

Grammars of Appropriation*

*This lecture was originally given at the University of Naples “L’Orientale” (June 16, 2011).

¹ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, Language, Thought*, trans. by Alfred Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1975).

² Edgar Thompson and E. C. Hughes, eds., *Race: Individual and Collective Behavior* (New York: Free Press, 1958).

We all tend to believe our language *is* us, that it inhabits us and we inhabit it, that it constitutes what Martin Heidegger calls the “House of Being”.¹ It is obvious why this is so, language introduces us to an identifiable world, initiates us into a family, providing those most basic concepts – ‘me’, ‘us’, ‘them’. Language itself identifies us, announces us, even, it seems, defines us, defines the space of being itself. Our language “is not just *a* language”, says Edgar Thompson, “it is *our* language, the language of human beings”.²

This is why the question of language in colonialism, and subsequently the question of language in post-colonial writing have become so hotly debated. The attachment to one’s language and the fear of its suppression or domination has been true of all languages and all societies. But in post-colonial societies language has been the centre of a very material question of struggle. Central to this struggle is the place of language within one’s construction of identity. In a globalised world *everybody* is aware of the issues of power and identity tied up in language. But the achievements of post-colonial writing demonstrate something about the agency of subject peoples when they appropriate a language, and it is the example of their experience with language that can offer hope to local communities in an increasingly globalized world. This is because, fundamentally, post-colonial writing demonstrates that cultural identity is not *embedded* in language but, like the subject, is *produced* by language users. The exciting implication of this is that neither cultural production nor the production of identity is confined to a single language.

A symbol of the impact of a colonial language comes in that moment in Shakespeare’s final play *The Tempest* when the monster Caliban and Prospero have had a bitter exchange and Caliban is banished. Caliban threatens to overwhelm Prospero’s island by miscegenation – “to people the isle with Calibans” (I: ii 351-352),³ and it is his daughter, Miranda, who replies in a speech that defines the colonial relationship. Caliban is an “abhorred slave” (353), “savage” (356), “brutish” (358), and “vile” (359). Miranda’s language has the power to construct Caliban, a power that reflects Prospero’s very tangible control of his body, his actions, his destiny.

This play has for some time been seen as an allegory of the colonial relationship and especially of the way in which language can construct, imprison and define the colonized. But Caliban’s response to Miranda’s diatribe is one of the most memorable in literature and encapsulates the bitter reaction of many colonized peoples to centuries of linguistic and political control: “You taught me language; and my profit on’t/ Is, I know how to curse. The red plague rid you/ For learning me your language” (I: ii 364-66). In terms of the play it is no wonder that Caliban rejects that language. It serves to confine him in Prospero’s power as surely as

³ This and further quotations are from William Shakespeare, *The Tempest*, ed. by Virginia Mason Vaughan and Alden T. Vaughan (London: Arden, 1999).

the magician's cloak. For the language is a feature of Prospero's Art itself. But if we see Caliban as a model of the colonial subject he has done much more with Prospero's language than use it to curse.

The physical and cultural space between Miranda and Caliban, a space that seems to be unbridgeable, a space of time, geography and culture, is ironically, the in-between space that language inhabits. Bhabha calls this the Third Space of Enunciation and for him cultural identity always emerges in this contradictory and ambivalent space, a space that makes untenable that purity and hierarchy of cultures so beloved by imperial discourse.⁴ But this space is also a transcultural space, a 'contact zone', the excess of fixed subjectivity – that space in which cultural identity develops. This is pre-eminently the space of language. It is the space of post-colonial transformation. The radical observation we make from the struggles and transformations of post-colonial language use is that *all* language occupies this space, but its most radical examples occur in the appropriations of English by formerly colonized people. Far from being locked in a linguistic prison like Caliban, the colonized people who have transformed the English language have made it a vehicle of liberation, of self-representation and self-empowerment.

⁴ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 36-39.

Two anglophone African novelists, the Kenyan Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and the Nigerian Chinua Achebe, have debated the pros and cons of using a colonial language longer, more often and more resolutely than other post-colonial writers. The fundamental questions remain the same: Do writers who continue to write in a colonial language 'remain colonized' or can they appropriate the language as a tool for their own purposes? Does literature in a language such as English privilege western cultural values, and with them the whole history of colonial oppression and control? Can such a literature use English as a tool to reveal the non-western world and even record resistance to that colonial world view? Does *any* communication in the dominant language imprison the subject in a dominant discourse?

Let me offer the startling claim that language *itself* occupies the space between identities. The space of the crossing, the 'in-between space' rarely comes into the discourse of either nation or language. For national or cultural identity there seems little space for in-betweenness. Yet it is within this in-between space that people live and speak. To say language occupies this interstitial space may appear both disruptive and extreme. So much cultural identity is invested in language that it appears imperative to most speakers that language be a stable discourse in which ontological certainty can be guaranteed. 'My' language constitutes the avenue of my entry into an articulately experienced world. It is the language through which I came to have a family, a community, a society, a nation. To all intents and purposes, *my language is me*. Yet my language may be used by someone who is not me, my family or culture. How then does my language identify my difference?

The situation becomes extremely fraught when the language is a colonial one. Ngũgĩ's position is stated early in his essay "Towards a National Culture" in which

he expresses four general objections to the use of English: (1) the colonial tongue becomes a province of the élite and thus the language itself reproduces colonial class distinctions; (2) language embodies the “thought processes and values” of its culture; (3) learning a colonial tongue alienates a speaker from the ‘values’ of the local language and from the values of the masses (which to Ngũgĩ are the same thing); (4) national language should not exist at the expense of regional languages which can enhance national unity “in a socialist economic and political context”. To various degrees these objections apply today to the use of a global language.⁵

⁵ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, “Towards a National Culture”, in *Homecoming* (London: HEB, 1972).

English has indeed been an instrument of domination, but does a post-colonial user of English remain a slave in the language because it was first used to enslave? “Those of us who have inherited the English language”, says Achebe,

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.⁶

⁶ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), 58.

The position of most African writers is as pragmatic as Achebe's. The legacies of colonialism constantly need to be addressed, but, paradoxically, they may best be addressed by some of the tools taken from the colonizers. I will address here only Ngũgĩ's major objection, that “[l]anguage embodies the thought processes and values of a culture”. In *Decolonizing the Mind* Ngũgĩ states that “[l]anguage, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture”.⁷ Where English is concerned, “[i]t is widely used as a means of communication across many nationalities. But it is not the carrier of a culture and history of many of those nationalities”.⁸ This is an issue that has become global because virtually every society must now deal with English. The key question here is “how does a language ‘carry’ a culture?” and “[i]s it impossible for a language to ‘carry’ a culture different from the one in which it emerged?”. Obviously what we mean by the term ‘carry’ will be critical in deciding this. Chinua Achebe believes that a language can ‘carry’ a different culture: “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”.⁹ Clearly, what Ngũgĩ and Achebe mean by the term ‘carry’ are quite different things, and this points out some of the difficulty of the debate, because many people believe that to ‘carry’ does not mean simply to ‘bear’, but to ‘embody’. At the centre of this conflict is the myth that a language embodies the essence of a culture. Hence, English, whether transported into a foreign language or settler culture, is held to be profoundly ‘inauthentic’ in its new place. If we were to regard an ‘authentic’ language as one which somehow embodies cultural uniqueness in a way no other language could, then English would be linguistically inappropriate to the development of a non-British culture.

⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonizing the Mind: the Politics of Language in African Literature* (London: James Curry, 1981).

⁸ Ibid., 13

⁹ Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 62.

But if we look at the issue from another angle and ask “What is inherently English about the English language?” we would be confronted with a mosaic of Saxon, Celtic, Norman, French and Latin. When Samuel Johnson tried to fix the English language in place for all time with his dictionary he found the effort futile, that “to pursue perfection was, like the first inhabitants of Arcadia, to chase the sun, which, when they had reached the hill where he seemed to rest, was still at the same distance from them”.¹⁰

The ideas that language embodies the essence of a culture, and hence that this essence cannot be conveyed in another language, are two of the most persistent myths about language, and prevail in every post-colonial region. But the question is: Is it impossible for signs of cultural difference to be communicated in a different language? If those signs communicate difference rather than essence, the answer must obviously be ‘No!’. In fact the very existence of a dynamic field of post-colonial literatures in English refutes this. Appropriations of a language can accommodate various forms of difference. The idea of an authentic relation between a language and a culture is a political concept, and as such, can be very useful, as Gayatri Spivak indicates in her use of the term ‘strategic essentialism’, but it runs the risk of imprisoning writers into a belief in their inability to use to language ‘authentically’.

Chinua Achebe responds to the assertion that African writers will never reach their creative potential till they write in African languages, by reiterating the point that a writer’s use of a language can be as culturally specific as he or she makes it. If we ask ‘Can an African ever learn English well enough to use it effectively in creative writing?’, Achebe’s answer is yes. But the secret such a writer has at his or her disposal is a healthy disregard for its traditions and rules. All writers have a creative sense of the possibilities of language, but the non- English speaking post-colonial writer has the added dimension of a different mother tongue, a different linguistic tradition from which to draw. If we ask ‘Can he or she ever use it like a native speaker?’ Achebe’s answer is ‘I hope not’. His point is one that remains as true today as it was then. The appropriation of English by post-colonial writers is not only possible but extremely effective and enriches the language. The grammars of such appropriations can be very unruly ones, but in Achebe’s words, “[t]he price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use”.¹¹

Ngũgĩ’s purpose in *Decolonizing the Mind* is to draw attention to the political ramifications of using a colonial language. However there is a constant slippage between this political position, which confirms the ability of the individual speaker to make choices, and a position that sees the speaker as unable to avoid the view of the world the language seems to present. To assume that the colonial language inculcates the subject, incontrovertibly, into a way of seeing the world, is to accept, by implication, that the subject is either passive or helpless. This occurs when Ngũgĩ claims of colonized African societies that “it was language which held captive

¹⁰ Samuel Johnson, “Observations on the Present State of Affairs (1756)”, in Donald Green, ed., *The Yale Edition of the Works of Samuel Johnson*, vol. 10 (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1977), 188, 186.

¹¹ Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 61.

¹² Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind*, 32.

their cultures, their values and hence their minds”.¹² To assume that the speaker of a colonial language has a ‘colonized mind’ is to accept a theory of the subject as without agency, something that is refuted at every turn by post-colonial discourse.

Indeed, cultural producers of all kinds have always recognized the utility of the tools at their disposal. Even where writers have used indigenous languages, the influence of English literary traditions is obvious. For instance, the emergence of novels and plays in languages like Wolof, Yoruba, Gikuyu in Africa, and Bengali, Kannada and Malayalam in India, has in each case required the invention of an audience, the creation of audiences of readers to ‘consume’ literary works of a kind that had not previously existed in those languages. Ngũgĩ is quite happy to “utilize all the resources at our disposal – radio, television, film, schools, universities, youth movements, farmers’ co-operatives – to create a different kind of society”. But language is held to be different because it somehow mysteriously embodies the thought processes, values and cultural history of a culture.

A crucial consideration in the link between language and culture is whether a culture can be pinned down to a particular set of beliefs, values and practices, as Ngũgĩ asserts, or whether in fact cultures experience a perpetual process of internal change and transformation. Achebe identifies this changeability with the resonant phrase: “[w]e lived at the crossroads of cultures”. These crossroads have a dangerous potency “because a man might perish there wrestling with multiple-headed spirits, but also he might be lucky and return to his people with the boon of prophetic vision”.¹³ The metaphor of the crossroads does not fully indicate the extent to which cultures may become changed by the intersection. Indeed no culture is static, but is a constant process of hybrid interaction and change. Cultures encounter each other in a contact zone in which both are changed. It is within this Third Space – the Third Space of language itself – that the transcultural work of post-colonial literatures is performed. This work occurs by means of the processes of appropriation and transformation that enable the Third Space to become a space of resistance as well as a space of sharing.

The idea of language as *itself* somehow a Third Space, a vehicle that is by its very nature interstitial and ‘in-between’, means that language is always a translation. This becomes clearer if we consider bilingual writing as a form of inner translation. Salman Rushdie writes: “[t]he word ‘translation’ comes, etymologically, from the Latin for ‘bearing across’. Having been borne across the world, we are translated men. It is normally supposed that something always gets lost in translation; I cling, obstinately, to the notion that something can also be gained”.¹⁴ Whether lost or gained, the ‘bearing across’ is a dynamic and dialogic process.

Strategies of Transformation

The strategies by which a colonial language is transformed are extremely varied. Apart from direct glossing in the text, either by explanation or parenthetical insertions,

¹³ Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 67-68.

¹⁴ Salman Rushdie, *Imaginary Homelands: Essays and Criticism 1981-91* (London: Granta, 1991), 17.

such devices include the inclusion of untranslated words, syntactic fusion, in which the English prose is structured according to the syntactic principles of a first language; neologisms, new lexical forms in English which are informed by the semantic and morphological exigencies of a mother tongue; the direct inclusion of untranslated lexical items in the text, ethno-rhythmic prose which constructs an English discourse according to the rhythm and texture of a first language, and the transcription of dialect and language variants of many different kinds, whether they come from diglossic, polydialectal or monolingual speaking communities. I elaborate these transformative strategies at greater length in *Caliban's Voice*.¹⁵

¹⁵ Bill Ashcroft, *Caliban's Voice* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

If we look closely at these inter-cultural linguistic devices and the commentary which surrounds them, we can see that they are often claimed to reproduce the culture by some process of metaphoric embodiment. Evidently many writers believe that by such means they are keeping faith with their own culture and transporting it into the new medium.¹⁶ Thus the untranslated words, the sounds and textures of the language are vaguely held to have the power of the culture they signify by a process of ontological union. Such uses of language are metonymic. Code switching, ethno-rhythmic prose, the refusal to translate certain words, all have an important cultural function, not by embodying the culture, by representing cultural identity, but by inscribing difference. They install what can be called a 'metonymic gap', a sense of distance that comes about through the use of certain linguistic strategies. In effect the writer is saying 'I am using your language so that you will understand my world, but you will also know by the differences in the way I use it that you cannot share that world'. In this way language variance has a metonymic function in the literary text. It occupies fully and openly the contested space of translation.

¹⁶ Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day*, 61-62.

Ultimately, literature reveals that although 'language speaks' in that we can only say what the laws of language allow, the inventiveness of speakers at the limits of those laws, the capacity to appropriate and transform a dominant language with the grammar and syntax of a vernacular tongue, is a characteristic of post-colonial writing. Why is this important? Because the task of decolonization has not ended but keeps reinventing itself just as neo-colonial power keeps re-inventing itself as neoliberalism and neoconservatism. Although globalization is not a simple extension of imperialism, we still need to contend with imperialism. The message of post-colonial writing in its use of an imperial language is that we do not have to be victims, but can interpolate the discourses that victimize and transform them in ways that change the forever.