

Luan Staphorst

Chair for Critical Studies
in Higher Education
Transformation, Bird
Street Campus, Nelson
Mandela University
6001; Faculty of English
Language and Literature,
Lincoln College, University
of Oxford, OX1 3PX.

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0003-4676-4498>

E-mail:

luan.staphorst@mandela.ac.za
luan.staphorst@lincoln.ox.ac.uk

First submission: 6 May 2023

Acceptance: 10 November 2023

Published: 31 July 2024

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.38140/aa.v56i1.7315>

ISSN: 0587-2405

e-ISSN: 2415-0479

Acta Academica -
2024 56(1): 43-61

© Creative Commons
With Attribution (CC-BY)



English and/in Africa: reflections on the language question, Afropolitanism, and linguistic orientation six decades after the 'African Writers Conference'

This article offers a speculative reflection on the position of English as a language within the context of Africa – a question that continues to 'haunt' African studies broadly, and African linguistics, literary, and cultural studies specifically. To this end, the ideas and arguments of Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o on the language question that arose from the 1962 African Writers Conference is firstly critiqued, after which the article secondly problematises the notion of the 'ownership' of language that underpins both Achebe and Wa Thiong'o's views. Thirdly a speculative argument for the repositioning of English relative to the continent that draws on the concept of Afropolitanism is presented. Through 'reading' English and Afropolitanism together, and specifically presenting the concept of 'Afropolitanese', the article concludes we could acknowledge how the English language in particular, and language as a socio-cultural phenomenon in general, is enmeshed with a global, yet rooted, cosmopolitanism.

Keywords: English, language ideology, Afropolitanism, rooted cosmopolitanism, linguistic orientation.

Introduction

If African studies is the field that confronts us fully with the horrors of colonial reason, how are we to approach it within discourses that position the “language of the coloniser [as always-already] scorch[ing our] lips[?]” (Fanon 2004: 58). Although this article is written in English, with it figuring prominently in the title, this question is not exceptional to it. I would posit the student and academic of African studies broadly, and African linguistics, literary studies, and philosophy specifically, working in French at Sorbonne University, or in Portuguese at the University of Coimbra, or in German at the University of Leipzig would face a similar question. However, this question of language in the European metropole is arguably of lesser importance than the question of those same languages within those country’s ex-colonial outposts. Are they merely lingering remnants of Europe’s imperial presence, sustaining the coloniality of being, or should they be regarded as ‘at home’, as a productive part of the postcolonial condition?

This article reflects on what could be regarded as the perennial question of English’s ‘status’ as language within Africa, and does so through firstly briefly discussing the context of the ‘question’ with reference to the ideas and arguments of Chinua Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o. Secondly, the notion of the ‘ownership’ of language is problematised, and thirdly Afropolitanism and Afropolitanese are presented as terms through which the position of the language on the continent can be reasoned. Through these terms, the article concludes, a more nuanced understanding of English within the continent could be reached, while rejecting totalising and reductive notions of language as such.

The English question

Considering that literary writers can be described as those members of society with arguably the most intimate of relationships with language, it is unsurprising that one of the most prominent debates on the status and function of English within Africa was to have occurred among writers. 2022 marked 60 years since the June 1962 African Writers Conference, officially the ‘Conference of African Writers of English Expression’. This gathering has become an almost mythical reference point in the study of the development of African literature, literary decolonisation, and the language question (see Zabus 2007, Kalliney 2015, Wa Ngugi 2018). It is a myth in the sense that a tradition of creative writing among Africans, writing in ‘European’ and in ‘African’ languages, in the novel and in other literary forms, can be traced back to at least the early 20th century (see Sithole 2018, Wa Ngugi 2018). It is, however, not a myth that the conference was the first continental African writers conference to be held on the continent, and its

importance cannot, therefore, be disregarded. Of particular importance to this article is the question of language that largely flowed from the conference, and which has remained a discussion point since.

Two positions (among many) in relation to English that arose from the conference will be the focus of this article. The first, articulated by Achebe (1997: 345, 348), views English as a resource:

Those of us who have inherited the English language 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 that included many other items of doubtful value, especially the atrocities 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 [...] I have been given this language and I intend to use it.

Achebe's framing of English is not only to regard it as a general resource, but as an inherited one – language as property that has been passed down, and which the new 'owner' could use as they see fit. Achebe's vision for English within Africa is one that sees it, therefore, as a "new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home, but altered to suit its new African surroundings" (Achebe 1997: 349). He further positions it as particularly 'national' in its scope – one within which a 'national literature' could be shaped, with other African languages treated as sites of 'ethnic literature'.

In contrast, the second view, held by Wa Thiong'o, regards English as a curse. Reflecting, in 1986, on the questions posed and debated during the 1962 conference, he would convey his dismay at what was *not* discussed: "If ... if ... if ... this or that, except the issue: the domination of our languages and cultures by those of imperialist Europe" (Wa Thiong'o 1986: 6). This notion of 'domination' is crucial to Wa Thiong'o's view of language in general, and languages of "imperialist Europe", like English, in particular. For he argues that the "domination of a people's language by the languages of the colonising nations was crucial to the domination of the mental universe of the colonised" (Wa Thiong'o 1986: 16). In order to decolonise the mind, then, the "people's language" needs to be reinstated as primary; something that cannot be done while English, like other 'European' languages, has a hegemonic presence.

Although offering radically different views as to what the position and role of English ought to be in Africa, I would posit that Wa Thiong'o and Achebe's ideas reflect a shared understanding of the nature of language, namely that it constitutes an object, or a form of property, hence something that could be

owned. The difference is in relation to the question of the owner – in Achebe's case, ownership has passed from the ex-colonial master to the African, while Wa Thiong'o argues that the ex-colonial master continues to own it, hence Africans ought to reclaim 'their' languages and cultures. Achebe posits that English can be changed and transformed to bend to the will of "its African surroundings", while Wa Thiong'o regards it as invasive, ergo encroaching on Africa's 'natural' sociocultural diversity.

It should firstly be noted that these two positions do not represent the only ones defended at the 1962 conference, nor do they encapsulate the various positions adopted and furthered in relation to English in the context of Africa since then. The writings of Ali Mazrui in the 1970s, Kole Omotoso and Njabulo Ndebele in the 1980s, Neville Alexander in the 1980s and 1990s, and the recent debate between Wa Thiong'o, Biodun Jeyifo, and John Mugane in a 2018 edition of *Journal of African Cultural Studies* point both to the continued relevance of the question, and the absence of a final, conclusive answer to it. Considering this article takes the 1962 conference specifically as a point of departure for its reflection, and considering the ideas of Achebe and Wa Thiong'o are arguably the most prominent positions that flowed from the conference, they are the central reference points.

Secondly, although Achebe and Wa Thiong'o's views are not presented in or as policy-speak, their arguments can be summarised in relation to the dominant paradigms within language planning and policy studies, namely Richard Ruiz's (1984) classification of the 'language-as-resource', 'language-as-right', and 'language-as-problem' orientations (see Wright 2002 for a discussion of language orientations within the South African context). Ruiz argued that when approaching the question of language, any given argument can be linked to at least one of these three orientations. When reading Achebe and Wa Thiong'o against this backdrop, Achebe's views can be described as being in alignment with the 'language-as-resource' and 'language-as-right' orientations, and Wa Thiong'o's views can be described as 'language-as-problem' orientation. The importance of these 'orientations' will become clearer as the article's argument develops.

Language and ownership

The 'naturalness', or 'common sense', of the notion that language is tied to culture and/or nationality is easily gleaned from the quickest of glances to linguonymy – the Germans speak German, the French speak French, and the Portuguese speak Portuguese. English, spoken by the English, is no exception. And while this is (largely) true, the equation between culture/nation and language ought not to be read as totalisingly true. A 'common sense' analysis also, for example, points to

the fact that not all Hungarians speak Hungarian, that Japanese is not only spoken by the Japanese, and that there is no language called Nigerian spoken by Nigerians. It is, therefore, not only a misleading equation, but a highly ideological one.

That language is viewed in this relation to culture/nation, and that such a view is dominant, is, however, not a coincidence. For viewing language as something more than a communication tool, and rather as an intricate facet of culture, is a central dimension of modernity (Blommaert 2006). This linkage is perhaps nowhere as clear as in the modern idea of 'nationhood' as formulated in continental Europe: language, as the mentioned linguonomy suggests, became tied to the 'nation state' and the 'national identity', and as part and parcel of this modernisation impetus languages themselves were modernised into 'standards' (see Eriksen 2007). European modernity did not, therefore, lead only to an ideology of culture and nationhood that views language as being part of it, but saw an "artefactual ideology of language [develop], an ideology in which particular textual practices can reduce language to an artefact that can be manipulated like most other objects" (Blommaert 2008: 292). Here Euromodernity, in so far as we can demarcate it within the context of the European continent, interacts dramatically with Africa and other colonial territories. When one acknowledges the link between Euromodernity and colonialism (see Quijano 2007), it is to be expected that colonialism, and by extension postcolonialism that takes shape in relation to it, would share conceptual domains. It is subsequently in Africa, argues Jan Blommaert (2008: 292), that the artefactual ideology of language is largely shaped and honed: where 'standard', 'purity', and 'race' are intermingled in the process of 'linguistic development'. The question and treatment of 'African' languages, much like many other dimensions of Euromodernity's social, saw its experimentation in Africa (see Comaroff and Comaroff (2012) for more on this general historical 'experimentation').

Acknowledging that a notion of ownership is a symptom of an artefactual ideology does not, however, answer the question as to how English could, or should, be viewed. Neither does this ideology merely figure as an idea of language as ownable. The sociolinguist Philip Seargeant (2009) argues that the metaphor 'Language is an Object' that underpins this ideology manifests both in general linguistic theorisation, such as the concept of 'loanwords', for example, and in particular concrete forms of language, such as the mentioned 'standard language' and its 'correct' grammar forms, spelling norms, and orthographic conventions. That languages, specifically in the form of linguistic human rights, are subject to law further evidences how they are encoded and made ownable (see Hutton 2010). Languages are 'inventions', as sociolinguists Alastair Pennycook and Siffree Makoni (2007) argue, but acknowledging it as such is not enough to deconstruct it – languages have, rather, actively to be 'disinvented' and 'reconstituted'.

Afropolitanism and English

Rather than present the answer to this question as merely a choice between ownership and non-ownership of English, I would draw on the French poststructuralist philosophy of Giles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987) in an attempt to provide a notion of a 'reconstituted' English within the African context. The underlying architecture of Deleuze and Guattari's approach to epistemology and ontology is predicated on the notion of rhizomatic thinking. They use the image of the rhizome, which refers to a particular type of plant root system, in contrast with the taproot. Whereas a taproot system consists of a single, vertical root that anchors an organism, a rhizomatic system, also known as rootstalks, has a complex, horizontal network of roots that develop in multiplicitous ways. Within Deleuzeguattarian thought, then, opting for rhizomatic thinking leads to complexity, and specifically negates arborescent, or totalising, thought.

This line of reasoning can be brought into further conversation with Paulin Hountondji's (1973) notion of cultural pluralism as argued for within the context of African societies. Culture, Hountondji argues, is an inherently pluralistic phenomenon, since the very foundation thereof is the tension between opposing ideas, values, and experiences which feed a larger whole. Acknowledging the plurality of culture, is, therefore, to acknowledge both the givenness of tension vis-à-vis cultural phenomena and the temporal dynamism that undergirds it. Notions of the 'traditional' or the 'modern', in the strict and often discriminating senses of these ideas in relation to culture, evaporate once pluralism is grappled with as givenness.

In the context of English, viewing it as rhizomatic and pluralistic is to acknowledge its transcultural, transnational, and transcontinental rootedness. The notion of 'World Englishes' in linguistics point to this fact; however, even this notion implies a marked accent on those Englishes deemed to be 'Worlded'. As Ndebele (1987: 3) has argued, the "very concept of an international, or world, language was an invention of Western imperialism". In true rhizomatic thought, there exists only 'X English', where 'X' represents any cultural, spatial, or registral demarcation with which the specificity of language could be identified. There is, therefore, no 'English' on the one hand and 'World Englishes' on the other; there is only 'X English'. This critique echoes some aspects of Pennycook's (2007) argument for acknowledging 'English' as a 'myth'; opting instead for deconstructing 'English' as an idea entangled with a pervasive and totalising imperial hegemony.

Returning to Ndebele (1986) can be generative in thinking through the particularity of 'X English' in Africa. He offers the notion of the 'ordinary' as a way in which to comprehend a given situation and its complexities. Turning the gaze

to the 'ordinary', rather than the 'spectacular', "is sobering rationality; it is the forcing of attention on necessary detail. [For p]aying attention to the ordinary and its methods will result in a significant growth of consciousness" (Ndebele 1986: 152). I would link this notion of the ordinary with Sara Ahmed's (2006: 1) concept of orientations, referring to "how it is that we come to find our way in a world that acquires new shapes, depending on which way we turn". The 'orientation' towards the ordinariness of English diverts one away from ideological presupposition and desire, and rather demands attention to the emergence of English as-is. Within the context of linguistics and language politics, the 'ordinary' can refer specifically to the use of English within Africa, versus the 'spectacular' ideal of the international standard – whether British or American – and the ideological assumptions of English-as-problem or English-as-resource. The results of such studies evidence 'X Englishes' on the continent (see Kamwangamalu 2019), and complex attitudes as it relates to the incorporation of English as part of the linguistic repertoire of speakers (see Makubalo 2007, McKinney 2007, 2013, Parmegiani 2014).

A further example can be gleaned from reflections on what Munene Mwaniki (2018) has termed the 'advanced language politics' of the #mustfall movements. Bevelyn Dube (2017) has, for example, noted the ironies and contradictions of the demand to remove Afrikaans at certain universities in favour of English, a hegemonic colonial language. While I agree with Dube's view that the demand is ironic against a broader call for Africanisation, effectively entrenching the Anglicisation of universities, Mantoa Motinyane's (2018) analysis of the various ways in which 'traditional' African languages are used in conjunction with, and even in opposition to, English during the #mustfall movements point towards a critical accenting (in Carli Coetzee's (2013) conception of 'accent') of English. It is not, therefore, uncritically accepted nor adopted, and is, rather, being contested, shaped, and re-positioned in various ways. While I remain critical of the call, and the eventual decision, to do away with Afrikaans, the move towards English is not a linear, simplistic, nor unnegotiated one.

It is against this backdrop that I would propose the notion of 'Afropolitan English' as a more accurate term by which the 'X English' in Africa could be known, rather than attempting to argue that English is an 'African language'. 'Afropolitanism' can be read against the backdrop of various theories and conceptions of Africa that have emerged over the past three decades seeking to challenge an air of intellectual, cultural, and political Afropessimism that has engulfed both public and academic discourses (see Kroeker 2022). Alongside the theories of the African Renaissance, Afrotopia, and Afrofuturism, Afropolitanism presents an attempt at providing a frame through which a generative and progressive notion of 'Africa' and 'African' can be conceptualised – Afro-optimism, for short.

If a position ‘for Africa’ is important, another dimension of Afro-optimistic theories has been critiques of Western excess, specifically the afterlives of Euromodernity and globalisation. This critique is coupled with the argument that the notion of Modernity and Globalisation (capital-lettered) is misleading – with calls for acknowledging the complex and multiplicitous realisations of these phenomena the world over (Giddens 1995, Eisenstadt 2000). There are presents, futures, and pasts where the Western excesses of these phenomena can be challenged productively, without being beholden to their capital-lettered logics. Herein we can already see a rhizomatic reasoning unfolding – a reasoning that resists the totalising narrative of Modernity and Globalisation as inherently negative, European, and imposed on others.

The term ‘Afropolitanism’ was coined by artist Taiye Selasi in 2005 to encapsulate the condition of being of a 21st century class of worldly, cosmopolitan, and migrant Africans, often found in diasporic spaces. While initially “describe[d as] the social imaginary of a generation of Africans born outside the continent but connected to it through familial and cultural genealogies, [it] can now be read as the description of a new phenomenology of Africanness – a way of being African in the world” (Gikandi 2011: 9). The philosopher Achille Mbembe (2020: 60) has been central in fashioning the term towards this more substantive articulation of Afropolitanism-as-phenomenological-concept – one that does not only relate to a political identity, but reflects an “aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world”:

Afropolitanism is not the same as Pan-Africanism or negritude [...] It is a way of being in the world, refusing on principle any form of victim identity – which does not mean that it is not aware of the injustice and violence inflicted on the continent and its people by the law of the world. It is also a political and cultural stance in relation to the nation, to race, and to the issue of difference in general. In so far as African states are pure (and, what is more, recent) inventions, there is, strictly speaking, nothing in their essence that can force us to worship them – which does not mean that we are indifferent to their fate (Mbembe 2020: 60).

Two key notions Mbembe sketches in this passage can be highlighted in relation to language in particular – the rejection of victimhood, and the rejection of imposed ‘inventions’. Firstly, it is important to note how Wa Thiong’o’s notion of English as a colonial imposition relates to a discourse of victimhood, with his ‘solution’ being its removal. This critique of Wa Thiong’o’s position is echoed by Olúfémí Táíwò’s (2022) characterisation of the linguistic decolonisation movement, the movement that advocates doing away with ‘European’ languages in favour of ‘authentically African’ ones in the name of cultural freedom, anti-imperialism,

and social justice, as disregarding the agency with which many, if not most, Africans have – both historically and contemporaneously – lived with, in, and from ‘European’ languages such as English.

My argument does not, however, purport that the historical movement of ‘European’ languages ‘into’ Africa (or any other previously colonised space) was free of prejudice and violence in relation to language. However, to disregard the multiplicitous ways in which ‘colonial’ languages have been contented and contested on the continent would be an act of grave misrecognition – an act silencing those who have done, and continue to do, great acts of social, epistemic, and cultural justice through, and not only in spite of, ‘colonial’ languages. Should we, for example, disregard the oeuvres of Wole Soyinka and Bessie Head, the thought of Kwasi Wiredu and Mpho Tshivhase, and the scholarship of Toyin Falola and Paul Zeleza due to their supposed treason to ‘African’ languages by way of English?

Secondly, in relation to the rejection of ‘inventions’, we can turn to Achebe. In his argument, the ideas of ‘inheritance’ and ‘ancestral home’ with which he describes English are equally objectionable due to their grounding in received ‘inventions’. Achebe does not offer a perspective on language that would deconstruct our understanding of the coloniser/decoloniser dichotomy in relation to it, but rather keeps it in place. Positioning English in the African context within an Afropolitan discourse leads one to reject both victimological arguments and notions of the language as ‘originally’ or ‘authentically’ English. It is, rather, as the linguist John McWhorter (2008) describes it, a ‘bastard language’ (and as in fact all languages are).

At this point it should be noted that ‘Afropolitanism’ is not an uncontentious term, with various interpretations and value judgements that have been articulated in response to it (see Ede 2016, Coetzee 2017, Skinner 2017, Toivanen 2017, Ibironke 2021, Ho 2021, Lawore 2021, Chipato 2023). The motivation for using this term is not to conjure images of a mobile, diasporic, and cosmopolitan African elite, but rather to link English both with Mbembe’s description of an attitudinal stance towards the world, and to align it with philosopher Kwame Appiah’s (2005, 2006) notion of ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ (see Gehrmann 2016 for a discussion of Afropolitanism-as-Rooted-Cosmopolitanism). By ‘rooted cosmopolitanism’ Appiah argues for a type of citizenship and consciousness that acknowledges the particular and the local not as something that should be scorned or derided, but as indispensable to the individual. No cosmopolitan-citizen, Appiah argues, comes from the ‘World’ (capital-letter), but always comes from *a* ‘world’, and ought to draw on that ‘world’ in grounding their being. It is, therefore, a view of cosmopolitanism not in opposition to the local, but one dependent upon it.

Translating this notion of the citizen to language in general, and English in particular, means viewing it as simultaneously local and international – as both ‘variant’ and ‘standard’, hence glocal. It is one among many, and yet always-already many unto itself.

This view of English, rather than focusing only on Europe and Africa, further diverts the gaze away from an arguably myopic dichotomy to one that sees rhizomatic connections. Considering that the question of ‘ownership’ of English has been raised in contexts as diverse as Taiwan (Seilhamer 2015), Brazil (Diniz de Figueiredo 2017), Kazakhstan (Djuraeva 2022), and Singapore (Wee 2022), points to it being a fundamentally transcendent challenge present wherever the language can be found, further supporting the thesis for Afropolitanism-as-Rooted-Cosmopolitanism.

There is a further way in which ‘Afropolitanism’ is a generative term in this context, and this can be illustrated by pushing rhizomatic thinking to its limits. The direct words of two thinkers of this text have entered this analysis via translation – both having originally been written in French. This presents an opportunity, I would argue, for thinking-Afropolitanism not only as an ‘X English’, but as a continental register with variants, including ‘German Afropolitanese’, ‘French Afropolitanese’, and ‘English Afropolitanese’, for example. This radical accenting of ex-colonial languages moves the centre of gravity away from the supposed ‘Africity’ of those particular languages, to regarding them as dimensions of a continental register. This is, however, not the ‘limit’ of rhizomatic thought I am referring to; rather the limit is to regard both of these possibilities – ‘Afropolitan English’ and ‘English Afropolitanese’ – as nodes in the rhizome of linguistic being found both on the continent and beyond. The idea of ‘English’ as a discrete, bounded entity fades, subsequently, into memory.

Afropolitanese and ‘African’ languages

At the same time, I would argue, the focus on ‘X Afropolitanese’ can be equally emancipatory in relation to what is ‘traditionally’ understood to be ‘African’ languages. Much has been written on the entanglements between the notion of ‘African language’, missionary linguistics, and the effective ‘creation’ of languages during Africa’s colonial period (see Harries 1988, Makoni 1998, 2003, Gilmour 2007, Heugh 2016) – writings that point to artefactual ideology previously discussed. An orientational shift towards the ordinariness of language, or the way in which language is used within the African context, has given rise to the development and sharpening of various concepts and theories as to language within the contemporary moment – I am thinking of (ubuntu) translanguaging (Makalela 2014, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c, 2016, 2018, 2019) and linguistic citizenship

(Williams and Stroud 2013, 2015, Stroud and Williams 2017, Stroud et al. 2020) in particular.

Ubuntu translanguaging refers to phenomena in educational domains whereby educators and pupils' diverse linguistic repertoires are drawn upon – often spontaneously – in relation to both linguistic and other subject-specific knowledges. Linguistic citizenship, on the other hand, points to forms of linguistic identity formation and affirmation that defy hegemonic linguistic standards and ideals. Rather than merely reflect linguonymical identities, complex linguistic repertoires are drawn upon by South Africans to shape and define both individualised and collective identities. Although these theories have slightly different emphases and describe language use in different domains – translanguaging in the educational, and linguistic citizenship in the identitarian – they are nevertheless underpinned by a resistance to received notions of linguistic 'purity', 'multilingualism', and 'standard', and hence implicitly reject languages as being fixed, bounded entities. These theories are part of a broader change in sociolinguistic thinking (see Dyers 2016) that can be linked, in varied and complex ways, to the late modern world, southern theory, and decolonial impulses. This does not deny the existence of Euromodern conceptions of language, nor that such conceptions can be found among Africans. The emphasis, rather, is on a shift in thinking that has opened new avenues of research that has, in turn, provided evidence of the complexity of language vis-à-vis the lived reality of Africans.

Is it, therefore, not possible to 'think' 'X Afropolitanese', to orient ourselves and our understandings of language towards the contextual emergence thereof within the African context, rather than as received ontologies? Rather than regarding language as a resource, as a right, or as a problem, regarding it as something that orients (see Van der Merwe 2022 for a discussion of language-policy-as-orientation), and something through which the 'ordinary' can be oriented towards, could, I would speculate, go a long way towards doing away with the dominant frame that dictates our view of languages in Africa in general, but in multilingual societies more generally. This dominant frame views languages as inherently caught in hierarchies of inequality (see Msila 2019). In contrast, the focus on 'X Afropolitanese', I would suggest, leads to the logical conclusion that 'A Afropolitanese', 'B Afropolitanese', and 'C Afropolitanese' are but mere lexemes of the larger lexicon. And without the fullness of Afropolitanese, without acknowledging and working towards its fullness, there is a void, a linguistic being out of balance and inharmonious.

In this way Afropolitanism should not only be regarded as a defence of 'European' or 'colonial' languages in Africa, but as arguing for the acknowledgement and active promotion of all languages within the continent that shape iterations

of Afropolitanese in its fullness. As mentioned, ubuntu translanguaging and linguistic citizenship are southern theories that have been formulated, debated, and honed within the African sociolinguistic context – focused on describing how language-use by Africans does not conform to many traditional understandings of fixed and bounded linguistic categories – a phenomenon that Jacop Nhlapo had already noted in the 1940s.

In contrast to Nhlapo, however, who argued for proactive change in the linguistic landscape by way of a form of language engineering, which he termed linguistic harmonisation, in order to break down received, colonial barriers in relation to language, I would posit that the scholarship on ubuntu translanguaging (specifically with reference to English and Nguni languages) and linguistic citizenship (with reference to English and Afrikaans) point to the realisation of an informal and 'natural' form of harmonisation, or Afropolitanisation, within the linguistic sphere. 'Engineering' languages to reflect this is not necessary – the data point to the fact that the harmonisation of languages is evident in many ways and on many fronts, and language policies could be rewritten in order to reflect this. An Afropolitan view of language and language policies can, therefore, be regarded as postdevelopmental in spirit – not only relative to a critique of the need for 'language development' as such, but also in relation to the realisation that the development of language, vis-à-vis the notion of the 'standard', is a product of an artefactual ideology.

The concept of Afropolitanese should not, therefore, be read as oppositional to 'African languages' in the traditional understanding of the term – it is not, therefore, only in support of 'European' or 'colonial' languages, but rather reflects the extant and always-already emergent reality of language constitution and reconstitution. Through this, it aims not to 'elevate' 'traditional African' languages as co-inhabiting a space with English, but recognise the lexemes, grammars, and idioms that would traditionally be described as belonging to them as unmissable dimensions of the naturally occurring rhythm of language formation on the continent. Language policies can, therefore, also be rewritten in order to reflect this particular linguistic orientation, namely to reflect, acknowledge, and dignify the always-already emergent forms of Afropolitanese on the continent – and not the 'spectacular' standards. Afropolitanese, then, is not a form of prescriptionism, but rather an epistemic frame, or, to echo Mbembe's (2020: 60) description of Afropolitanism, an "aesthetic and a particular poetic of the world".

Conclusion

Reflecting on the argument put forward in this article, it could, at a glance, seem to echo much of Achebe's thought as to honing and shaping English within the African context, and therefore appear to be more in line with his thought than that of Wa Thiong'o. I would respond by noting that while it is true that Wa Thiong'o offers perhaps the most sustained objection to regarding English as 'African', and therefore pre-empts any possibility for 'X English' to be accommodated intellectually, his notion of 'moving the centre', which is central to his (Wa Thiong'o 1993) decolonial philosophy, could nevertheless be invoked as an echo of Deleuze/guattarian rhizomatic thought. Although the specific object of 'English' is not something he explicitly regards as being worthy of decentring in relation to Africa, his general line of reasoning is generative in this context.

In contrast, Achebe, ironically, does not allow for a notion of decentring in the true sense, since he views English as being in a hierarchical relation to other African languages. English, he argues, should be the language of 'national literature', and by extension of the 'national culture', of any given country, while other African languages become carriers of the 'ethnic'. This split between the national and the ethnic is, I would argue, a misguided one, for it not only assumes and maintains a hierarchical distinction in 'applicability' or 'function' of language, but does so in a way that is akin to the political split between citizen (the national) and subject (the ethnic) that characterise the historical colonial political system (see Mamdani 1996). And just as "[t]o do away with one, you have to do away with the other" (Mamdani 1998) as it relates to citizen and subject, the category of national and ethnic in relation to language is an invention that has to be deconstructed concurrently.

English could be seen as something that "scorches [our] lips" (Fanon 2004: 58), it could be regarded as an "inheritance" (Achebe), and we could frame it as responsible for the "domination of a people's language" (Wa Thiong'o 1986: 16). Or, it could be read against the backdrop of what all languages are: malleable, dynamic, and elusive. And it is these qualities of language as a phenomenon, I conclude, that defies easy and simplistic categories of thought. Language within the context of (post/de)colonialism is no different. What this article has reflected on is the centrality of acknowledging the complexity of this most symbolic of human 'inventions', and the value of 'reimagining' it through thought paradigms different from those received. Ultimately, I would posit, it is not the 'answer' to the question of the status of English, nor any other language, that is important, but this acknowledgment, and the epistemic play that follows.

References

- ACHEBE C. 1997 [1965]. English and the African writer. *Transition* 75/76: 342-349. <https://doi.org/10.2307/2935429>
- AHMED S. 2006. *Queer phenomenology: orientations, objects, others*. London: Duke University Press. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9780822388074>
- ALEXANDER N. 1989. *Language policy and national unity in South Africa/Azania*. Cape Town: Buchu Books.
- ALEXANDER N. 1990. *Education, culture and the national question. Education and the struggle for national liberation in South Africa*. Johannesburg: Skotaville.
- APPIAH KA. 2005. *The ethics of identity*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- APPIAH KA. 2006. *Cosmopolitanism: ethics in a world of strangers*. New York: Norton & Company.
- BLOMMAERT J. 2006. Language ideology. In: Brown K (ed). *Encyclopedia of language and linguistics, Vol. 6*. Oxford: Elsevier. <https://doi.org/10.1016/B0-08-044854-2/03029-7>
- BLOMMAERT J. 2008. Artefactual ideologies and the textual production of African languages. *Language and Communication* 28(4): 291-307. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2008.02.003>
- COETZEE C. 2013. *Accented futures: language activism and the ending of apartheid*. Johannesburg: Wits University Press. <https://doi.org/10.18772/12013067403>
- COETZEE C (ED). 2019. *Afropolitanism: reboot*. London and New York: Routledge.
- COMAROFF J AND COMAROFF JL. 2012. *Theory from the South: or, how Euro-America is evolving toward Africa*. New York: Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00664677.2012.694169>
- CHIPATO F. 2023. The global politics of African identity: pan-Africanism and the challenge of Afropolitanism. *Global Studies Quarterly* 3(3): ksad046. <https://doi.org/10.1093/isagsq/ksad046>
- DELEUZE G AND GUATTARI F. 1987 [1980]. *A thousand plateaus: capitalism and schizophrenia*. Trans. B Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press.
- DINIZ DE FIGUEIREDO EH. 2017. Conceptualizations of English in the discourses of Brazilian language teachers: issues of mobility, empowerment and international ownership: an analysis of ideologies of English in Brazilian ELT. *English Today* 33(2): 31-37. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078416000602>
- DJURAEVA M. 2022. Multilingualism, nation branding, and the ownership of English in Kazakhstan and Uzbekistan. *World Englishes* 41: 92-103. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12557>
- DUBE B. 2017. Afrikaans must Fall and English must Rise: ironies and contradictions in protests by South African university students. *Africa Insight* 47(2): 13-27.

- DYERS C. 2016. The conceptual evolution in linguistics: implications for the study of Kaaps. *Multilingual Margins: A Journal of Multilingualism from the Periphery* 3(2): 62-72. <https://doi.org/10.14426/mm.v3i2.41>
- EDE A. 2016. The politics of Afropolitanism. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28(1): 88-100. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2015.1132622>
- EISENSTADT SN. 2000. Multiple modernities. *Dædalus* 129(1): 1-29. <https://doi.org/10.1177/03058298000290031201>
- ERIKSEN TH. 2007. Nationalism and the internet. *Nations and Nationalism* 13(1): 1-17. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1469-8129.2007.00273.x>
- FANON F. 2004 [1961]. *The wretched of the earth*. Trans. R. Philcox. New York: Grove Books.
- GEHRMANN S. 2016. Cosmopolitanism with African roots: Afropolitanism's ambivalent mobilities. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 28(1): 61-72. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2015.1112770>
- GIDDENS A. 1995. *Konsequenzen der Moderne*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- GIKANDI S. 2011. Foreword: On Afropolitanism. In: W Wawrzinek and JKS Makokha (eds). *Negotiating Afropolitanism: essays on Borders and Spaces in Contemporary African Literature and Folklore*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. https://doi.org/10.1163/9789042032231_003
- GILMOUR R. 2007. Missionaries, colonialism, and language in South Africa. *History Compass* 5(7): 1761-1777. <https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1478-0542.2007.00472.x>
- HARRIES P. 1988. The roots of ethnicity: discourse and the politics of language construction in South-East Africa. *African Affairs* 87(346): 25-52. <https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordjournals.afraf.a098010>
- HEUGH K. 2016. Harmonisation and South African languages: twentieth century debates of homogeneity and heterogeneity. *Language Policy* 15(3): 235-255. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-015-9372-0>
- Ho J. 2021. Afropolitanism and social class. *PMLA* 136(5): 770-777. <https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812921000705>
- HOUNTONDI P. 1973. Pluralism – true and false. *Diogenes* 21(84): 101-118. <https://doi.org/10.1177/039219217302108406>
- HUTTON C. 2010. Who owns language? Mother tongues as intellectual property and the conceptualization of human linguistic diversity. *Language Sciences* 32: 638-647. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langsci.2010.06.001>
- IBRONKE O. 2021. Afropolitanism from below. *PMLA* 136(5): 785-791. <https://doi.org/10.1632/S0030812921000754>
- JEYIFO B. 2018. English is an African language – Ka Dupel [for and against Ngūgĩ]. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 30(2): 133-147. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2016.1264295>

- KALLINEY P. 2015. Modernism, African literature, and the Cold War. *Modern Language Quarterly* 76(3): 333-368. <https://doi.org/10.1215/00267929-2920051>
- KAMWANGAMALU NM. 2019. English as a naturalized African language. *World Englishes* 38: 114-127. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12395>
- KROEKER L. 2022. African Renaissance, Afrotopia, Afropolitanism, and Afrofuturism: comparing conceptual properties of four African futures. *Africa Spectrum* 57(2): 113-133. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00020397221101633>
- LAWORE O. 2021. A critique of Afropolitanism: toward the formation of a new reading model – Nigeriopolitanism. *Research in African Literatures* 52(1): 139-155. <https://doi.org/10.2979/reseafritelite.52.1.09>
- MAKALELA L. 2015a. Breaking African language boundaries: student teachers' reflections on translanguaging practices. *Language Matters: Studies in the Languages of Africa* 46(2): 275-292. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10228195.2014.986664>
- MAKALELA L. 2015b. Moving out of linguistic boxes: the effects of translanguaging strategies for multilingual classrooms. *Language & Education* 29(3): 200-217. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09500782.2014.994524>
- MAKALELA L. 2015c. Translanguaging as a vehicle for epistemic access: cases for reading comprehension and multilingual interactions. *Per Linguam: A Journal for Language Learning / Tydskrif vir Taalaanleer* 31(1): 15-29. <https://doi.org/10.5785/31-1-628>
- MAKALELA L. 2016. Ubuntu translanguaging: an alternative framework for complex multilingual encounters. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 34(3): 187-196. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2016.1250350>
- MAKALELA L. 2018. Community elders' narrative accounts of ubuntu translanguaging: learning and teaching in African education. *International Review of Education* 64: 823-843. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11159-018-9752-8>
- MAKALELA L. 2019. Uncovering the universals of ubuntu translanguaging in classroom discourses. *Classroom Discourse* 10(3-4): 237-251. <https://doi.org/10.1080/19463014.2019.1631198>
- MAKONI S. 1998. African languages as European scripts: the shaping of communal memory. In: S Nuttall and C Coetzee (eds). *Negotiating the past: the making of memory in South Africa*. Cape Town: Oxford University Press Southern Africa.
- MAKONI S. 2003. From misinvention to disinvention of language: multilingualism and the South African Constitution. In: S Makoni, G Smitherman, A Ball and KA Spears (eds). *Black linguistics: language, society and politics in Africa and the Americas*. New York: Routledge.

- MAKUBALO G. 2007. 'I don't know... it contradicts': identity construction and the use of English by high school learners in a desegregated school space. *English Academy Review: a journal of English studies* 24(2): 24-41. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131750701452287>
- MAMDANI M. 1996. *Citizen and subject: contemporary Africa and the legacy of late colonialism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- MAMDANI M. 1998. When does a settler become a native? Reflections of the colonial roots of citizenship in Equatorial and South Africa. Inaugural lecture as AC Jordan Professor of African Studies, University of Cape Town, 13 May.
- MAZRUI AA. 1975. *The political sociology of English language: an African perspective*. Berlin: De Gruyter. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110824322>
- MBEMBE A. 2020 [2007]. Afropolitanism. Trans. L Chauvet. *Nka: Journal of Contemporary African Art* 46: 56-61. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10757163-8308174>
- MCKINNEY C. 2007. 'If I speak English, does it make me less black anyway?' 'Race' and English in South African desegregated schools. *English Academy Review: a journal of English studies* 24(2): 6-24. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131750701452253>
- MCKINNEY C. 2013. Orientations to English in post-apartheid schooling: a study of sociolinguistic and identity changes amongst adolescent girls in multilingual schools. *English Today* 29(1): 22-27. <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0266078412000491>
- MCWHORTER J. 2008. *Our magnificent bastard tongue: the untold history of English*. New York: Gotham Books.
- MOTINYANE M. 2018. A textual analysis of the African language expressions used during the #RhodesMustFall campaign. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 36(1): 37-48. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2018.1457269>
- MSILA V. 2019. Rethinking Babylon: the language dilemma and the search for social justice in Africa. *English Academy Review: a journal of English studies* 36(1): 100-112. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131752.2019.1587829>
- MUGANE J. 2018. The great English heist in African studies. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 30(2): 121-123. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2017.1357353>
- MWANIKI M. 2018. South African higher education language politics post #Rhodes-MustFall: the terrain of advanced language politics. *Southern African Linguistics and Applied Language Studies* 36(1): 25-36. <https://doi.org/10.2989/16073614.2018.1452880>
- NDEBELE NS. 1986. The rediscovery of the ordinary: some new writings in South Africa. *Journal of Southern African Studies* 12(2): 143-157. <https://doi.org/10.1080/03057078608708118>

- NDEBELE NS. 1987. The English language and social change in South Africa. *English Academy Review: a journal of English studies* 4: 1-16. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131758785310021>
- NHLAPO J. 1944. *Bantu Babel: will the Bantu languages live?* Cape Town: The African Bookman.
- NHLAPO J. 1945. *Nguni and Sotho*. Cape Town: The African Bookman.
- OMOTOSO K. 1988. The languages of our dreams or the dreams of our languages. In: KH Petersen (ed). *Criticism and ideology: Second African Writers' Conference, Stockholm 1986*. Uppsala: Nordiska Afrikainstitutet.
- PARMEGIANI A. 2014. The (dis)ownership of English: language and identity construction among Zulu students at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. *International Journal of Bilingual Education and Bilingualism* 17(6): 683-694. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13670050.2014.953775>
- PENNYCOOK A. 2007. The myth of English as an international language. In: A Pennycook and S Makoni (eds). *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Clevedon, Buffalo, and Toronto: Multilingual Matters. <https://doi.org/10.21832/9781853599255-006>
- PENNYCOOK A AND MAKONI S. 2007. Disinventing and reconstituting Languages. In: A Pennycook and S Makoni (eds). *Disinventing and reconstituting languages*. Clevedon, Buffalo, and Toronto: Multilingual Matters.
- RUIZ R. 1984. Orientations in language planning. *NABE Journal* 8(2): 15-34. <https://doi.org/10.1080/08855072.1984.10668464>
- SEARGEANT P. 2009. Metaphors of possession in the conceptualisation of language. *Language & Communication* 29(4): 383-393. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2009.02.001>
- SEILHAMER MF. 2015. The ownership of English in Taiwan. *World Englishes* 34(3): 370-388. <https://doi.org/10.1111/weng.12147>
- SELASI T. 2013 [2005]. Bye-Bye Barbar. *Callaloo: A Journal of African Diaspora Arts and Letters* 36(32): 528-530. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cal.2013.0163>
- SITHOLE N. 2021. Resituating 'African-language' literatures in African literature: the case of BW Vilakazi. *South African Journal of African Languages* 41(2): 222-229. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02572117.2021.1948228>
- SKINNER RT. 2017. Why Afropolitanism matters. *Africa Today* 64(2): 3-21. <https://doi.org/10.2979/africatoday.64.2.01>
- STROUD C AND WILLIAMS QE. 2017. Multilingualism as utopia: fashioning non-racial selves. *AILA Review* 30: 167-188. <https://doi.org/10.1075/aila.00008.str>
- STROUD C, WILLIAMS QE, BONTIYA N, HARRY J, KAPA K, MAYOMA J, MPENDUKANA S, PECK A, RICHARDSON J AND ROUX S. 2020. Talking parts, Talking back: fleshing out linguistic citizenship. *Trabalhos em Linguística Aplicada* 59(3): 1636-1658. <https://doi.org/10.1590/010318138877711120201211>

- TÁÍWÒ O. 2022. *Against decolonization: taking African agency seriously*. London: Hurst and Co.
- TOIVANEN A. 2017. Cosmopolitanism's new clothes? The limits of the concept of Afropolitanism. *European Journal of English Studies* 21(2): 189-205. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13825577.2017.1344475>
- QUIJANO A. 2007. Coloniality and modernity/rationality. *Cultural Studies* 21(2): 168-178. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502380601164353>
- VAN DER MERWE C. 2022. Re-considering orientations in South African language policies. *Bandung: Journal of the Global South* 9: 279-299. <https://doi.org/10.1163/21983534-09010011>
- WA NGUGI M. 2018. *The rise of the African novel: politics of language, identity, and ownership*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press. <https://doi.org/10.3998/mpub.9724578>
- WA THIONG'O N. 1986. *Decolonising the mind: the politics of language in African literature*. London, Nairobi and Portsmouth: James Currey and Heinemann.
- WA THIONG'O N. 1993. *Moving the centre: the struggle for cultural freedoms*. London: James Curry.
- WA THIONG'O N. 2018. The politics of translation: notes towards an African language policy. *Journal of African Cultural Studies* 30(2): 124-132. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13696815.2016.1183476>
- WEE L. 2022. When English is not a mother tongue: linguistic ownership and the Eurasian community in Singapore. *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development* 23(4): 282-295. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01434630208666470>
- WILLIAMS QE AND STROUD C. 2013. Multilingualism in transformative spaces: contact and conviviality. *Language Policy* 12(4): 289-311. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10993-012-9265-4>
- WILLIAMS QE AND STROUD C. 2015. Linguistic citizenship: language and politics in postnational modernities. *Journal of Language and Politics* 14(3): 406-430. <https://doi.org/10.1075/jlp.14.3.05wil>
- WRIGHT L. 2002. Language as a 'resource' in South Africa: the economic life of language in a globalising society. *English Academy Review: a journal of English studies* 29(1): 136-158. <https://doi.org/10.1080/10131750285310031>
- ZABUS C. 2007. *The African palimpsest: indigenization of language in the West African Europhone novel*. Amsterdam and New York: Rodopi. <https://doi.org/10.1163/9789401204552>