspectives, but he cannot be found in the company of promoters of indigenous African languages who scoff at Marxism and class politics as 'Western' impurities. Above all else, Ngũgĩ's dedication to language as a tool of liberation of Africa and, especially, of the masses of Africans at the bottom heap of the prevailing world economic order is without equal among African writers, not only of his generation but of all the waves of modern African writing in both the indigenous languages and the languages of initial colonial imposition. Thus, Ngũgĩ's ideas and positions on language are inseparable from the towering moral and ideological authority of the struggles that he has waged unrelentingly in the last four decades.

For Ngũgĩ: this profile, this 'celebration' would be incomplete without drawing attention to the comparative impact of the Kenyan author's writings in an indigenous African language – Gikũyũ – relative to the impact of his and other African authors' writings in English, French or Portuguese. I know no better way to express this than to make a comparison between Ngũgĩ and another canonical African author who, like Ngũgĩ, has also experienced imprisonment and exile on the basis of the impact of his works and pronouncements as an author. I have in mind

here none other than Wole Soyinka of Nigeria. It is no diminishment of the worth of Soyinka's impact that no warrant has ever been issued for the arrest of any of the characters of his literary works. Nevertheless, this is not without some significance for it does set up a contrast with Ngũgĩ concerning whom the government of Daniel Arap Moi issued a warrant for the arrest of Matigari, the eponymous protagonist and hero of Ngũgĩ's Gikũyũ novel of the same title. This would be a rather trite and gratuitous point were it not for the fact that it demonstrates that the impact of Ngũgĩ's works in his homeland, if not in the rest of Africa and the world, tremendously increased when he began to write in Gikũyũ. In other words, Matigari, both the novel and the character, had an impact in Kenya that none of Ngũgĩ's works in English and their characters had or could have had. Bearing this in mind, we can confidently assert Ngũgĩ has not only proved that there was a potentially large audience base for writings in indigenous African languages but also that the impact of the writing could go far beyond anything that any African writer could produce in English or French. Indeed, there is an almost identical repetition of this differentiation within Ngũgĩ's own works, for while the celebrated revolutionary English-language play, The Trial of Dedan Kimathi, that Ngũgĩ co-authored with Micere Mugo apparently greatly troubled the political authorities, it was when Ngũgĩ wrote and performed a Gikũyũ-language play, Ngahika Ndenda (I Will Marry when I Want) that the Kenyan State felt threatened enough to close down the Kamiirithu Educational and Cultural Centre that had staged the play with a cast mostly made up of amateur actors comprising workers, farmers and the rural poor. Some of his critics like to lay emphasis on the fact that after his famous promise in 1984 in the book, Decolonizing the Mind, that he was never again going to write in English, Ngũgĩ later broke this promise and resumed writing in English (while continuing to write in Gikũyũ). Such critics will do well to take to heart the deeper implications of these two examples of Matigari and Ngahika Ndenda: writing in an indigenous African language is far from being an act of self-consignment to a barren literary and cultural wasteland; as a matter of fact, it might lead to unimaginable forms and levels of a sustaining relationship between author and readers, and between the writer, the nation and the world. But is it the case that what Ngũgĩ has demonstrated in Gikũyũ with Matigari and Ngahika Ndenda can be repeated in all or even most of the indigenous languages of our continent? This question leads us directly to the next section of this commentary in which, against Ngũgĩ, we examine the limits, perhaps the dangers even of what can be usefully described as the magisterial authority of Ngũgĩ's achievement in indigenous African language writing in one Kenyan language, Gikũyũ.

## 4. Against Ngũgĩ: from colonial and postcolonial shrubbing to neoliberal frenectomy

We come now to a number of problems in Ngũgĩ's ideas and positions on the language question that are so startling in their egregiousness that we are forced to conclude that paradoxically, these problems occur precisely because they seem excused or justified by the commanding authority of Ngũgĩ's exemplary writings and activities in the promotion and development of indigenous African languages. Perhaps, the most surprising of these problems, the one to which we can ascribe the root of Ngũgĩ's criterion or principle of absolute autochthony, is the complete absence of consideration of, or reflections on writing, in and of itself, in virtually all of

his writings on the language question. If this phenomenon of extensive writings about languages of and in Africa that is completely silent on writing itself seems to be an aporia, I give confirmation that I do in fact consider it aporetic. Here, I wish to identify and then build on the two distinct but closely connected expressions of this aporia in Ngũgĩ's writings and politics on the language question. What are these?

First, there is Ngũgĩ's seeming total unawareness of, or indifference to, the enormously crucial fact that an African writer – or indeed any writer in any region or nation of the world – does not simply move from interest, skill and expertise in her or his language to writing in the given mother tongue but must necessarily go through the existing and flourishing infrastructure of writing in the mother tongue. If there is no such infrastructure in existence, the move is impossible. In the light of this observation, consider the underlined sentence in the third of the four epigraphs to this commentary from none other than Professor John Mugane, Head of the African Language Program at Harvard and one of Ngũgĩ's self-avowed ardent followers: 'Most of the languages (i.e. of Africa) are primarily oral with little available in written forms'. Expressed in a simple and uncomplicated form, this observation boils down to the following crucial question that Ngũgĩ has absolutely never posed in all his writings on language: what should a would-be African writer do who wishes to write in the indigenous mother tongue but whose language neither has a writing script nor print capitalism of even an embryonic form? On the expert evidence provided by Mugane, this in fact applies to the vast majority of the indigenous African languages. I assert again that Ngũgĩ has never given this massively important fact any consideration in his extensive writings on the language question. Among many consequences of this 'blindness' is Ngũgĩ's unexamined, erroneous and simplifying assumption first, of parity or equality between all indigenous African languages and secondly, a vast inequality between, on one side, all indigenous African languages taken together and, on the other side of the divide, all the languages of colonial imposition like English, French and Portuguese. This is a gross and unhelpful simplification of the structure of power and dominance among the languages in use in Africa at the present time. It is a product of that wilful empiricism with which, as we have seen earlier in this discussion, Ngũgĩ displaced Fanonist dialectics in his account of how colonized people (should) respond to colonization. We shall return to this issue at the end of this commentary. For now, let us turn to the second of the two expressions of the aporia inherent in Ngũgĩ's silence on writing in his writings on language.

Here, we move from the external dimensions of the writing script of a language, the medium of print and the production processes of either developed or undeveloped print capitalism to processes internal to writing as the medium through which a language, any language, emerges as literature in its written form. In his writings, Ngũgĩ pays scant attention to the external factors of writing that we have succinctly elaborated here. If that is the case, consider the fact that Ngũgĩ pays absolutely no attention at all to factors internal to language on its way to producing and being received as literature. The starkest and indeed somewhat very brutal expression of this particular aporia is that at one level Ngũgĩ is dismissive of or indifferent to

anything new, refreshing and innovative in developments within English as a medium of African literature while, at another level, he gives no specifications at all of the same phenomenon within writings in indigenous African languages. Indeed, I was totally flummoxed by the fact that a writer of Ngũgĩ's stature who happens also to be a professor of comparative literature could, in his Harvard lecture, write the following simply astonishing statement about internal processes of writing in the English language by African writers:

The subtext is that African languages are inherently incapable of relating to each other, but ironically they can relate to English, especially when Anglophone writing dives into them for a proverb or two to spice their literary offering to Europhone modernity of monolingualism.

This is all that Professor Ngũgĩ can say about the connection with their mother tongue languages in writings in English of any of the following authors: Chinua Achebe (1958Achebe, Chinua. 1958. Things Fall Apart. London: Heinemann. [Google Scholar], 1964Achebe, Chinua. 1964. Arrow of God. London: Heinemann. [Google Scholar]), Wole Soyinka (1967Soyinka, Wole. 1967. Kongi's Harvest. London: Oxford University Press. [Google Scholar], 1971Soyinka, Wole. 1971. Madmen and Specialists. London: Methuen. [Google Scholar], 1975Soyinka, Wole. 1975. Death and the King's Horseman. London: Methuen. [Google Scholar]), Ama Ata Aidoo (1979Aidoo, Ama Ata. 1979. Anowa in the Dilemma of a Ghost and Anowa. Lagos: Longman West African Writers. [Google Scholar], 1993Aidoo, Ama Ata. 1993. Changes – A Love Story. New York: The Feminist Press. [Google Scholar]), J.P. Clark, Christopher Okigbo, Okot p'Bitek, Kofi Awoonor or Niyi Osundare? Things Fall Apart and Arrow of God? Kongi's Harvest, Madmen and Specialists, and Death and the King's Horseman? Anowaand Changes – A Love Story? A proverb or two to spice their literary offerings to Europhone modernity? This is worse than mediocre literary criticism and banal cultural theorizing; it is a bizarre distortion of the mature vision of writers and writings that have profoundly engaged the crises and dilemmas of African and global modernity, colonial, neocolonial and neoliberal.

We must begin to move to the conclusion of this commentary on Ngũgĩ's latest paper on our language problem in Africa and indeed, the whole world. Nothing I have said or can say here can blunt the edge of the deep psychological and cultural roots of Ngũgĩ's stand against English and the other European languages of initial colonial imposition. One thinks here of the force of James Joyce's (1964Joyce, James. 1964. A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man. New York: The Viking Press. [Google Scholar]) feelings of loss and deprivation, writing in A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man more than 400 years after the English colonization of Ireland:

The language in which we are speaking is his before it is mine. How different are the words home, ale, Christ, master on his lips and on mine! I cannot speak or write these words without unrest of the spirit. His language, so familiar and so foreign, will always be for me an acquired speech. I have not made or accepted its words. My voice holds them at bay. My soul frets in the shadow of his language. (Joyce, 189)

Widely adjudged by scholars and critics as one of the most gifted and innovative writers that have ever written in the English language, to the end Joyce nonetheless remained vigilant to the ambiguous uses of the language that had been bequeathed to him and his people by colonization. And he turned this vigilance into stunning acts of creative de-formation of English as a literary language, reaching almost unmatched peaks in Finnegan's Wake and Ulysses. In Africa, in the Caribbean, in South Asia and New Zealand (especially among Maori writers), this Joycean paradigm has been repeated and finessed many, many times over.

This is far from the path taken by Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o who writes in English now apparently because he feels that he must, and then only as a supplement to his primary concern with his writings in and concern for the real or 'true' African languages. He is absolutely without equal among all Anglophone writers of the past and the present in his total indifference to the present circumstances and future prospects of the bequeathed colonial language(s) in his homeland and his continent. All he cares about, all he is unwaveringly dedicated to is the development and promotion of African languages, where 'African' implies autochthony of belonging. Not for him the words of the fourth epigraph to this discussion, Achebe's simple but luminous saying: 'where one thing stands, another thing will stand beside it'. In the context of this discussion, this means: where the indigenous languages stand, the non-indigenous languages stand beside them. In other words, it seems that Ngũgĩ cannot commit to, cannot even envisage promoting and developing, all languages effectively in use in Africa, whether they are indigenous or became African through the history and historicity of their evolution as non-indigenous African languages. This leads us to three particular blindnesses traceable to Ngũgĩ's abandonment of dialectics and rigorous historical materialism for empiricism. I will end this piece with them because of their significance.

First, contrary to Ngũgĩ's perennial affirmations of the far greater resources devoted to the development of foreign or European languages in relation to indigenous languages, as a matter of fact and at a deeper level of long-term consequences, all languages without exception are very badly or poorly taught in African schools and universities today. The failure rates may be higher in English, French and Portuguese, but they are not much better in the indigenous languages. This is due in part to factors identified and repeatedly decried by Ngũgĩ, such as the wrong-headed policies of the African states themselves. But Ngũgĩ completely leaves out the considerable impact of neoliberal impositions by the World Bank and the IMF of massive disinvestments in education and other areas of public expenditure, all in the name of privatization and deregulation, the capstones of neoliberal economic and social hegemony both at home in the heartland of global capitalism and in the world at large in the peripheries in the global South. I repeat: all languages are badly or poorly taught, with dire consequences now and in the future ahead of us.

Second, Ngũgĩ misrepresents and greatly oversimplifies the structure of power, hierarchy and advantage between languages in use in Africa. While the old colonial divide between the languages of colonial imposition and the indigenous African languages has not disappeared, it

has been massively complicated by postcolonial and neoliberal mutations that we ignore only at our peril. For instance, over all the other languages of colonization, English now exercises a hegemony across all states in Africa and the world that it did not have before it effectively became the language of neoliberalism worldwide. As a consequence of this, in Africa some countries that were historically Francophone or Lusophone have either formally become Anglophone or have effectively become Anglophone without the formal declaration, as in, respectively, the case of Mozambique that has actually joined the Commonwealth and that of Rwanda that has not made the formal declaration but is to all intents and purposes practically now 'Anglophone'.

And among African states, writing, that very cultural edifice that Ngũgĩ has ignored and completely left out of his consideration in all his writings, has come back with a vengeance to haunt his uncompromising stand that all languages are equal and 'no language is more of a language than another language'. For the truth is that indigenous African languages that have well-established alphabets and writing scripts, together with consolidated infrastructures of print capitalism to back them, are inestimably privileged over languages that do not have these material and infrastructural consolidations in place. Thus, Ngũgĩ's idealistic declaration that all languages are equal is exactly as contingent on the recognition that you have to fight against objective impediments to its realization as the recognition that the noble and humanistic sentiment that all men and women are born equal can be made real only if we recognize and dismantle the objective conditions of inequalities of wealth, education and opportunity between people. But how could Ngũgĩ arrive at this revolutionary critique of idealism and abstract humanism if he pays no attention whatsoever to the inequalities between and among indigenous African languages themselves, quite apart from the world dominance of English in the neoliberal phase of global capitalism? This question logically leads to our final item in the list of the blindnesses in Ngũgĩ's refusal to see, pace Achebe, that where one thing stands, another thing will stand beside it: lingual frenectomy as the spectre, the worst nightmare of neoliberal English (dubbed 'Globish' by some critics) beside which Ngũgĩ's notion of 'shrubbing' is very tame indeed. What exactly is this?

The story of lingual frenectomy can be very succinctly told since it has been widely discussed on the Internet with a book like The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes (Kirkpatrick, Andy, ed. 2010. The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes, London: Routledge, providing a sort of scholarly context for the popular discussions on the phenomenon. Thus, it is the portents and ramifications throughout the world that present us with a formidable challenge. Roughly around the last quarter of the last century, extending to the beginning of the new millennium, the rage for English as the preferred, hegemonic language of global capitalism took a particularly bizarre turn when many parents in China and South Korea began to have surgical frenectomy performed on their children in order to make it easier to speak English correctly or even perfectly. Frenectomy is the severing or slicing of the frenulum, the thick tissue below the tongue, the aim being to lengthen the tongue thereby making it easier for that organ of speech to, among other things, easily pronounce words with 'r' in it. This of course had absolutely no

physiological or scientific basis as children of first-language English speakers have their frenulum in place providing no hindrance to pronunciation of any words. This frenectomic frenzy took extreme forms and proportions in South Korea where educators, psychologists and socio-linguists found it impossible to persuade parents of the futility, the dangers of lingual frenectomy. The National Human Rights Commission of South Korea even made documentary films to popularize the case against frenectomy. In the end, the rage for this surgical and symbolic self-mutilation in South Korea faded away or petered out. The demand for English in the country has not abated, but the Korean language, in its spoken and written forms, still endures: where one thing stands, another thing will stand beside it.

South Korea was never colonized by the English and yet linguistic alienation based on the assumed and actual hegemony of English took a more severe form in that country than the trauma of 'shrubbing' in postcolonial Kenya. In his paper, Ngũgĩ seems bemused or perplexed that colonial Kenya, in which he had learnt to read and write Gikũyũ, seems paradoxically more 'progressive' than the postcolonial Kenya in which his son was savagely humiliated by 'shrubbing'. But this is a misperception caused by an extreme empiricism that cannot perceive that there are continuities and discontinuities between the colonial, postcolonial and neoliberal phases of capitalism, both within the nations and regions of the world and across the entire planet. And there is also this complexity to think about here: Korea has one of the longest continuously spoken and written languages in the world. There is even a probability that printing and the moveable type may have been in existence in Korea before it emerged in the West. Against these historical complexities, lingual frenectomy could only make a bit of a dent in the opposition of the Koreans to the linguistic hegemony of English in the epoch of neoliberalism. With this thought in mind, I say to Ngũgĩ: complexity and ambiguity also pervade the speaking and, especially writing of all the languages in use on our continent and we must deal with them. This is because if we do not deal with complexity and ambiguity, they will deal with us.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

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