The Renaissance of the Bantu Languages in Literature: A Comparative Path with the Italian Languages in Their Common Research of an Identity

Susanna Iacona Salafia

Fatih University, Istanbul, Turkey
*Corresponding Author: sjs45@hotmail.com

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Abstract *Decolonizing the mind: the politics of language in African Literature*, 1986, Kenia (Ngugi Wa' Thiong'O); *De Vulgari Eloquentia* ("About Eloquence in the Vulgar"), 1303-05, Tuscany-Italy (Dante Alighieri); *Half of a yellow sun*, 2007, Nigeria (Chimanda Ngozie Adichie); *Canale Mussolini* ("Mussolini Canal"), 2010, Italy (Antonio Pennacchi).

As you can see from the rough scheme above, the following will be a "horizontal" presentation rather than a "vertical" one.

I will not talk extensively of the life and activity of the four mentioned writers, so "distant" each other either in time or in space but I will make talk, for them, their own mentioned works (a collection of essays, a middle age treatise and two novels). I will try to assume, synthetize and summarize the political and artistic role these four authors played, only through their direct speech and words, extracted from some sample works of theirs. I will also try to understand the social and political context which they belonged to from what they have said or told in the analyzed works.

Keywords Bantu, African Literature, Italian Literature, Comparative literature, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie, Antonio Pennacchi, Dante Alighieri

1. Introduction

I analyzed the two novels of the above scheme, "Half of the yellow sun" (2007, Chimamanda Ngozie Adichie) and "Canale Mussolini" ("Mussolini Canal", 2010, Antonio Pennacchi) from a linguistic and formal writing point of view. A perspective that, in the same time, allows me to explain the social context in which the two authors lived. These first two literary works are, in a sense, interconnected and interwoven each other, meaning that they have elements in common, even though the authors are so geographically distant and with completely different cultural

backgrounds. Furthermore, the other two works of the scheme, the Middle age treatise and the African essay have elements in common and are interconnected each other as well. Both "couples" are, on their turn, interwoven each other: the second couple representing the "synthesis", the "sons" of the first "couple". But what links the four authors and four works so distant in time and place?

2. The Bantu Languages

This sub-branch of the Niger-Congo languages is composed by 250 main languages ("Ethnologue" counts 535 language), even though the border between language and dialect is still not clearly marked. The Bantu languages are spoken mainly in central and east Africa, and in all southern part of the continent.

Figure 1. map showing the diffusion and subdivision of the Niger-Congo languages in Africa. The area is divided into B(Bantu) and A to describe the extent of the Bantu subfamilies.

Sawili is considered the "lingua franca" of all the Niger-Congo languages, divided in two subbranches: Niger Congo A and Niger Congo B or Bantu languages.

3. Decolonizing the Mind: Politics of Language in African Literature

The first chapter of the Ngugi's collection of essays, *Decolonizing the mind: the politics of language in African Literature*, is titled as *The language of African Literature* and focusses on the general issue about the language to be used in writing African literature as novels, fiction, poems, theatre. What should be defined as "African" literature. Which language should be the "carrier" of the the African culture inside and outside the continent. English or local and national African languages? But this debate among the African intellectuals, scholars and academic people that involved the most representative writers of the continent, from Chinua Achebe, in Nigeria, to Ngugi wa Thiong'O in Kenia and the Sudanese Taban Lo Liyong ("On the abolition of the English Department") dates back to 1962. This wide discussion started soon after the independence from the colonialism of most African states, in connection with the rebuilding of their political and cultural identity. In the first conference about what should be defined African literature, "A conference between African writers of English expression", held in Makerere, Uganda, two different and contrasting positions emerged about the African literary language: Chinua Achebe's and Ngugi wa Thiong'O's ones. The first writer of the two stated that the use of local languages would have given birth to an "ethnic" literature not to a national one, because in each African state many languages and dialects were spoken. Chinua Achebe was for the use of NSE. Nigerian Standard English (a sort of "Africanized" English language) in the specific case of a Nigerian Literature, where tens of different languages and dialects were used.

On the other side, there was Ngugi Wa Thiong'O that started a struggle and a campaign, that is still on, among writers advocating the use of local and national language. "Language is a courier of a culture and of an environment" as Ngugi restated at the University of California conference titled "Moving the center" where he was invited as special guest in 2008. "If I don't know where I am I can't give anything in Literature", exalting also the importance of the role of "translation" from national African languages to English. Because literature deals with emotions, passions, only the mother tongue, the one that you heard from your mother when you were a newborn, can convey passions and emotions. According to Wa Thiong'O, English language for African people is a "superstructure" and it belongs to the rational sphere so it can't be used to express feeling and emotion in African literature. "We all should practice knowledge in our own language", as Ngugi argued in the mentioned conference. Among the Ngugi's twenty six literary works we find eight of them (novels, poems,

plays, satirical fables and short stories) written and composed in Gikuyu language, one of the seven Kenian languages, of the Bantu families, spoken by the Kikuyu tribe. In the first chapter of "Decolonizing the mind, The language of African Literature," wa Thiong'O deepens and explains his position about the use of African languages in national literature.

4. "De Vulgari Eloquentia": Its Connections to African Intellectuals

De Vulgari Eloquentia ("About Eloquence in the Vulgar") is the title of an essay by Dante Alighieri, written in 1303 at the end of Middle age when the vulgar Italian language started to spread in the Tuscany region of Italy. This middle age treatise was written in Latin and initially meant to consist of four books, but Dante abandoned it in the middle of the second. It was probably composed shortly after Dante went into exile in the Italian region of Romagna. The first book deals with the relationship between Latin and the vernacular Italian (which Italian language stemmed from) and the search for the "most illustrious" vernacular or local regional dialect in Italy among the fourteen varieties he had found in the different areas of Italy.

Figure 2. map showing the subdivision of the Middle age Vulgar Italian in local dialects spoken in different areas of the country

Dante wants to give to vernacular Italian language the same dignity that was only meant for Latin language. There are also political reasons in this assumption. At that time there was an internal struggles between the Papal power of Rome against the state-cities of the middle age. Latin was the language of the Papal state, of the Oppressor as English in

Africa was the language of the Colonizer. Dante's worst enemy was in fact the Pope Bonifacio VIII who always interfered in the Florence political struggle between the two local factions, Guelphi and Ghibellini, sometimes supporting one and sometime supporting the other factions.

Latin was the language of the aristocracy, of the ruling class while the vulgar Italian was of the emerging middle class, of the early bourgeoisie.

The opposition Latin/Vulgar, is also an opposition of social classes. Dante defines the Vulgar as the language that a baby learns from his nunny, differently from the "Grammar", term used to indicate "Latin", seen as something of unchangeable and considered an artificial product of the elites. Dante affirms the nobleness of the Vulgar language because it is the natural language, the first one to be pronounced. Just as Ngugi Wa Thiong'O affirmed in his essay, centuries after and in a geopolitical context completely different. There also then some important and curious analogies between Dante Alighieri and the African intellectuals about their common attitude towards their national languages. The linguistic relation Latin/Vulgar Italian as described by Dante in his treatise can be compared, in this context to English/NSE relation described by Chinua Achebe, while from a political point of view it is comparable to the relation English/African languages deconstructed by Ngugi Wa Thiong'O. "Language was not just a string of words. It had a suggestive power well beyond the immediate and lexical meaning. Our appreciation of the suggestive magical power of language was reinforced by the games we played with words through riddles, proverbs, transpositions of syllables, or through nonsensical but musically arranged words. [...] The language of our evening teach-ins, and the language of our immediate and wider community, and the language of our work in the fields were one"(excerpts from *Decolonizing the mind*, 1986, Ngugi Wa Thiong'O); "...la lingua volgare è quella che, senza bisogno di alcuna regola, si apprende imitando la nutrice [("...the vulgar language is the one which is apprehended without need of any rule but just imitating own nurse) ("De Vulgari Eloquentia, Book 1, 1303 Dante Alighieri)];..."

5. "Half of the Yellow Sun" and "Canale Mussolini": a Literary Comparison from a Linguistic Point of View

Half of the yellow sun by the Nigerian Adichie and *Canale Mussolini* ("Mussolini Canal") by the Italian writer Antonio Pennacchi are two novels published, respectively, in 2007 and 2010. Their plots, narrative structure and setting are completely different: the first is set during the Biafra civil war in the 70s and the events, narrated in third person, are developed through the personal perspective of the main character: Ugly, a Nigerian house boy, coming from the jungle to the city Nsukka; Odenigbo, a Nigerian university professor and important intellectual; his wife Olanna, a

university lecturer and daughter of a very rich Nigerian business man; Olanna's twin sister Kainene; Kainene's fiancée Richard, an English writer moved to Nigeria in search of inspiration. There is then a continuous shift of the point of view of the story between these main characters.

Canale Mussolini, instead, is set during the Fascist regime in Italy, from 1926 to the end of the second world war and it is the saga of a big family of peasants who has been relocated, by the dictator Benito Mussolini, from the Veneto, an Italian northern region, to central Italy, in an area of the country called "Maremma" in Tuscany and the area of "Agro Pontino" near Latina, a big city near Rome. Latina was entirely built by this colony of Venetian people and it is a very recent city. Maremma and Agro Pontino at that time were marsh areas, full of malaria and other infectious diseases. Mussolini relocated there, by big trains, thousands of Venetian poor families of peasants assigning them acres of lands for free in order to drain them and then to live on cultivating and growing those lands.

What connect these two novels each other and together to the discourse of Ngugi and Dante?

Both novelists, the Nigerian Adichie and the Italian Pennacchi, used the "vulgar" language, that is the language really spoken by the people, in a new and experimental way: as a coexistence or a mingling of the local languages (Igbo in *Half of the Yellow Sun* and Venetian language in *Canale Mussolini*) and the official literary languages (English and Italian), as it is reported in the below excerpts from dialogues of the two books, in the lists below.

Excerpts from dialogues of *Half of the Yellow Sun* novel (Igbo words in **bold** characters):

"...you've brought the houseboy. **I kptotago ya**"

"**Kedu afa gi?** What's your name?" Master asked, startling him.

"I'm going for a walk, to clear my head, **i nugo?**"

"Yes, **Ugwu**. Look here, **nee anya**"

"...pounding **akpu** in the mortar"

"**Née Anya**, this is all water"

...His heart hit his chest painfully. "**Nzogbo nzogbu, enymba..**"

"**Nwoke m**, are you sure..

"**Afa m bu Yomo**"

"**kedu?**" she asked - "I am well, **mah**"

Botanical and food words: **akpu, ube, ugu, okwuma, arigbe**.

Excerpts from dialogues of *Canale Mussolini* ("Mussolini Canal") novel (in **bold** the Venetian words. In brackets [()] the translation from Italian to English and from Venetian to Italian)

"**Zoghe**". Giocate" (Play)

"Potrei parlare **anca mi (anch'io)?**" (Could I talk too?)

"**Ma cossa xe sùssesso in questi tri ani, dove xe 'a diferenza** [(Ma cosa è successo in questi tre anni, dov'è la differenza?)] ("But what happened in these three years, where is the difference?)"

"Cossa votu?"[(Cosa vuoi?)(What do you want?)]

"Ago' copa' un cristian" [(ho accoppato un cristiano)(I have killed a man)]

their literary "Fathers"(Dante and Wa Thiong'O) in their research of a literary use of the most "illustrious" vulgar languages.

6. Conclusions

The use of local idioms as literary languages in both the novels is an interesting case study of comparative analysis. Either Adichie or Pennacchi used the local language only in the dialogues among their characters. The sentences uttered by characters are in a mingling of official and local language. The vernacular or national words are in the same sentence beside the English words. The local expression are, in fact, immediately followed or preceded by their correspondent sentence in the official language, to allow the reader to understand their meaning in real time. How if the same sentence would have been repeated two times: the first in dialect and the second in Italian or viceversa. In previous literary experiments of other novels, the vernacular words and expressions, used as literary language, were reported as translation in foot notes. This new way of using local languages in novels allows to contaminate the official literary language and, in the same time, to make the reader understand in a complete natural way, as it was an only one language but with different varieties. Official languages are not a "superstructure" anymore but linguistic codes of the soul and the heart thanks to the contribution of the local language. Pennacchi and Adichie are dignitous "sons" of

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