

CHINUA ACHEBE

THE POLITICS OF LANGUAGE

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OF ALL THE EXPLOSIONS THAT HAVE ROCKED the African continent . . . , few have been more spectacular, and hardly any more beneficial, than the eruption of African literature, shedding a little light here and there on what had been an area of darkness.

So dramatic has been the change that I am even presuming that one or two in this very distinguished audience might recognize that my title is a somewhat mischievous rendering of the subtitle of the book *Decolonizing the Mind* by an important African writer and revolutionary, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. The mischief lies in my inserting after the word *politics* the words *and politicians* like dropping a cat among Ngũgĩ's pigeons.

Ngũgĩ's book argues passionately and dramatically that to speak of African literature in European languages is not only an absurdity but also part of the scheme of western imperialism to hold Africa in perpetual bondage. He reviews his own position as a writer in English and decides that he can no longer continue in the treachery. So he makes a public renunciation of English in a short statement at the beginning of his book. Needless to say, Ngũgĩ applies the most severe censure to those African writers who remain accomplices of imperialism, especially Senghor and Achebe, but particularly Achebe presumably because Senghor no longer threatens anybody!

Theatricalities aside, the difference between Ngũgĩ and myself on the issue of indigenous or European languages for African writers is that while Ngũgĩ now believes it is *either/or*, I have always thought it was *both* . . .

I write in English. English is a world language. But I do *not* write in English *because* it is a world language. My romance with the world is subsidiary to my involvement with Nigeria and Africa. Nigeria is a reality which I could not ignore. One characteristic of this reality, Nigeria, is that it transacts a considerable portion of its daily business in the English language. As long as Nigeria wishes to exist as a nation it has no choice in the foreseeable future but to hold its more than two hundred component nationalities together through an alien language, English. I lived through a civil war in which probably two million people perished over the question of Nigerian unity. To remind me therefore that Nigeria's foundation was laid only a hundred years ago at the Berlin conference of European powers and in the total absence of any Africans is not really useful information to me. It is precisely because the nation is so new and so fragile that we would soak the land in blood to maintain the frontiers mapped out by foreigners.

English is therefore not marginal to Nigerian affairs. It is quite central. I can speak across two hundred linguistic frontiers to fellow Nigerians only in English. Of course I also have a mother tongue which luckily for me is one of the three major languages of the country. Luckily I say because this language, Igbo, is not really in danger of extinction. I can gauge my good luck against the resentment of fellow Nigerians who oppose most vehemently the token respect accorded to the three major tongues by newscasters saying goodnight in them after reading a half-hour bulletin in English!

Nothing would be easier than to ridicule our predicament if one was so minded. And nothing would be more attractive than proclaiming from a safe distance that our job as writers is not to describe the predicament but to change it. But this is where the politics of language becomes *politicking* with language.

One year after the [1962] Makerere conference, a Nigerian literary scholar, Obi Wali, published a magazine article in which he ridiculed the meeting and called on the African writers and the European 'midwives' of their freak creations to stop pursuing a dead end. And he made the following important suggestion: 'What we would like future conferences on African literature to devote time to is the all-important problem of African writing in African languages, and all its implications for the development of a truly African sensibility.' Having set that rather clear task before 'future conferences on African literature,' Dr. Obi Wali, who was himself a teacher of literature and a close friend of the poet Christopher Okigbo, might have been expected to lead the way along the lines of his prescription. But what he does instead is to abandon his academic career for politics and business. As a leading parliamentarian in Nigeria's Second Republic he might have played the midwife to a legislation in favour of African literature in African languages. But no; Obi Wali, having made his famous intervention, like a politician simply dropped out of sight.

In 1966 Nigeria's first military coup triggered off a countercoup and then a series of horrendous massacres of Igbo people in Hausa-speaking northern Nigeria. A famous educationist well-known for his opposition to the continued use of English in Nigeria wrote in a Lagos newspaper offering the incredible suggestion that if all Nigerians had spoken one language the killings would not have happened. And he went further to ask the Nigerian army to impose Hausa as Nigeria's lingua franca. Fortunately people were too busy coping with the threat of disintegration facing the country to pay serious attention to the fellow. But I could not resist writing a brief rejoinder in which I reminded him that the thousands who were killed spoke excellent Hausa.

The point in all this is that language is a handy whipping-boy to summon and belabour when we have failed in some serious way. In other words we play politics with language and in so doing conceal the reality and the complexity of our situation from ourselves and from those foolish enough to put their trust in us.

The politics Ngũgĩ plays with language is of a different order. It is a direct reflection of a slowly perfected Manichean vision of the world. He sees but one 'great struggle between the two mutually opposed forces in Africa today: an imperialist tradition on one hand and a resistance tradition on the other.' Flowing nicely from this unified vision, Africa's language problems resolve themselves into European languages sponsored and foisted on the people by imperialism and African languages defended by patriotic and progressive forces of peasants and workers.

To demonstrate how this works out in practice, Ngũgĩ gives us a moving vignette of how the enemy interfered with his mother tongue in his 'Limuru peasant community.' 'I was born in a large peasant family: father, four wives and about twenty-eight children . . . We spoke Gikũyũ as we worked in the fields.' The reader is given nearly two pages of this pastoral idyll

of linguistic and social harmony, in which stories are told around the fire at the end of the day. Even at school young Ngũgĩ is taught in Gĩkũyũ, in which he excels to the extent of winning an infant ovation for his composition in that language.

Then the imperialist struck in 1952 and declared a state of emergency in Kenya; and Ngũgĩ's world is brutally shattered:

All the schools run by patriotic nationalists were taken over by the colonial regime and were placed under District Education Boards chaired by Englishmen. English became the language of my formal education. In Kenya, English became more than a language: it was *the* language, and all others had to bow before it in deference.

A heart-rending scenario, but also a scenario strewn with fatal snags for the single-minded. I had warned about this danger in one of the earliest statements I ever made in my literary career – that those who would canonize our past must serve also as the devil's advocate, setting down beside the glories every inconvenient fact. Unfortunately Ngũgĩ is too good a partisan to do this double duty. So he files the totally untenable report that imperialists imposed the English language on the patriotic peasants of Kenya as recently as 1952!

What about the inconvenient fact that already in the 1920s and 1930s 'the Kikuyu Independent Schools which were started by the Kikuyu after their rift with the Scottish missionaries, *taught in English* instead of the vernacular even in the first grade' (Symonds 1966: 202; emphasis added). For the avoidance of doubt, the scenario here is of imperialist agents (in the shape of Scottish missionaries) desiring to teach Kikuyu children in their mother tongue while the patriotic Kikuyu peasants broke away because they preferred English!

What happened in Kenya also happened in the rest of the empire. Neither in India nor in Africa did the English seriously desire to teach their language to the native. The historic and influential Phelps-Stokes Commission in West Africa in 1922 had placed much greater value on the native tongue than English; and its recommendations were picked up by the British Advisory Committee on Native Education on Tropical Africa (Smock and Bentsi-Enchill 1976: 174).

In Nigeria the demand for English was already there in the coastal regions in the first half of the nineteenth century. In a definitive study of the work of Christian missions in Nigeria 1841 to 1891, Professor J. F. A. Ajayi reports that in the Niger delta in the 1850s the missionary teachers were already 'obliged to cater for the demand . . . for the knowledge of the English language' (1965: 133). In Calabar by 1876 some of the chiefs were not satisfied by the amount of English their children were taught in missionary schools and were hiring private tutors at a very high fee (133–4). Nowhere in all this can we see the slightest evidence of the simple scenario of European imperialism forcing its language down the throats of unwilling natives. In fact imperialism's ways with language were extremely complex.

If imperialism was not entirely to blame for the dominance of European languages in Africa today who then is the culprit? Ourselves? Our parents? If our fathers were at least partly to blame or if we were misguided, why do we not change the situation today by renouncing the use of European languages and rediscovering our indigenous tongues? Or is it by any chance true that these alien languages are still knocking about because they serve an actual need?

No African in our recent history had fought imperialism more doggedly than Kwame Nkrumah of Ghana. And yet we are told that:

During the Nkrumah era, political leaders demonstrated considerable concern over the possible divisive impact of a mother tongue medium policy. Although English is

a language alien to Ghana they saw it as the best vehicle for achieving national communication and social and political unification.

(Smock and Bentsi-Enchill 1976: 176)

In addition to this political problem Ghana faced the practical question of teaching mother tongues when ethnic mixing had reached significant levels in urban and rural schools as a result of internal migrations. Already by 1956 the Bernard Committee had found that schools where the pupils spoke a single mother tongue were far fewer than schools in which more than five languages were represented in fair numbers. The simple consequence of this is that if the policy of teaching in mother tongues were to be enforced the schools concerned would have to hire more than five teachers for every class. (This was at the 1956 level of ethnic mixing in Ghana. The situation today, thirty years later, would be considerably more difficult, unless we are to follow South Africa and send every native back to his homeland!)

It would seem then that the culprit for Africa's language difficulties was not imperialism, as Ngũgĩ would have us believe, but the linguistic plurality of modern African states. No doubt this will explain the strange fact that the Marxist states in Africa, with the exception of Ethiopia, have been the most forthright in adopting the languages of their former colonial rulers – Angola, Mozambique, Guinea-Bissau and most lately Burkina Faso, whose minister of culture said with a retrospective shudder recently that the sixty ethnic groups in that country could mean sixty different nationalities.

This does not in any way close the argument for the development of African languages by the intervention of writers and governments. But we do not have to falsify our history in the process. That would be playing politics. The words of the Czech novelist, Milan Kundera, should ring in our ears: 'Those who seek power passionately do so not to change the present or the future but the past – to rewrite history.'