Recasting the Centre: Ngugi wa Thiong'o and the Africanization of English

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Abstract
The political, psychological, and sociolinguistic transmutations the English language undergoes in post-colonial contexts and societies have engaged the attention of both literary and linguistic scholars over the years. The processes by which the use of the English language in post-colonial societies gradually move from an external to an internal norm have been variously labeled as 'nativization', 'indigenization', 'relexification', and 'abrogation and appropriation'. For example, linguistic nativization refers to the process whereby English-knowing bilinguals in non-native English cultural and linguistic setting not only use the English language for representing typically non-native social, cultural, and emotional contexts, but also use various linguistic devices to contextualize the English language in their respective cultures.
Recasting the Centre: Ngugi wa Thiong’o and the Africanization of English

The political, psychological, and sociolinguistic transmutations the English language undergoes in post-colonial contexts and societies have engaged the attention of both literary and linguistic scholars over the years. The processes by which the use of the English language in post-colonial societies gradually move from an external to an internal norm have been variously labeled as ‘nativization’, ‘indigenization’, ‘relexification’, and ‘abrogation and appropriation’. For example, linguistic nativization refers to the process whereby English-knowing bilinguals in non-native English cultural and linguistic setting not only use the English language for representing typically non-native social, cultural, and emotional contexts, but also use various linguistic devices to contextualize the English language in their respective cultures. The language nativization process is similar to the other processes of ‘indigenization’ and ‘relexification’ respectively. As employed in post-colonial theory, ‘abrogation and appropriation’ refer to the processes whereby post-colonial writers define themselves by seizing the language of the centre and replacing it in a discourse fully adapted to the colonized place. According to Bill Ashcroft et al:

The first, the abrogation or denial of the privilege of ‘English’ involves a rejection of the metropolitan power over the means of communication. The second, the appropriation and reconstitution of the language of the centre, the process of capturing and remoulding the language to new usages, marks a separation from the site of colonial privilege.

My main purpose in this paper is to investigate the Africanization of English in Ngugi. Data for the discussion are based on Ngugi’s five novels and the play he co-authored with Ngugi wa Miiri. Ngugi’s creative writing presents an interesting paradigm because, recently, his attitude to the English language has been one of outright repudiation. Unlike many other African writers like Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, and Gabriel Okara who believe that the English language will be able to carry the weight of their African socio-cultural experience, Ngugi begins his book Decolonising the Mind with the statement: ‘This book ... is my farewell to English as a
vehicle for any of my writings. From now on, it is Gikuyu and Kiswahili all the way. This mood of total rejection of English as a medium for literary creativity is further reiterated in his most recent book, Moving the Centre: 'It was once again the question of moving the centre: from European languages to all other languages all over Africa and the world; a move if you like towards a pluralism of languages as legitimate vehicles of the human imagination.'

However, a paradox seems to permeate the early Ngugi’s creative thinking prior to his repudiation of English as a vehicle for his literary communication. He argues that although he writes his novels in English, he does not write in the fashion of Achebe or Okara who consciously bend the English language to reflect their African experience. In response to Reinhard Sander’s and Ian Munro’s question about the reasons his novels are written in predominantly Standard English, Ngugi states:

These writers (i.e. Achebe and Okara) are fed linguistically from below. They are fed by the idiom of speech, the rhythm of speech of the people about whom they are writing. You find that, on the whole, West Africans have been in a lot more contact with the English language than the East Africans. And you find that West Africans have even developed a form of English that is peculiar to the West African scene as the Pidgin English. So that somebody like Chinua Achebe finds it easy when he’s portraying a character to fall back on Pidgin English as a form of characterization. We don’t, on the whole, have an East African English yet, although it may come into being. So the kind of English we have in East Africa is very much the sort of school English with correct grammar, etc. But maybe in a few years’ time in East Africa there will be a variation of English that can be used as a form of method of characterization. Meanwhile we shall be content merely to capture everything of ordinary life and speech, using the so-called Standard English.

In other words, Ngugi would want us to believe he does not consciously strive to Africanize his narrative idiom. However, a cursory reading of his works reveals that as far back as 1964 when he wrote Weep Not, Child, Ngugi unconsciously engaged in the nativization process and that his novels exhibit traces of ‘East African English’. Linguistic nativization in Ngugi assumes two modes: on the one hand, Ngugi engages in the process of relexification of his mother tongue, Gikuyu, using English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythms and, on the other hand, he resorts to linguistic appropriation whereby English words are redefined in new contexts. I shall discuss the process of linguistic nativization in Ngugi under the headings of ‘Loanwords’, ‘English Words, African Values’, and ‘English Sentences, African Idiosyncrasies’ respectively. In the following discussion the Standard British English (hereafter BE) equivalents, glosses, and other explanations are supplied in parentheses following the Kenyan English examples which are italicized. The inverted commas in the examples are the author’s while the asterisk indicates that they actually occur in the narrative idiom or the ‘outer frame’, that is, language which serves as direct communication between author and readers, as op-
posed to the ‘inner frame’ which involves the protagonists and characters of the narrative communicating with each other directly and in reported speech. Consequently, the fact that many of these examples are attested in the narrative idiom indicates that Ngugi consciously or unconsciously uses them.

Loanwords

Loanwords typify the process whereby Ngugi subjects English words to the phonological and morphological processes of his native language. The inscription of Gikuyu morpho-phonemic dynamics on BE words involves the addition of vowels to the end of BE words and the breaking up of consonant clusters by the insertion of vowels as in the following examples:

1. They called him Isaka* (WNC 33).
   (The author himself explains that ‘This was his Christian name, a corruption of Isaac’ [WNC 33])
2. His father Ezekiel ... was a wealthy landowner...* (POB 13)
   (Ezekiel)
3. ...the way she held up her chin as she spoke, had ‘staili’ (POB 64)
   (style)
4. The sign outside read: BETTER EAT AT HIRITONI* (DOC 155)
   (The BE equivalent of this example is given in the preceding discourse: ‘But it had a self-important name, the Hilton’ [DOC 155])
5. The Sirena cries out (WMWW 34).
   (The BE equivalent is supplied in the following discourse: ‘You dash out. Another siren’ [WMWW 34])

English Words, African Values

Through the processes of relexification and appropriation, Ngugi inscribes African meaning and values into extant English words. In other words, English words are manipulated by Ngugi to produce and transmit meanings beyond the purely denotative reference of the words, conveying a wide range of emotional, attitudinal, and symbolic content. This is a counter-discursive strategy for challenging the dominant linguistic canons of BE. Although ten categories of lexico-semantic variation have been identified in African English, Ngugi’s lexico-semantic relexification and appropriation take the modes of semantic shift, conversion, translation equivalence, analogical creation, and coinage.

Through the process of semantic shift, Ngugi appropriates extant English words and imbues them with new meanings in consonance with the East African historical and cultural context as in the following examples:
6. If you said that you did not know who the barber was, or where his shop was, people at once knew that you were either stranger or a fool* (WNC 9)
(According to Ngugi, 'A fool, in the town's vocabulary, meant a man who had a wife who would not let him leave her lap even for a second' [WNC 9])

7. Gikonyo was among the first group of detainees to pass through the pipe-line back to the village* (GOW 51)
(According to Ngugi, 'The pipe-line was the official euphemism for the chain of concentration camps all the detainees had to pass through' [GOW 51])

8. 'I hear that they might be sending travellers to the moon' (POB 79)
(astronauts or cosmonauts).

In conversion, Ngugi subverts the dominant code by the deliberate transfer of a word from one part of speech to another without any change in its form. Like semantic shift, conversion is another example of linguistic appropriation as opposed to relexification. By circumventing the English code, Ngugi is able to economize his expressions and condense information. The following are some examples from the texts:

9. 'Don't woman me!' he shouted hysterically (WNC 53).
(to pester or nag like a woman)

10. Two rifled policemen...guarded the entrance* (GOW 172).
(carrying rifles)

11. Had she not ... mothered his child?* (GOW 183).
(X is a mother of Y)

12. He smiled once when he came to the tarmac-ed last stretch...* (POB 11).
(like a tarmac)

13. ...black policemen led by two gum-chewing white khaki-ed officers* (POB 100)
(wearing khakis)

14. 'We cold-showered our bodies at five in the morning' (POB 168).
(had a cold shower)

15. A riot squad and sirened police car came to the scene* (POB 183).
(blowing a siren)

Translation equivalence represents the process of relexification *par excellence*. As explained in the introduction, many African writers relexify their mother tongues, using English vocabulary but indigenous structures and rhythms. Generally speaking, loan-translations and calques are aspects of relexification. According to Zabus,

relexification ... can be ... redefined as the forging of a new literary aesthetic medium out of the elements of an alien, dominant lexicon. As a method, relexification stems from a need to solve an immediate artistic problem: that of rendering African concepts, thought-patterns and linguistic features in the European language. As a strategy in potentia, relexification seeks to affirm the hidden or repressed original behind what is construed as the original language text.14
The ideological intention of translation equivalence is thus to superimpose the thought-system of the colonized subject on the dominant code. However, since typologies are never fool-proof, I find it difficult to distinguish between translation equivalents and coinages in certain contexts. Some of the examples furnished below could as well qualify as coinages.

15a. The two women usually stayed together to ... 'shorten' the night (WNC 11).
   b. They usually went there to shorten the night* (WNC 12)
   (pass the night by telling traditional stories)
16. 'When will you open school?' (WNC 38).
   ('When will you resume school?')
17. 'You "drink" oath' (WNC 72).
   ('You take oath')
18a. 'What will you do after all your learning. I am sure you will be a big man' (WNC 105).
   b. '...he was probably the first such big man in our village...’ (POB 39).
   (an important person)
19. 'Then – you – come to laugh at me. To laugh at your own father. I'll go home, don't worry' (WNC 123).
   ('I'll die')
20. ...everybody knew that Kabonyi was ill* (RB 97).
   (As explained by the author, ‘Actually he was not ill, but he was full of fury’ [RB 97])
21. The iron snake ... was quickly wriggling towards Nairobi* (GOW 12).
   (railroad)
22a. The whiteman with bamboo poles that vomited fire* (GOW 12).
   b. They all carried bamboo sticks that vomited fire* (POB 122).
   c. 'A piece of metal pipe that emits fatal fire and smoke,' Muturi said (DOC 211).
   (guns)
23. Brushing sides with women’s skirts* (GOW 52).
   (doing a woman’s job)
   (According to Ngugi, ‘When a person bought a dance, the guitarist played for him alone, praising his name, always the son of a woman’ [GOW 63])
25. that was twelve years after Godfrey Munira ... first rode a metal horse* (POB 5).
   (a bicycle)
26. 'the men in the city – we hear that they put a rubber trouser on it?’ (POB 74).
   (condom)
27. – a city whose buildings touched the sky* (POB 117).
   (skyscrapers)
28. ...it was he who had casually broached the possibility of his supplying us with 'grains of maize' (POB 223-224).
   (bullets)
29. ...school children brought in hired lorries to see the *winged horse* (POB 257).
   (airplane)

30. And the road workers would raise their voices above the roar of the *earth-eating machines* (POB 265).
   (caterpillars)

31. ...all the potent drinks that were brewed there: Changaa, Kang’ari, *Kill-me-Quick* (POB 284).
   (a locally brewed hard drink)

32. ...who thinks he has found a Kareendi of the *easy thighs*? (DOC 27).
   (a woman of easy virtues)

33. ‘I thought you only knew this *language of “Good morning”*’ (DOC 57).
   (the English language)

34. ‘It could be the *woman’s disease,*’ Mwaura said (DOC 69).
   (pregnancy)

35. ‘...let’s shower saliva on our breasts...’ (DOC 87).
   (pray)

Translation equivalence is also underscored through the use of native figures of speech and proverbs. It is through the use of these devices that Ngugi, for example, is able to evoke the cultural milieu in which the action takes place. Examples of such figures of speech include ‘Your breasts were full and pointed like the tip of the sharpest thorn’ (WMWW 22), ‘they sang songs/With words that pierced one’s heart like a spear’ (WMWW 26), ‘you look like an old basket/That has lost all shape’ (WMWW 29), etc. Ngugi also ‘transcreates’ proverbs from his native language. The culture-embeddedness of such linguistic items is well-recognized and, as Achebe says, they are ‘the palm-oil with which words are eaten’. Ngugi’s use of proverbs often focuses on the values of the society as in the following examples: ‘A man brags about his own penis,/However tiny’ (WMWW 4), ‘An aging hero has no admirers’ (WMWW 13), ‘A fool’s walking stick supports the clever’ (WMWW 15), ‘When axes are kept in one basket, they must necessarily knock against each other’ (WMWW 17), ‘there’s no maiden worth the name who wants to get grey hairs at her parents’ home’ (WMWW 17), etc.

Analogical creation is the formation of new words on the basis of partial likeness or agreement in form or in sense with already existing words in English. Word formation processes in English such as affixation and compounding are very productive analogy models in Englishes. The following are some examples:

36a. Normally she chatted with her *houseboy* (GOW 34).

b. ‘I told you about the *houseboy*’ (GOW 143).
   (BE = housekeeper; this usage probably originated from the fact that although the domestic chores of a housekeeper in Western contexts may be restricted, a houseboy in the African context is several things at the same time – driver,
baby-sitter, cleaner, cook, launderer, watchman, etc. – depending on the caprices of the master. Ironically, the British colonial masters encouraged the use of houseboy as a form of denigration of their male servants; cf. housegirl.

37. ‘Don’t I see those town-people?’ (POB 9).
(BE = townspeople)

38. The Haraambe ... is not for gossipers* (DOC 39).
(BE = gossips)

39a. ‘I’m not the one who has instructed their wives to become “sugar mummies”’
(DOC 122)

b. Sugarmummies and sugardaddies/ Are now all over the land (WMWW 63).
(cf. sugar-daddies; rich, usually elderly, women who are generous to young men in return for sexual favours or friendship).

Finally, chiefly through the word-formation process of compounding, East African users of English invent words or word groups which not only help in collapsing potentially longer expressions or structures but also aid in fashioning words that convey new cognitive and sociolinguistic reality peculiar to the world Ngugi attempts to represent. Coinages found in Ngugi include the following:

40. Some people called them devil’s waters because they deceived you* (WNC 5).
(mirage; Ngugi himself explains this phenomenon in the following manner: ‘when you travelled along it (the road) on hot days you saw little lakes ahead of you. But when you went near, the lakes vanished’ [WNC 5])

41. Her other son had died in the Big War* (WNC 16).
(the Second World War)

42a. ‘Remember, tomorrow is the day of your second birth’ (RB 9).

(initiation ceremony into manhood)

43a. ...he had employed two men, a driver and a turn-boy* (GOW 53).

b. ...the turn-boy whistled* (GOW 197)

c. The drivers and the turn boys would often spend the night there* (POB 266).
(driver(s) or conductor(s) who takes turns with another driver)

44. Mysterious stories about him spread among the market women* (GOW 156).
(women traders)

45. Their feet would dig into the ‘small loads’ (GOW 170).
(excreta)

46. ‘...he’ll always be your husband unless he demands back his bride-price’
(GOW 201).
(dowry)

47. ‘You should see us, the roadboys as they call us’ (POB 104).
(boys hawking odds and ends by the roadside)

48. ...he saw a chance to finally still the occasional voices of guilt since his midnight tea at Catundu*
(POB 114).
(secret oath-taking)
49a. 'That is Boss Kihara’s sugar girl' (DOC 22).

b. 'No, I refused to be his sugar girl,' Wariinga said (DOC 73).
   (girl friend or mistress)

50. ‘...it had first given me a small back-hander of about 2,000,000 shillings’
   (DOC 116).
   (bribe)

51. My mother’s bridewealth was a calf taken in battle (WMWW 12).
   (dowry)

52. ...she would like to dress up/Like all her age-mates (WMWW 105).
   (people in the same age group)

In terms of their counter-discursive strategy, the foregoing Kenyan English expressions challenge the territoriality of British English and thus polarize African and colonial discourses. Paradoxically, since necessity is the mother of invention, many of these ethnolexemes – Isaka, Ezekieli, staili, Hiritoni, sirena, pipe-line, travellers, iron snake, bamboo poles that vomited fire, metal horse, rubber trouser, grains of maize, winged horse, earth-eating machines, and houseboy – are the products of the contact and convergence between Kenyan and English cultures, serving as naming devices for the East African who is forced to signify names, people, and places in the other tongue. Notice, however, that the lexical innovation, houseboy, is used by Margery Thompson, the wife of a British colonial officer in A Grain of Wheat. These ethnolinguistic forms thus confirm W.D. Ashcroft’s view that ‘language variance is metonymic, a synechdochic index of cultural difference which affirms the distance of cultures at the very moment in which it proposes to bring them together.’

English Sentences, African Idiosyncrasies

Through the process of relexification, Ngugi grafts the linguistic structures of his native language onto the English language, while through appropriation he subverts the formation-rules of English syntax. The process of relexification is similar to Ashcroft’s syntactic fusion ‘in which the English prose is structured according to the syntactic principles of a first language’. Syntactic variations such as double subjects, reduplications, peculiar use of the tag question and emphatic premodification illustrate the process of relexification or syntactic fusion while features such as substitution of prepositions, non-distinctive use of reciprocal pronouns, unusual pluralization, and superfluous conjoining are typical of appropriation or subversion.

Double subjects are constructions which involve the subject of the sentence as focus and an anaphoric pronoun subject or complement, for example:
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53. ‘It is a bad woman this’ (WNC 23).
   (‘This is a bad woman’)

54. ‘My legs, they shake’ (RB 97).
   (‘My legs shake’)

55. ‘And her voice, it is like a song’ (GOW 139).
   (‘...her voice is like a song’)

The reduplication of lexical items belonging to various word classes is used for emphasis and to indicate continuation of a process. Examples noted in Ngugi include the following:

56. Suddenly Waiyaki became jealous, jealous for Nyambura* (POB 88).

57. ...she would walk slowly, slowly* (RB 104).

58. ‘They never listened to the political talk-talk of a few men’ (GOW 77).

59. ...the third would pat-pat the crying baby* (POB 24).

60. ‘Mr. Antelope ... you go jump-jumping, leap-leaping in the air’ (POB 179).

61. ‘I went out into the street again, looking only for tall, tall buildings’ (DOC 42).

The peculiar use of tag questions, also noticeable in West African English, occurs in Ngugi. For example, in BE, the structure of tag questions is composed of a statement and a tag attached to it. In such structures there is contrasting polarity: a positive main clause is followed by a negative tag and vice versa. In many African languages, and particularly West African languages with which this writer is familiar, the parallel structure consists of a single clause with a postposed particle. For example in Yoruba spoken in Nigeria, this particle is realized as abi?. The same tendency is observable in the Fanti language spoken in Ghana where the contrasting polarity tags are collapsed in the expression mebua?. The tag observed in Ngugi is not so? which may be the relexified form of the Gikuyu structure:

62. You were the only one who said that we should cook food for the visitors, not so? (WMWW 19).
   (You were the only one who said that we should cook food for the visitors, weren’t you?)

Emphatic premodification in Ngugi involves the use of a redundant premodifier to achieve emphasis, as in the following example:

63. ...we can defeat the enemy of this our land (WMWW 66).
   (‘this land’ or ‘our land’)

Since many African languages either do not have overt prepositions or do not have prepositions which correspond to the English ones, Ngugi sometimes substitutes prepositions as in the following example:
Suddenly Waiyaki became jealous, jealous for Nyambura* (RB 88).
(...jealous of Nyambura)

Ngugi also subverts the formation-rules of English syntax by his non-distinctive use of reciprocal pronouns. For example, according to Randolph Quirk and Sidney Greenbaum, the reciprocal pronoun each other is commoner in a sentence with two antecedents, e.g., 'John and Mary like each other'; however, where more than two antecedents are involved, the reciprocal pronoun one another is often preferred, e.g., 'The four children are fond of one another'.18 Ngugi, like many other African users of English, does not distinguish between the reciprocal pronouns each other and one another as in the following examples:

65. Two of the ridges in the opposite sides of the long sides of the plain ... were near one another* (WNC 7).
66. Nyambura and Miriamu looked at one another* (RB 34).
67. The two avoided one another for the rest of the day* (GOW 96).
68. Gradually, Wariinga and the Rich Old Man got to know one another* (DOC 143).

Ngugi also sometimes subverts the pluralization rules of English, as in the following example:

69. '...big companys are busy collecting gold' (POB 238).
   (companies)

Again, we have a subversion of the conjunction rules of English in the following example:

70. But he was able to be clever although he was a little bit rough* (WNC 20).

In conclusion, it ought to be emphasized that although Ngugi does not believe that he writes in an 'East African English' or 'Kenyan English', this study has amply demonstrated that Ngugi consciously or unconsciously engages in linguistic nativization in his creative writing. In fact, the conscious Africanization of his use of English is evident in his parenthetical and in-text explanations and glosses of some of the loan-words and lexical items furnished in this study (such as examples 1, 6, 7, 20, 24 and 40).

It also ought to be pointed out that many of the modes of lexico-semantic and syntactic variation noted in Ngugi are also found in the creative writing of his West African counterparts like Chinua Achebe, Wole Soyinka, Gabriel Okara, and Ayi Kwei Armaah.19 It is thus doubtful whether any post-colonial writer using English as a second or foreign language can escape nativizing or indigenizing the language altogether. Consequently, although Ngugi has successfully moved the centre of his
creative writing from the code of 'standard' British English to that of his mother tongue, Gikuyu, this movement has not occurred without his prior reterritorialization of the English language. As Ashcroft et al. rightly observe:

...the syncretic and hybridized nature of post-colonial experience ... refutes the notions that often attract post-colonial critics: that cultural practices can return to some 'pure' and unsullied cultural condition, and that such practices themselves, such as the use of vernacular terms or grammatical forms in English literature, can embody such an authenticity. Therefore, syncretic views of the post-colonial distance themselves from the universalist view of the function of language as representation, and from a culturally essentialist stance which might reject the use of English because of its assumed inauthenticity in the 'non-English' place.20

NOTES

1. I am grateful to Professor Susan Gingell whose comments on the first draft of this paper have resulted in an overall improvement of its conceptual framework.
7. Ashcroft et al., op.cit., p. 38.
8. Weep Not, Child (London: Heinemann, 1964); The River Between (London: Heinemann, 1965); A Grain of Wheat (London: Heinemann, 1967); Petals of Blood (London: Heinemann, 1977); Devil on the Cross (London: Heinemann, 1982), I Will Marry When I Want (London: Heinemann, 1982). After excerpts, the novels and the play will be identified as follows: WNC, RB, GOW, POB, DOC, and WMWW.


17. Ibid., p. 72.


19. See, for example, Bamiro, op. cit., pp. 7-17, pp. 47-60.