

Judy Kendall: ‘Saro-Wiwa’s Language of Dissent: Translating between African Englishes’

This article calls attention to the essential translational aspect of linguistic experimentation in literary uses of African Englishes in colonial and postcolonial West African literature. It focuses mainly on the literature of the most linguistically diverse country in Africa – Nigeria. Drawing on the theoretical work of Itamar Even-Zohar, Lawrence Venuti and Pierre Bourdieu, it demonstrates how the use of different Englishes in this literature act in a translational way, relating and responding to cultural, political and social contexts. Specific attention is paid to Amos Tutuola’s use of interlanguage and diglossia; Chinua Achebe’s manipulation of acts of code-switching and mixing; and how Ken Saro-Wiwa’s development of a unique language of dissent in his novel *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English* is built upon these earlier experimentations with translations between Englishes.

Keywords: Ken Saro-Wiwa, Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Englishes, code-switching, interlanguage, diglossia, Itamar Even-Zohar, Pierre Bourdieu, postcolonial

Saro-Wiwa’s Language of Dissent: Translating between African Englishes

Judy Kendall

In his 1985 novel *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*, Ken Saro-Wiwa develops a unique language of dissent that builds on linguistic and translational experimentations in earlier West African literature in English. These include Amos Tutuola’s controversial use, in the pre-independence *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (1952), of interlanguage – a term that Jennifer Jenkins problematically describes as ‘learner language which has not yet reached the target’; and Chinua Achebe’s deployment in the post-independence *A Man of the People* (1966) of code-switching and code-mixing – terms that Jenkins defines as the use of ‘words, phrases, and longer stretches of speech in two or more languages’.¹ In these and other cases, such experimentation coincides with crises in the political context in which they were conceived. This is not simple coincidence, however, as application of translation theory to the linguistic aspects of such developments will demonstrate. Saro-Wiwa, in particular, breaks significant new ground by making deliberate use of this connection between Englishes and economic, educational, social, and political conditions in his employment of what he refers to as ‘rotten

English' in *Sozaboy*. This rotten English is a fluid language of dissent specific to the context and development of its speaker. It consists of a highly creative, subversive mix of different Englishes, acutely enabling for those with no political voice. The mix is comprised of multiple acts of translation that present, mirror, negotiate, and challenge political and social effects of shifts in status through unusual relations between source and target language, and alterations in writer/narrator/translator visibility. The result is an extraordinarily brave contribution to the development of African Englishes in literature, deliberately exposing and exploiting political effects of language choice within the specific context of postcolonial Nigeria.

Language use can have such an effect because, as Susan Bassnett puts it, it 'does not simply mirror reality, but intervenes in the shaping of meaning'.² Separate languages, composed of discrete units used in different combinations, shape meaning differently. Such differences, however subtle, reflect and result in different ways of thinking. **Such a perception of language is not new. In words that scandalize today, the London Missionary Society referred in 1826 to the pernicious effect on the mind of particular languages, '[a]ll the Indian languages have been for so many ages the vehicle of every thing in their superstition which is orally debasing or corrupting to the mind, and so much is the grossly impure structure of heathenism wrought into the native languages, that the bare study of them often proves injurious to the mind of the European'.**³ In 1966 Kenneth Burke remarked, in much more even-handed words, that 'if any given terminology is a *reflection* of reality, by its very nature as a terminology it must be a *selection* of reality; and to this extent it must function also as a *deflection* of reality'.⁴

As a result of the global spread of English in the twentieth century the number of Englishes that now exist is vast. This is particularly evident in Africa. Hans-Georg Wolf's attempt at categorization breaks down West African English into 'national varieties', and

then divides Nigerian Englishes into Yoruba-, Igbo-, and Hausa-influenced sub-varieties. He also notes the dominance of varieties that have originated in areas that are prospering economically, implying a relation between environment and use of English that is very relevant to a study of innovative use of Englishes in African literature, and specifically in Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*.⁵ The potential for a multiplicity of Englishes to arise in Nigeria in particular is evident in the fact that nearly 400 other languages are spoken there. Some possess orthographies, many do not, but all have the potential to create further sub-varieties of Nigerian English.

These different Englishes continue to evolve. Such changes in language are closely tied, as Wolf implies, to changes in the economy. They are also tied to changes in the political climate. This link is reflected in the terminology that researchers in the area employ, which echoes the close and direct relation between variations of English and their colonial and postcolonial history. Analysis of successive alterations in this terminology reveals that researchers are keenly aware of the continued evolution of and connection between language and political contexts. An early term for these Englishes was 'New Englishes', defined by Platt, Weber, and Ho as 'any second language new variety of English that has become "localized" or "nativized" by adopting some language features of its own'.⁶ Later, in the 'Author's Note' to *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa cites Platt, Weber, and Ho's work on Englishes in reference to the strong links he observes between varieties of Englishes and the socio-economic and educational conditions in which they are used. However, Platt, Weber, and Ho's politically contentious adjective 'new' could imply the perspective of predominantly Western scholarship. In this context, Braj Kachru adopted 'World Englishes' as the title of his *World Englishes* journal upon its foundation in 1982. Later terms include the title of Schneider's book, *Postcolonial Englishes*, which emphasized political and historical influences, while Jennifer Jenkins opted for the title *World Englishes* or 'Englishes as nation-

bound varieties’ for her 2003 book, although in the third edition of 2015 (cited above, n. 1) she changed the title to *Global Englishes* in order to take into account ‘the recent massive growth in the use of English’ in ‘newer non-nation-bound developments’ (p. xiii).

Such diversification in English, particularly since it often results in the use of more than one English in a particular area, leads inevitably to the topic of language choice. This is a contentious issue, since, as Bassnett has observed, ‘languages are rarely equal, reflecting the hegemonic position of certain cultures’.⁷ Different kinds of English carry different connotations of status and power in accordance with the cultural and political contexts in which they are spoken. In addition, they convey different moods, emotions, and atmospheres. Schneider was aware of this, noting that what he termed Nigerian Pidgin was utilized by many speakers ‘as a code of friendliness and proximity ... a sign of an informal, relaxed atmosphere, thus strongly imbued with a positive attitude’. He also recorded changes in perceptions of different kinds of English: ‘a “native,” i.e. British, accent is no longer really aimed at, as it is seen as “affected and un-Nigerian”’ or ‘affected and arrogant’.⁸

Language choice may not, of course, be restricted simply to different kinds of English. Schneider’s reference to ‘Nigerian Pidgin’ exemplifies this, since pidgin can be classified not as a kind of English but as a separate language altogether: a ‘new African language’, in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o’s words, albeit one that includes some English elements.⁹ In Ngũgĩ and Achebe’s well-rehearsed and hotly articulated debate about language choice for African literature, the possibilities ranged from Standard British English, to pidgin, to the sixty or more languages spoken in Ngũgĩ’s homeland, Kenya, and the several hundred indigenous languages spoken in Achebe’s homeland, Nigeria. Ngũgĩ and Achebe’s discussions on this issue were conducted over decades, first initiated at the seminal 1962 conference ‘African Writers of English Expression’ in Uganda, and then further articulated in a series of essays by Ngũgĩ, Achebe, and others. The debate revolved around which

language(s) African writers should employ as ‘the creative vehicles of our imagination’ (Ngũgĩ, ‘Language’, p. 445). Ngũgĩ argued for the use of the writer’s mother-tongue, Achebe for the appropriation of English.

It is worth rehearsing some aspects of this debate because of its influence on the kinds of Englishes adopted in African literature, and the translational considerations that pertain to them. Ngũgĩ lamented the central position English took in the production and study of African literature, outlining the dangers inherent in exposing ‘the colonial child ... to images of his world as mirrored in the written languages of his coloniser’ and thus encouraging such children to look at their culture from the outside, conditioning them ‘to see that world in a certain way ... as seen and defined by or reflected in the culture of the language of imposition’, and reinforced by the work of ‘geniuses of racism’ (‘Language’, p. 443). Ngũgĩ also raised the question of audience, the choice of English necessarily restricting African readership to those literate in English.¹⁰ Ngũgĩ labelled works by African writers in English or other European languages as Afro-European literature rather than African literature. He acted on his principles, switching from writing novels in English to Gikuyu in the late 1970s. His last novel written in English was *Petals of Blood* (1977), and his first written in Gikuyu was *Caitani Mũtharabaini*, later self-translated into English as *Devil on the Cross* (1980). Achebe, on the other hand, embraced the potential he saw in English, or, to be more precise, in Englishes. For multilingual communities, such as those in Nigeria, he argued that English became ‘a language with which to talk to one another. If it failed to give them a song, it at least gave them a tongue, for sighing.’ His criterion for writing in English was that it be specifically fashioned to his ends, no longer Standard British English but made into his ‘own’ language:

The price a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use ... The writer should aim at fashioning an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience ... I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings.¹¹

It is significant that the writers on both sides of this debate drew on a sense of place to argue their case. Ngũgĩ valued his language of choice, the writer's mother-tongue, because he saw it as avoiding outsideness, unlike the language he rejected, English, a language which came from outside, and also carried with it strongly negative colonial associations as 'the language of the master' ('Language', p. 447). He argued that it was imbued with associations and value systems that had a strongly negative impact on an indigenous African readership, alienating these readers from their own culture and history. Ngũgĩ's choice of Gikuyu, however, while articulating, from the inside, the culture, world-view, and aesthetics of Gikuyu people, inevitably stood as a barrier for a non-Gikuyu speaking readership. Achebe emphasized this point. He felt that his language of choice needed to have a relation to the home of the past but also to the present – to the ancestral and to the contemporary international world. Whereas Ngũgĩ saw the outsideness of English as a danger, Achebe viewed that outsideness as an opportunity for the writer/speaker both to inhabit and to stand outside the ancestral and the contemporary. Sometimes in his novels this occurs with bewildering rapidity, with what might appear alien in the context of the ancestral home appearing comfortably at home in the contemporary setting. Both writers agreed, however, that making the right language choice was crucial, since it allowed them to carve out a specific position and enable a specific and perhaps otherwise unvoiced voice to speak.

Instead of signalling a position in the accepted hierarchy, the language chosen can signal a place outside that hierarchy, a privileged place from which the speaker can make critical comments on that hierarchy and also create new modes of expression. In the case of pidgin, Gillian Gane and M. A. K. Halliday have observed its function as an ‘underlanguage ... in which unpleasant truths are revealed’, articulating ‘a resistant counterknowledge.’¹² New modes of expression are also evident in Achebe and other writers’ employment of specific different Englishes in their novels. The very choices that writers such as Achebe, Tutuola, and Saro-Wiwa made in terms of use of new Englishes act as strong comments upon the social, cultural, political, and linguistic hierarchies of their day. Some of these new modes of expression may, in turn, as Pierre Bourdieu predicts in *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, become the new norm, with an acknowledged place inside the accepted hierarchy.¹³ However, while these new varieties of English remain new, they carry, as part of their newness, the potential to subvert established conventions, political and linguistic, to challenge and affect established hierarchies, and prompt shifts in position and power.

This is as true of written as it is of oral language, particularly in the case of the language of innovative literary texts. It is no accident that most of the writers cited so far are Nigerian. In Nigeria, the country that boasts the greatest linguistic diversity in Africa, innovative language use in its literature in English is frequent, often occurring at times of political instability and change, and often taking the form of the introduction of new Englishes, as in the work of Tutuola, Achebe, and Saro-Wiwa. It can also be seen in Wole Soyinka’s early plays. *The Trials of Brother Jero* and *The Dance of the Forests* were both first produced in independence year, 1960, with *The Dance of the Forests* being selected for the Nigerian Independence celebrations. These, together with Soyinka’s 1965 play *The Road*, draw on a mixture of influences from Yoruba, pidgin, and other varieties of English, sometimes moving, like Samson in *The Road*, who is both passenger tout and driver’s mate,

almost seamlessly between one English and another:

SAMSON: You no sabbe de ting wey man dey call class so shurup your mout.

Professor enh, he get class and he get style. That suit he wears now, that was the very way he used to dress to evening service.¹⁴

Soyinka also explores the uses to which different Englishes are put. In *The Trials of Brother Jero*, he writes ambiguity into the expression of these uses in the play by choosing Jero, an unscrupulous preacher, to articulate them:

CHUME. Help him. Help him. Help ‘am. Help ‘am.

JERO. Job Job. Elijah Elijah.

CHUME (*getting more worked up*). Help ‘am God. Help ‘am God. I say make you help ‘am.

Help ‘am quick quick.

...

JERO ... Only Brother Chume reverts to that animal jabber when he gets his spiritual excitement,

And that is much too often for my liking. He is too crude.¹⁵

Linguistic innovation is evident in Gabriel Okara’s 1964 novel *The Voice* in which he uses translational tactics to impose Ijo syntax onto English:

As a writer who believes in the utilization of African ideas, African philosophy and African folklore and imagery to the fullest extent possible, I am of the opinion the

only way to use them effectively is to translate them almost literally from the African language native to the writer into whatever European language he is using as medium of expression. I have endeavoured in my words to keep as close as possible to the vernacular expression. For, from a word, a sentence and even a name in any African language, one can glean the social norms, attitudes and values of a people.¹⁶

The result was a startling mixture of voice, perspective, and register, and an indication of the fluidity of identity and status, dictated simply by the costume donned, as in the following instance: ‘Thus this black-coat-wearing man his story had told and thus Okolo remembered.’¹⁷

In other less linguistically diverse countries, innovation at times of political crisis may appear in terms of literary structure. In 1977, at the climax of the vicious struggle for an independent Zimbabwe, Dambudzo Marechera created an extraordinary re-envisioning of traditional narrative form in *The House of Hunger*. A few years later in 1983, after independence, he prefaced the book with a comment that directly connects a writer’s language with its cultural and political milieu: ‘For a black writer the language [English] is very racist; you have to have harrowing fights and hair-raising panga duels with the language before you can make it do all what you meant it to do ... discarding grammar, throwing syntax out, subverting images from within.’¹⁸

Such writings form a body of literature in English that experiments in different ways with interlanguage, code-switching, and the creation of new and fluid language mixes. In each case, significant political challenges result. One way in which these might be articulated is through reflections upon language choice and status communicated in-text via the author, narrator, or character. An example of this occurs in Achebe’s *The Man of the People*:

‘That is next to impossibility,’ he said. Peter liked his words long. He had his standard six certificate which two or three years before could have got him a job as a messenger in an office or even a teacher in an elementary school. But today there simply aren’t any jobs for his kind of person any more.¹⁹

This text emphasizes shifting relations between language, status, and, in this case, employment opportunities.

A political comment may occur paratextually via article, interview, or author’s note. While Marechera uses an interview, published together with his novella, to comment on his sometimes violent appropriation of English, Saro-Wiwa declares, in *Sozaboy*’s ‘Author’s Note’, the influence of the political environment of the Nigerian Civil War on his employment of rotten English.

Okara’s *The Voice* articulates political challenge stylistically. In this book, code-mixing works with semantic content to challenge over-passive acceptance of a new political regime at the expense of older traditional wisdom: ‘Our fathers’ insides always contained things straight ... and we did the straight things till the new time came.’ The main character, Okolo, observes the inevitably destructive result of language: ‘Names bring divisions, and divisions, strife. So, let it be without a name.’ The only way to avoid corrupting ‘your purpose in this world’ is to ‘keep it clean as a virgin sheet of white paper’, that is, unwritten (*The Voice*, pp. 50, 21, 112). The mix in this English of African proverb, biblical phrasing and rhythms, and British English ‘poetic’ metaphor argues eloquently for the importance of opening the mind to different ways of thinking: ‘Why shouldn’t there be a Nigerian or West African English which we can use to express our own ideas, thinking and philosophy in our own way?’ (Okara, ‘Language’, p. 436).

The work of writers such as these not only reflects but pioneers transitions in attitudes to particular African Englishes in regional and international literary circles. In turn, such shifts in attitude themselves reflect and affect a wider cultural audience, and inform succeeding writers' linguistic innovation. This becomes evident when tracing the ways in which the interlanguage of Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is used and transformed from Tutuola to Achebe, and then startlingly re-envisioned in Saro-Wiwa's fresh and linguistically challenging *Sozaboy*.

It is no exaggeration to say that African English literature opened up with Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, described by O. R. Dathorne as standing 'at the forefront of western African literature'.²⁰ Achebe's literary and critical explorations of different Englishes were also vital and far-reaching, his words on the Africanization of English resonating with twenty-first-century writers of African literature. With *Sozaboy*, however, Saro-Wiwa took a significant step forward, handing over to a naive recruit in the Nigerian Civil War a 'rotten' English previously deemed unpublishable, but which succeeds as perhaps no other English could in expressing the needs, difficulties, and desires of those who might otherwise lack a political voice.

The fact that language is hierarchical means it also acts as an agent of exclusion, and variations from standard language ideology are noted as errors, as delineated by Jenkins in *Global Englishes* (p. 22). This is evident in the notoriously contrasting but fervently articulated reactions to the language of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* of its early readers, critics, and editors.²¹ These reactions refer to what was perceived as Tutuola's grammatical incompetency in English; his imaginative leaps and playful freedom of voice; his apparent disregard of narrative conventions; his skill in translating oral storytelling to the written page; the degree of intentionality in his linguistic experiments; his success in rendering Yoruba

speech rhythms and idiom in English; and the book's place as the first representative of a Yoruba English literature.

Tutuola claimed that he wrote *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* because 'I don't want the past to die. I don't want our culture to vanish. It's not good. We are losing [our customs and traditions] now, but I'm still trying to bring them into memory. So far as I don't want our culture to fade away.'²² To achieve this, writing in his native Yoruba would not suffice, yet his limited education precluded the use of Standard British English; hence his use of interlanguage.

Early responses by West African critics suggest acute embarrassment. They expressed fears that the book's 'bad grammar' would confirm existing stereotypes of primitive, uneducated Africans. In contrast, early Western critics declared it fresh, unique, and exotic.²³ However, they also declared it unclassifiable, listing it in the *British National Bibliography* not under 'Literature' or 'Modern Fiction in English,' but 'English Miscellany'. Subsequent reviews further diminished its status from serious literature to that of 'tale' or 'story', Dylan Thomas setting the tone: 'brief, thronged, grisly and bewitching ... nothing is too prodigious or too trivial to go down in this tall, devilish story'.²⁴

Initially recommended to them by T. S. Eliot, Faber and Faber's interest in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* was based, as Carolyn Hart records, on its 'roots in the West African mind'.²⁵ So important was this to Faber that they consulted an anthropologist and a historian to authenticate the manuscript. Their judgement of the English in which it was written is indicated in the following communication to Tutuola: 'Just as no one but a West African could have had such a strange tale to tell, so your manner of writing it has a charm of its own We propose ... leaving intact all those expressions which, though strictly speaking erroneous, are more graphic than the correct expressions would be.'²⁶ Faber and Faber nevertheless altered some of the text to conform to Standard British English, and made this

public by including in the first edition a facsimile manuscript page on which they had altered word order and verb tenses. This distanced them from what risked being perceived as ‘erroneous’ English. They also, rather troublingly, used this visual device to provide readers with an apparently authentic glimpse into ‘the West African mind’, thus enforcing the stereotyping feared by early West African critics, turning work and writer into a Debordian spectacle to be passively accepted and consumed as a ‘pseudo-response to a communication without response’.²⁷

Another effect of Faber’s editorial interference was to render Tutuola’s English inconsistent. Some verb tenses were ‘corrected’, others not. In Tutuola’s original text, however, his English maintains an interior logic, constituting therefore, as Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin note, ‘an important and early example of diglossia formation [diglossia] in post-colonial literature’, in other words, a new form of English possessing a ‘separate linguistic logic’ that provided the basis of a potent metaphoric mode in cross-cultural writing.²⁸ Such an assessment pushes Tutuola’s work with different Englishes into the realms of translation, and this is reflected in descriptions of the language it uses. Adebisi Afolayan calls it ‘Yoruba English’, a language ‘possessing Yoruba deep grammar that nevertheless has many of the surface features of conventional English grammar’.²⁹ For Chantal Zabus, this ‘outlandish “folk-novel” precariously straddles the world of orature and that of literature and bridges the two by translating the one into the other’.³⁰ Wole Soyinka cites *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as ‘the earliest instance [in English] of the new Nigerian writer gathering multifarious experience under, if you like, the two cultures, and exploiting them in one extravagant, confident whole’.³¹ The connection with translation is also emphasized in Overvold, Priebe, and Tremain’s comment in *The Creative Circle* on ‘the centrality of translation to all who are involved in the field of African literature’ and Olabode Ibironke’s argument that ‘African

writers are necessarily translators, in that the distinction between “source” and “target” are constantly interlocked and interchanging’.³²

The Palm-Wine Drinkard constitutes a very specific kind of translation. It involved Tutuola drawing from both Yoruba and Standard British English, and altering the original Yoruba content and the English medium in which it is written, to produce a unique diglossia that confidently combines Yoruba oral literature, rhythms, proverbs, and musicality with English religious literature and phraseology, and more contemporary references to modern-day Nigeria, all working together and on the same level.

It is the creative confidence of this language as well as its mixing of sources that informs the later experiments conducted by Saro-Wiwa in *Sozaboy*. Like the narrator in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, the main character of *Sozaboy* presents the reader with this new language as a fait accompli, without comment or apology. However, perhaps informed by the strongly-worded reception which greeted the experimental language of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Saro-Wiwa felt the need to articulate directly his intentions in relation to the English of his novel via his ‘Author’s Note’. This ‘Note’ bears a relation to the translator’s preface in that Saro-Wiwa is outlining his particular approach to translation. A similar need for articulacy in relation to a writer’s particular uses of English can be discerned in a number of Achebe’s interviews and articles, and in the interview with Marechera appended to *The House of Hunger*. This indication of the parallels between the innovative use of Englishes in African literature in English and the work of translators suggests that examining relevant works by Tutuola, Achebe, and Saro-Wiwa in terms of their status as translations or quasi-translations will help uncover the reasons why the Englishes they contain, culminating in the rotten English of *Sozaboy*, have had and continue to have such strong linguistic and political effects, effects that diverge significantly from those produced by texts written in a more standard English.

The Palm-Wine Drinkard was written shortly after the Second World War in 1946. It was published in 1952 in the years leading up to Nigerian independence. The timing of such a work, and its position on the borders of translation which the newness of its English accords it, is significant, given Itamar Even-Zohar's observation of the preponderance of translated literary work at times of instability in terms of languages and cultures and at turning points in a society's literary, cultural, or political life: **'historical moments where established models are no longer tenable for a younger generation'**.³³ At such turning points, translated works normally situated at the periphery of a culture's literature shift to a central, highly influential, position, and are in a position to introduce elements into that culture's literature that did not exist before, both in terms of models of reality, and new language and compositional patterns and techniques. Such a process necessarily requires changes in literary convention. Established ways of writing will be challenged and altered if not overturned. This can be seen in the initial reluctance to classify *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* as serious literature, and the emphasis by its publishers on its apparent grammatical mistakes. Tutuola's brazen use of an unrecognized interlanguage constituted a formidable challenge to predetermined linguistic and literary hierarchies, a challenge reinforced by the apparent endorsement of the book by the Western press and its reviewers.

Lawrence Venuti's emphasis on exclusion or reduction in the translation process is reversed in the case of *The Palm Wine Drinkard*. While for Venuti 'foreign languages, texts, and cultures always undergo some degree and form of exclusion, reduction, and inscription that reflect the cultural situation in the translating language', Tutuola's work has a highly positive effect on the source literature.³⁴ This is because, unusually, while the translating language (English) affects and changes the source text, Tutuola ensures that this English is itself affected and altered by the rhythmic, poetic, and structural qualities of Yoruba oral literature. Thus, the influences run both ways, and English loses its authority, ceasing to be

the instrument of cultural domination. It can no longer be called the ‘language of imposition’ reinforced by ‘geniuses of racism’, as Ngũgĩ put it (‘Language’, p. 443).

Again, the translated literature that takes centre stage normally comes from a major source literature. Once again, with *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* the reverse occurs. Inspired not by a major source literature in global terms but by Yoruba oral literature, the result is a shift of that minority source literature to a central position in the eyes of a Faber and Faber reading public. Tutuola, by using interlanguage, foreignizes his text, and so alerts his readers both to the source text of Yoruba oral literature and to his acts as writer/translator in reworking, altering, and appropriating the dominant colonial language, Standard British English, for creative literary purposes. His use of unfamiliar language and authorial interpolations also reminds readers of the existence of source and target text. By interrupting the story even while telling it, he makes visible his own presence as translator/writer. In addition, his interruptions stress the provisionality of the language used and its limitations in relation to the source text (oral literature): ‘I changed the lady to a kitten and put her inside my pocket and changed myself to a very small bird which I could describe as a “sparrow” in English language.’³⁵ Thus, he ensures that the language he uses remains ‘outside’, idiosyncratic, challenging, and far from the Bourdieu ‘norm’. Reactions of Achebe’s 1970s Nigerian students attest to this. They considered *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* ‘childish and crude’, ‘not ... good enough to engage the serious attention of educated adults like themselves’, as Achebe lamented.³⁶

Tutuola, by not choosing Yoruba or English, and by writing in and between both instead, alerts the reader to ‘what remains *untranslatable*’, as Derrida put it.³⁷ The unfamiliarity of the language, with its idiosyncratic grammar and constructions, highlights the gaps between reader and tale; reader and oral source text; source language and source culture. A tale from somewhere else, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is also a tale that is present,

but its language never allows its readers to forget its provenance. The distances the narrative spans are thus incorporated within its structure, grammar, and lexicon in a manner later reflected and developed in Saro-Wiwa's creation of rotten English.

One way in which Tutuola accomplished this is through sentence and paragraph construction. In the book's sketchy final paragraph of sixteen words, the conjunction 'But' lacks a previous connecting clause, as if this part of the sentence exists but remains unwritten, beyond words. Similarly, the paragraph's non-sequitur of an ending 'there was no famine again' suggests more than the words articulate, bringing the book to an unexpected halt while managing to promise future fruitfulness and abundance: 'But when for three months the rain had been falling regularly, there was no famine again' (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, p. 125).

Tutuola, by practising foreignization of his text, and thus constantly alerting the reader to his acts of translation by means of his foreign and idiosyncratic language use, ensures that his text is not absorbed or domesticated into the receiving culture of what could be described as the target language, English. Thus he prevents the original source material from being appropriated by that receiving culture. Instead, the unfamiliarity of his interlanguage allows the original source texts and cultures to remain still detectable within it.

The acts of translation in *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* draw on more than one source culture: also present are biblical cadences and imagery from the Christian tradition. As Soyinka put it, Tutuola was, like his Yoruba counterpart, D. O. Fagunwa, 'not bothered', 'not inhibited': 'his writings are weird - his imagery comes from everywhere'.³⁸ *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* thus represents a confluence where a number of different languages, Yoruba, Standard British English, Yoruba English, and pidgin, meet or collide. For Soyinka, Tutuola is offering his audience 'the contemporary imagination in a storytelling tradition', comprising therefore yet another form of translation ('From a Common Backcloth', p. 11). This multiplicity of linguistic collision is crucial to the book's effect, as Zabus notes: 'Part of the

difficulty in assessing *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* is indeed due to a triple transposition: (1) from oral to written; (2) from Yoruba to English, coupled with the passage from Yoruba-language literature to English-language literature; (3) from an indigenous, limited audience to a broad world readership.³⁹

These linguistic shifts, coupled with the corrected facsimile's reminder of provisionality and plurality, emphasize the distance between readers of *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* and its source text(s)/languages. Readers are made keenly aware of the choices of language available and the consequent possible readjustments in linguistic hierarchy. They also participate, as they read, in the book's process of redefinition of language, culture, and hierarchy, by engaging with an interlanguage that both maintains its links with all source languages and also emphasizes its independence from the colonial English norm.

Tutuola's interlanguage works precisely because it is learner language that has not reached its target. As Achebe put it, 'A good instinct has turned his apparent limitation in language into a weapon of great strength – a half-strange dialect that serves him perfectly' ('The African Writer and the English Language', p. 434). Thus, the falling short of target becomes the work's virtue, allowing for the creation from two cultures of Soyinka's 'extravagant, confident whole' ('From a Common Backcloth', p. 9). Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin celebrate this very element in their assessment of Tutuola: 'Tutuola's "interlanguage" may be seen as paradigmatic of all cross-cultural writing, since the development of a creative language is not a striving for competence in the dominant tongue, but a striving towards appropriation, in which the cultural distinctiveness can be simultaneously overridden-overwritten' (*The Empire Writes Back*, pp. 66-7).

Later, Saro-Wiwa developed this exploration of alternative uses of Englishes in the highly original *Sozaboy*. However, other successors to the legacy of Tutuola took a different approach with their use of Englishes. In contrast to *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*'s revolutionary

measures, Achebe, educated to university level in English, focused on Englishes already in common use. Soyinka remarked on this difference in approach, praising Tutuola's 'largeness that comes from an acceptance of life in all its manifestations ... [involving] us in a coordination of the spiritual and the physical', and then observing of Achebe, 'In a sense – not a pejorative one – he is a chronicler, content to follow creases and stress lines, not to impose his own rearrangement on them' ('From a Common Backcloth', pp. 10, 11).

'Chronicler' suggests a detached recorder of events, unlike a creative novelist who imposes rearrangements, fictions, embellishments upon such events. In this sense, Achebe became not only a chronicler or recorder of his father's friends' stories but also a recorder of language he came across, setting down oral uses of language in his literary writings. In addition, unlike Tutuola, Achebe worked mainly with what was already familiar, albeit shifting this from one context (oral or Igbo) to a less familiar setting (written English). In his earlier novels (1958-66) he achieved this by inserting untranslated Igbo words and phrases. By his last novel, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987), he had moved on to specific uses of pidgin. In each case, he was strongly aware of the political effects of such language use, as is evident in *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which, like Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, heralded the imminent independence of Nigeria.

This turning-point in Nigeria's political and cultural history informed both the conception and execution of *Things Fall Apart*: 'There was something in the air. I was very lucky to be born in the time I was which, for me, was the moment of Nkrumah in Ghana and the launching of African freedom.' At that time, as Simon Gikandi noted, 'Africans were not supposed to write books', and so many of their stories remained unrecorded. Achebe recounted how these circumstances directly led to *Things Fall Apart*: 'something inside said to me, look, your story is nowhere around here ... I began to look for my people's story and to listen more attentively to my father's friends when they visited.'⁴⁰

Achebe was also aware of how the Englishes in which he wrote were connected to, inspired by, and affected the contexts in which they were used. He notes, in *A Man of the People*, not only how the regime represented in the book inspired a proverbial saying but the appropriateness to that regime of one particular linguistic rendering of the saying ‘in language evermore suited to the times: “you chop, me self I chop, palaver finish”’ (p. 149). Achebe’s chronicling of hitherto unwritten combinations of Englishes that ‘suited the times’ provided him with a conduit for political comment and challenge via a translational mode that capitalized on the shifts in status which language can acquire when set in unfamiliar modes, juxtaposed with other languages, or shifted from the oral to the written, the published, the read. He saw such English not as ‘aping the white man’s mannerisms and way of speaking’ but as ‘a new English’ altered to suit both its ancestral home and its new African surroundings.⁴¹

However, like a chronicler, Achebe tended to resist interpreting the events or language recorded in his literary works. Instead, he acted as an invisible translator from oral to written literature. He adopted a device later taken up by Saro-Wiwa in *Sozaboy*, in which readers are alerted to the differences between Englishes through the filter of a main character/narrator: ‘Some of it was Edna and some (like the bit about visions of tomorrow) clearly was not; it must have come straight from one of these so-called “Letter Writers” ... Having mentally removed those parts of it which were not her sweet spontaneous self I began to analyse the rest’ (*A Man of the People*, pp. 111-12). In this way Achebe domesticated his texts, ‘erasing the foreign’.⁴²

The contrast with Tutuola is evident. In *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, Tutuola did not stick, as a chronicler would, to an exact record of events, but drew on a wide range of references outside Yoruba culture. He also appeared in-text in the roles of both interpreter and translator, breaking off from the novel mid-thread, to comment and interpret. His

interjections pointed the reader back to an awareness of his writing processes, highlighting translation choices and illuminating Yoruba references for a British audience. Nor was Tutuola shy of calling directly on his readers in the manner of a dilemma tale: ‘So I shall be very much grateful if anyone who reads this story-book can judge one or both cases and send the judgement to me as early as possible’ (*The Palm-Wine Drinkard*, p. 115).

Achebe, however, kept his focus narrow. He limited his appearances in-text as writer, and steered his language towards particular targets, employing his mastery of English not to alter it but to extend its literary range. As a scrupulous chronicler of what was already in use, rather than as a maker of new language, he did not create interlanguage as Tutuola did, nor create a new English like Saro-Wiwa’s in *Sozaboy*. Instead, Achebe introduced into written work minute acts of translation that were already occurring orally – code-switching. He focused on recording in detail, and sometimes overtly through the words of his character-narrators, exactly when one variety of language shifted to another. This slow-motion approach allowed him to demonstrate how English could slip effortlessly between different varieties in response to tiny adjustments in the occasion, mood, and subject-matter: “‘As soon as we hear communist we begin de shake and piss for trouser. Excuse me,’” he said to the lady and dropped the pidgin as suddenly as he had slid into it. “‘The other day somebody asked me why did I go to Russia last January ...’” (*A Man of the People*, p. 79).

Thus, Achebe reflected and spoke to aspects of the times of transition in which he was writing by working with multiple Englishes, taking innovative measures that approximated acts of translation. While his words always remained clearly within one or other language or register, albeit juxtaposed with others, he nudged the focus towards the moments of switching between them, and the negotiations that occur in those moments. In other words, he trained the spotlight upon translation as it is actually in process, hovering so long that his readers are obliged to take full account of this translational moment. The result, as Ngūgĩ recognized,

was that ‘Achebe created a third position out of the tension between Igbo and English, which becomes the base of his creativity; you feel there’s an African voice in his work being rendered in English.’ Thus, in a novel apparently written in English, Igbo asserts itself as an unmistakable, if superficially invisible, presence. Achebe himself said in 2000 of writing in English ‘that language becomes a part of you. And you can’t use language at a distance; you introduce English and Igbo into a fascinating conversation, as they are in my daily life.’⁴³

In his essays, Achebe supported this practice by stressing the importance of ensuring that the gap between the new Englishes a writer might fashion and conventional linguistic standards remain narrow, so that the new Englishes (informed as they might be by other apparently absent languages) and conventional standard English still remain closely connected. Thus, he urged, in ‘The African Writer and the English Language’, that ‘the African writer should aim to use language in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost’ (p. 433).

In other words, unlike Tutuola’s idiosyncratic diglossia, Achebe was tracking shifts in language in an English that seemed to have approached or already reached its target. This posed a difficulty, since the proximity of Achebe’s neat, confident language use to the Bourdieu ‘norm’ risked that language’s being incorporated into the linguistic and political hierarchies it was seeking to avoid, and into the dominant language it was seeking to question.

For Bourdieu, such a result would inevitably lead to a ‘call for new transgressions by those who refuse to be ranked in the mode, to be included, absorbed’ (*Distinction*, p. 252). Saro-Wiwa can be said to have answered that call, since the language of his *Sozaboy*, rotten English, comprises just such a transgression. In rotten English, which Saro-Wiwa described as ‘a mixture of Nigerian pidgin English, broken English and occasional flashes of good,

even idiomatic English', dialect and literary language meet.⁴⁴ The effect is liberating. Key to this effect is his presentation of his refashioned dialect as the literary language of the novel. Bakhtin explains it thus: 'dialects, on entering the literary language and preserving within it their own dialectological elasticity, their other-languedness, have the effect of deforming the literary language; it, too, ceases to be that which it had been, a closed socio-linguistic system ... what results is not a single language but a dialogue of languages'.⁴⁵

In the 'Author's Note' to *Sozaboy*, Saro-Wiwa stresses that its language, rotten English, came first. When he was advised it would be difficult to sustain this kind of English in a longer work, his reaction was to rise to the challenge: 'I knew then that I would have to write a novel, some day, in the same style.' He also emphasized the direct influence of a crisis or turning point in his political environment, which enabled the conditions needed for the production of such a novel: 'The Nigerian Civil War which I saw from very close quarters among young soldiers in Bonny [in the Niger Delta] where I was civilian Administrator, provided me with the right opportunity.' Thus, *Sozaboy* constitutes a political challenge that related both to its peculiar linguistic properties and to the political context, or 'turning point' in which it was written.

Sozaboy is narrated by a barely-educated military recruit. Its language has qualities which reflect the excluded, dislocated society to which its speaker belongs, outside the mainstream. These qualities constitute the norm in this culture in which languages collide to create rotten English. As Saro-Wiwa writes in the 'Author's Note':

Sozaboy's language ... is disordered and disorderly. Born of a mediocre education and severely limited opportunities, it borrows words, patterns and images freely from the mother-tongue and finds expression in a very limited English vocabulary. To its speakers, it has the advantage of having no rules and no syntax. It thrives on

lawlessness, and is part of the dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live, move and have not his being.

Michael North has noted how the ‘hybridized, syncretic’ features of rotten English are key to the novel. By means of its disorderliness, rotten English enables *Sozaboy* to propose ‘a Nigeria that is not divided along ethnic and linguistic lines [and] allows *Sozaboy* to contradict, to speak against, the civil war at the level of form’.⁴⁶

Thus, Tutuola’s and Achebe’s previous linguistic experimentations, translations, and mixing of different Englishes, in both cases also closely tied to and generated by turning points in their political context, provided a baseline for Saro-Wiwa. However, it is a baseline from which Saro-Wiwa swiftly departed. With rotten English, Saro-Wiwa refashioned language not only to reflect, as Achebe did, current oral but unofficial non-establishment uses, but to challenge the establishment. The very qualities that persuaded Saro-Wiwa’s schoolteacher to deem his rotten English story unpublishable are what give that language power in published form. Rotten English’s strength lies in the fact that it falls short of target. Englishes, grammars, and lexia are mixed in ways that have not occurred before, either in written or oral forms, in layers. It is an English that remains outside established linguistic conventions, hierarchies, and demarcations, as its principles of disorderliness, lawlessness, and chaos indicate. The language is cut free. It remains outside the mainstream, and it is this position that gives it power for long as it continues to fall short of target.

Rotten English is resonantly inarticulate with broken grammar and syntax. It is also powerfully eloquent of the desire to be more articulate. By sustaining such a level of eloquent inarticulacy, the language challenges the reader’s conceptions about what comprises clarity. In lines such as ‘I wanted to be big man like lawyer or doctor riding car and talking big big English’, the broken English Sozaboy resorts to in his attempts to evoke the apparently

immovable linguistic hierarchies within which he and his rotten language reside has a strong effect (*Sozaboy*, p. 11). The fragmented language, because of its ability to move the sophisticated articulate readers of *Sozaboy*, diminishes the power of those hierarchies even as it expresses that power.

A key feature of rotten English is its flexibility, a quality that Saro-Wiwa generally admired in English, calling the book in *Sozaboy*'s 'Author's Note' 'the result of my fascination with the adaptability of the English Language'. At a time when Achebe's work had helped ensure an acceptance of sophisticated uses of code-switching as a literary norm, Saro-Wiwa's personal exposure to conditions created by the Nigerian Civil War allowed and perhaps even obliged him in *Sozaboy* to return to the territory in which Tutuola was working, re-introducing to the language and construction of African literature in English a provisionality, a process, and a flexibility, all of which are key to understanding the literary and political significance of *Sozaboy*'s linguistic innovations.

Homi Bhabha has noted how fixity is 'an important feature of colonial discourse ... in the ideological construction of otherness'.⁴⁷ For Bhabha, drawing on Frantz Fanon's words, such fixity demonstrates 'a determination to objectify, to confine, to imprison, to harden'. He goes on: 'Phrases such as "I know them", "That's the way they are", show this maximum objectification successfully achieved.'⁴⁸ The political challenge of *Sozaboy* resides in its disordered and disorderly avoidance of such fixity, in the way the language remains in flux and peripheral. Even when *Sozaboy*'s rotten English starts to absorb aspects of Standard British English 'big grammar', the result is fragmented and in transition. When *Sozaboy* himself starts to grasp the unpalatable meanings that specific terminologies can obscure, his expression of this in rotten English not only reveals the limits of his burgeoning understanding of such terminology, but also, crucially, its subterfuge. Transposing

‘Kwashiokor’ from ‘big grammar’ into rotten English exposes some of the fallacies that surround its usual employment:

I have never heard of Red Cross Centre before so I asked him what they are doing in the Centre and whether it is Camp. He said yes, it is camp where they used to keep people who are sick from hunger and kwashiokor and who will soon die.

Kwashiokor. Kwashiokor. Kwashiokor. I am telling you, I like that name Kwashiokor. And you mean to say it is disease. If it is so, it will be a very good disease to kill somebody.

(p. 143)

In addition, ‘Kwashiokor’, stripped of its usual context, calls up in Sozaboy an unexpected display of poetic sensibility. The sound of this long and unfamiliar word overrides, for Sozaboy, its association with suffering. Instead he bestows on it the troubling power to transform a potentially fatal condition into something that appears to be ‘very good’, thus translating and transforming the intimidating power of medical terminology over those unused to it into a magical if illusory potency in which they can share. At the same time, the rotten English with which this is articulated confounds the apparent transformation. Its down-to-earth rotten prose chillingly exposes the illusion evoked by the sound of the word by juxtaposing ‘good’ with ‘disease’ and ‘kill’. The flexibility and unsophisticated qualities of rotten English involve a partial absorption of words like ‘Kwashiokor’ in a necessary exposure of the subliminal effects of such words.

Just as Sozaboy’s lack of voice and linguistic inadequacies are core to the novel, so too is Saro-Wiwa’s absence from it as author. His authorial presence is restricted to the paratextual margins of his unpaginated ‘Author’s Note’, subtitle, dedication, and glossary.

This absence strengthens the outlawed effect of Sozaboy's 'disordered and disorderly' language. Unlike Achebe, there are no discrete acts of guidance to aid the reader in tracing and interpreting the abrupt acts of code-switching. Unlike Tutuola, there are no authorial interpolations concerning source text or translator. If there is a translator in the main text, it is Sozaboy. His is the only voice that speaks. When he reports other people's words it is through the lens of his own linguistic abilities. Commentary upon language use is also channelled through Sozaboy's sometimes painfully inarticulate voice. In addition, his rotten English provides its own self-commentary as it fragments, juxtaposes, develops, and confounds Sozaboy.

To an extent, Sozaboy's confusion and difficulties with some of the language he encounters seem more troubled than any reader's experience, his naivety paving the way for the adoption and adaptation of 'big grammar' in such a manner as to bring its subtleties and deceptions to the surface for his readers, if not for him. The intrusion of a second and only partially understood English into Sozaboy's prose emphasizes the fragile relationship all language has with concepts such as 'meaning' and 'truth'. In this context, the plurality of influences and evident changes in the rotten English of the novel are key to its efficacious scrutiny of the regime it depicts. As Nidra Poller notes, 'whereas people who live in the closed world of a single language believe they know the true names of things, the sphere of bilingualism is propitious to fertile self-doubt, to a remise en question, the doubting of one's own word and one's own world'.⁴⁹

Rotten English is characterized by a lack of connectedness. It is frequently punctuated with full stops. Separate thought-moments struggle to make links across the sentence divisions. In fact, rotten English depends for its effect on the lack of links, on what resides between words, between different registers and Englishes. This inarticulacy carries the weight of the novel, enabling those perceived as inarticulate to speak without speaking for

them and thus taking their voice from them. In the words of Bhabha, ‘it is the “inter” – the cutting edge of translation and renegotiation, the *in-between* space – that carries the burden of the meaning of culture’ (*The Location of Culture*, p. 38).

Crucially, through its apparent inadequacies, rotten English articulates the struggle for articulation, a struggle against chaos and disorder that not only internally disrupts the language and by implication the culture for which it speaks, but also disrupts the wider society in which these are situated, for the society in which rotten English can be spoken is also chaotic, not fixed. This chaos is itself exemplified in the language, which, as Sozaboy notes, has undergone many changes. Gane has remarked on how the need for African writers in English to create and translate simultaneously is ‘one of the defining conditions of postcolonial literature ... both a constraint and an opportunity’.⁵⁰ The effect of words derived from a source literature in *Sozaboy*, a text that is therefore both a created piece and a translated target text, has a transforming effect on the English that results. Uniquely, however, and unlike the work of Saro-Wiwa’s predecessors such as Achebe and Tutuola, this transformation is observed not by the writer himself but from the point of view of the speaker of rotten English.

For Sozaboy, the ‘big grammar’ of Standard British English, infecting the language he speaks and understands, heralds hardship:

Radio began dey hala as ‘e never hala before. Big big grammar. Long long words. Every time.

Before before, the grammar was not plenty and everybody was happy. But now grammar begin to plenty and people were not happy. As grammar plenty, na so trouble plenty.

The equation of ‘grammar’, as a representation of order, structure, and hierarchy, with ‘trouble’ for those like Sozaboy who reside at the bottom of the pile, or indeed outside it, places emphasis on the relations between language and socio-economic status. Saro-Wiwa was careful to highlight this in *Sozaboy*’s ‘Author’s Note’ by specifically referring to Platt, Weber, and Ho’s classic linguistic textbook on Englishes:

[*Sozaboy* was] the result of my closely observing the speech and writings of a certain segment of Nigerian society. For, As Platt, Weber and Ho accurately observe in their book, *The New Englishes*, ‘In some nations ... the New Englishes have developed a noticeable range of different varieties linked strongly to the socio-economic and educational backgrounds of their speakers ...?’

In keeping with this awareness, Saro-Wiwa lets Sozaboy’s discordant mix of language define his low economic and social status, emphasized also through Sozaboy’s implied inarticulacy, which he himself sums up as a lack of ‘Grammar’: ‘The man with the fine shirt stood up. And begin to talk in English. Fine fine English. Big big words. Grammar. “Fantastic. Overwhelming. Generally. In particular and in general.” Haba, God no go vex. But he did not stop there’ (p. 46). Thus, the particular uses of language in *Sozaboy* bestow articulacy on a society and individuals caught up in a civil war not of their making, a civil war they do not understand. Through the language in this novel, which crucially has no written heritage, Saro-Wiwa is able to write for a minority voice without destroying that voice. Inasmuch as rotten English draws together parts of different Englishes and inasmuch as this is an (invented) oral language that is now written down, *Sozaboy* represents a double act of quasi-translation, imperfect and always approximate, to (and from) what is known and

to (and from) what is not known, at a turning point for that minority voice and culture. This is enacted within the novel through Sozaboy's own gradual confidence in the rotten English he speaks.

The publication of *Sozaboy* coincided with, or at least heralded, a turning point in terms of Saro-Wiwa's involvement as political spokesman with the fortunes of a particular minority group, the Ogoni people. Six years after the publication of *Sozaboy*, in 1991, he devoted himself full time to their cause. The Ogoni were being exploited by big oil conglomerates whose power they could not hope to match. Saro-Wiwa, until his execution in 1995, acted as their most prominent spokesman. He recognized that their lack of political voice meant that while they suffered the devastation resulting from oil drilling and transportation, they did not enjoy the economic benefits such an industry can bring.

Sozaboy can be read as acting as speaker and translator not only for people like the Ogoni, but for literate educated writers and activists who wish to speak for them. This occurs both because of the changing nature of the language used and also because of Sozaboy's changing use of it as he gains confidence in reworking Standard British English into the vernacular. The end result for Sozaboy, his rejection of the label 'soza' or 'sozaboy' with all that he now understands it implies, and a consequent refashioning of his own identity and power, presents an invigorating message of hope for those unheard or silenced minorities for whom the novel speaks.

However, as well as multiple acts of translation, *Sozaboy* also explores partial acts of translation and failures in translation. Difficulties are created by gaps in knowledge, understanding, and power between rotten English speakers and masters of 'big grammar': 'As Bullet was speaking was confusing me again. I don't like how he used to talk big big grammar sometimes. Either he will be laughing small small and he will not talk plenty or if he wants to talk, he will make big big grammar and he will be confusing me' (pp. 92-3).

Frequently, rotten English speakers are dominated and threatened by ‘big grammar’, which acts as a partial source text, as well as a source language, in the novel. Quoted in fragments and out of context, the novel struggles to translate ‘big grammar’ into rotten English. One reason why Venuti’s usual trajectory, the target language diminishing the status of the source text, is reversed here is because the source text retains some dominance over the target language, confusing and obstructing comprehension at times. This is due both to the struggle to translate it and to the superior status it is afforded in (and outside) the novel. Nevertheless, conversely, precisely because of the continued struggle to translate big grammar into the target language of rotten English, rotten English, while remaining the central language of the novel, is afforded a precious marginality and flexibility.

Since there is no obvious external translator or commentator in *Sozaboy*, and since the source text itself also resides within the novel, the diminishing effect of target language on source text no longer persists. Instead, there is a dizzying sense of disorientation as the reader struggles to find a steady footing from which to view these multiple language and status shifts, particularly since the rotten English of the novel changes as Sozaboy progresses with his tale. Slowly ‘big grammar’ gains more presence in Sozaboy’s rotten English. At the same time, ‘big grammar’ is also changed and absorbed by rotten English, and readers also gain progressive fluency in rotten English, a fluency that adapts, alters, and expands just as rotten English itself does.

Such flexibility fosters a continual moving of goal posts that results in surprising shifts in viewpoint. Sozaboy’s perceptions of Western customs act as a mirror for Western views of other cultures. What is strange and exotic about Western society for Sozaboy distances that society from the reader, and renders Sozaboy’s customs and beliefs less strange: ‘it is in oversea that I can catch Hitla. And it is in oversea that I will find woman to

marry, especially as I hear that woman does not cost money there. Even sef, if porson want to marry na the woman go give am all the money. Woman plus him family' (p. 27).

In *Sozaboy*, the status of language and speaker are constantly in question. Readers of the book are obliged as they read to inhabit and experience the lack of articulacy of Sozaboy and rotten English, thus rendering both articulate, achieving for them reversal in status:

The big grammar continued. 'Odious. Destruction. Fighting'. I understand that one. 'Henceforth. General mobilisation. All citizens. Able-bodied. Join the military. His Excellency. Power conferred on us. Volunteers. Conscription'. Big big words. Long long grammar. 'Ten heads. Vandal. Enemy.' Everyone was silent. Everywhere was silent like burial ground. Then they begin to interpret all that long grammar plus big big words in Kana. In short what the man is saying is that all those who can fight will join army.

(pp. 46-7).

Passages like this initially appear to enter the binary mode of discrete, stable, external source and target language, with Standard British English as a source, enjoying a superior status, a source that the target language, rotten English, struggles to translate. However, Kana is also referred to as the target language, as if the translation process continues outside the book, with the 'translation' provided at the end of the paragraph acting as a paraphrase of Kana, translating back from it for the benefit of the English reader in concise English, only differing from Standard by the skilful omission of an article which has the result of placing a deadly weight upon the final article-less word: 'In short what the man is saying is that all those who can fight will join army.' The translation process is presented as complex, and is referred to as an exercise in comprehension: "'Fighting". I understand that one'; in

interpretation: ‘they begin to interpret all that long grammar’; and summary: ‘In short what the man is saying is’.

Thus, the translational activity of rotten English resists any simple source-target binary mode, instead depicting a mix of languages perceived as central and peripheral, spoken and written, literary and non-literary, sophisticated and unsophisticated. Hierarchical distinctions are dissolved as the identities and boundaries of the languages shift and entangle, forming a continued, intimate, internal translational interchange. One language’s poetics, devices, and lexia affect, alter, are carried across, and translated into another and back. The source becomes the target, the target the source. Other targets and sources are introduced; the ‘dominant’ has a sight of the precious flexibility and overview enjoyed by the marginal; the marginal tastes the ‘dominant’. The narrator’s linguistic territory also shifts, his idiolect assimilating more ‘big grammar’. These changes do not reflect the narrator’s expanding territory: instead, they *are* that territory. Rotten English’s target is itself. Thus, it is not the characters but the novel that becomes the voice of the rootless, the silenced, the inarticulate, the people with no voice, excluded in their minority status from benefits of, in the case of the Ogoni for example, the oil reserves exploited on their land.

In *Sozaboy*, the main character, a low-level recruit with no voice and little authoritative language, is afforded both space and language, so gaining voice and articulacy. This is the result, in Philip Lewis’ terms, of ‘abusive fidelity’, the translator working not only with the syntax of the translating language but with its registers, dialects, and styles.⁵¹ Sozaboy is empowered by his experimental open-ended translational use of language, by his position in the novel as main speaker of that language and also as its translator. The apparent inaccuracies of these translations and the chaos and disorder of Sozaboy’s language are strengths, providing for him a reading of ‘big grammar’ that finally inspires him to change both his name and his response to the ‘trouble’ of war: ‘I was thinking how I was prouiding

before to go to soza and call myself Sozaboy. But now if anybody say anything about war or even fight, I will just run and run and run and run. Believe me yours sincerely' (p. 181). As William Boyd points out in the introduction to the Longman edition of *Sozaboy*, Sozaboy's 'mistake', employing the conventional shallow and formulaic 'yours sincerely' with full sincerity, has the result of piercing through the myth of the heroism of war to a more brutal and honest understanding of both the war and his own previous moniker of 'sozaboy'.⁵²

Standard British English in this novel is both pulled apart and sucked into the mix that constitutes rotten English. By the novel's last lines, rotten English has fully incorporated aspects of the dominant language that appeared so terrifying at the start. Inadvertently for Sozaboy, perhaps, but unambiguously for his readers, the sincerity with which he approaches language exposes its falsities, exemplifying ways in which the common soldier or inarticulate recruit can create through a translational use of his vernacular rotten English a powerful and disturbing language of dissent.

University of Salford

¹ Jennifer Jenkins, *Global Englishes: A Resource Book for Students*, third edn (London, 2015), pp. 64, 35.

² Susan Bassnett, *Translation Studies*, third edn (London, 2002), p. 10.

³ **London Missionary Society 1826, quoted in R. Bailey, *Images of English* (Cambridge, 1991), pp. 135-136.**

⁴ Kenneth Burke, *Language as Symbolic Action* (Berkeley, CA, 1966), p. 45.

⁵ Hans-Georg Wolf, 'East and West African Englishes: Differences and commonalities', in *The Routledge Handbook of World Englishes*, edited by Andy Kirkpatrick (London, 2010), pp. 197-211 (pp. 197, 201).

⁶ John T. Platt, Heidi Weber, and Mian Lian Ho, *The New Englishes* (London, 1984), p. 3.

⁷ Susan Bassnett, *Reflections on Translation* (Bristol, 2011), p. 4.

⁸ Edgar Schneider, *Postcolonial English: Varieties around the World* (Cambridge, 2007), pp. 206-7, p. 211.

⁹ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, 'The Language of African Literature', in *Colonial Discourse and Post-colonial Theory: A Reader*, edited by Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman (London, 1994; hereafter 'Language'), pp. 435-55 (p. 448).

¹⁰ See also Obiajunwa Wali, 'The Dead End of African Literature?' *Transition*, 10 (1963), 13-16.

¹¹ Chinua Achebe, 'The African Writer and the English Language', in Williams and Chrisman, pp. 428-34 (pp. 430, 434).

¹² Gillian Gane, 'Achebe, Soyinka, and Other-Languagedness', in *The Creative Circle: Artist, Critic, and Translator in African Literature*, edited by Angelina E. Overvold, Richard K. Priebe, and Louis Tremaine (Trenton, NJ, 2003), pp. 131-49 (p. 137); see also M. A. K. Halliday, 'Anti-Languages', *American Anthropologist*, 78 (1976), 570-84.

¹³ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, translated by Richard Nice, revised edn (London, 2010), p. 252.

¹⁴ Wole Soyinka, *The Road* (London, 1965), p. 15; for more on Soyinka's *The Road* and *A Dance of the Forests* see James Gibbs, *Modern Dramatists: Wole Soyinka* (London, 1988), pp. 83-4; see also Penelope Gilliatt's review of *The Road* in *The Observer*, 19 September 1965, reprinted in *Critical Perspectives on Wole Soyinka*, edited by James Gibbs (Washington, DC, 1980), pp. 106-7.

¹⁵ Wole Soyinka, *The Trials of Brother Jero* (1960), in *Six Plays* (London, 1984), pp. 15, 16.

¹⁶ Gabriel Okara, *Transition*, 10 (September 1963), as quoted by Ngũgĩ in 'Language', p. 435.

¹⁷ Okara, *The Voice* (New York, 1970), p. 61.

¹⁸ Dambudzo Marechera, 'An Interview with Himself', *The House of Hunger* (London, 1978), n.p. **[THIS FIRST IS PREFERABLE BUT IF YOU NEED A REFERENCE WITH PAGE NUMBERS]: Dambudzo Marechera, 'Dambudzo Marechera interviews himself', in 4 June 1952 — 18 August 1987: Pictures, Poems, Prose, Tributes, compiled and edited by Flora Veil-Wild and Ernst Schade (Harare, 1988), pp. 6-8 (pp. 7-8).**

¹⁹ Achebe, *A Man of the People*, revised edn (Oxford, 1988), p. 21.

²⁰ O. R. Dathorne, *African Literature in the Twentieth Century*, revised edn (London, 1979), p. 94.

²¹ For examples of extreme reactions to this novel, see Dathorne, p. 94.

²² Amos Tutuola, quoted in Timothy T. Ajani, "'He Being Dead Yet Speaketh": The Legacy of Amos Tutuola', *Journal of Nigeria Studies*, 1.2 (2012), 1-20 (p. 3).

²³ For these reactions see Dathorne, p. 94, and Achebe, 'Work and Play in Tutuola's *The Palm-Wine Drinkard*' in *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (New York, 1989), **pp. 100-12** (p. 100).

²⁴ Dathorne, p. 94.

²⁵ Carolyn Hart, 'In Search of African Literary Aesthetics: Production and Reception of the Texts of Amos Tutuola and Yvonne Vera' *Journal of African Cultural Studies*, 21 (2009), 177–95 (p. 182; see also p. 181).

²⁶ Bernth Lindfors, *The Blind Men and the Elephant and Other Essays in Biographic Criticism* (Trenton, NJ, 1999), p. 118, as quoted by Hart, p. 186.

²⁷ Guy Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (Detroit, 1983), p. 219.

²⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Postcolonial Literatures* (London, 2010), pp. 66-7.

²⁹ Adebisi Afolayan, 1988, as quoted by Ajani (n. 22), p. 14.

³⁰ Chantal Zabus, *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel* (New York, 2007), p. 119.

³¹ Wole Soyinka, 'From a Common Backcloth: A Reassessment of the African Literary Image' (1963) in *Art, Dialogue, and Outrage: Essays on Literature and Culture* (New York, 1988), **pp. 7-14** (p. 9).

³² Overvold *et al.* (n. 12), p. 1; Olabode Ibironke, 'The Horses of Knowledge: African Literature and the Canons of Translation', in Overvold *et al.*, **pp. 112-30** (p. 112).

³³ Itamar Even-Zohar, 'The Position of Translated Literature within the Literary Polysystem', in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, **revised edn (London, 2012), pp. 162-167 (pp. 164)**.

³⁴ Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility: A History of Translation*, second edn (London, 2008), p. 267.

³⁵ Amos Tutuola, *The Palm-Wine Drinkard* (London: Faber and Faber, 1952), p. 28.

³⁶ *Hopes and Impediments* (n. 23), pp. 100, 101.

³⁷ *Jacques Derrida: Acts of Literature*, edited by Derek Attridge (London, 1992), p. 257.

³⁸ Soyinka interviewed by Mary David in 'Wole Soyinka Talks to Mary David', *Wasafiri*, 9/18 (1993), 22-7 (p. 23).

³⁹ Zabus (n. 30), p. 119; see also Penelope Gilliatt's review of *The Road* for a similar assessment of what 'Wole Soyinka has done [with *The Road*] for our napping language', in which she refers to the foreignness, originality, and audacity of the English(es) in this play. Gilliatt (n. 14), p. 106.

⁴⁰ All the quotations in this paragraph are from Achebe's interview with Simon Gikandi, *Wasafiri*, 24:3 (1996), 4-7 (p. 5).

⁴¹ Lines from *Daily Chronicle* editorial in *A Man of the People* (n. 19), p. 4; 'The African Writer and the English Language' (n. 11), p. 434.

-
- ⁴² Bassnett on Venuti's theory of foreignization/domestication: Bassnett (n. 7), p. 17.
- ⁴³ Achebe, *Anthills of the Savannah* (1987; Harmondsworth, 2001), pp. xiii, xii.
- ⁴⁴ Ken Saro-Wiwa, 'Author's Note', *Sozaboy*, revised edn (Harlow, 2009), n.p.
- ⁴⁵ M. M. Bakhtin, 'Discourse in the Novel', translated by Caryl Emerson and Michael Holquist in *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays by M. M. Bakhtin*, edited by Michael Holquist (Austin, TX, 1981), pp. 269-422 (p. 294).
- ⁴⁶ Michael North, 'Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*: The Politics of Rotten English', *Public Culture*, 13 (2001), 97-112 (p. 109).
- ⁴⁷ Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, revised edn (London, 2004), p. 94.
- ⁴⁸ From Frantz Fanon's 'Racism and Culture', in *Toward the African Revolution*, translated by H. Chevalier (London, 1970), p. 44, quoted from *Location of Culture*, pp. 119-20.
- ⁴⁹ Nidra Poller, 'An Authentic Kuruma' in *Research in African Literatures*, 22 (1991), 235-43 (p. 242).
- ⁵⁰ Gane (n. 2), p. 131.
- ⁵¹ See Venuti, *The Translator's Invisibility* (n. 34), p. 18; see also **Philip Lewis, 'The Measure of Translation Effects' in *The Translation Studies Reader*, edited by Lawrence Venuti, revised edn (London, 2012), pp. 220-39.**
- ⁵² William Boyd, 'Introduction', *Sozaboy* (Harlow, 1994), n.p. See also Michael North's expansion on Boyd's observation, pp. 107-8 of the article cited in n. 46.