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| RESEARCH ARTICLE

Language Issue in African Literature: A Phenomenal Debate of the Past, the Present and the Future

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| ABSTRACT
This paper contributes to the ongoing growth of African literature by addressing one of its most enduring and complex debates: the question of language. For decades, writers and scholars have struggled to reach common ground on the appropriate medium of expression, as their positions are shaped by diverse cultural backgrounds, political ideologies, and literary traditions. Through a critical and diachronic approach, this study revisits key moments of the debate, before and after the Asmara Declaration, which brought together African intellectuals across the continent. It demonstrates how the colonial legacy continues to generate both opportunities and dilemmas: while European languages allow for broader readership and global visibility, they simultaneously marginalize African languages and their cultural depth. In the context of globalization and the digital age, the issue has become even more pressing as African literature reaches its Golden Age. The study concludes that African literature, though geographically singular, remains culturally and linguistically plural, embodying Africa's complex historical trajectory.

| KEYWORDS

Language issue, Golden Age of African literature, phenomenal debate, post-colonial discourse, globalization

| ARTICLE INFORMATION

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Introduction

In the vast area of African literature, woven from the diverse threads of cultures, histories, and languages, a phenomenal debate stands out as a monumental pillar: the issue of language. From the early stirrings of post-colonial independence to the current era of globalization, the question of which language serves as the most fitting vessel for African literary expression has sparked controversial dialogues among scholars and writers. This paper embarks on a thorough analysis of this major discourse, tracing its evolution from the echoes of historical gatherings to the present-day crossroads of linguistic plurality and cultural identity. At the heart of this scholarly study lie fundamental questions: should African literature be predominantly penned in indigenous languages, reclaiming cultural autonomy and resisting the lingering vestiges of colonialism? Should it embrace the global reach of languages imposed by imperial powers, thereby ensuring wider accessibility and resonance on the world stage? This complexity as a reality reverberates through the corridors of literary theory, criticism, and practice, which casts a shadow over the very essence of African literary creation.

Indeed, the genesis of this debate can be traced back to historical moments in African literary history, such as the landmark gatherings at Makerere University in 1962, Dakar and Fourah Bay in 1963. These significant conferences served as tests of intellectual ferment where luminaries of African letters grappled with the complex interplay of linguistic diversity, cultural heritage, and literary innovation. Scholars such as Obi Wali, John P. Hutchison, and prominent African writers among whom Chinua Achebe from Nigeria, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o from Kenya, Wole Soyinka From Nigeria, Cheikh Hamidou Kane and Birago

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Diop from Senegal, etc., emerged as vanguards of divergent perspectives, each passionately advocating for their vision of an African literary landscape.

The Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures in 2000, in turn, marked a watershed moment in this ongoing discourse. It crystallizes the collective aspirations of scholars and writers toward linguistic emancipation and cultural reclamation. This declaration, echoing the voices of past generations, affirmed the intrinsic value of African languages as channels of knowledge, identity, and unity while also calling for their rightful place in the educational and literary spheres. Yet, amidst these calls for linguistic revitalization and cultural affirmation, the frameworks of the debate remain fluid and contested. Scholars such as John P. Hutchison, Boubacar Boris Diop, and Lencer Achieng' Ndede continue to probe the nuances of language policy, education, and literary production. Their view is to offer fresh insights into the intricate dynamics of language and power in the African literary landscape. As we stand on the threshold of a new era characterized by the uncompromising march of globalization and the ever-shifting sands of cultural exchange, the language issue in African literature assumes even greater significance.

This paper endeavors to navigate these turbulent waters with scholarly rigor and critical insight. It sheds light on the multifaceted dimensions of a debate that lies at the very heart of African literary identity. Through a diachronic approach, a literary critique, and theoretical inquiry, the study seeks to draw sustainable conclusions that lead to less divergences and more perspectives. Its main objective is to chart a path toward a more inclusive, equitable, and vibrant literary future for Africa. The paper delves into the historical, theoretical, and practical dimensions of the language issue in African literature. It begins by contextualizing the debate within the broader currents of post-colonial discourse, tracing its origins from decisive moments in African literary history to contemporary expressions of linguistic agency and cultural resurgence. Based on a critical review of influential works by the aforementioned scholars and literary figures, this study will illuminate the divergent standpoints and underlying tensions that have animated discourse for decades.

I. Literature review

This literature review presents a comprehensive overview of the evolution of discourse surrounding African literature. It traces its roots from the historical gathering of African Anglophone Writers in English at Makerere University, Kampala, in June 1962, organized by the late Ezekiel Mphahlele. It discloses a narrative that spans decades and encapsulates pivotal debates, conferences, and declarations that have shaped the trajectory of African literary studies. It all started with Obi Wali's seminal essay, "The Dead End of African Literature" which catalyzed the investigation of the intricate relationship between linguistic diversity and the evolution of African literary theory. Wali's critique highlights the paradox of using colonial languages to articulate indigenous African experiences and underscores the imperative for African writers to reclaim agency by embracing their native languages as vehicles for literary expression.

After the Kampala conference, the discourse expanded to include broader Francophone perspectives as evidenced by the Dakar and Fourah Bay conferences in 1963. Mphahlele's elucidation of these gatherings underscores the emergent dialogue on the integration of African literature into university curricula, which reflects a significant step in the institutionalization of African literary studies: Mphahlele reports in his "African Literature and Universities: A Report on Two Conferences to Discuss African Literature and the University Curriculum":

> At Dakar were represented the host university itself, the universities of Grenoble (France), Lovanium (Congo), Witwatersrand (Johannesburg), South Africa, Ghana, and Nigeria, and Ecole Normale de Brazzaville (Congo). Four Senegalese writers were also present: Cheikh Hamidou Kane (novelist), Sembene Ousmane (novelist), Ousmane Soce Diop (novelist) Birago Diop (poet); also Camara Laye (Guinea novelist), and the Congolese poet Tchicaya UTamsi. President Leopold Sedar Senghor opened the conference. Much time was spent on papers on one aspect and another of the content of African French writing. It was decided to set up a centre de documentation at Lovanium University to conduct research into African literature and to guide teachers in the choice of authors for study. It was felt that African literature should be studied under a chair of comparative literature, or African studies, and it would be premature to award a *Certificat de littérature* or *Certificat d'histoire littérarire africaine*. One felt that the tendency throughout was to emphasize what one might call the sociology of African writing rather than talk about it as literature. Indeed, the speakers defined their trend in no uncertain terms in their literary criticism. What was not discussed at all, and which most probably decided the conference to place the study of African literature outside French literature (Mphahlele, 1963, p.16).

What arises from these rich exchanges is that a compromise was found and the idea was to have African literature taught in universities in both French and English regardless of the restrictions it could cause to African nationalists. Although Wali found keen interest in the debate, he did not agree on the compromise, which led Chinua Achebe to respond to his thoughts. Thus, the review navigates through trailblazing responses to Wali's critique particularly Chinua Achebe's essay "The African Writer and the English Language" which offers a nuanced defense of English as a vital medium to convey African experiences on a global stage. Achebe's advocacy for a pluralistic conception of African literature accommodates both English and indigenous languages and lays the groundwork for subsequent debates. To support this idea, Abiola Irele once argued in a conference of African writers:

> The idea of teaching Swahili as the *lingua franca* of Africa was first introduced by Wole Soyinka at Dar es-Salam and he reiterated this idea in 1977 at *the First Black and World Arts Colloquium*. This implies translating all the existing works of literature into that language. To me, it is not necessary to establish a common language for all Africans and I do not see any problem with the multiplicity of African languages (Irele , 1981, p.26).

However, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Decolonising the Mind* questions the colonial legacies that have shaped linguistic hierarchies within African literary production. Ngũgĩ calls for a decolonization of the mind and stresses the broader imperative to reclaim indigenous languages as instruments of cultural affirmation and resistance. Thus, the narrative culminates with the landmark Asmara Declaration on African Languages and Literatures which crystallizes decades of scholarly discourse into a clarion call for linguistic emancipation and cultural resurgence. This declaration's emphasis on the centrality of African languages in fostering continental unity and decolonizing African minds heralds a paradigm shift in African literary studies:

> We noted with pride that despite all the odds against them, African languages as vehicles of communication and knowledge survive and have a written continuity of thousands of years. Colonialism and neocolonialism created some of the most serious obstacles against African languages and literatures. We noted with concern the fact that these obstacles still haunt Africa and continue to block the mind of the continent. /…/ We identified a profound incongruity in colonial languages speaking for the continent.

The Asmara declaration further affirms the following points:

- African languages must take on the duty, responsibility, and challenge of speaking for the continent.
- The diversity of African languages reflects the rich cultural heritage of Africa and must be used as an instrument of African unity.
- Dialog among African languages is essential: African languages must use the instrument of translation for advanced communication among all people, including the disabled.
- All African children have the unalienable right to attend school and learn in their mother tongues. Every effort should be made to develop African languages at all levels of education.
- African languages are essential for the decolonization of African minds and African Renaissance. (The Asmara Declaration, 2000).

It appears that after the Asmara declaration, the debate has taken an interesting move and invites scholars to produce with more sound arguments. In recent scholarship, Hutchison's exploration of African language literature as a vehicle for cultural nationalism underscores the urgent need for educational reform rooted in linguistic diversity and local community engagement. Nonetheless, Lencer Achieng' Ndede's interrogation of the definitional boundaries of African literature from an Afrocentric and postcolonial perspective challenges conservative paradigms. The latter support a more inclusive and expansive conception of African literary expression.

Unarguably, current research show that the linguistic question raised in African literature as a central concern of postcolonial literary discourse, still continues to transform in the light of contemporary developments in decolonial theory, sociolinguistics, and digital culture. Something striking to mention is that while early theorists such as Obi Wali , Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o established the canonical foundations of the debate, twenty-first century scholarship particularly the works of John Mugane, Biodun Jeyifo, and Stephanie Bosch Santana have re-engaged and renewed it in light of new media ecologies, transnational readerships, and the political economy of language use in Africa.

As Dia observes, the earliest phase of the debate was marked by the Achebe -Ngũgĩ dichotomy and the main question was whether African literature should be written in European or indigenous languages. Achebe's pragmatism in "English and the

African Writer" saw English as a practical, unifying tool capable of expressing African experience globally, while Ngũgĩ's *Decolonising the Mind* denounced colonial languages as instruments of epistemic domination. For Ngũgĩ, reclaiming African languages was tantamount to reclaiming the African self as he contends that "language carries culture, and culture carries the entire body of values by which we come to perceive ourselves" (Ngũgĩ , 1986, p.16). In the same vein, Tobias Warner's seminal work, *The Tongue-Tied Imagination*, reintroduces the debates, focusing on the Francophone side and showing another dichotomy between two Senegalese writers, Sembene Ousmane and Birago Diop who engaged in the same contradictions that opposed African anglophone writers. To update the audience, Warner notes that "More than fifty years after the Dakar and Makerere conferences, the language debates have come to feel untimely in a different way. There is now a palpable sense for many writers and critics that the issue of language is a holdover from the past" (Warner, 2019, p.3).

The heated debates continue accommodating new tends and nuances. As regards Ngũgĩ's, his later works reveal a significant evolution and deepening of his position. In *Secure the Base: Making Africa Visible in the World* he no longer frames the issue simply as a binary between English and African languages. Instead, he re-situates the debate in a global epistemic framework, arguing that linguistic decolonization must proceed alongside intellectual sovereignty. He envisions African languages as bases of cultural and philosophical renewal capable of engaging global modernity on their own terms. In his words, "to secure the base is to root oneself in one's languages and cultures, not to retreat into parochialism but to meet the world as an equal"(Ngũgĩ ,2016, p.5). Indeed, this updated stance demonstrates that Ngũgĩ's thought has developed from an exclusive call for linguistic purity to a relational and strategic multilingualism. He seems to recognize that language is not an end in itself but a means to reclaim the visibility of Africa in the global knowledge order. His emphasis has thus shifted from "rejecting" colonial languages to re-centering African languages as epistemic authorities in dialogue with others. This evolution responds to critics who saw his earlier approach as idealistic or isolationist. More relevantly in his "The politics of translation: notes towards an African Language Policy", he recommends translation as a facilitating tool for cultures to communicate: "Translation is an integral part of the everyday in nature and society and has been central to all cultures, but we may not always notice it" (Ngũgĩ ,2016, p.131).

Biodun Jeyifo, in his essay "English is an African Language – Ka Dupe! [For and Against Ngũgĩ]" acknowledges Ngũgĩ's moral and political consistency but challenges what he calls the "myth of absolute autochthony." For Jeyifo, English has become a legitimate African language through its long appropriation and localization, as evidenced in African creative and political texts, from Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* to the Arusha Declaration. Ngũgĩ, however, refines his response in his dialogue with John Mugane's *Contemporary Conversations: Is English an African Language?* where he accepts that linguistic realities in Africa are plural but maintains that African languages must remain the locus of thought-production and cultural creativity, not just mediums of translation. In the same vein, John Mugane complements Ngũgĩ's more recent view by proposing the concept of "vertical English," referring to how English operates as a *gatekeeping* language of privilege in education, law, and administration. Mugane's critique reveals that the issue is not only linguistic but *socio-economic*: English as an African language remains stratified, accessible to elites while excluding the majority of speakers of African languages. His sociolinguistic lens updates the political urgency of Ngũgĩ's project, showing that the colonial hierarchies of language persist under neoliberal globalization. This is the reason why Ngũgĩ showed his reluctance regarding the stakes of globalization arguing that it creates imbalance to the detriment of African languages rather than balancing the cultural trade that it undertakes:

> The third barrier arises from fears of being left out of the heaven promised by globalization. This arises from the earlier colonially rooted notion that African languages are not modern enough and that European ones are the only ladder to global heaven. If Africa promotes its languages, the continent will miss the train to Heaven. (Ngũgĩ ,2016, p.126)

Equally important, Stephanie Bosch Santana's *Forms of Mobility: Genre, Language, and Media in African Literary Cultures* relocates the debate into digital space. She argues that in the age of blogs, Facebook fiction, and multilingual online communities, African writers have reimagined language as a mobile and hybrid system rather than a fixed identity marker. Her concept of "forms of mobility" highlights how African languages, English, and creoles coexist dynamically across digital and transnational contexts. This reinforces Ngũgĩ's more recent insight that linguistic sovereignty does not mean isolation, but the ability to participate in the world through one's own linguistic base. Santana's argument that "the digital space has Africanized the global" extends Ngũgĩ's call for visibility into the realm of media and technology. Her analysis of multilingual digital texts, combining English, Chichewa, and Zulu, demonstrates how contemporary African writers operationalize Ngũgĩ's vision of linguistic empowerment, not by rejecting global languages but by transforming their use through African logics of expression. In this contemporary constellation, Ngũgĩ's position stands as both the foundation and the evolving core of the debate. From the radical linguistic nationalism of *Decolonising the Mind* to the epistemic pluralism of *Secure the Base*, Ngũgĩ charts a path that connects cultural reclamation with global intellectual engagement. His more recent thinking aligns with a decolonial paradigm that understands language as a site of negotiation, not of withdrawal, a vision that contemporary African literature, from print to digital, continues

to materialize. But, questions still arise as Warner posits: "the language question was once one of the great intractable problems haunting literary decolonization in the twentieth century, but it has since acquired a reputation for being a blind alley of identity politics and narrow nationalism" (Warner, 2019, p.3). In sum, the literature review steers a rich scholarly survey that delineates the contours of an evolving discourse that continues to nurture African literary studies with its complexities and nuances and perspectives.

II. On the definition of the complex literary map of African Literature

African literature, unlike its national counterparts across the world_ French, German, or Danish literatures _ presents a unique challenge in defining its geographic and literary boundaries. While national literature is often confined within the linguistic borders of a single language, African literature spans a vast expanse of languages, cultures, and experiences. This inherent diversity imbues it with a rich but complex literary map that defies easy categorization. Indeed, the scope of African literature extends beyond mere geography; it encompasses several linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts that shape its literary landscape.

The complexity is further compounded by the plurality of identity in African literature. Unlike national literature, which is anchored in a singular linguistic and cultural identity, African literature is polyglot. It rests on a myriad of languages and dialects. From English and French to indigenous African languages like Yoruba, Hausa, Pulaar, Wolof, etc., its linguistic character mirrors the continent's diverse heritage and multiplicity of voices. This diversity not only enriches African literature but also presents a profound challenge in defining its contours and boundaries. This is the reason why the debate cannot escape potential divergences at all. While Wali defends the necessity of developing African languages in creative writing, arguing against the predominance of European languages like French and English in African literature, he contends that literature should exploit the potential of language and advocates the use of African languages to enrich cultural expression:

> Literature, after all, is the exploitation of the possibilities of language. It is the African languages that are in crying need of this kind of development, not the overworked French and English. There is, for instance, a good deal of scholarly work being done in the linguistic structure of several African languages, but there is practically no use being made of these in creative writing, simply because we are all busy fighting over the commonplaces of European literature. If linguistic science devotes so much energy and attention to African languages in spite of their tribal and limited scope, why should imaginative literature, which in fact has more chances of enriching the people's culture, consider it impossible to adventure in this direction? (Wali, 1963, p. 14)

Wali's perspective is to value linguistic diversity in shaping African literature and challenging Eurocentric literary conventions. However, Ndede has more recently explored the complexity surrounding Wali's "strict" definition of African literature, particularly when she points to debates regarding language, themes, and authorship. For her, Afrocentric critics emphasize themes such as nativism and the significance of indigenous languages in defining African literature whereas structuralist nativists view African literature as rooted in indigenous practices:

> The term "African literature" has presented a lot of problems, especially what is considered African literature, in which language it should be written, what it should be about, and who should be considered an African writer. Most Afrocentric critics' definitions attribute to nativism - the claim that true African independence requires a literature of its own, with thematic nativists arguing that African literature addresses the everyday material concerns of the African reading public in readily accessible forms. Structuralist nativists think of African literature as that which has conventions and philosophies of presentations derived from recognizable indigenous practices. Linguistic nativists argue that literature is defined and described by the material languages in which it is written. For these linguistic nativists, a body of literary works must be written in languages native to Africa (Ndede , 2016, p.2).

Indeed, Achebe himself attempted earlier to clarify some definitions, drawing the attention of critics to the distinction between two things: "national literature" and "ethnic literature". Whereas the former term is clear in Western literature which has a single language as both the mother tongue and the official language of education for writers, the latter term seems to be rather ambiguous in Africa where the reality differs due to the multitude of languages that one individual writer or reader faces in their literary adventure. A person whose mother tongue is not used in school or the *lingua franca* is likely to disconnect from the mainstream culture. This is why Achebe exposes the challenges encountered in defining African literature during the Conference of African Writers of English Expression in 1962. He raises questions about the geographical and linguistic scope of African

literature, examining whether it should be produced in or about Africa and include various languages. He also mentions as an example his interesting encounter with the Swahili poet Shabaan Robert who offered him his book written in Swahili, but he could not read it:

> /…/When in 1960, I was traveling in East Africa and went to the home of the late Shabaan Robert, the Swahili poet of Tanganyika, things had been different. We spent some time talking about writing, but there was no real contact. I knew from all accounts that I was talking to an important writer, but of the nature of his work I had no idea. He gave me two books of his poems, which I treasure but cannot read—until I have learned Swahili. (Achebe, 1963, p.8)

Achebe recommends a nuanced approach to the use of English in African literature. Moreover, he is aware of the importance of preserving cultural identity while effectively communicating the African experience in other languages. However, he rejects the fact of striving for native-like proficiency in English and instead encourages African writers to use the language in a manner that resonates with their unique experiences. He warned critics and the audience of the complexity of the issue in the following terms: "You cannot cram African literature into a small, neat definition. I do not see African literature as one unit but as a group of associated units-in fact, as the sum total of all the national and ethnic literatures of Africa"(Achebe, 1963, p. 9).

What is fascinating in the above assertion is the attention-grabbing distinction between national and ethnic literature. In fact, the Nigerian writer wants to inform people that the adjective 'national" may mean different things and does not correspond to what it is exactly in foreign countries. To better understand his argument, national literature in Africa could be written in the official language, and the other one in a local language can only be qualified "ethnic literature". Achebe further posits that "any attempt to define African literature in terms that overlook the complexities of the African scene is doomed to failure". This is the reason why I affirm that African literature is like a house with many rooms and different options of accommodation. Its definition defies easy categorization because of its diverse linguistic, cultural, and historical contexts. If we also revisit the literary history of the debate, the Dakar and Fourah Bay conferences conclusions (1963) proposed to promote the teaching of African Literature in African university curricula in French and English. This decision agrees on the perspective of identifying what could be the most advantageous option for the promotion of African literature and what would help better avoid ethnocentrism. Dia raises this issue in his research: "Not everyone in African literature understands each other; they do not speak the same language. This could be seen as a colonial division, but it accounts more positively for cultural plurality and diversity" (Dia , 2016, p.11).

III. Is linguistic diversity an asset or an obstacle?

In his letter to African youth, Amadou Hampâté Ba postulates that "the beauty of a carpet lies in the variety of its colors, so the diversity of people, cultures, and civilizations makes the world attractive and rich"(Ba, 1985, p.17) (my translation). This statement tells us a lot about African culture. Its literature is written in various languages. Some in foreign languages such as English, Portuguese, French, and others in African languages (Yoruba, Hausa, Wolof…). The reality here is still the predominance of foreign languages; which made Ngũgĩ , Wali and Sembene Ousmane from Senegal advocate earlier in the 1960s for writing and producing literature in African languages such as Gikuyu, Kiswahili, Wolof, Yoruba, and others. For Ngũgĩ, this practice represents an act of decolonization, reclaiming the right of African peoples to define themselves through their own linguistic lenses. By rejecting the dominance of English and French, he redefines linguistic diversity not as a source of division but as a form of resistance and intellectual freedom. In this sense, linguistic diversity becomes an asset because it allows multiple epistemologies to coexist, strengthening rather than fragmenting African identity and literature. It is through such diversity that African literature can fully articulate its plurality of experiences and reclaim its sovereignty. For Ngũgĩ this seems to be a good option to accommodate his recent thoughts on "securing the base"; it positions linguistic diversity as the cornerstone of epistemic sovereignty. Here lies the richness and complexity of African literature. A telling example is the fact that it is sometimes put in singular "African Literature" or in plural "African Literatures" to refer to the same thing. Therefore, both names are correct and sound. This is, indeed, what characterizes African literature and distinguishes it literarily, culturally, and geographically from others. Such linguistic character grabs the attention of anyone who is introduced to it for the first time. All these factors show that African literature is addressed through a diverse but complex literary map that refers to the literature of all Africans regardless of the language of expression.

The overarching question is: in the context of globalization in which cultures crisscross, should we restrict or extend the means of expression of such a diverse geographical entity that is politically plural and culturally singular? To understand the real picture, whether written by, for, or about Africans, African literature is exposed to different audiences that are tempted to listen to distinctive voices. Hence, the core of the divergences tends to be ideological. The pro-European languages are criticized for being influenced by Western views and colonial imperialism. Yet, their counterparts, pro-African languages, seem to be

ethnocentric or radical with regard to their reluctance toward any *lingua franca* that better promotes the national literature. Consequently, a cultural divide occurs or else a paradigm shift of the meaning of "national literature" asserts itself radically. From this perspective, it is important to ponder over Chasles's affirmation "Any people without cultural trade with others is but a lost link in the great net" (Chasles cited by Rousseau, 2000, p.19).

To recognize Ngũgĩ's and Wali's efforts to promote African languages, their advocacy for indigenous languages in African literature echoes the sentiment of cultural nationalism or preservation and revitalization. In *Decolonizing the Mind*, Ngũgĩ supports the transformative power of language on cultural consciousness and emphasizes the imperative of writing in African languages to counteract the enduring legacy of colonialism. His choice to write later works such as *Matigari* in Gikuyu exemplifies his commitment to linguistic authenticity and cultural empowerment. However, their positions looked radical to some critics and Warner mentioned it in these terms:

> Although Ngũgĩ's thinking on the language question has continued to evolve over the intervening decades, his original polemic in *Decolonising the Mind* is sometimes treated as if it encapsulates all that can possibly be at issue in the politics of language—both in African literatures and in postcolonial literatures more broadly—in ways one sus- pects Ngũgĩ never intended. To chart a different approach to the language question, we have to set aside *Decolonising the Mind* as our touchstone. Our task is not to deny the in1uence or interest of this text but rather to insist that there have been and continue to be other trajectories (Warner, 2019, p. 15).

While Ngũgĩ envisions linguistic plurality as empowerment and an effective way of countering linguistic hierarchy, Mugane provides a sobering counterpoint by exposing the enduring linguistic hierarchies that complicate this vision. Mugane demonstrates that postcolonial Africa has not fully escaped the linguistic hierarchies established during colonialism. English, French, and Portuguese remain privileged in education, literature, and governance, while many indigenous languages are marginalized. Even within African languages, a new internal hierarchy has emerged, with widely spoken *lingua francas* such as Kiswahili or Hausa overshadowing many local languages. Indeed, Moradewun Adejunmobi made an interesting point about this misunderstanding, raising the awareness of the audience on the orientation of the call for writing in African languages or in the mother tongue. She draws the attention of the audience on the main principle:

> /…/ The call by the Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o for writing in African languages has often been misunderstood as a call for writing in all African languages when it was in fact a call for writing specifically in mother tongues envisioned as the true vernaculars for African writers. As made clear in Adejunmobi (2004: 21), African advocates for writing in African languages have not been consistent in distinguishing between writing in an African language that had become a lingua franca like Kiswahili and writing in an African language that had not become a lingua franca (Adejunmobi , 2022, p.28).

Adejunmobi clarifies that the call was mainly to use very popular African languages that have become *lingua francas* like Kiswahili but not mother tongues that seem to be only used and understood by minority groups. This will definitely deepen the gap rather than narrow it down as Mungane relevantly questions still existing linguistic hierarchies. Adejunmobi further argues that "when some African writers like Wole Soyinka called for writing in African languages, what they had in mind was the elevation of a single African language like Kiswahili as the sole and unifying language of writing for all Africans" (Adejunmobi, 2022, p.29). For her, this call for action was thus misunderstood and that is the reason why, in her own words, "for many others, however, Ngũgĩ included, writing in an African language meant writing in one's mother tongue (29). Adejunmobi gives fittingly the illustrations of the Tanzanian writer Shaaban who uses such *lingua franca* to the detriment of his mother tongue in contrast to Ngugi who rather prefers to use his own mother tongue:

> Against this backdrop, we can see that Ngũgĩ's position on writing in African languages actually differs from that of the Tanzanian author Shaaban, who described Kiswahili, the language in which he wrote, as his mother tongue, though as Mwangi (2017: 48) has indicated, Shaaban's first language was Yao, not Kiswahili. Shaaban's willingness to identify with a language that was not his first language is certainly in keeping with historical trends in Africa before the twentieth century (Adejunmobi, 2022, p. 29).

For Mugane, this reveals a paradox: linguistic diversity exists, but it operates within a structure of inequality that limits its emancipatory potential. In this view, linguistic diversity looks like a conditional asset; it holds immense cultural value, but its benefits can only be realized if linguistic hierarchies are dismantled and linguistic justice is achieved. Without such transformation, diversity is likely to become a veneer that hides deeper structural inequities in African literary and academic

production. Mugane thus insists that the debate on language and literature remains relevant, as the persistence of these hierarchies continues to shape who gets to speak, write, and be heard in African letters.

Nonetheless, within the celebration of linguistic diversity, the specter of colonial legacies looms large. Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Cheikh Hamidou Kane, Birago Diop to name but a few, grapple with what others call the "paradox" of writing in the language of the colonizer. The former contends that African writers can utilize English as a tool to convey their unique perspectives while challenging colonial ideologies. This intricate dance between African writers and the English language is a recurring motif in postcolonial literature and underscores the nuanced interplay between language and power.

From the perspective of dissemination and readership, it is important to underline that Africa's literary landscape is vibrant and diverse and owes much to its linguistic richness. This is a medium for histories that resonate with the diversity of their cultures. Thus, the profound use of indigenous languages in the style of writers affirm the depth and authenticity of African literature. Achebe's masterpiece, *Things Fall Apart* is a good illustration. He intertwines Igbo culture and African oral aesthetics and infuses his narrative with Igbo proverbs, idioms, and expressions. This form of writing fosters a deeper understanding of the social and cultural fabric that binds readers and critics. This way of writing promotes what he calls the "Africanization of English". Such a concept uses a foreign language but combines it with expressions and idioms from the local language to give more linguistic flavor and to display the local color.

The option of "Africanization" is still supported. Biodun Jeyifo's "*English is an African Language – Ka Dupe! [For and Against Ngũgĩ]"* comes back on the point adopting a more pragmatic approach to the issue of linguistic diversity. Recognizing the entrenched position of English in African literary expression, Jeyifo does not advocate for its outright rejection but instead explores how African writers have indigenized and transformed the language. Through creative adaptation, blending English with African idioms, proverbs, and syntactic rhythms, African authors have effectively "Africanized" the colonial language, turning it into a vehicle for expressing African realities. Writers such as Chinua Achebe and Wole Soyinka, for instance, exemplify this linguistic hybridity, transforming English into a space of cultural negotiation rather than subjugation. In the Francophone side, Ahmadou Kourouma and Aminata Sow Fall have done the same with the French language. For Jeyifo, linguistic diversity is thus not merely a matter of language choice but of linguistic creativity. It becomes a performative act of reclaiming agency within the structures of global communication. In this pragmatic sense, linguistic diversity is an asset, as it demonstrates African writers' ability to reshape the tools of their historical oppression into instruments of expression and innovation.

Ngũgĩ, Mugane, and Jeyifo reveal the multifaceted nature of linguistic diversity in African literature. Ngũgĩ represents the radical end of the spectrum, envisioning linguistic diversity as the ultimate symbol of epistemic sovereignty. Mugane grounds this vision in sociolinguistic reality, revealing how entrenched hierarchies continue to obstruct the full realization of that sovereignty. Jeyifo, meanwhile, mediates between ideological purism and practical adaptation, demonstrating how African writers negotiate power through creative linguistic transformation. Collectively, these scholars affirm that linguistic diversity, despite its challenges, remains a profound asset to African literature. It enables multiplicity of voices, perspectives, and epistemologies, ensuring that African narratives are not confined to a single linguistic or cultural paradigm. Yet, as Mugane warns, this potential can only flourish within systems that value all languages equally, not as instruments of hierarchy but as vessels of human creativity and identity. The debate, therefore, does not rest on whether linguistic diversity is an asset or obstacle, but rather on how African societies can transform structural inequalities so that this diversity truly becomes a force for liberation and literary vitality.

Yet, in any opportunity lie some challenges. The potential limitation of global accessibility is a major concern. Although indigenous languages pervade African literature with authenticity and depth, they present barriers to wider dissemination and understanding on a global scale. There is an impediment to access to works produced in African languages when translation is not available. The other issue is that there are very few people who can competently read and write local languages. Some countries like Senegal have initiated language policies to introduce them to school but not as effectively as many thought. It is a good start Hutchison shares his views on this issue:

> In post-independence Africa, many of the so-called "francophone" countries have made efforts to integrate African languages into their formal education systems, in one configuration or another of rather transitional bilingual education. Likewise, in the non-formal education sector, adult literacy efforts have frequently been carried out using African languages, as has historically been encouraged by the various directives from UNESCO in this direction./…/

> Ironically, most of the UNESCO-driven literacy campaigns have never been linked to the requisite documentation and development of literature that are needed to sustain a literacy effort and enable it to flourish. Though professing a preoccupation with the importance of reading material, UNESCO has rarely delivered and has yet to be the driving force in the creation of a literate environment in Africa (Hutchison, 2006, p. 23).

There is a need to balance things, but rationality matters when it comes to building education policy for people of different concerns, cultures, and languages. The opportunities afforded by Africa's linguistic diversity are manifold: enriching literature with depth, authenticity, and cultural resonance. Navigating the complex terrain of colonial legacies and linguistic imprints poses a daunting challenge. As African writers continue to negotiate their relationship with language and power, they must strive to harness their inherent prospects. They should also confront these challenges and ensure that Africa's voices resonate not only within its borders but also across the global literary landscape.

IV. New trajectories of African literature: toward transcultural and transnational dynamics of African literature

The tests and prospects inherent to African literature's linguistic character present a nuanced landscape. They replicate both the resilience of African cultures and the enduring legacies of colonialism. As writers navigate this intricate terrain, they must confront the pressure between cultural authenticity and global accessibility. The revitalization of linguistic diversity should not overshadow the command of accessibility and inclusivity. Indigenous languages serve as a repository of cultural heritage. Yet, their limited reach beyond local communities poses an obstruction to global engagement. Hence, African writers face the daunting task of bridging the gap between cultural specificity and universal or transnational resonance. They should ensure that their narratives transcend linguistic boundaries without sacrificing authenticity.

The growth of translation and digital technologies offers promising options to overcome many challenges that have marked the past. It was hard to connect to some writings in African languages unless the person was talented enough to speak many of them. Today, translation initiatives aim to make African literature more accessible to global audiences by rendering works in multiple languages. Even though Ngũgĩ has some worries about translation, it revels as a viable solution:

> But while it is true that translation is the common language of languages, hierarchies of power and domination distort its full function as our common heritage. In more equitable relations of wealth, power and values, translation can play a crucial and ultimate role of enabling mutuality of being and becoming even within a plurality of languages (Ngũgĩ , 2018, p.130).

There are also interesting digital platforms that provide a space for indigenous voices to be heard beyond traditional publishing channels, which democratize access to African literature on a global scale. Translation then emerges as a linchpin in addressing linguistic divides and preserving cultural nuances. Works like Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and Mariama Bâ's *So Long a Letter* exemplify this transformative power of translation. These two novels are probably the most read in African literature, with dozens of translations in other world languages. This sophisticated means of dissemination expands the impact of African literature across cultures. However, they are mostly written in foreign languages. In contrast, very few works written in African languages have received such acclaim.

In the digital age, technology offers further options for innovation. It enables the distribution of African literature in audio formats and transcends the limitations of written language. Stephanie Bosch Santana demonstrates that African writers are now operating in what she calls "forms of mobility", digital, linguistic, and generic. In works like *Diary of a Zulu Girl* and online literary communities, English, indigenous languages, and hybrid registers coexist fluidly, reflecting how African voices move across physical and virtual borders. Santana's concept of "convivial multilingualism" suggests that the digital age has created a new linguistic ecology in which translation, code-switching, and online storytelling revive the vitality of African languages in ways that early theorists could not imagine. As African literature evolves, new trajectories emerge. They are guided by the rules of cultural exchange and technological advancement. By embracing linguistic diversity and technological innovation, writers and scholars can softly cope with the complexities of the literary map and bridge the gaps of literary expression. In doing so, they can value the legacy of past debates while charting a bold and inclusive vision for the future of African literature. Through collaboration, dialogue, and creative experimentation, African literature can continue to thrive and evolve. It will enhance global literary discourse and preserve the unique voices and experiences of the continent.

With the digital revolution, African literature should thrive more than ever and resolve language barriers considerably. This revolutionary era can be called the Golden Age of African literature. It marks an era of revitalization and innovation. The digital

realm fulfills the dream of linguistic democratization envisioned by the Asmara Declaration. Now, languages like Swahili, Yoruba, and Zulu circulate online globally without mediation through colonial tongues. Technology stands as a solution to this issue and the advantage is twofold: while writing or telling stories in their mother tongue, African authors can use technology and have their works recorded in audio formats. These materials can go through further exploitation and get recorded by competent readers and translated and transcribed from the audio material into any relevant language. Such activities involve both writers and storytellers. The latter may be more concerned with oral literature, but now the time has come for them to go hand in hand with writers. A telling example is the use of AI now to create videos contents adapting African folktales. This is a vital form of teaching African oral literature with sophisticated tools.

The digital hybridity that Bosch Santana identifies resonates with Ngũgĩ's updated notion of "securing the base." Both view language as dynamic and relational, anchored in African identity but outward-looking. Where Ngũgĩ advocates for epistemic rootedness, Santana demonstrates how this rooting now happens through technological and media innovation. African writers can thus be both local and global and preserve linguistic authenticity while achieving planetary reach. This is an effective strategy to connect national and ethnic literatures, as well as oral and written literatures. But, the feasibility incurs greater costs than usual. Publication might be very expensive and a challenging business for producers because of the technical aspects it entails.

Taiwo Oloruntoba-Oju explores a parallel transformation within spoken and popular linguistic cultures, focusing on the youth-driven hybrid languages that have emerged across the continent such as Sheng in Kenya, Nigerian Pidgin, Camfranglais in Cameroon, and Tsotsitaal in South Africa. For him, these hybrid vernaculars embody a vibrant form of living linguistic creativity, revealing how young Africans negotiate identity, power, and modernity through language play. Rather than viewing such linguistic mixtures as "corruptions" of standard forms, he argues that they represent innovative linguistic bricolage, capturing the hybrid realities of postcolonial urban life. These languages are dynamic, constantly evolving, and deeply tied to digital and musical cultures, which spreads through hip-hop, street poetry, and social media. They also challenge the binary of indigenous versus colonial languages, forging new communicative spaces where African youth articulate cosmopolitan yet locally grounded identities. Oloruntoba-Oju thus expands the notion of linguistic diversity beyond literature into the realm of everyday expression, showing that Africa's linguistic creativity is not confined to texts but thrives in living performance and digital circulation.

Putting things in poetic language, the digital revolution has opened the gates of the Golden Age of African literature, where the once-muted murmur of concern has become a resonant chorus shaping the continent's cultural inheritance. At the heart of this age lies a vivid crossroads, a symbolic roundabout where narratives meet, converse, and diverge into new avenues rich with heritage and innovation. One path bears the intellectual gravitas of Achebe and Soyinka, Birago Diop, etc., another carries the political and linguistic defiance of Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Obi Wali, while yet another, the "transcultural avenue", spans continents through the art of translation. In this connection, diversity reveals itself not as an impediment, but as a generative force. This era of new perspectives enables African literature to seize both local roots and global skies and weave its multiplicity into a unified and enduring legacy.

But still, despite the richness that indigenous languages bring to African literature, barriers persist, particularly concerning global accessibility. Although writing in these languages preserves cultural authenticity, it may limit the reach of literary works beyond linguistic boundaries. To circumvent these tests, African literature should be poised to embrace a transcultural and transnational trajectory. By transcending linguistic and cultural edges, it can foster dialogue and exchange among diverse communities within and beyond the continent. This inclusive approach credits the multiplicity of voices and experiences that characterize African literature and supplements global literary discourse with unique perspectives and narratives.

African literary theory and practice have grown considerably. It requires urgent exploration of new linguistic trajectories. The digital revolution should be profitable as it facilitates literacy in Africa and introduces the voices of new and old generations of African writers and storytellers who do not have the chance to be heard. In so doing, writers and scholars should avoid falling into the traps of history. The context, today, turns out to be like the metaphor of sitting around a table to interpret a half-full bottle of water. Some are interested in what is positive as content, others in what is missing as a shortcoming. In either case, both sides could be right. However, it could be more fruitful to look at ways of how the very bottle can be filled and profitable for all as it still has room to take more liquid or ingredients (whether of the same color or not). This means astutely that diversity prevails, but it should not be an obstacle. Under this interpretation, digital platforms have expanded that house into a networked village, a metaphorical space where African languages coexist with English, French and other foreign languages in mutual transformation. Hence, this can be the answer to the language issue: why not welcome all languages and cultures and even look for effective dissemination? Vitality matters all the more because it leads to tangible outcomes. Reaching this step is a significant milestone in the controversial debate and adds value to the conclusions of the Dakar and Fourah Bay conference.

Conclusion

The linguistic question in African literature is no longer a struggle between the colonial and the indigenous but a negotiation of visibility and power in a globalized and digital age. Ngũgĩ's call for epistemic sovereignty, Jeyifo's pragmatism, Mugane's sociolinguistic critique, and Bosch Santana's concept of "forms of mobility" all point toward a new paradigm: African literature as a space of multilingual coexistence, translation, and technological renewal. The future of African literature lies not in choosing one language, but in mobilizing many. The multifaceted exploration of language in African literature reveals a vibrant interplay between cultural diversity, historical legacies, and the quest for cultural authenticity. The issue in this field is a dynamic debate nurtured through different voices and perspectives and nuances. It reflects the resilience, creativity, and adaptability of African writers. Linguistic diversity forms the bedrock of storytelling. In addition, the challenges and prospects presented by colonial legacies, the quest for cultural expression, and the political dimensions of language use in African literature continue to captivate readers worldwide.

African writers, thus, traverse the complexities of linguistic choices, translation, and the political implications of language. However, they contribute to the literary tradition and expand the discourse on identity, power, and representation. The new and future trajectories of African literature promise greater innovation as writers can explore various forms of expression and engage with global audiences while retaining the rich cultural legacy that defines African literary traditions. Each linguistic choice made by African writers reflects not only their artistic expression but also the wider cultural and historical context in which they write. Whether drawing from indigenous languages, colonial legacies, or global linguistic influences, African writers navigate a complex terrain of linguistic diversity to weave narratives that resonate with readers worldwide.

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