

THEORIES AND METHODOLOGIES

Translation, Postcoloniality, Literary Multilingualism

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This essay discusses the intersection of translation and postcolonial African literature in the light of the writing of literary multilingualism and heteroglossia, tracing pathways from an anti-colonial discourse to decolonization and the postcolony. The trajectory evolves from the colonizer-colonized binary, marked by an anti-colonial discourse, at the inception of African European-language literature, to the dynamics of class and power at the basis of contemporary writing in African fiction. Postcolonial translation studies has for the most part been centered on the strategies employed by postcolonial subjects to subvert language, thus fashioning a counterhegemonic, anti-colonialist discourse. Research in this subfield of translation studies has closely followed trends in postcolonial studies, which has been defined largely in terms of a dichotomous framework pitting the West against the East, the colonized against the colonizer, the Global South against the Global North, and so on. Translation was thrust into the role of interceder or bridge builder between distant or alien cultures, negotiating the boundaries between tradition and modernity—that is, writing the oral tradition of a colonized people in the language of the colonizer. Translation was therefore viewed as the displacement or transportation of the subaltern other to an alien context of modernity. Although this approach has enhanced knowledge in the areas of multilingualism, literary heteroglossia, and the sociolinguistic underpinnings of power relations studies, it has often overlooked those linguistic and cultural practices in the postcolony that are fairly autonomous and not subordinate to relations with the former colonial power.

The heterogeneity of language practice in the postcolony poses a challenge for normative translation theory, which, until a major

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cultural turn in the 1990s, often assumed a transfer between stable or monolithic linguistic or cultural entities. Reality in the postcolony is necessarily pluralistic and chaotic and therefore resistant to the homogenizing effect of normative translation. This conception of postcoloniality seeks to draw our attention away from the reductive paradigm of colonizer-colonized to one informed by class and power differentials within the postcolony. It redefines our understanding of postcoloniality in translation studies with an emphasis on the linguistic heterogeneity of postcolonial society and the various modes of translation and intercultural communication within that space. Postcolonial translation studies therefore is oriented to mirror current trends in contemporary literature in the Global South that, for the most part, showcase linguistic and cultural practices that reflect life as it is lived within the postcolony. For an understanding of the evolution of the discourse on postcolonial African literary translation, it is important to trace the pathways from its inception to current discourses on literary trends in the postcolony and its diaspora.

Tradition and Modernity

Early conceptualizations of the writing and translation of African European-language literature generally cast translation as a process of negotiation between tradition and modernity, modernity viewed in terms of writing and tradition represented by orality. The significance of orality for translation is due mainly to the literacy bias of modernity, based on the privileging of writing over orality. Modernity had ascribed a stigma to the concept of orality, which had become synonymous with backward and primitive. When modernism began to seek traces of its nostalgic past, cultures of orality became a sounding board for modernity and the stages of its progress and enlightenment. The concept of orality has evolved far beyond these modernist preconceptions, a development enhanced by the seminal work of Walter J. Ong (1982), Jack Goody (1977), and Albert Lord (1960). From a mainly negative perception as unwritten, nonliterate, and exotic, orality has grown into a major field of

scientific interest and the focus of interdisciplinary research including translation studies. Although the intersection of orality studies and translation research is fairly recent, oral expression and performance have long been integral to the art of translation. Postcolonialism and cultural studies have been instrumental in locating orality within the purview of translation inquiry. Following the cultural turn in translation studies, preoccupation with issues of ideology, identity, and power relations led to a growing interest in the translation and representation of minority cultures. Many oral texts come from cultures with colonial histories, which are often stereotyped as primitive, marginal, or exotic because of the predominance of oral tradition. Hence the urge for the inscription of oral aesthetics by literate cultures through writing and other forms of encoding in conformity with the modernist preference for the permanence of writing over the ephemerality and unpredictability of orality. Therefore, translation assumes a mediating role between the perceived timelessness of the primitive other and the modernizing West.

There is an imperative on writers from historically dominated cultures to use the language of hegemony for purposes of emancipation and recognition on the global stage. This in itself imposes a bilingual state of being, which calls on translation as a writing strategy for dominated writers. Faced with the choice of either writing in a local language without literary capital or in a global language, these writers opt for the colonial language with its global reach, but seek to mold the language to suit local forms of literary expression. Translation has therefore played an important role in shaping the literary discourse of formerly colonized nations by creating a unique idiom through the writing of orality. Take for example the following excerpt from Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* (1964), one of the early African fictions in English:

You asked me why I am giving you my hands in this happening-thing, when you have become the enemy of everything in the town? Well, I am giving you my hands and my inside and even my shadow to let them see in their insides that if even the people do not

know, we, you and I, know and have prepared our bodies to stand in front of them and tell them so. They now feel that I really am a witch, so I put fear into their insides. That sweetened my inside because I had wanted to remain a witch in their eyes so that I could do something against them. Then you returned, and when I started to hear the happening-things in your name, my hopes rose to the eye of the sky. And then yesterday you came running, being pursued by the people. So I called you in. These are my answering words to your questioning words. (56)

Okara's novel is a telling example of early European-language writing where Western and non-Western language cultures collide, which allows for the exploration of the interface between orality and writing as a mode of creative writing and translating. The African European-language text is a translating text that (re)articulates identity as it translates African oral narratives into a European language consciousness. Okara confronts the African and European worlds through the translation (or transliteration) of his Ijaw oral culture into English and thereby defies or subverts the anthropological opposition between European modernism and African primitivism by staging a decolonizing modernity for Africa.

Given the African European-language writer's bicultural experience, straddling the African and the European-language cultures, the writer's use of the colonial language often reflected a kind of hybridity and made for a peculiar European language variety. Bill Ashcroft and his coauthors heralded these new possibilities, which they saw as the source of an emerging diversity in English literature written in a wide variety of Englishes. Language is a major factor in defining African Europhone literature and should therefore draw considerable attention in the reading process. This fact must be accounted for in any reading of African literature. Translation becomes part of the reading process in order to highlight the fact that the African writer's apparent non-Western use of the colonial language is often heavily grounded in the oral narrative aesthetic. For the colonized community, translation as mediation between tradition and modernity is

used to counter the effects of empire, thus paving the way to a kind of modernity without the stranglehold of empire.

Translating the Postcolony

Following the end of the Cold War in the 1980s—which had split African nations between the capitalist West and the communist East as a result of the geopolitics of Euro-American interests, coupled with the distancing or fading of the urgency of anti-colonial struggles for independence—African European-language literature began to move beyond the colonizer-colonized paradigm and became more engaged in fictionalizing the postcolony itself or postcolonial subjectivities in the diaspora. Many of the new wave of writers were born after independence in the 1960s and even some of those born shortly before independence may not have been old enough to witness or participate in the independence struggles. The ideals of Negritude and Pan Africanism receded in the face of the indelible struggles for economic and political equality and freedom in the postcolony, including migrant communities in the colonial metropole. These post-postcolonial fictions have turned inward, as it were, drawing heavily on daily life and events within the postcolony and in the diaspora. Of course, there are still incursions into themes about the high-handedness of the colonial metropole, but they are mainly attacks on the politics of neocolonialism and the nefarious effects of globalization and environmental planetarism. Post-postcoloniality or metacoloniality engages more aggressively with a variety of themes including the plight of postcolonial subjects, feminism, gender and sexual orientation, LGBTQ+ rights, the environment, human rights issues, dictatorship, and plutocracy. It is interesting to see how this current literary trend intersects with recent activism by movements like Black Lives Matter. Issues of white supremacy, anti-Black racism, and colorism, which directly affect the lives of people of African descent, are raised in African post-postcolonial fiction owing to the global continuum or linkages in the experiences of Black people. An overriding theme in these post-postcolonial fictions

is the power dynamics between the masses and the elite or simply the relation between class and power within the postcolony and its diaspora. Of course, neocolonialism has also taken root but is seen as enabled by the corrupt collaboration between the former colonizers and the puppet or sham leadership they installed in autocratic governments following independence.

Post-Postcoloniality

Contemporary postcolonial literature now skirts the colonizer-colonized paradigm, to a certain extent, and focuses attention on the travails of life beyond postcolonialism (hence my reference to “post-postcoloniality” as a trope for apprehending reality in the postcolony after decades of political independence). This literature addresses issues or themes related to neocolonialism, globalization, migration, and global cosmopolitanism. It seeks to foster understanding of postcolonial contexts not as counters or clones of Western modernism but rather as products of their own histories and cultural patrimony.

Post-postcoloniality, as a paradigm shift, resets the object of inquiry in terms of the dynamics of class and power within the postcolony, turning the gaze of postcolonial inquiry inward rather than outward toward some hegemonic power. The politics of resistance, characteristic of postcolonial writing and translation, adopts the trajectory of resistance of the masses aimed at the elite rather than the well-worn strategy of resistance to colonial domination. Of particular interest to explorations of post-postcolonial literature and translation is the fictionalization of literary multilingualism and heteroglossia through aesthetic practices that draw on the interface between orality and linguistic innovation. As a specimen of writing and translation beyond postcoloniality, the literature about child soldiers presents the practice of literary multilingualism and heteroglossia in the light of the dynamics of class and power within the postcolony. The following excerpt is taken from Ahmadou Kourouma’s novel *Allah n’est pas obligé* (2000; *Allah Is Not Obligated*):

Et deux . . . Mon école n’est pas arrivée très loin; j’ai coupé cours élémentaire deux. J’ai quitté le banc parce que tout le monde a dit que l’école ne vaut plus rien, même pas le pet d’une vieille grand-mère. (C’est comme ça on dit en nègre noir africain indigène quand une chose ne vaut rien. On dit que ça vaut pas le pet d’une vieille grand-mère parce que le pet de la grand-mère foutue et malingre ne fait pas de bruit et ne sent pas très, très mauvais.) (9–13)

Number two . . . I didn’t get very far at school; I gave up in my third year in primary school. I chucked it because everyone says education’s not worth an old grandmother’s fart any more. (In Black Nigger African Native talk, when a thing isn’t worth much we say it’s not worth an old grandmother’s fart, on account of how a fart from a fucked-up old granny doesn’t hardly make any noise and it doesn’t even smell really bad.)

(*Allah Is Not Obligated* 1–5)

The literature on child soldiers became a popular genre in African postcolonial literature, because it represented the ultimate dysfunction and chaos of the postcolony now under the control of the local elite that is corrupt and given to plutocracy and megalomania. In the above excerpt the protagonist is a child soldier who had barely had an elementary education and had been hardened by drugs and turned into a killing machine. Kourouma succeeds in capturing the approximate French language of the character and highlights the practice of literary heteroglossia and polylingualism, which includes the mixing of popular and standard language, a disregard for language registers, and a fair amount of obscenities and tough talking. Given the current climate of political correctness and wokeness, Kourouma’s text flaunts the rules and uses expressions with the *N*-word such as “nègre noir africain indigène” to describe popular indigenous speech. The expression is also used elsewhere in the novel to distinguish between indigenous African populations and people of African descent from enslaved communities in the new world who were resettled in West Africa following the back-to-Africa movement. The deliberate use of swear words and

expressions including those not mentionable in public such as “l'école ne vaut plus rien, même pas le pet d'une vieille grand-mère” (“education's not worth an old grandmother's fart any more”) is meant to jolt the reader into a kind of consciousness of the harsh reality of a child soldier and to convey the utter dysfunction and chaos of the postcolony. Some of the statements that are unmentionable in polite company are cast as literal translations of proverbs or sayings drawn from the oral tradition. This gives the writer some measure of poetic license, as it is often claimed that African oral tradition allows for obscenity in the expression of proverbs or other expressions or sayings of wisdom. The intralingual practice of literary heteroglossia and polylingualism in post-postcolonial fiction draws on the practice of multilingualism as a fact of life in contemporary postcolonial societies. This recalls translation as an integral aspect of linguistic or verbal communication in multilingual contexts. In other words, translation is inherent to the reading and comprehension of current postcolonial fiction.

The next excerpt is drawn from Mongo Beti's *Trop de soleil tue l'amour* (1999; *Too Much Sun Kills Love*), the first in a planned trilogy of detective novels Beti began to write when he returned to his native Cameroon and became disillusioned with the deplorable state of affairs in that postcolony. Unfortunately, Beti passed away and the trilogy was never completed. After decades of writing against French colonial and neocolonial domination, Beti turned his critical gaze at his country of birth upon settling there after retirement from France. Beti, like Kourouma, is among a few African writers who contributed significantly to anti-colonial literature, before and after independence, and who turned their gaze somewhat inward at the postcolony in the twilight of their life. The novel, *Trop de soleil tue l'amour*, is a searing depiction of corruption, dysfunction, chaos, and plutocracy in the postcolony of Cameroon (see Mbembe). The following excerpt showcases police corruption and the general sense of insecurity in a country where dictatorship and political power are sustained through espionage and the spread of fear. The main characters here are Zam, the

journalist, who fears for his life because of insidious threats from the regime, and Eddie, who had returned home from France and was passing for a lawyer. They have just had an encounter with a secret service police officer who, it is assumed, was trailing them and spying on the journalist.

—Qu'est-ce qui lui a pris tout à coup de capituler comme ça, en rase campagne? demanda Zam à son avocat dès qu'ils furent dehors.

—Je suppose, fit l'avocat, que tu veux parler de cet *enculé de flicailon de merde*, que je n'avais d'ailleurs jamais vu auparavant, ce qui ne laisse pas de m'étonner? *Tu as vu comment il cause?* On dirait un acteur qui a longtemps répété les répliques. Et comment il te reluquait, tu as vu? *Et si c'était un pédé?* . . . T'as vraiment pas pigé, *journaloux de mes fesses?* Pour leur *foutre la pétoche*, à ces *enfoirés*, y a des mots fétiches aujourd'hui. Tu prononces, par exemple, *fanatiques*, *initiatives incontrôlées*, *individus vindicatifs*, et le tour est joué. (37–39; my emphases)

“What came over him all of a sudden to toss in the towel in the middle of a round like that?” Zam asked his lawyer as soon as they were outside.

“I suppose,” answered the lawyer, “you're referring to that shitty asshole of a small-time cop, who in any case, I'd never seen before? Which doesn't make it any less surprising. Did you just hear him chat? Like he's an actor who has spent a long time rehearsing his lines. And how he ogled you, did you see? And what if he was queer?” . . . “You really don't get it, do you, hack of my ass? And you call yourself a journalist? If you want to scare those assholes shitless, all you need these days are a few magic words like fanatics, uncontrolled initiatives, vindictive individuals, and the game's over.” (my trans.)

The excerpt showcases the use of popular swear words designed to reinforce the depiction of an amoral, dysfunctional postcolony where a tough-talking fake lawyer succeeds by playing on the perception of generalized insecurity faced by the population including the police, who are also victims of the corrupt regime they help maintain in power. The text is dialogic in that the language is polylingual alternating standard French and popular French argot, used here

to enhance the toughness and unpredictability of life in the postcolony. Of course, Eddie is also using Parisian argot to buttress his image as a street-smart lawyer from Paris, nonetheless. It is rather ironic that the police would back off out of sheer ignorance of the officialese, typical of postcolonial bureaucracies, thrown at them by the fake lawyer. You would think that being public servants and enforcers of the authority of the regime, the police would be versed in such bureaucratic jargon. The mention of queerness and the recourse to popular French or Parisian argot are indicative of writing strategies that are becoming commonplace in current literature about the postcolony and the diaspora.

As a clear case of art imitating life, postcolonial literature has continued to pursue themes that are inspired by the ever-evolving transformations of society, whether political, economic, or sociocultural. African literature has evolved from its anti-colonial roots, taking on several epithets—namely, pre- or post-independence, postcolonial, post-postcolonial, and decolonial. Decolonization has been instrumental in reasserting the African logos within postcolonial spaces and globally in the diaspora. This evolution has been characterized by linguistic mutations resulting in a generalized practice of literary multilingualism and heteroglossia reflective of reality in contemporary postcolonial society. African migrant literature, which includes narratives of migration to and from the continent, is a fast-developing area of fiction sustained by the continuum or linkages between the continent

and its various diaspora communities. There is a sense of an emerging and consequential body of work and creative impulses in literature, music, cinema, and other audiovisual and electronic media propelling Africinity globally. Translation is at the center of these developments. It is indeed timely to explore the writing and translation of African European-language literature in terms of the reality beyond the postcolonial—that is, in the light of the essence of an emerging post-postcoloniality or metacoloniality. There is potential here for an overlap with the developing trends globally and within the diaspora emanating from discourse having to do with global activism (such as the Black Lives Matter movement) and migration.

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