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A Linguistic Analysis of the Strategies of Appropriation in Selected Postcolonial Novels

*A dissertation
submitted in fulfillment of
the requirements for a
PhD Degree*

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PREFACE

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 new African surroundings.

This oft cited statement of Chinua Achebe's seems not only to summarize the position most postcolonial writers find themselves in, but also the main argument of this interdisciplinary study, entitled *A Linguistic Analysis of the Strategies of Appropriation in Selected Postcolonial Novels*.

When I started out working on this research, my contention was uni-dimensionally limited to the claim that postcolonial writers adopt a number of linguistic strategies to reformulate English into more culture-specific varieties of englishes. Four years of (critical) reading and analysis have expanded my contention into a *multi-dimensional* perception of these works. It is not only the local culture which these writers encode in their texts, but also ideology, power-struggles, and the dialectics of the post/neo-colonial state of affairs which formulate the deep structure of all of these texts.

The term *strategies of appropriation* is adopted from the seminal work *The Empire Writes Back* (1989) Ashcroft, Griffith and Tiffin. *Appropriation* is defined as "the process by which the language is

taken and made to 'bear the burden' of one's own cultural experience" (38). The strategies identified by Ashcroft et al are five main categories: glossing, untranslated words, Interlanguage, syntactic fusion, as well as code-switching and vernacular transcription. In their concluding remarks, Ashcroft et al point out that

Strategies of appropriation, then, seize the language, re-place it in a specific cultural location, and yet maintain the integrity of that Otherness, which historically has been employed to keep the post-colonial at the margins of power, of 'authenticity', and even of reality itself.

(77)

Since these strategies of text production have greatly impacted on developing strategies of reading, it seems to be essential to resort to CDA as a constituent of those strategies of reading.

Interdisciplinary in approach, the study adopted Norman Fairclough's three-dimensional framework of Critical Discourse Analysis for an alternative examination of postcolonial texts. Though CDA is a relatively new discipline, it is rapidly establishing itself as a very strong tool for studying language as discourse, in relation to sociocultural as well as political communicative events. It is founded on the idea that there is unequal access to linguistic and social resources which are institutionally controlled. In this sense, the very process of *discursive formation* becomes a privilege for those who are "in control". Discursive formations refer to the practices of exclusion, in

the light of which “although the same language may be spoken throughout a country ..., there is a sense in which access to those frameworks which circulate in society is not equally available to all.” (Mills 14).

Thus CDA itself is an interdisciplinary approach, which seeks

to map three separate forms of analysis onto one another: analysis of (spoken or written) language texts, analysis of discourse practice (processes of text production, distribution and consumption) and analysis of discursive events as instances of sociocultural practice”

(Fairclough 1995:2)

The major contribution of CDA, here, is the inclusion of a discursive component in the sociological definition of discourse, not limiting it to a purely linguistic approach. In other words,

The method of discourse analysis includes linguistic *description* of the language text, *interpretation* of the relationship between the (productive and interpretative) discursive processes and the text, and *explanation* of the relationship between the discursive processes and the social processes.

(Fairclough 1995: 97)

It is necessary here to state what is meant by the term “discourse”. The basic definition of discourse, within the field of linguistic studies, as Hoey states, is “any stretch of spoken or written language that is felt as complete in itself” (1983: 15), where

“communication is an interlocking social, cognitive, and linguistic enterprise.” (Hatch1992: 1).

In the field of social sciences, *The Labor Law Talk Dictionary* defines a discourse as “an institutionalized way of thinking, a social boundary defining what can be said about a specific topic”. Thus discourse is the verbal formulation of the experience of the world, and a particular representation of reality. In this sense, the term discourse “is generally used to designate the forms of representation, codes, conventions and habits of language that produce specific fields of culturally and historically located meanings.” (Brooker 1999: 1).

Hence, discourse – both as a communicative act, and in the broader sense of a socio-cultural formulation of the world – is a site in which meaning is constructed and negotiated in accordance with the dominant ideology, with the intention of maintaining the established power structures through the preservation of the dominance of one discourse/discursive formation over other formations.

Critical discourse analysts, in general, consider the larger discourse context that lies beyond the grammatical structure, since it is one of the tenets of CDA that “language connects with the social through being the primary domain of ideology, and through being both a site of, and a stake in, struggles for power” (Fairclough 1989: 15). In other words, through its analysis of texts, CDA attempts to

“denaturalize” the ideological foundations of discourse which have over time become naturalized, internalized and accepted as common truths. It has, therefore, gained much ground in a number of fields such as gender studies, media studies, the study of New Capitalism, etc. Hence, it is only logical to choose this approach in relation to the study of postcolonial texts.

The present study seeks to analyze the discursive formations of postcolonial texts, and the manifestation of ideological and sociocultural aspects through the language employed in these texts.

The application of Fairclough’s model on selected postcolonial texts in this study is based on my personal reading of the model. It is my belief that the model functions dialectically, i.e. it represents both the *production* of texts and their *consumption*, stemming from sociocultural practices, to be structured into discourse practices, resulting in a text. The process is then reversed for purposes of analysis.

This three-dimensional framework is studiously applied to the four texts selected. There were a number of significant criteria for the selection which may be summarized in terms of geography, history and theme.

Geographically, the selected texts cover the main areas of the British Empire and, hence, the later Anglophone Commonwealth,

including Nigeria, Kenya, India and Egypt. This geographical expanse allowed for a comparative reflection of the production of texts in a postcolonial/neocolonial context.

Historically, the texts span five decades of the twentieth century, beginning with the 1950s, during which the founding works of the postcolonial canon came into being. The novelist selected for this period is *Chinua Achebe*, known as the Father of the postcolonial novel. The 1960s witnessed the height of nationalist movements, heralding the “postcolonial condition”. *Ngugi wa Thiong’o* – one of the most prominent novelists of Kenya, and the representative writer for the decade – describes that period in the following words:

This was the sixties when the centre of the universe was moving from Europe or, to put it in another way, when many countries particularly in Asia and Africa were demanding and asserting their right to define themselves and their relationship to the universe from their own centres in Africa and Asia.

(Ngugi 1993: 2)

The sixties are followed by the 1980s, which saw the publication of by-now well-established “postcolonial” texts that started to cast a critical eye on the post-com-neocolonial state of affairs. This decade also witnessed the introduction of postmodernist features of writing, the most significant example of which is Salman Rushdie.

In the texts of the 1990s, language and the postcolonial themselves become themes. According to Ngugi,

The nineties will see more and more writers trying to break out of the linguistic prison to seek their genuine roots in the languages and rhythms of life of the dispossessed majority.

(Ngugi 108)

Retrospectively, this turned out to be a highly insightful prediction, as the examination of Ahdaf Soueif's text has shown.

Thematically, the four novels can be considered discursively as one grand narrative of the colonial-postcolonial history of the Third World. Achebe's text, *Things Fall Apart* (1959), reconstructs a pre-colonial tribal context only to examine the first encounters with colonialism. Ngugi's novel, *Weep Not, Child* (1964), is a forceful study of the struggle against the colonial socio-political institutions which have already firmly established themselves in the colonies. Since nationalist movements sooner or later managed to achieve (some form of) independence, Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1981) opens with the independence of India, in an attempt to trace how the postcolonial condition, in fact, soon metamorphosed into a neocolonial status quo. This is further explored by Ahdaf Soueif's text *The Map of Love* (1999), which contemplates the culmination of colonialism in the new era of globalization, while simultaneously looking back again at the beginnings of the nationalist struggles at the turn of the 19th century.

The dissertation, hence, consists of five chapters and a conclusion, according to the following scheme.

Chapter One, *The Introduction*, reviews the background and the scope for the study, provides the working definitions for the terms “postcolonial”, “discourse” and “CDA”, and elaborates on the analytical framework adopted and the methodology of its application to the selected texts.

Chapter Two, entitled *The Linguistic Features of Founding Works*, examines Achebe’s text, *Things Fall Apart*. Following the review of the linguistic map and the historical background as contexts for the production of the text (which is the systematic structure of all subsequent chapters examining texts), the chapter proceeds to analyze the linguistic and discursive features of the text. These include an examination of Achebe’s linguistic reconstruction of the pre-colonial, patterning of active/passive as well as direct/reported speech structures to construct the gradual (historical/textual) shift in agency and the orality of the community represented. The chapter closes with a discussion of the features of linguistic and discursive subversion adopted by the author, in particular lexical borrowing and the relexification of proverbs into English.

Chapter Three, *The Struggles of Languages*, is a study of Ngugi’s text, *Weep Not, Child*. In accordance with Fairclough’s reiteration of

the necessity to contextualize and historicize the text, the analysis of Ngugi's text takes into consideration his theory of English as a "cultural bomb" in the heart of Africa. This is reflected in his choice of passive structures, which – unlike Achebe's use – are not intended to construct agency, but rather reflect the nationalist struggle and the power imbalance through a careful choice of verb structures. Ngugi further relied on deictic markers for the construction of the centre/periphery dichotomy, basic to colonial discourse, and hence essential for its subversion and the construction of a powerful counter-discourse.

Chapter Four is a shift to the Indian subcontinent. Entitled *The Linguistic Struggle in the Indian Novel*, the chapter examines Salman Rushdie's appropriation of English, both as a postcolonial and a postmodern writer. The very nature of the texts in the last two decades of the twentieth century called for an alternative linguistic analysis which was derived from Robert Hodge and Gunther Kress's *Language as Ideology* (1979, 1993). Through transformations, classifications, the concept of ideological complex, and modality, Hodge and Kress study how the surface structure disguises the ideological discursive formations inherent in the deep structures of discourse. Since many of the core concepts used by Hodge and Kress seem at first glance similar to Chomsky's concepts of transformational grammar, the Text Analysis section of this chapter opens with a comparison between the

two, highlighting the aspects of divergence into a socio-textual/socio-discursive analysis of the use of language. The analysis also tackles the construction of “India” as a discursive formation, as well as the linguistic features of the technique of Magic Realism and Fragmentation (both of which are prominent features of postmodernist writings).

Chapter Five shifts back to Africa, but this time to Egypt. The chapter is entitled *(Re-)Mapping the Linguistic Struggle*, and examines Ahdaf Soueif’s *The Map of Love*. The title of the chapter draws attention to the fact that – as maintained previously in my MA dissertation – Soueif contributed to the remapping of the Anglophone scene by her introduction of an Egyptian variant of new english. Further the text itself maps the various voices, registers, languages and discourses prevalent locally and globally in Egypt’s nationalist struggle against (neo-)colonialism. Again Hodge and Kress’s approach is adopted for the analysis of the representation and construction of the various levels of language and discourse. The chapter concludes with an examination of how the etymological study of Arabic through English becomes a metaphor of the search for identity, and how language, the text and translation themselves become themes and a metaphor for rootedness.

Finally, the *Conclusion* makes a summarizing comment on the results of the study.

There are a number of important findings which should be restated here. There is no doubt that the postcolonial discourse has developed significantly from the resistant nationalistic voice-finding efforts of the early years, to a more daring, critical and resonant counter-discourse, leveled at both the neo-colonial powers, as well as the local ruling elite. Textually, these developments can be traced on two basic levels: linguistically and discursively.

Linguistically, the texts have grown out of Achebe's experimental subversive techniques, mostly through lexical borrowings, proverbial relexifications and the usage of a syntax highly resonant of the African oral folk tale.

Discursively both the novel, as a Eurocentric white genre for narration, and the English language, legacy of the colonizer, are appropriated, and the first seeds for a counter-discourse are sown. *Things Fall Apart* is considered the first postcolonial text to seek the decolonization of the native mind through a careful, yet forceful, attempt at re-entering history.

Ngugi seeks to move the centre and decolonize the minds of the people, both through subversive techniques, and – in later stages of

his literary project – through denouncing English itself as a vehicle for cultural and literary communication. Discursively, not only is one of the novel's main themes the effect of British educational institutions and policies on the children of Kenya, and the effect of English on socio-political mobility, but the language itself used by Ngugi adopts a syntax which encodes conflict and tension.

Through lexical transformations and discursive formations, Rushdie questions the established grand narratives of the West. The postmodern postcolonial writer does not so much need to fight their way back into the narratives of history as earlier writers needed to do. In the eighties, with neo-colonialism gaining in momentum and force, writing in English for Rushdie, is an act of conquering the language, hence the colonizer. Decolonization is no longer the straightforward struggle of the people against the colonizer/oppressor, and partly achieved by the renunciation of the language of the colonizer as advocated by Ngugi. In a world, in which reality itself has become multifaceted, perceptible according to the discursive formations dominant at that particular moment in history, language too is becoming a highly elusive system of signifiers.

The postcolonial has not only become hybrid, it is also polyphonic, as Soueif's text shows. It is a "metalinguistic / metadiscursive" comment on the postcolonial discourse in its interaction with the

neocolonialist/globalization discourse. Since the access to discourse and discursive formations, is the main socio-political tool for self-representation and empowerment, Soueif seems to suggest her own text as an enabling platform, which empowers the speaker(s) to produce a counter-discourse. Her greatest achievement is the subversion of the claim that one has “to speak as the English themselves would speak”, for it is in fact the “cloak of the foreign idiom” which allows the text to construct its counter-discursive meanings. The strategies of appropriation adopted by Ahdaf Soueif seek to naturalize the “foreign idiom” within the matrix of the host language. Looking back at Achebe’s text, we may conclude that postcolonial experimentation with language has indeed come a long way.

Paratextually, there is obvious parallelism between the thematic development of the grand-narrative expressed by the texts, and the anti-colonial/postcolonial discursive formations constructed by the very experimentation of the writers with the language.

On the one hand, Achebe, as representative of early postcolonial writers, working in the 50s and 60s, hearkened back to the canon, rewriting it from the insider’s perspective. Soueif, on the other hand, as a writer and commentator of the late 20th century, seems to re-interpret