The Anglophone African Novel as minor literature: from transliteration to appropriation in Nigerian writing

O romance africano anglófono como literatura menor: da transliteração à apropriação na escrita nigeriana

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The Linguistic Dilemma of the First Generation of Nigerian Writers

As the celebrated Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe underlines in his frequently quoted article "English and the African Writer" (1965), the matter of the language in which an African author chooses to write has been a reiterated and recurrent topic in the field of African literature since its inception. More specifically, in the case of Anglophone African literature, there have been—as described in the aforementioned article—many and varied opinions with respect to this dilemma, that is to say, as to whether it is appropriate or not to use the English language in the production of African literatures.

In response to the complexity of the linguistic situation resulting from the colonial period, many members of what has often been called "the first generation of African writers", who had received a bilingual education, felt compelled to decide which language to use as a medium of expression. From the time of the early debates (such as those that took place in Uganda in 1962 at the "Conference of African Writers of English Expression"), voices that defended the exclusive use of the African vernacular languages made themselves heard. As the Nigerian critic Obi Wali stated in his 1963 article "The Dead End of African Literature?" in regard to the aforesaid conference:

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> The basic distinction between French and German literature for instance, is that one is written in French, and the other in German. All the other distinctions, whatever they be, are based on this fundamental fact. What therefore is now described as African literature in English and French, is a clear contradiction, and a false proposition, just as 'Italian literature in Hausa' would be. What one would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to, is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implications for the development of a truly African sensibility. In fact, the secondary place which African languages now occupy in our educational system would be reversed if our writers would devote their tremendous gifts and ability to their own languages. (Wali, 1963, pp. 14-15)

On the other hand, there were authors, for example Achebe, who justified the use of the English language in the production of *national* literatures, taking into account the historical circumstances and the benefits that the utilisation of European languages could have not only in facilitating communication between Africans, but also between Africa and the rest of the world:

> [t]hose African writers who have chosen to write in English or French are not unpatriotic smart alecs with an eye on the main chance—outside their own countries. They are by-products of the same processes that made the new nation states of Africa ... Those of us who have inherited the English language may not be in a position to appreciate the value of the inheritance. Or we may go on resenting it because it came as part of a package deal which included many other items of doubtful value and the positive atrocity of racial arrogance and prejudice which may yet set the world on fire. But let us not in rejecting the evil throw out the good with it. (Achebe, 1965, p. 28)

As Ezekiel Mphahlele highlights in a report regarding the 1962 conference previously mentioned, after deliberation and interesting discussion: "[i]t was generally agreed that it is better for an African writer to think and feel in his own language and then look for an English transliteration approximating the original" (Mphahlele cited in Wali, 1963, p. 14). In this particular context, the word "transliteration" acquires a specific meaning:

> *Transliteration* does not have the same meaning in African literary theory as in standard English . . . in the early sixties, following the political independence of several African countries, the word *transliteration* was introduced into African critical terminology as a blend of *translation* and *literal*. The word in this sense . . . may be roughly glossed as "literal translation," a meaning not listed in any English dictionary. The word denoted *an important aesthetic doctrine in the postcolonial language politics of African literature* . . . So understood, *transliteration* as used by Mphahlele in his news report may be defined as the act of thinking and conceiving in one's first language but expressing the substance thought or conceived in one's second language such that the second-language expressions used contain some salient linguistic and rhetorical implants from the first language. (Onwuemene, 1999, pp. 1057-1058, [emphasis added])

Although it is indeed true that from the very beginning great importance has been attached to the ideological aspects involved in choosing a colonial language when producing African literatures, in this article special attention is

drawn to the extraordinary creative process developed by different members of the first generation in their works. This has frequently been pointed out by Paul Bandia, from Concordia University, Canada, in diverse books and articles (1993, 2005, 2006, 2008, 2009, 2010, 2012), among which *Translation as Reparation. Writing and Translation in Postcolonial Africa* (2008) should be mentioned, or in a recently published interview in which he affirms that "the kind of writing practice carried out by African writers in European languages is reminiscent of what I would call 'translating' from an oral discourse" (Bandia cited in Rodríguez Murphy, 2015a, p. 145). It is important to emphasise, therefore, what these writers managed to do with their "inherited" language, in this case English, so as to achieve harmony between English and African sociocultural realities.

As Gyasi has stated, in many cases African authors, because of their status as (de)colonialised subjects necessarily had to overcome the difficulties and contradictions which arose when using more than one language in their texts: "African writers, because of their past or present circumstances as (de)colonised persons, have to live and deal with all the difficulties, contradictions, and alienations in their use of language" (Gyasi, 1999, p. 84). Undoubtedly, the interest of the diverse members of the first generation not only in using the language inherited from the imperial period, but also in expressing the theme of tradition in their works, had an effect on both the form and the content of their writings.

Things Fall Apart: A Creative Type of Translation

In this sense, it is important to cite Achebe's first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), as one of the pioneering works in the field of African literature written in English; at the time, because of its innovative style, it offered a new way of writing about Africa and Africans. By applying different strategies, in his novel Achebe accomplishes a creative translation into English of his mother tongue, Igbo, one of the main vernacular languages in Nigeria, and he recounts an experience which takes place between cultures:

> The way I look at my life is really a conversation between two languages. The first language I learnt, my mother tongue, is Igbo. I began to learn English about the age of eight and so this conversation between languages, which I feel extremely important, began quite early for me. We were colonised people... Nigeria was made of many, many ethnic groups and many, many languages and one way to keep this creation of the British was the English language. So, this conversation between languages is a very real thing for us in that part of the world....We sort of live at the cross-roads of languages as well as cultures. (Achebe, 2008)

Through the appropriation of English, the writer's intention is to describe his African reality in his works. Thus, he expresses himself according to the linguistic and literary characteristics of that language, "in full communication with its ancestral home", while at the same time "Africanising" it via the manipulation of rhythm, register or vocabulary, and hence "altered to suit its new African surroundings":

> Is it right that a man should abandon his mother-tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal, and produces a guilty feeling. But for me there is no other choice. I have been given this language and I intend to use it ... 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, 1965, p. 30, [emphasis added])

As a translator between cultures, Achebe uses English creatively in his writing, as can be observed in the following examples taken from *Things Fall Apart*, where he skilfully includes[1]: Igbo proper nouns, terms, and expressions; similes, songs, tales and legends; and proverbs.

Igbo proper nouns, terms, and expressions

- [Okoye] he was going to take the Idemili title, the third highest in the land (TFA, p. 5).
- Near the barn was a small house, the 'medicine house' or shrine where Okonkwo kept the wooden symbols of his personal god and of his ancestral spirits (TFA, p. 10).
- Even as a little boy he [Okonkwo] had resented his father's failure and weakness, and even now he still remembered how he had suffered when a playmate had told him that his father was agbala. That was how Okonkwo first came to know that *agbala* was not only another name for a woman, it could also mean a man who had taken no title (TFA, p. 10).
- [Unoka] had a bad *chi* or personal god (TFA, p. 13).
- This year they talked of nothing else but the *nso-ani* which Okonkwo had committed (TFA, p. 22).
- Just then the distant beating of drums began to reach them. It came from the direction of the *ilo*, the village playground (TFA, p. 30).
- On her arms were red and yellow bangles, and on her waist four or five rows of *jigida*, or waist-beads (TFA, p. 49).
- [the converts] None of them was a man of title. They were mostly the kind of people that were called *efulefu*, worthless, empty men (TFA, p. 101).
- These outcasts, or *osu* . . . thought it was possible that they would also be received (TFA, p. 111).
- These court messengers ... were called *kotma*, and because of their ash--coloured shorts they earned the additional name of Ashy-Buttocks (TFA, p. 123).

Similes, songs, tales and legends

- Okonkwo's fame had grown like a bush-fire in the harmattan (TFA, p. 3).
- [Ikemefuna] grew rapidly like a yam tendril in the rainy season (TFA, p. 37).
- Okonkwo encouraged the boys to sit with him in his *obi*, and he told them stories of the land . . . stories of the tortoise and his wily ways, and of the

[1] In the following examples, TFA stands for *Things Fall Apart*.

bird *eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat (TFA, pp. 37-38).
- Ezinma bubbled with energy like fresh palm-wine (TFA, p. 56).
- Okonkwo stood by, rumbling like thunder in the rainy season (TFA, p. 58).
- [Ekwefi] stood gazing in the direction of the voices like a hen whose only chick has been carried away by a kite (TFA, p. 72).
- The words of the hymn were like the drops of frozen rain melting on the dry plate of the panting earth (TFA, p. 104).

Proverbs
- As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings (TFA, p. 6).
- Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them (TFA, p. 6).
- Let the kite perch and let the eagle perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wing break (TFA, p. 14).
- As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness (TFA, p. 14).
- Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching (TFA, p. 16).
- But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his *chi* says yes also. Okonkwo said yes very strongly; so his *chi* agreed (TFA, p. 19).

As Achebe points out in the previously mentioned article, "English and the African Writer" (1965), in reference to his third novel *Arrow of God* (1964), there is a purpose behind his style and, although other options are possible, the use he makes of the English language has specific characteristics. Hence his example and choice of a fragment from his novel, in which

one may read the following:

> I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eyes 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 do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow. (Achebe, 1965, p. 29)

Next, with the aim of showing that the style in the text could indeed be changed, Achebe says, "[n]ow supposing I had put it another way. Like this for instance" (Achebe, 1965, p. 30):

> 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. (Achebe, 1965, p. 30)

In the first case, the author's creative use of English opens up a space for the representation of the Igbo context and culture. In the second, however, that specificity is silenced. Or, in Achebe's words, "[t]he material is the same. But the form of the one is in character and the other is not" (Achebe, 1965, p. 30).

For Achebe's generation, the issue of language choice has been especially significant in the production of their writings. As Bandia (2008) and Vidal (2010) argue, in relation to the book by Deleuze and Guattari, *Kafka.Toward a Minor Literature* (1986/1975), these African authors are faced with the same impossible situations as Kafka: the impossibility of not writing, the impossibility of writing in the coloniser's language and the impossibility of writing in any other way. That is why they have recourse to translation[2], with the aim of deterritorialising the dominant language:

> Given their multilingual experience and faced with an unfavourable fact of linguistic hierarchy or diglossia, postcolonial writers are condemned somewhat to think (and breathe) language, to make language an important and indispensable paradigm in their work. This heightened consciousness of language is a fact of life for those authors of what Deleuze and Guattari have referred to as "minor/minority" literature, that is, literature written by a minority in a dominant language . . . often with a strong tendency for deterritorializing language. (Bandia, 2008, p. 138)

Due to the educational background of the authors of the first generation, such as Achebe, in their work there is a special interest in writing according to the conventions of the English language and, at the same time, in portraying the main characteristics of their cultures. As a result, in many cases, their texts constitute a representative example of Anglophone African minor literature (Bandia 2006, 2008) and "Euro-African intertextuality" (Irele, 2001, p.xiv).

From Transliteration to Appropriation in Nigerian Writing

Although one should bear in mind the situation of the pioneering authors that we have described so far, and the importance of their works in the development of the most recently produced African literature, it is interesting to underline the fact that different varieties of English have now become part of the linguistic landscape in many former colonies in Africa. Therefore, in many cases, members of the newer generations no longer see English as an inherited language from colonial times or, in Achebe's words, "a counterargument to colonization"; rather it is one of the many transculturated elements which have become an important part of their everyday experience:

> They [the first generation] have, for instance, placed Nigeria on the literary map of the world, but their greatest achievement, one that will give them a lasting significance in Nigeria's literary history, has yet to be clearly recognized and articulated—namely, their demystifying of English for future generations of Nigerian writers. The creation of an autochthonous medium of literary expression for Nigeria is not a one-step process but a phased one …

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[2] In her often-cited book, *The World Republic of Letters*, Casanova describes the processes of "literalization" that these authors have to undergo in order to "translate" their texts and obtain therefore a "certificate of literariness" (2004, p. 136), granted by the consecrating powers: "No matter the language in which they are written, these texts must in one fashion or another be translated if they are to obtain a certificate of literariness" (p. 136).

> What transliteration in Nigerian writing has accomplished is the first phase. Transliterators have used English, no matter how marginal or deviant, in ways that were not sanctioned by the conventions of English as codified in dictionaries, style manuals, and literary stylistic traditions. In doing so, they have overthrown for their compatriots the overbearing and daunting power of international standard English and set the stage for the next phase, that of truly appropriating and reconstituting English for Nigerian literature. (Onwuemene, 1999, pp. 1064-1065)

In the case of the newer generation of Nigerian writers, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta, Chris Abani or Uzodinma Iweala, to name but a few, an innovative way of utilising the English language stands out in their works (Rodríguez Murphy 2015b), drawing from the current linguistic situation in Nigeria and the diaspora. On diverse occasions, Adichie, who spends her time between the United States and Nigeria, has described the importance in her writings of the influence of preceding authors, particularly Chinua Achebe, but she has also emphasised the need to comprehend the way in which the English language has evolved and how in time it has been adapted to the Nigerian context:

> I'd like to say something about English ... which is simply that English is mine. Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency, as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English. (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie cited in Azodo, 2008, p. 2)

Through its pages, the most modern Anglophone Nigerian literature transmits the multilingualism that characterises the postcolonial Nigerian space by means of the inclusion, within the text in English, of the vernacular Nigerian languages, "Nigerian English" and "Pidgin English", as well as of images depicting the diaspora.

> I think that I find myself inhabiting many Nigerian Englishes . . . I want to capture a sort of Nigerian Englishness [in my work] . . . It is not just that I want to write about characters who speak both Igbo and English, which is what I, and many people in my world do, we speak Igbo and English, or Yoruba and English, or Hausa and English at the same time, often in the same sentence. I want to capture that, but also, there is a kind of Nigerian English that has its own syntax, that to an ear that is not used to it can sometimes sound a bit awkward . . . Now that English has this ridiculous power in the world . . . I like to think of my writing as a kind of an engagement with the different Englishes of the world, if that makes sense. (Adichie, 2014)

What remains very clear in the literary creations of the various generations of Anglophone Nigerian writers is that the term "African", from pre-colonial times up to the present, cannot be defined in one way alone. The process begun by the pioneering authors who, in many cases, used a "deterritorialised" form of English in order to respond to the Empire has been essential in ensuring that other voices may be heard, voices which describe stories of Africans on their

continent as well as in the rest of the world and which, as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has reminded us, could contribute to countering and confronting stereotypes of what it means to be African in the 21st century:

> I believe that it is important that we recognize the equal humanity of the people with whom we inhabit this earth. There is no doubt that we are all equally human, but the course of history has made it possible for some people to question the humanity of others, which has grave consequences for all of us. And so, we need to combat and challenge and complicate stereotypes. We need to conceive of a world in which the idea of difference is just that: *difference*, rather than something necessarily better or worse. I am obviously biased, but I think that literature is one of the best ways to come closer to the idea of a common humanity, to see that we may be kind and unkind in different ways, but that we are all capable of kindness and unkindness. (Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, 2008, p. 46)

There is no doubt that literature, in this case African literature, can help us to remember that the history of humanity is a collection of stories. Evidently, in the hybrid societies of the era of globalisation it is increasingly important to listen to and read many different stories, tales written in diverse voices and accents and in different varieties of English or, in the words of Kachru, "World Englishes" (1985, 1986, 1992, 2006), which have gradually developed in many and varied parts of the world.

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Abstract

Since its inception, Anglophone African literature has offered a wide range of examples of what Deleuze and Guattari once referred to as "deterritorialization of language" (1986/ 1975). On the Nigerian scene, authors such as Chinua Achebe began to write in a deterritorialised form of English in order to act in response to colonial power. In Achebe's ground-breaking first novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), different stylistic devices—introduction of elements of the oral African tradition such as proverbs, myths or folktales, to name but a few—are used in order to transliterate or translate Igbo culture into English producing, as a result, a representative example of Anglophone African minor literature (Bandia 2006, 2008) and "Euro-African intertextuality" (Irele 2001: xiv). In this regard, Achebe, and other authors of what has been called "the first generation of Nigerian writers", paved the way for the newer generations of authors, such as Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta or Uzodinma Iweala, to continue appropriating and recreating the English language for Nigerian literature.

Resumen

Desde su establecimiento, la literatura africana anglófona ha ofrecido una amplia variedad de ejemplos de lo que Deleuze y Guattari han definido como la "desterritorialización de la lengua" (1978/1975). En el contexto nigeriano, autores como Chinua Achebe comenzaron a escribir en un inglés desterritorializado con el objetivo de responder al poder colonial. En su primera novela, *Things Fall Apart* (1958), Achebe utiliza diferentes recursos estilísticos – entre ellos, la introducción de elementos propios de la tradición oral como proverbios mitos o leyendas- para traducir la cultura igbo al inglés produciendo, como resultado, un claro ejemplo de literatura africana menor en lengua inglesa (Bandia 2006, 2008) y de lo que Irele denomina "intertextualidad euroafricana" (2001). En este sentido, tanto Achebe como otros miembros de lo que se ha denominado "la primera generación de escritores africanos" han ido sembrando el camino para que los autores de las nuevas generaciones, como, por ejemplo, los nigerianos Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, Sefi Atta o Uzodinma Iweala, continúen (re)creando y transformando la lengua inglesa para retratar sus propias experiencias.