

Une thèse de doctorat

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Style beyond Borders: Language in Recent Nigerian Fiction

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Several years ago, as I was about to start working on a doctoral dissertation, it was suggested to me that I might try to combine my interest in literature with the linguistic focus of the classes I was helping to teach at the University of Liège. This was a challenging point of departure for, despite the fact that linguistics and literary studies approach the same object – language – from different perspectives, these fields of research are still separated by a border that is all too rarely crossed. The discipline of stylistics, however, has tried to exploit the common ground between the two domains. As such, it provided the methodological basis for my thesis, which, I decided, would focus on contemporary Nigerian fiction.

This combination of method and subject was an obvious choice for two reasons. First of all, the question of language has been central in the field of African literature ever since the 1960s, when the Nigerian critic Obi Wali declared that African writers should write in African languages, and not in former colonial linguistic codes which were exclusively spoken by an educated elite and which, according to him, did not provide an accurate reflection of African cultures. If his arguments were later famously developed by the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o, other authors strongly disagreed with this position. Most notably, the Nigerian novelist and essayist Chinua Achebe expressed the conviction that, even though his mother tongue was Igbo, "the English language w[ould] be able to carry the weight of [his] African experience" ("The African Writer and the English Language", 1965). Achebe advocated the use of a different type of English in African fiction – a language that contained proverbs, idioms and metaphors borrowed from African oral heritages. In many ways, Achebe's leading role in the language debate still symbolizes the vigorousness of his country's literature. For decades, he has been at the vanguard of one of the richest literary traditions of the African continent – a fact which leads to the second reason why I selected this nation's fiction as a topic for my dissertation, namely this body of writing's outstanding quality and its substantial size.

Once this choice had been operated, I proceeded to acquaint myself with the criticism focusing on the analysis of language in Anglophone Nigerian fiction. These initial readings led to three observations. First of all, and somewhat paradoxically, despite the many discussions centred on the subject of language in Nigerian – and more generally African – works of fiction, only a limited number of studies attempted to perform close examinations that highlighted the *literary* significance of the linguistic features found in these texts. Secondly, the few studies that did so successfully hardly ever ventured beyond the analysis of cultural aspects. Put differently, stylistic techniques that could not be traced back to the writers' mother tongues or ethnic backgrounds were largely ignored, probably as a result of the language debate's emphasis on the cultural component of African styles. And thirdly, while successful authors such as Chinua Achebe and Nobel Prize winner Wole Soyinka received due critical attention, virtually no linguistically-oriented research had been conducted on younger novelists. Thus, in my study, I decided to examine how linguistic theory could contribute to the elaboration of literary interpretations of recent works by three Nigerian authors: Gbenga Agbenugba (1966-), Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-) and Ben Okri (1959-).

Following an initial chapter containing contextual and methodological elements, the first analytical chapter of my dissertation focused on the novel *Another Lonely Londoner* (1991), a rarely discussed work by the little-known author Gbenga Agbenugba. The narrative was written in an experimental style mixing English with Nigerian Pidgin and including features of Nigerian English, Black British English, Cockney and Yoruba. I undertook extensive analyses of the interaction between English and Nigerian Pidgin from sociolinguistic and grammatical perspectives, each time with the view of assessing the impact of the languages on the novel's possible literary interpretations. I also gave the other codes, varieties and linguistic influences contained in the book systematic treatment, and it gradually appeared that all these elements combined to produce a complex polyphonic piece.

The following chapter provided an examination of selected works by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie. The investigation into Adichie's writing constituted the point of methodological articulation of my study. The first part followed the way paved by the analysis of Agbenugba's novel, and further looked into issues relating to cultures and linguistic codes, among which the themes of language and food in some of Adichie's short stories, and the presence of Igbo, codeswitching and proverbs in her novel *Purple Hibiscus* (2003). The second part of the chapter departed from explicitly cultural models and investigated the narrator's use of language with a variety of theories, borrowed for instance from functional grammar and cognitive linguistics. This combination of approaches aimed at demonstrating that literary, cultural, social and cognitive methods could complement each other to produce a coherent interpretation of Adichie's work.

The final chapter compared Ben Okri's second novel, *The Landscapes Within* (1981), with the author's revised version of the same book, *Dangerous Love* (1996). A general introduction outlining the changes that had taken place between the two narratives was followed by a discussion of some of the stylistic aspects that distinguished Okri's earlier novel from his later text. The chapter then took a cognitive turn, and tried to establish the importance of metaphor in the novels, especially in *Dangerous Love*. This analysis of metaphor led to the creation of an interpretative framework that formed the basis for a textual analysis of some of the novels' narrative sequences.

The conclusion reaffirmed that the adoption of an eclectic methodology had contributed to the exploration of Gbenga Agbenugba's, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's and Ben Okri's approaches to the notion of identity. In the light of these results, possible lines of research for the future were evoked: on the one hand, I underlined the necessity to develop the interaction between the different linguistic theories I had used; on the other, I suggested that it would be highly interesting to examine a larger literary corpus to reach substantial conclusions on the styles used in Nigerian literature – especially that of the twenty-first century, since it has not yet been subjected to close scrutiny.