

## At the Interface of two Different Linguistic Aesthetics: Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*

İki Ayrı Dilbilimsel Estetiğin Arasında Chinua Achebe'nin İki Romanı:  
*Parçalanma ve Tanrının Oku*

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### Öz

İngilizce'nin ve diğer Avrupa dillerinin Afrika edebiyatında kullanılması sık sık alevli tartışmaların odağında olmuştur. Afrika dillerini kullanan yazarları açık şekilde dışarıda bırakan 1962'deki Anglofon Afrika Edebiyatı üzerine yapılan Makerere Konferansı ile Obi Wali'nin "The dead end of African literature?" ("Afrika Edebiyatı'nın Çıkamaz") (1963) başlıklı tartışma yaratan makalesinin yayımlanması genellikle bu tartışmanın başlangıç noktası olarak görülür ki bu tartışma Nijeryalı yazar Chinua Achebe'yi İngiliz dilinde yazmanın destekçisi olarak görürken Kenyalı yazar Ngugi wa Thiong'o'yu da onun karşıtı gibi göstermektedir. Igbo estetiği üzerine kurulu ancak uluslararası okuyucunun da anlayabildiği bir dil kullanan Achebe, İngilizce'yi yaratıcı kullanımı ile ün yapmıştır. Ancak, kendisinin "yeni İngilizce" dediği kullanım, alışılmış yabancılaştırmanın ötesine geçerek, daha önceleri sömürgeci olanın dilini İngilizce'nin Afrika kültürüne devşirilmiş hali ile değiştirip yerel bir dil benimseyerek uluslararası okuyucuya erişebilmekte ve Afrika'nın sömürge dönemi gerçeklerini ve sonuçlarını kullanarak eski sömürgeciyle yüzleşebilmektedir. Achebe'nin romanlarında, iki dilbilimsel estetik arasında bulunan "yeni İngilizce," iki tarafın kültürel farklılıklarını ortaya koyarak hikâyenin bir parçası haline gelir. Bu makale, *Parçalanma ve Tanrının Oku* romanlarındaki esas tema olan Igbo ve İngiliz kültürlerinin çatışmasını vurgulamak amacıyla Achebe'nin bu karma dili nasıl kullandığını inceleyecektir. Çalışma önce Achebe'nin İngilizce'yi nasıl Afrikalılaştırdığını gösterecek daha sonra da romancının karma dili iki kültürün çakışma noktasında nasıl kullandığını irdeleyerek Igbo sözlü geleneğinin kaybolmasının izlerini sürecektir. Böylece, karma dil, sömürgecinin dilini kullanarak yazma ile yerel dilin kullanılması çıkmazı ile yüzleşmek durumunda kalan sömürge dönemi sonrası yazarların karşılaşılan bu ikilemden dilbilimsel bir kaçış stratejisi olmanın ötesine geçmektedir.

**Anahtar sözcükler:** Chinua Achebe, dilbilimsel hibridite, "yeni İngilizce", Afrika edebiyatı, sömürge dönemi sonrası edebiyat

### Abstract

The use of English and other European languages in African literature has often been the focus of heated debates. The Makerere Conference on Anglophone African Literature in 1962, which explicitly excluded writers who work with African languages and the subsequent publication of Obi Wali's contentious essay "The dead end of African literature?" (1963) are often seen as the starting point of this debate, which saw Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe as the main supporter of writing in English and Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o as the main adversary. Achebe is well-known for his creative use of English, forging a language based on Igbo aesthetics, but nevertheless comprehensive to an international audience. However, his "new English", as he calls it, goes beyond merely defamiliarizing and subverting the language of the erstwhile colonizer in order to create a home-grown, African

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version of English, while at the same time being able to reach an international audience and thus confront the ex-colonizer with an African view of the realities of colonialism and its consequences. In Achebe's novels, this "new English", located at the interface of two linguistic aesthetics, becomes part of the story itself, illustrating the cultural differences between the two sides. The study will illustrate how Achebe employs this hybrid language in his novels *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God* to underscore their central themes: the violent conflict between Igbo and British society. After presenting how Achebe Africanizes English in the two novels, it will demonstrate how he uses it not only to pitch the two cultures against each other but also to trace the loss of Igbo oral tradition. The hybrid language thus proves to be more than a linguistic exit strategy out of the dilemma faced by postcolonial writers who are confronted with the choice between writing in the ex-colonizer's language or in a local language.

**Keywords:** Chinua Achebe, linguistic hybridity, "new English", African literature, postcolonial literature

## Introduction

The Makerere Conference on Anglophone African Literature in 1962, which explicitly excluded writers who work with African languages (see also Ngugi, 1986, p. 111), and the subsequent publication of Obi Wali's contentious essay "The dead end of African literature?" (1963) are often seen as the starting point of the debate concerning the use of English and other European languages in African literature. Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, often referred to as the Godfather of African Literature, and Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o were outspoken opponents in this debate. In *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986), Ngugi publicly announced his decision to henceforth abandon English in favour of Gikuyu and Swahili as the language of his fictional writing and set forth his reasons for this decision. Achebe aired his views in various essays such as "English and the African writer", written in 1964 and first published in 1965 in the Accra-based magazine *Transition*,<sup>1</sup> where he posed himself the question of whether Africans "ought to" write in English and answered with a clear yes (1975, p. 62; emphasis in original).

However, Achebe not only wanted to adopt the language; he wanted to appropriate it and to adapt it to his own purposes, fashioning a "new English" that nevertheless remains comprehensible to an international audience (1975, p. 62). The idea of international exchange was important to him, not only within the African continent (see e.g. Achebe 1975, pp. 57-58), but also between Africa and the metropolitan centres of power. Both his first novel *Things Fall Apart* (TFA), published in 1958, two years before Nigeria gained independence from the British, as well as *Arrow of God* (AG), published in 1964, are clearly addressed not only to an African audience, but also – if not primarily – to a European audience (see also Ngara 1982, p.79). Both novels explain pre-colonial Igbo<sup>2</sup> culture to the West and underscore the fact that Africa "was not one long night of savagery from which the first Europeans acting on God's behalf delivered them", as Achebe put it (1975, p. 45). The colonial conflict between the two cultures – the Igbo on one side and the British on the other – is the central theme of both *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*. After presenting how Achebe Africanized English in these novels, I will illustrate how he employed his "new English", located at the interface of two linguistic aesthetics, to underscore this central theme.

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1 It was reprinted ten years later in the collection *Morning Yet on Creation Day* with the title "The African writer and the English language" (Achebe 1975).

2 In recent academic writing, the spelling "Igbo" seems to outweigh the older spelling "Ibo". "Igbo is the more precise term for *Ibo*" (Shelton, 1969, p. 86; emphasis in original).

## Achebe's "new English"

Achebe localizes English mainly through "the use of the Igbo proverb and the traditional folk stories; the recreation of the speech-patterns and rhythms of the Igbo metaphorical language; and the use of particularized Igbo words and phrases" (Turkington, 1977, p. 52). By introducing these Igbo elements into English, Achebe creates a highly idiosyncratic hybrid language, as the following excerpt from *Arrow of God*, set in an Igbo village during early colonialism, will illustrate (quoted and commented on in Achebe, 1975; Obiechina, 1972; Shelton, 1969; Zabus, 1991). The arrival of Christian missionaries threatens to undermine the spiritual authority of the village's Chief Priest Ezeulu. Ezeulu struggles to preserve Igbo traditions, values and beliefs and with them his privileged position in society. In the following excerpt, Ezeulu gives his reasons for sending one of his sons to attend the missionary church service:

"The world is changing," [Ezeulu] had told him. "I do not like it. But I am like the bird Eneke-nti-oba. When his friends asked him why he was always on the wing he replied: 'Men of today have learnt to shoot without missing and so I have learnt to fly without perching.' I want one of my sons to join these people and be my eye there. If there is nothing in it you will come back. But if there is something there you will bring home my share. The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place. My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow." (AG, p. 46; emphasis in original)

Literary critic Emmanuel Obiechina argues that although the passage is written in English, "the rhythm of its prose and the structure of feeling behind it are West African; both reflect the oral tradition of West Africa" (1972, p. 16). To demonstrate that Achebe here moulds the English after Igbo, his mother tongue, Obiechina translates part of this passage into Igbo and then provides a close, literal rendering of the Igbo version<sup>3</sup>:

I want me that one inside children my join people these that he becomes eyes my inside place-that. If that it has not something be in the inside it, you come out again. But if it be that it has something be inside place-that, you bring back me own my. The world is like spirit (masquerade), dancing. Person wants to see it/him well he not stands in one place. Spirit my tells me that persons any that not become friend person white today will be saying tomorrow that if it had been that they know. (Obiechina, 1972, p. 17)

When comparing the two passages, it becomes clear that Achebe has not translated literally from Igbo. Nevertheless, his writing shows salient inferences from his native language. Zabus (1991) speaks of "relexification" – the simulation of an African language in a Europhone narrative. Notable are Achebe's concessions to Standard English syntax as for example changing the Igbo sequence of noun + possessive (eyes my) into the Standard English word order of possessive + noun (my eyes) (Obiechina, 1972). However, in general Achebe's passage stays close to the imagined Igbo original. Phrases like "to be his eyes" or "my spirit tells me" are idiomatic expressions that "every Igbo speaker

3 For the Igbo version, see Obiechina, 1972, p. 17.

will recognize" (Obiechina, 1972, p. 17; see also Zabus, 1991, pp. 136-137). The passage further contains elements of oral rhetoric: the folk tale of the bird Eneke-nti-oba as well as two proverbial expressions ("The world is like a Mask dancing. If you want to see it well you do not stand in one place." / "My spirit tells me that those who do not befriend the white man today will be saying *had we known* tomorrow.") (see also Shelton, 1969, pp. 102-103; Zabus, 1991, pp. 137-138).

Proverbs form an integral part of the society Achebe portrays (Turkington, 1977, p. 52). In oral societies proverbs are "the repository for the received wisdom of generations, containing the truth, consolations and frame of reference for a whole people" (1977, p. 52). Ong points out that "[t]he law itself in oral cultures is enshrined in formulaic sayings, proverbs, which are not mere jurisprudential decorations, but themselves constitute the law" (2002, p. 35). Proverbs thus create an illusion of objectivity and omniscience. As Obiechina puts it, "[t]he man who proverbializes is putting his individual speech in a traditional context, reinforcing his personal point of view by objectifying its validity, and indirectly paying tribute to himself as a possessor of traditional wisdom" (1975, p. 156).

The use of proverbs is determined by factors such as the "status of the speaker vis-à-vis the listener" (Obiechina, 1975, p. 164). For example, women and children are traditionally not allowed to use proverbs (Turkington, 1977, p. 53). Age also plays a role: "It would be improper for a young man or a woman to speak to a male elder in proverbs" (Obiechina, 1975, p. 164). In fact, when in *Arrow of God* the young emissary of the Chief Priest's rival "affects the roundabout mode of speech appropriate to a more elderly person" (Obiechina, 1975, p. 164), the Chief Priest responds with annoyance: "If you have a message, deliver it because I have no time to listen to a boy learning to speak in riddles" (AG, p. 53). The use of proverbs therefore not only celebrates the oratorical abilities of the speaker or narrator (Akoma, 2004, p. 183), but sets the speech of elder males apart from the "light, down-to-earth, rambling or bantering style of female speech and the jerky, elliptical syntax of children" (Obiechina, 1975, pp. 164-165).

Proverbs are widely used in Anglophone African literature, constituting "probably the most common form manifesting the use of translated mother-tongue metaphors" within this literature (Adejare, 1998, p. 26). Elements of traditional oral rhetoric – "the roundabout mode of speech", as Obiechina (1975, p. 164) calls it – are a distinctive feature of Achebe's Igbo-English. Shelton (1969, p. 87) counts a minimum of 129 proverbs in *Arrow of God*. This "habit of verbal elaboration and indirection" (Wasserman, 1998, p. 81) of the Igbo is in stark contrast to British directness. As Wasserman puts it, "the language of the Ibo is essentially centrifugal, beginning with a single idea and working outward to its many forms of expression" (1998, p. 82; see also Janmohamed, 1998, p. 97). The contextualizing of proverbs for the benefit of the non-Igbo reader further adds to this amplifying effect, as is illustrated by the following example:

It is praiseworthy to be brave and fearless, my son, but sometimes it is better to be a coward. We often stand in the compound of a coward to point at the ruins where a brave man used to live. The man who has never submitted to anything will soon submit to the burial mat. (AG, p. 11)

Not only the centrifugal indirectness but also the effort a reader unfamiliar with Igbo culture has to invest in decoding the metaphorical language, slows down the reading as the "[t]ransition from one linguistic sensibility into another calls for the expenditure of perceptive effort" (Obiechina, 1975, p.

187). As Obiechina puts it, “an English attuned ear [...] is bound to pause, hit by a sudden roadblock, the moment the eye encounters Ezeulu’s illustrative proverb[s]” (1975, p. 187). However, as I will illustrate below, in Achebe’s novels the figurative language with its abundance of proverbs does not only require more cognitive effort from the Western reader, it also serves to set the speech of the Igbo apart from that of the British colonizers, thus pitching the two cultures against each other and tracing the tragic loss of the former at the hands of the latter.

### The heteroglossic narrating voice: Igbo orality versus British literacy

Right from the start of the novel, on the very first pages of *Things Fall Apart*, we learn that “[a]-mong the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly” (TFA, p. 6). However, the British see things differently: “one of the most infuriating habits of these people was their love of superfluous words” (TFA, p. 150). The linguistic incompatibility of the Igbo and the British is due to the fact that the former are an oral culture while the latter comprise a literate one (Wasserman, 1998, p. 78). The “central conflict” of *Things Fall Apart* is “essentially one of survival between an oral and a literate culture” (1998, p. 79). Throughout the book, “Achebe takes great care to capture the oral nature of Ibo society, if only to trace the tragic loss of this tradition” (1998, p. 79). The following passage, the opening paragraph of *Things Fall Apart*, will illustrate how Achebe expresses the orality characteristic of traditional Igbo society in the narrating voice:

Ọkọnkwo was well known throughout the nine villages and even beyond. His fame rested on solid personal achievements. As a young man of eighteen he had brought honour to his village by throwing Amalinze the Cat. Amalinze was the great wrestler who for seven years was unbeaten, from Umuofia to Mbaino. He was called the Cat because his back would never touch the earth. It was this man that Okonkwo threw in a fight which the old men agreed was one of the fiercest since the founder of their town engaged a spirit of the wild for seven days and seven nights.

The drums beat and their flutes sang and the spectators held their breath. Amalinze was a wily craftsman, but Ọkọnkwo was as slippery as a fish in water. Every nerve and every muscle stood out on their arms, on their backs and their thighs, and one almost heard them stretching to breaking point. In the end Okonkwo threw the Cat. (TFA, p. 3; my emphasis)

McCarthy (1998, p. 42) draws attention to the narrator’s repetitions, “a technique of the oral storyteller”. The fact that Okonkwo threw Amalinze in a fight is repeated three times in this short passage as is the fact that Okonkwo is a celebrated fighter in Umuofia.

Once a name or event is introduced [Achebe] proceeds by moving forward, then reaching back to repeat and expand, moving onward again, accumulating detail and elaborating: “well known” advances to “fame” and to “honour”, just as “It was this man that Okonkwo threw” repeats what has gone before and underlines its importance. (McCarthy, 1998, p.42)

According to Ong (2002, p. 40), this “redundancy, repetition of the just-said” is typical of oral expression and “keeps both speaker and hearer surely on the track”. Contrary to writing, where the reader can go back and retrieve lost context, in orality “there is nothing to backloop into outside the mind, for the oral utterance has vanished as soon as it is uttered” (2002, p. 39). The repetitive, non-sequential character of oral narrative with its many recapitulations, postponed amplifications and explanations is therefore one of the characteristic features of orality (Janmohamed, 1998, p. 93) as it ensures the audience’s understanding (see further Ong, 2002, pp. 39-41). McCarthy (1998, p. 44) further highlights the structural repetition in the passage, as for example the parallel sentence opening of noun + “was” (“Okonkwo was” / “Amalinze was” / “He was” / “It was” / “Amalinze was” / “Okonkwo was”). The repetitiveness of orality is reflected also in the narrative organization of the novel. As Janmohamed (1998, p. 95) points out, Okonkwo’s fame as a wrestler, after being introduced in the opening passage quoted above, is then repeated on page six and page twenty and finally an entire chapter is dedicated to the importance of wrestling in Igbo culture (pp. 34-37).

Janmohamed (1998, pp. 94-95) draws further attention to the prevalently paratactic sentence structure of the passage and Achebe’s refusal to “consolidat[e] the short, simple sentences and subordinat[e] some of them as modifying clauses”. This refusal again mirrors features of orality, as oral narrative is characterized by a “predominance of parataxis” (1998, p. 93), while “syntactic subordination is more characteristic of chirographic representation than it is of oral speech” (1998, p. 95; see also Ong, 2002, pp. 37-38).

Achebe contrasts the indirectness of Igbo speech with the directness of British expression in order to signal different perspectives in the narrating voice (see also Wasserman, 1998). Achebe’s narrator therefore behaves like the narrative’s eloquent Igbo characters when narrating from their perspective: “skirting around the subject and then hitting it finally” (TFA, p. 6). This expansive quality of Igbo speech, achieved “through the use of elaboration, repetition and analogy”, is in stark contrast to the directness of the British colonizers with their “proclivity for reduction rather than expansion” (Wasserman, 1998, p. 82).

This contrast between Igbo periphrasis and British reduction is elegantly put to use in *Things Fall Apart* in order to set the last chapter of the novel apart from the preceding chapters. After Okonkwo, the protagonist, has committed suicide, the narrator shifts towards a British perspective and finally assumes the perspective of the District Commissioner, symbolizing thus the defeat of the Igbo by the British. For example, this shift becomes apparent when comparing the following opening sentence of the last chapter with the above-cited opening passage of the first chapter:

When the District Commissioner arrived at Okonkwo’s compound at the head of an armed band of soldiers and court messengers he found a small crowd of men sitting wearily in the *obi*. He commanded them to come outside, and they obeyed without a murmur. (TFA, p. 150)

While the narrator has not yet moved into the mind of the District Commissioner, the beginning shift in perspective is apparent. The District Commissioner is now the subject of the narrative, while the villagers have become “the other” (“they”). With the shift in perspective from Igbo villagers to British colonialists, the language shifts from orality to literacy: the sentence structure is now organized in a subordinative, sequential fashion instead of the additive, non-sequential redundancy

of the opening passage (see also McCarthy, 1998, pp. 53-54). Furthermore, the last chapter's opening passage is process-oriented with its "weight on verbs" ("arrived" / "found" / "commanded" / "obeyed") (McCarthy, 1998, p. 54). In contrast, the opening of the first chapter is product-oriented, with the weight resting on facts ("well-known" / "fame" / "honour" / "great wrestler" / etc.).

Finally, in the last paragraph of the novel, the shift of perspective becomes complete and the narrator "moves into the mind and language of the District Commissioner" (Turkington, 1977, p. 61)<sup>4</sup>:

The Commissioner went away, taking three or four soldiers with him. In the many years in which he had toiled to bring civilization to different parts of Africa he had learnt a number of things. One of them was that a District Commissioner must never attend to such undignified details as cutting down a hanged man from the tree. Such attention would give the natives a poor opinion of him. In the book which he planned to write he would stress that point. As he walked back to the court he thought about the book. Every day brought him some new material. The story of this man who had killed a messenger and hanged himself would make interesting reading. One could almost write a whole chapter on him. Perhaps not a whole chapter but a reasonable paragraph, at any rate. There was so much else to include, and one must be firm in cutting out details. He had already chosen the title of the book, after much thought: *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger*. (TFA, pp. 151-152; emphasis in original)

The irony is obvious, from the title of the book to be written to the fact that the District Commissioner deems Okonkwo's life merely worthy of a paragraph, while Achebe has just written an entire novel depicting his life and that of his – prior to the arrival of the missionaries – well-functioning, civilized society. "The richness of Ibo story-telling", illustrated in the novel's opening paragraph, "stands in stark contrast to the almost painful brevity of the treatise which the commissioner outlines in the novel's final paragraph", as Wasserman puts it (1998, p. 83). This point is also made by Turkington (1977, p. 61), who argues that the "unemotional, factual prose" of the District Commissioner not only suits the Commissioner and serves the content, but it also sets itself clearly apart from the preceding "colourful, idiomatic and almost poetical narration" assuming the perspective of the people of Umuofia.

This shift towards the British perspective is further reflected in the organization of the narrative. While the narrative organization of the first part of *Things Fall Apart* is characterized by non-sequential amplification, in part two and three the narrative "follows a more rigorous and increasingly urgent chronological and causal pattern until it ends suddenly with Okonkwo fixed as a minor detail in a minor book of [a] vast chirographic culture" (Janmohamed 1998:98). The conflict between oral and literate culture ends with the triumph of literacy over orality. Or, as one of the British characters puts it in Achebe's novel, "the leaders of the land in the future would be men and women who have learned to read and write" (TFA, p. 146). A similar point is made by Janmohamed (1998, p. 88) who argues

4 Turkington (1977, pp. 60-61) claims that "in the very last paragraph of the novel, Achebe for the first time presents the cultural clash between African traditional values and white values in linguistic terms". However, as I have illustrated above, the shift of perspective is marked linguistically not only at the end of the last chapter, but right from the very first sentence of the last chapter.

that *Things Fall Apart* depicts “not only the material, political, and social destruction of indigenous societies caused by colonization but also the subtle annihilation of the conservative, homeostatic oral culture by the colonialists’ introduction of literacy”.

In *Arrow of God*, too, linguistic shifts reflect shifts in the narrator’s perspective. Not only is the name of the District Officer pidginized and spelt “Wintabota” in those chapters that are narrated from the view of the villagers, while it is spelt “Winterbottom” in those chapters that are narrated from the perspective of the colonizers, but the narrating voice also reflects qualities like the indirectness of Igbo expression or the directness of British expression, according to the perspective from which the story is narrated, as the following examples will illustrate:

The war was waged from one Afo to the next. On the day it began Umuaro killed two men of Okperi. The next day was Nkwo, and so there was no fighting. On the two following days, Eke and Oye, the fighting grew fierce. Umuaro killed four men and Okperi replied with three, one of the three being Akukalia’s brother, Okoye. The next day, Afo, saw the war brought to a sudden close. The white man, Wintabota, brought soldiers to Umuaro and stopped it. (AG, p. 27)

Tony Clarke was dressed for dinner, although he still had more than an hour to go. Dressing for dinner was very irksome in the heat, but he had been told by many experienced coasters that it was quite imperative. They said it was a general tonic which one must take if one was to survive in this demoralising country. For to neglect it could become the first step on the slippery gradient of ever profounder repudiations. Today was quite pleasant because the rain had brought some coolness. But there had been days when Tony Clarke had foregone a proper dinner to avoid the torment of a starched shirt and tie. (AG, p. 32)

The first passage is narrated from an Igbo perspective. This is signalled not only by the Igbo naming of the weekdays or the pidginized “Wintabota”, but also the repetitions; the additive sentence structure, which gives it an abrupt, almost stammering rhythm; the technique of introducing a fact (“The war was waged from one Afo to the next.”) and then elaborating it in the following sentences. In the second passage instead, narrated from a British view, the sentence structure becomes increasingly subordinated and the transitions fluid.

The differences are even more apparent when the narrator moves into the minds of the opponents:

Why, [Ezeulu] asked himself again and again, why had Ulu chosen to deal thus with him, to strike him down and cover him with mud? What was his offence? Had he not divined the god’s will and obeyed it? When was it ever heard that a child was scalded by the piece of yam its own mother put in its palm? What man would send his son with a potsherd to bring fire from a neighbour’s hut and then unleash rain on him? Who ever sent his son up the palm to gather nuts and then took an axe and felled the tree? (AG, p. 189)

After the first stretch of unrestful sleep [Winterbottom] would lie awake, tossing about until he was caught in the distant throb of drums. He would wonder what unspeakable rites went on in the forest at night, or was it the heart-beat of the African darkness?



Then one night he was terrified when it suddenly occurred to him that no matter where he lay awake at night in Nigeria the beating of drums came with the same constancy and from the same elusive distance. Could it be that the throbbing came from his own heat-stricken brain? He attempted to smile it off but the skin in his face felt too tight. This dear old land of waking nightmares! (AG, p. 30)

While the first passage is narrated from Ezeulu's view, most apparent in the "verbal abundance", to use Akoma's (2004) expression, of the three successive proverbs giving voice to the same thought, the second passage instead is narrated from the District Officer's view – the sentence structure once again becomes increasingly subordinated, the transitions are fluid, there are fewer repetitions, and idiomatic English replaces the metaphorical language.

However, behind the District Officer's perspective we can also discern Achebe's view. Exposing Winterbottom's discourse "as an example of [...] Africanist discourse", as Gikandi (1991, p. 62) puts it, he makes fun of European perceptions of Africa. This irony is most evident in the allusions to Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* ("unspeakable rites", "African darkness")<sup>5</sup>.

The narrator assumes the voice and perspective of the colonizer so that he can mimic the colonial utterance from within, so to speak. By reciting and recontextualizing colonial ideologies and discourses, as they are circulated in government houses or represented in manifestoes such as George Allen's *The Pacification of the Lower Niger*<sup>6</sup>, Achebe subverts them by reducing them to clichés and dead language. (Gikandi, 1991, p. 62; emphasis in original)

Thus, by showing that Winterbottom's local expertise is "founded on fantasy rather than reality" (Gikandi, 1991, p. 61), Achebe ridicules all those Europeans who claimed they "knew their African", as Achebe puts it (AG, p. 57), and "expresses [their] alienation in [African culture] rather than the mastery and control which is manifested by [their] exercise of power" (Gikandi, 1991, p. 61).

## Conclusion

Achebe creates a language that is based on Igbo aesthetics, but nevertheless remains comprehensive to an international audience. By contrasting this hybrid Igbo-English with the Standard English of the ex-colonizer, he traces the cultural demise of the Igbo at the hands of their British colonizers in the language of the narrative. Hence, Achebe's "new English", a fusion between Africa and Europe, between literacy and orality, not only subverts the Western language and Western narrative traditions by flouting their norms, but also serves to represent linguistically how Western values have undermined, violated and finally subdued Igbo values, thus underscoring the central themes of the two novels discussed above. The hybrid language, located at the interface

5 Achebe most famously denounced the racism in Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* in his essay "An Image of Africa" (1988, pp. 1-20).

6 The title Achebe uses in his novel is *The Pacification of the Primitive Tribes of the Lower Niger* (AG, p. 32). This is exactly the same title the District Commissioner envisaged for his own book on Igbo life in *Things Fall Apart* (TFA, p. 152).

of two different, conflicting aesthetics, is therefore more than a linguistic exit strategy out of the dilemma faced by postcolonial writers who are confronted with the choice of whether to write in the ex-colonizer's language or in a local language. Achebe's "new English" and its subsequent erasure traces the submission of the Igbo and denounces the impact colonialism has had on traditional Igbo society and continues to have, even after independence.

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