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LANGUAGE VARIATION IN DIASPORIC TEXTS: TRANSPARENCY OR OPACITY ?

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Résumé: Cet article questionne la relation dialectique entre la saillance des variétés linguistiques dans le discours et leur transparence. Par transparence, nous comprenons facilité d'accès à l'information sémantique, pragmatique, culturelle. Les variétés diatopique, diastratique et diaphasique sont aisément repérées mais elles ne sont pas nécessairement facilement interprétables. Leur relative opacité ou leur résistance à l'interprétation tient à la tentation de construire l'altérité par rapport à soi ou au même dont le lecteur fait l'expérience. Les variétés linguistiques sont abordées par l'étude de l'alternance codique dans des textes de fiction qui ne sont pas supposés être une représentation fidèle de la réalité mais qui sont des représentations imaginaires de sujets. Les textes postcoloniaux étudiés selon cette approche ont été publiés en anglais: *Girls at War and other stories* de Chinua Achebe (1972) et *Jagua Nana* de Cyprian Ekwensi (1961).

Mots-clés: variétés de langue: diatopique, diastratique, diaphasique, emprunts, alternance codique, transparence / opacité

Introduction: concepts, the choice of texts

This paper aims at problematizing the use of pidginised varieties of English in a Nigerian context. “Defamiliarization” is at stake since the subjacent idea is that Nigerian pidgin is not to be interpreted as a purely diastratic variety of language as it may well appear at first. If one considers varieties of Pidgin English in relation with central English, one may consider

them as diatopic variations. Concomittantly, they can be apprehended as diastratic variations, or, in other terms, variations according to the social class or social group a speaker feels that he / she belongs to. In the texts we are concerned with, not only do they function as diatopic variations, encoding distanciation from central English, and diastratic variations but also, and perhaps even more so, as diaphasic variations. We here take diaphasic as a near synonym of stylistic and situational. Diastratic and diaphasic variations are intertwined to represent different levels of a socio-cultural reality.

The texts we are dealing with have a common point: they are discursive representations of a disordered chaotic Nigerian society before or during the Civil War. In *Girls at War*, Chinua Achebe denounces Reginald Nwankwo who does not do anything to resist the atrocities of the war. Nwankwo works for the Ministry of Justice, has an authoritative voice, but spends most of his time in the company of young women despite the harshness of the period. One day he is glad to give a ride to a young and beautiful girl, Gladys, whereas he totally ignores an old woman, starved and exhausted. “Girls at War” stages the birth of a new order where the elders no longer have their place, where commerce, money and sex reign. In *Jagua Nana*, the link with the Nigerian Civil War is not as direct but it is part of the novel. *Jagua Nana* was published in 1961 whereas the Nigerian Civil War started in 1967 and ended in 1970. The novel denounces the economic, cultural and political tensions that gave rise to the war. Corruption (which literally means *break a whole, an entity*, from Latin *cum – rumpere*), political and moral, is central. Uncle Taiwo, a politician, earns rotten money, has three wives and keeps mistresses among whom Jagua Nana, named after the car. Jagua Nana makes use of her beauty to corrupt powerful men for different purposes: one of them is to get her lover, Freddie, a passport so that he could go to England. Cyprian Ekwensi denounces the power-hungry politicians and the corruption of a false democratic society in which all that matters is “quick-quick money”. Freddie Namme, Jagua Nana’s lover, goes into politics to get rich fast: “I wan’ money quick-quick, an’ politics is de only hope” (*Jagua Nana*: 137). Jagua Nana has her own definition of politics: “Politics be game for dog. And in dis Lagos, is a rough game. De roughest game in de whole worl’. Is smelly and dirty.” (*Jagua Nana*: 137). In the end, powerful Uncle Taiwo decides to organize the murder of Freddie, Jagua Nana’s ex-lover and his political rival.

Diatrastic variations: the limits of socio-realism

In these texts, Chinua Achebe and Cyprian Ekwensi draw a pseudo-realistic picture of an urban society that undergoes drastic changes. In Ekwensi’s work, the chaos in the streets of Lagos or eventually in other cities is

of primary importance: circulation and communication occur in the street. In “Girls at War” and *Jagua Nana*, the authors do not find their inspiration in the African oral tradition: the narrative is anchored in the society of their time, in the tribulations of life in a corrupt fragmented world. The use of a pidginised variety of English is related to the authors’ will to represent the sociolinguistic reality and also to “africanize” their discourse. In the first page of the novel, the narrator justifies the use Jagua Nana makes of Pidgin English:

(1) Like Freddie she was an Ibo from Eastern Nigeria, but when she spoke to him she always used pidgin English, because living in Lagos City they did not want too many embarrassing reminders of clan or custom. They and many others were practically strangers in a town where all came to make fast money by faster means, and greedily to seek positions that yielded even more money. (*Jagua Nana*: 5)

The reader is therefore immediately aware that Pidgin English, as it is used in the novel but also in society at large, is not simply a *lingua franca* in a situation of language contact in heterogeneous speech communities. Pidgin English emerges in a situation of redefinition or even “subversion” of one’s cultural self. The protagonists, Jagua and Freddie, as bilingual speakers, have the proficiency to interact in their native tongue, Ibo: they refrain from it not only to merge in a multi-ethnic urban society but also to shape their identities accordingly. Furthermore, the general grammatical system of Pidgin English is simplified or rather reduced by Ekwensi in the protagonists’ elaboration of discourse. The Pidgin Ekwensi uses is the product of history, alterity in relation with central English and genuine Pidgin English and creativeness. Linguistic variation is bound to pragmatic demands in a specific socio-cultural context. The regularities noticeable in the protagonists’ discourse shape it and are negotiated in interactions between them and also between the author and his readership. The elaboration of such reduced social diastratic discourse in a fictional situation of language contact implies the actualization of specific mechanisms. The idea is to make code-switching in a conversational contribution salient and comprehensible in the talk exchange between the protagonists as well as in the relationship between the text and the reader. We will argue that the selected variants are those that best satisfy the contract between the author and the reader. They are formal and functional features that differ from central English and from authentic Pidgin English to form a microsystem¹. Prominent prototypical features of Pidgin English are kept and function as linguistic units in discourse structuring. Pronunciation markers are of particular importance:

¹ We use the term microsystem to oppose fictionalized pidgin and genuine pidgin English that would then be considered as a macrosystem.

This may be because in many languages pronunciation seems to be the most flexible element, which can be used (subconsciously) to express subtle sociolinguistic messages of speaker identity and of distance from or solidarity with the listener. (Schmied 1991: 57)

In written discourse, graphemic variants symbolize the diverging phonemic system. We will give just a few examples that are representative of the texts and of general tendencies in English-based varieties and more so in West African pidgin (Schmied 1991, Holm 1988, Wells 1990 [1982]):

- Plosives and fricatives tend to be avoided or merged
- Vowels in accentuated syllables tend to be undifferentiated
- Diphthongs tend to be monophthongized
- Consonantal clusters tend to be reduced by dropping one of the consonants or by epenthesis

In *Jagua Nana* and “Girls at War”, it is mostly the consonantal system that tends to be representative of the phonemic divergences between pidgin and central English:

(2) (People addressing Jagua in a pub)

Then she saw him, already dressed in an English wool suit. He had become an ‘Englander’. At the *Tropicana* they had warned Jagua: ‘You takin’ big risk by lettin’ Freddie go. He goin’ to U.K. to forget you. Soon as he reached Englan’ he goin’ to see all de white gals, and he’ll hook dem and come home wit’ one. So what you goin’ to do? Eh, Jaga? When Freddie go an’ return wit’ one of dem white women, what you goin’ to do? I think you jus’ wastin’ de money you kin put in trading business, Jag’” (*Jagua Nana*: 58-59)

(3) (Nancy, Freddie’s girlfriend addressing Jagua)

‘De harlot woman!’ she said aloud. ‘De shameless harlot woman! She sleepin’ with de Papa, an’ she lyin’ to de Pickin’, and she don’t care nothin’. De harlot women! You goin’ to die wretched! Vulture will chop you eye!’ (*Jagua Nana*: 100)

(4) (Uncle Taiwo asking Jagua to talk to the market women so that he gains their support)

‘... Tell dem all de lie. When Uncle Taiwo win, dem will never remember anythin’ about all dis promise. Tell dem ah’m against women paying tax. Is wrong, is wicked. Tell dem ah’m fighting for equality of women. Women mus’ be equal to all men. You wonderin’ what to tell dem? Oh, Lord! Tell dem all women in dis Lagos mus’ get good work if dem vote for me. No more unemployment. Women mus’ be treated right. Dem mus’ have status. Dem mus’ have class...’ (*Jagua Nana*: 142)

This does not imply that vocalic divergences are not represented as examples (2), (4) above and (5) below show:

(5) ‘Who use to make juju sacrifice, Nancy? You modder?’

‘Ah don’ call anyone by name. But some woman when she love man, and de man don’ love her, she kin come to de waterside in de mornin’ an’ kill chicken, so de man kin love her’ (*Jagua Nana*: 83)

The most prototypical syntactic divergences between pidgin English and central English in the noun phrase and in the verb phrase can be presented in seven major points (Schmied 1991, Holm 1988, Wells 1990 [1982]):

- Inflectional endings tend to be omitted
- Articles and other determiners tend to be omitted
- Pronouns are not distinguished by gender
- Pre-verbal particles are used instead of complex tenses
- BE-ING constructions are extended to most verbs
- V V, V TO V, V V-ING constructions vary
- Adjectival forms tend to be extensively used as adverbs

In *Jagua Nana*, these syntactic features are reduced to a bare minimum to ensure the reader's comprehension. As examples (2) to (5) illustrate, we notice that verbal inflectional –S in V-S is dropped and that the auxiliary BE is omitted in BE V-ING constructions. The examples that follow illustrate different phenomena that are rampant in the novel:

- Omission of copular *be*:

(6) Freddie addressing Nancy about Jagua)
'Look, Nancy! Is only I can't help myself. I don't want to hurt Jagua. **She fine** and she have some money an' she know how to dress smart and hook all de men in Lagos. Das why we call her Jag-wa. But she's not for me. **She too high** up in de sky. You know, de woman take a fancy to me because she say I young and handsome. But she take money from de other men, an sleep wit' dem. And she tryin' to keep me for marriage when she get older, like I'm somethin' from de museum. **I too young** to sell my life like dat.'
(*Jagua Nana*: 19)

- Use of preverbal particle DONE, perfective marker

(7) (Talking about Freddie's flight to London)
'Tomorrow morn', before you wash de sleep from you eye, **dem done reach** London, shaking from de col'...' (*Jagua Nana*: 62)
Extension of the use of MAKE, marker of causation

(8) (Jagua's houseboy, Mike, to Freddie)
'Sir! Tenk God you return! Madam, she say **make you come** quick'
'Madam? But ah lef' her in de *Tropicana*.'
'No, sah. She sen' message from police station, sir. She say **make you come bail am**.'
(*Jagua Nana*: 62)

(9) 'You done finish?' asked the voice outside. 'Make we help you small. Oya, everybody!' ("Civil Peace": 86-87)

In "Girls at War", Reginald Nwankwo speaks pidgin or simplified English when he is talking "down" to less educated people. In the novel, pidgin is also the medium of communication in servants' interaction, here describing a military aircraft, a bomber: '**I see dem well well**,' said the other with equal excitement. '**If no de say de ting de kill porson e for sweet eye**. To

God².’ (“Girls at War”: 113). Nwankwo’s driver expresses his surprise in sub-standard English when his Master, influenced by Gladys, agrees to give a ride to a soldier: ‘Sorry, sir,’ said the driver. ‘I don’t know **Master wan to pick him.**’ (“Girls at War”: 121). In the short story, pidgin is scarcely used: the narrative unfolds in central English. In his novel entitled *No Longer at Ease* (1960: 99), Chinua Achebe explains how Christopher deliberately changes his language to show different aspects of his personality:

Whether Christopher spoke good or ‘broken’ English depended on what he was saying, where he was saying it, and how he wanted to say it. Of course that was to some extent true of the most educated people, especially on Saturday nights. But Christopher was rather outstanding in thus coming to terms with a double heritage³.

For educated people, language and language choices are empowering: the choice of pidgin can either be “unmarked” to make oneself understood, or “marked” to stage connivance or solidarity with fellow citizens.

Literary production is intended to reach a readership. In “Girls at War” and *Jagua Nana*, as opposed to other texts⁴ in which variation is less reduced and didacticized, the authors develop strategies to create a certain interactional harmony with the readers. Linguistic variants are used as connivance markers: accommodation strategies, the simplification of pidgin English, are based on the routinization or recurrence of the same variants that lead to interpretation. It would be of interest to see to what extent the reader is conscious of the different levels of accommodation. We may wonder about the level of transparency of variation on the one hand and of accommodation for the reader

² The translation into French by Jean de Grandsaigne (‘Femmes en guerre’, Paris : Hatier, 1981, p.147) reads as follows : ‘Moi les voir bien-bien, dit l’autre tout aussi exité. Dommage le machin-là lui savoir tuer, parce que regarder lui, très beau. Vrai de vrai !’

³ Within the same situation, Christopher (*No Longer at Ease* : 99) speaks pidgin English to show that he is not a rich man, later he speaks central English to prove his capacity to evolve in ‘high’ society :

‘... What can I offer you ?’

‘Champagne.’

‘Ah ? Na Obi go buy you that-o. Me never reach that grade yet. Na squash me get-o.’

They laughed.

‘Obi, what about some beer ?’

‘If you split a bottle with me.’

‘Fine. What are you people doing this evening ? **Make we go dance** somewhere ?’

Obi tried to make excuses, but Clara cut him short. They would go, she said.

‘**Na film I wan’ go**’, said Bisi.

‘Look here, Bisi, we are not interested in what you want to do. It’s for Obi and me to decide. **This na Africa**, you know.’

⁴ Even though Nigerian pidgin English undergoes simplification in most literary productions, we will just mention some other works by the same authors in which the degree of complexity and authenticity of pidgin English, in relationship with spoken pidgin, is most palpable: « Lokotown », *Survive the Peace* by Cyprian Ekwensi; *No Longer at Ease*, *A Man of the People* by Chinua Achebe...

on the other. We will argue that the authors' objective is to represent the impoverished identities of their protagonists in a dismantled corrupt world. Ekwensi is "a writer for the masses" who wishes to establish contact with his readers thanks to his linguistic and stylistic choices. Pidgin English certainly functions as a representation of diastatic variation but also as a marker of mental and psychological state, as a representation of diaphasic variation. We may add that in literary discourse, diastatic variations are necessarily diaphasic variations as well.

Stylistic diaphasic variations and their semiotic value

Today English is in some sense an African language. English-based pidgins and creoles and African Englishes in literary written discourse, answer demands and obey constraints. The wide range of Englishes present in Africa, from the basilectal to the acrolectal end of the continuum, is to some extent at least represented in literary discourse which, however, does not transparently reflect the sociolinguistic reality. The use of pidginised varieties is part of the African experience. We wish to point out a tension between realism and the representation of a perceived reality:

La représentation ne se définit pas comme la connaissance de la réalité, mais comme l'exposé de niveaux de réalité: le j'écris, implicite ou explicite dans tout texte, identifie un premier niveau de réalité qui articule les autres. (Soungoua 2010: 509)⁵. We will defend the idea that pidginised varieties are salient qualities that reveal the specific relevance of the texts to the African situation and to human situation at large. Code switching and the integration of pidginised varieties of English in literary discourse have particular functions:

- socio-political: representation and denunciation of societal, political disorder
- creative: urban vernacular pidginised English as a medium of literary creativity
- narrative: scansion, rhythm...

To support the idea that pidgins have a creative dimension in texts, we will quote Cyprian Ekwensi's words in an interview:

The Nigerian musician, the Ghanaian musician, the Kenyan musician uses local materials, local sentiments, local psychology, and the local language. So when you hear a high-life⁶ or even the soul music which is being played in our country today by the Afro-rock experts and kings, it's all either in Yoruba or in Igbo or in Hausa. It has a very

⁵ 'Representation cannot be defined as knowledge of reality but rather as the verbalization of different levels of reality : the I of the text, implicit or explicit in any text, identifies an initial level of reality onto which the other levels are articulated'. (our translation)

⁶ High-life is a music genre that spread to Ghana, Nigeria and other West African countries in the 20th century.

authentic ring. I have sometimes tried to imagine those same tunes sung in grammatical English. They wouldn't have the same impact. If they were sung in English, they would be in pidgin English, which is the language of the common people. (Bernth :1974) quoted by Soungoua (2010: 485)

Ekwensi was aware that writing extensively in a vernacular language would limit his international audience. Like other writers of the same period, he chose to use simplified pidgin creatively to "africanize" his writing hoping he would multiply his local audience. The variations the reader is faced with constitute the basis for his / her interpretation. A semiotization process is then the result of the production – interpretation activity. The reader constructs his / her interpretation of variation in the text in different modes: the semantic mode by making sense of discourse through the sentence; the semiotic mode by interpreting the formal properties and far more so the function of the linguistic signs that constitute variants. What really matters in the reception of these variants is not so much what they communicate (in terms of ontological referentiality) as what the reader makes of them as a micro-system of signs that make sense at a metasemantic level:

[...] il faut dépasser la notion saussurienne du signe comme principe unique, dont dépendraient à la fois la structure et le fonctionnement de la langue. Ce dépassement se fera par deux voies:

- dans l'analyse intralinguistique, par l'ouverture d'une nouvelle dimension de signifiante, celle du discours, que nous appelons sémantique, désormais distincte de celle qui est liée au signe, et qui sera sémiotique;
- dans l'analyse translinguistique des textes, des œuvres par l'élaboration d'une métasémantique qui se construira sur la sémantique de l'énonciation. Ce sera une sémiologie de "deuxième génération", dont les instruments et la méthode pourront concourir au développement des autres branches de la sémiologie générale⁷. (Benveniste 1974: 66)

Pidgins are capable of sustaining a written literature⁸. Passages in pidgin constitute motives in works that are not written in this medium: they are due to

⁷ 'One needs to go beyond the Saussurean notion of the linguistic sign as a unique principle upon which the structure and the functioning of language would depend. This will be achieved thanks to different processes :

- intralinguistic analysis, thanks to the recognition of a new dimension of significance, that of discourse, which we will qualify as semantic, distinct from the significance of the linguistic sign which is semiotic ;
- translinguistic analysis of texts and works thanks to the construal of metasemantics which will be based on the semantics of enunciation. This will give rise to a second generation of semiotics whose instruments and method will contribute to the development of the different branches of general semiotics'. (our translation)

⁸ One needs to remember that the first transcriptions of pidgins were due to scholars and missionaries who translated biblical texts : ' ... all the English varieties have been found adequate for the teaching of a doctrine involving such concepts as 'grace', 'redemption', 'transubstantiation' and the 'three divine persons in one God''. (Todd 1990 : 66)
One also needs to bear in mind that Nigerian pidgin was used for government propaganda during the Civil War. (Todd 1990 : 66)

actual observation and command of the language but they are also a form of literary convention. The generalization of varieties of pidgin English in individual speech (direct discourse, situation-bound) leads to the stabilization of a discursive tradition that is used as a means to “africanize” discourse and to denounce the social and political fractures of society. Rather than being mere salient and transparent diatopic and diastratic variations, they acquire a diaphasic creative stylistic and discursive function. Pidginised varieties are marked by a sense of immediacy, private and spontaneous communication anchored in a specific situation, emotions and they lead to linguistic innovation strictly speaking or to the recycling of existing forms. At the same time, they serve broader purposes: the integration of such varieties is an attempt to explore translinguistic identity, socio-cultural loss in a fragmented society and possibly regeneration. They do not merely constitute linguistic varieties but also variation in terms of communicative style in particular contexts of delivery: they are speech acts in direct discourse that help define protagonists. They situate experience locally and make it relevant to the here-and-now of the participants but they also tap into cultural knowledge and expectations. In that sense, it is difficult to dissociate the local from the more global dimension in literacy recourse to such varieties. In situational context, pidginised varieties operate as an instantiation of a culture and add in terms of theatricality. They add rhythm and loudness in individual performances that allow for dramatic effects and that draw the reader’s attention. The aesthetic properties of such verbal expression involve the reader. Variation operates as a meta-message that calls for the reader’s implication in processes of meaning creation. The reader recognizes that he or she is faced with metalinguistic devices such as conventionalized simplifications of pidginised varieties of English. These diaphasic or stylistic variants constitute expressive means that interplay between social and sociolinguistic rules and processes of meaning creation: “Pidgin facilitates character drawing and also functions as a choric medium for the writer’s grim humour.” (Todd 1990: 74).

(10) Maria was the first to raise the alarm, then he followed and all their children;
‘Police-o! Thieves-o! Neighbours-o! Police-o! We are lost! We are dead! Neighbours, are you asleep? Wake up! Police-o!’

This went on for a long time and then stopped suddenly. Perhaps they had scared the thief away. There was total silence. But only for a short while.

‘You done finish?’ asked the voice outside. ‘Make we help you small. Oya, everybody!’
‘Police-o! Tiefman-o! Neighbours-o! we done loss-o! Police-o!...’

[...]

The silence that followed the thieves’ alarm vibrated horribly. Jonathan all but begged their leader to speak again and be done with it.

‘My frien, said he at long last, ‘we don try our best for call dem but I tink say dem all done sleep-o... So wetin we go do now? Sometaim you wan call soja? Or you wan make we call dem for you? Soja better pass police. No be so?’

‘Na so!’ replied his men. (“Civil Peace”: 86-87)

Pidgins in texts have a double dimension: humor and pathos. We will note the tragic endings in *Jagua Nana*: Freddie's murder and in "Girls at War": the car in which Nwankwo, Gladys and the one-legged soldier Nwankwo condescended to give a ride to is bombarded. However they may be used in different situations in which they encode other values.

And yet it would be wrong to suggest that pidgins and creoles have been restricted to extremes of humour or pathos. They have shown themselves to be as flexible and versatile as their users have wanted them to be (Todd 1990: 75).

Conclusion

The integration of varieties of pidgin English is constrained. Constraints have different effects: a comic effect and a symptomatic effect. The adaptation of pidgins to the text removes the text from systematic reconstruction of referential or realistic meaning and yet it represents the symptoms of social fractures. We will end with the words of Jean-Jacques Lecercle (2010: 4) about artifice:

... cette petite agrammaticalité qui interrompt ou retarde la lecture, et force le lecteur à focaliser son attention sur le langage et non plus sur la narration ou l'argumentation.

[...]

... la syntaxe n'impose plus son ordre, car elle tend vers le chaos. Paradoxalement donc, l'artifice langagier, au moment où il contraint le lecteur, désaliène le texte⁹. (2010: 11)

The simplified fictional varieties of Pidgin English that punctuate the texts force the reader to create his or her own cognitive framework: the reader gradually builds up his or her own version of pidgin as the texts unfold. We recognize different levels of defamiliarization: sociolinguistic as the diaphasic variety of Pidgin English used is not faithful to sociolinguistic realities; sociocultural as the English readership is not akin with Pidgin English.

⁹ '... agrammaticality that interrupts or delays reading and that forces the reader to focalize his attention on language itself and no longer on the narrative or argumentation. [...] ... syntax no longer imposes its ordering since it tends towards chaos. Paradoxically then, linguistic artifice, as it constraints the reader, desalienates the text'. (Our translation)

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