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LINGUISTIC EXPERIMENTATION IN THE WIZARD OF LAW

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An examination of the creative use of Nigerian English Pidgin in Zulu Sofola's The Wizard of Law, the present essay argues that linguistic experimentation constitutes the most important mechanism for realising the comic impulse of the play. To overcome the problem of writing in a European language to address an African audience, African dramatists opt for different solutions. Some writers resort to translation. An edition of Kobina Sekyi's The Blinkards incorporates both the English and Fante versions of the play. Originally written in the former language, it was later translated into the latter for the benefit of his primary audience and in tune with its central theme of the primacy of the indigenous. In 1984, Ngugi wa Thiong'o took a fundamental decision that henceforth he would conduct his creative writing in Kikuyu, his mother tongue, and translate the works later into English for his international audience. Other writers settle for an African variety of the European language adopted by their respective countries as a lingua franca. They domesticate the European language by infusing into it indigenous apophthegms, epigrams, idioms, metaphors, proverbs, riddles, and symbols. Zulu Sofola belongs in the last group. In The Wizard of Law she uses Pidgin, mixes and switches codes, and captures nuances and the typical speech rhythm of half-literate Yoruba users of English. The linguistic hybridisation which works on lexical, morphological, phonetic/phonological, semantic and syntactic levels is highly successful. It accounts in large measure for the comic effects and the popularity of the play among Nigerian high school students who find the author's language easily accessible.

A farcical play that satirises the manipulation of language by lawyers to beguile their clients and opponents in legal cases and by traders to cheat and deceive their customers, *The Wizard of Law* provides abundant research material

for linguists on the complex cross-fertilisation that goes on between English and Yoruba. Most of the common grammatical errors made by Yoruba speakers of English become truly creative in Pidgin and make it so structurally different that it attains the status of a complete register. It is important to state that Sofola does not set out to mock at the incompetence of barely literate Yoruba handlers of English. Rather, she celebrates the creative potential of the second language situation, one of the ambiguous legacies of colonialism. Ambiguous, because it is partly salutary, considering its linguistic and literary possibilities, and partly deleterious because it alienates people from their own cultural environment, causes confusion, and constitutes a serious handicap to both learners and teachers.

The first impression that strikes a reader of the play is its heavy atmosphere of code-mixing. Most, if not all, Yoruba users of English – from school drop-outs to university professors – engage in this linguistic practice. For the semiliterate it is simply unavoidable, while for the intellectuals it is dictated by context. A university professor would not ordinarily mix registers in a classroom situation, but at home in the company of his children or friends, he reverts rather unconsciously to the practice. The language of the play, therefore, is in accord with its social setting. As defined by Paul Christophersen, "Pidgin is a language consisting mostly of English words, but with a grammatical structure all its own" (quoted in: Dillard 1975: 203). Nigerian Pidgin is a variety of West African Pidgin which, according to Bernard Mafeni, "runs the gamut all the way from true creole – as a mother tongue and home language – to what one might call 'minimal pidgin', the exiguous jargon often used between Europeans and their domestic servants" (quoted in: Spencer 1971: 96). There are many varieties of Nigerian Pidgin. Although they all have English as their base language, they have different substrates like Edo, Igbo, and Yoruba. Sofola incorporates elements from the three examples of substrates given above. Her ambiguous Edo and Igbo cultural heritage and her marriage to a Yoruba man account for her high level of competence in Nigerian Pidgin.

Ramoni, a professional lawyer who is passing through a difficult period financially, reflects on his misfortune in *The Wizard of Law* and complains thus: "Wives of men like me should be wearing lace, damask and sanya olomi golu, not ponki" (Sofola 1975: 3). He would probably have used golden for olomi golu and calico for ponki in a courtroom context. But conversing with his wife at home, he finds no compelling reason to use English vocabulary which in fact would sound awkward and ludicrous in the given context, as it does in a similar situation in Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel* (Soyinka 1963: 1-10). Lakunle's attempt in Soyinka's play to impress Sidi, a village belle whom he is wooing, with his idea of modernity and his mastery of English produces an incongruity that portrays him as a true comic character: a buffoon and a

clown. Since *olomi golu* and *ponki* are not italicised, they cannot be taken as vocal intrusions from Yoruba. Ramoni, therefore, can be said to be using Pidgin. Highly educated speakers of Pidgin use fewer words from the substrate than do the illiterate or semiliterate.

Sikira, who married Ramoni under the grand illusion that the lawyer was rich, is not inclined to believe her husband's word of promise that he is about turning around their pecuniary circumstances. Her disbelief worries her husband a lot. She tells him: "Why should I believe you? You have no kobo in your pocket. (in mockery) Abi you want to buy the lesi, damasi and sanya olomi golu with the hairs under your arm?" (Sofola 1975: 3). Yoruba phonological rules govern the articulation of half-literate Yoruba users of Pidgin. The absence of consonant clusters in Yoruba compels Sikira to replace the consonant /k/ with the vowel /i/ and so damask becomes damasi. Again, it can be concluded from the nonitalicisation of lesi, damasi, and sanya olomi golu that Sikira, like her husband, uses Pidgin. However, the nominal items are plain interferences from Yoruba. In the initial or medial position the connective Abi means 'or', while in the final position it becomes the interrogative 'isn't it?'. The word is gradually finding its way into the Nigerian Pidgin lexicon. There is no English equivalent for sanya, a highly prized, thick, hand-woven beige fabric which, correctly spelt, should end in -n. The lexical item golu should have its vowel /o/ doubled. Although both husband and wife mix their codes, they achieve different degrees of success. Had Ramoni chosen to pronounce damask as though it were an indigenous Yoruba word, he would still have anglicised it a little by eliding the vowel /i/ in damasi or the stop consonant /k/ in damask. In placing her characters on different language levels that correspond to their individual educational status, Sofola is guided by the principle of verisimilitude. As highly educated as Ramoni claims to be, he still has not overcome the difficulty encountered by the Oyo Yoruba in articulating the English voiceless fricative /s/. According to the stage direction, he pronounces it as sh (Sofola 1975: 4). We know a couple of university professors from among the Oyo subethnic group who find the phonetic problem insoluble and confuse the two fricatives. Their academic colleagues often make jest of their linguistic handicap. It is commonplace greeting an Oyo Yoruba: "Omo Ibadan, ki ni so?" 'Child of Ibadan, what is the so (show)?'. The dialectal articulation of the palatoalveolar fricative /ʃ/ as the alveolar fricative /s/ by the Oyo Yoruba is the target of ridicule in the greeting. That Sofola highlights the speech mannerism of the subethnic group in a comedy that is set in Ibadan, the capital of Oyo State, is nothing extraordinary. What is remarkable about it is that the pronunciation problem, an identity marker, contributes to the comic realisation of the play as a burlesque piece of local colour writing.

The conversation between Ramoni and Rafiu in the latter's shop is riddled

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with code-mixing, code-switching, interferences, and other common features of English Pidgin, as used by the Yoruba and exemplified in the following discourse:

RAMONI: I never ate amala unless the elubo was made with yams from

your father's farm.

RAFIU: Tank, sah.

RAMONI: There was no man as honest and wise as he. He was an

Omoluabi.

RAFIU: (blushing a bit) Tank, sah. E se, sah.

RAMONI: And you look every inch like him. Just the way every seed of

beans resembles the other. And we used to call you 'Oriede'.

RAFIU: (grins blushingly) Ah sah! (Sofola 1975: 8).

There is no English equivalent for the Yoruba food amala, but yam flour could have been used to avoid the interference instanced by elubo. As defined in Dictionary of Modern Yoruba, Omoluabi is a 'gentleman' (Abraham 1958: 414). Its etymology points to the Bible (Genesis 6: 1-14; 7:1). The word is formed from the phrase omo ti Noah bi 'the child born to Noah'. The non-occurrence of the voiceless dental fricative θ and of consonant clusters in Yoruba explains why the articulation of *Thanks* begins with the alveolar plosive /t/ and why the word loses its plural inflection in Tank, respectively. The love of reduplication for emphasis accounts for Rafiu's translating "Tank, sah" into Yoruba: "E se, sah". The diminutive Oriede 'the head of a shrimp' is both contemptuous and jocose. Diminutives are ambiguously used in comedies as words of abuse and endearment. The shrimp's head metaphor is abusive, for it connotes that Rafiu is dangerous and troublesome: a trial of a trader. A shrimp eater must be extra careful so that the needle-like head does not get stuck in the throat. Similarly a potential buyer must be wary of being cheated by Rafiu. Trying desperately to make a sale, Rafiu pleads with Ramoni: "Sah, buy something from my hand now. I glad to get a big lawyer inside my shop today. Buy small from my hand, sah" (Sofola 1975: 9). Pidgin speakers often dispense with both auxiliary and main verbs and consequently end up using an adjective as a verb, as in the phrase I glad. Largely a transliteration, Rafiu's statement begins and ends with sah, a honorific term that portrays the cloth-seller as respectful. It is really a commercial gimmick, a disguised linguistic device to cozen the lawyer into buying a piece of cloth. Rafiu succeeds in fobbing off nine metres of velveteen lace on Ramoni. He craftily doubles the price, cheats the lawyer, and makes an excess profit of ninety naira. The cloth-seller, therefore, is not as innocuous and as respectful as he pretends to be. His obsequiousness, like Uncle Tom's, is actually a survival strategy. He adds sah to all his statements only to humour the lawyer, one of self-deluded professionals who pride themselves on being learned. It is amazing and ironic that the cloth-

seller, most probably a school drop-out, can use language so deviously that it beguiles and deceives a learned man. Life, as conceived of by Rafiu, is a game of deceit and he is out to play and win. He tells Ramoni: "Trade life is very hard, sah. Weder farming tabi trading at Gbagi shop. Trade life is hard. People always come for cheating. Nobody for trust" (Sofola 1975: 8). It is as if he was a clairvoyant who had foreknowledge of Ramoni's evil design to rip him off. What is of interest to us in the game of duplicity is the dissembling role played by language. Ultimately, the lawyer outwits the trader in the law court. He counsels his client Akpan, Rafiu's goat-keeper who is charged for stealing the goats under his care, to feign that he is a goat and bleat in reply to all questions put to him in court. The strategy works. Akpan and Rafiu are ordered by the trial judge to be sent to an asylum. The former for answering gbe e to all questions and the latter for his mental confusion which is reflected in his disordered and incomprehensible statements in the courtroom. Akpan explores the highly onomatopoeic nonce-word gbe e to his advantage. Asked by his defence lawyer to pay his legal fee after the case has been dismissed, Akpan simply bleats gbe e like a goat to which the oppressive capitalist system has reduced him. His is the final victory in the war of wits. The learned lawyer is gulled with the same linguistic tool supplied by him! The irony cannot but produce a belly-laugh in the theatre (Sofola 1975: 37-41).

Another important feature of Pidgin is phoneme approximation or phoneme substitution. In fefeteen 'velveteen' the labiodental fricative /f/ is substituted for its weak form /v/ which is absent in the Yoruba language (Sofola 1975: 9). The approximation/substitution leads to the formation of the polymorphic word, with one part fefe derived from the substrate and the other teen from the base language. The absence of consonant clusters in the substrate accounts for the elision of the lateral /l/. The Pidgin word Na substitutes It is a in "Na, fine one, sah". The first comma is definitely a typographical error. Pidgin incorporates into itself Nigerian slang words and expressions like cash madam 'a rich lady' and chop plenty money 'misappropriates public funds' (Sofola 1975: 9, 12). In its ideal form there is no gender inflection and am serves effectively for both male and female, as in "Eh, go catch am" (Sofola 1975: 13).

There is an element of inconsistency of style in the play. Rafiu uses Pidgin in the second scene and a learned English style in the third. He achieves in the third scene, that is, the dunning episode, different levels of style, as shown in the following two statements made within a space of just one minute:

RAFIU: It's a lie. He was at my shop just now and he buy velveteen lace for N180.

RAFIU: Talk sense, madam. That man just bought nine metres of velveteen lace from my shop (Sofola 1975: 16-17).

Addressed to Sikira, the two statements, especially the second which is simply impeccable, are closer to English than to Pidgin. The confusion of tense, or the absence of a subject-verb inflection, is the only element that is characteristic of Pidgin in the first. Considering its grammatical structure, the second is Educated Nigerian English. The question then arises: why does Rafiu change from one register to another in so short a time? A facile explanation would be that the transformation evidences a failure of craft on the part of the playwright. Rationally apprehended, however, the change reflects Rafiu's mental confusion which is carried even into the courtroom and for which he is ordered to be taken to an asylum. Another explanation could be that the cloth-dealer wants to make the lawyer's wife recognize that he is educated and, therefore, should be treated with some respect. In other words, his style in the dunning episode is proof or a measure of his intelligence. But, since he is not as educated as he pretends to be, he commits a terrible grammatical mistake in the first statement. Sikira tries to hoodwink Rafiu into believing that somebody impersonated her husband to cheat him and that the cloth-dealer is dotty for having come to the wrong place to ask for his money. Pedantic and exuding an air of superior wordly wisdom, she educates Rafiu: "It is so, my boy. There are now many such rogues in town. However, go back to your shop and search everywhere again because you might have put the nine metres somewhere in your shop and forgot where you put it. Look under and inside every corner" (Sofola 1975: 18). Rafiu's statement to which Sikira has responded further reinforces the third proposition. It goes as follows: "Madam, I am very serious. Somebody like your husband came to my shop this evening and bought nine metres of velveteen lace for N180. He said his name was Ramoni Alao, and lives at this address. He was my father's friend and knew me very well. I believed him and sold him the cloth" (Sofola 1975: 17).

If Rafiu is capable of employing such an educated style, it follows logically that the use of Pidgin in his banter with Ramoni in the second scene is not indicative of his limitation in English. It is rather a matter of choice. He toadies to Ramoni and uses a low form of Pidgin in order to gain the lawyer's confidence and have an opportunity to fleece him of his money. A negation of our second proposition, Wole Soyinka's argument that the high English style used by illiterate or semiliterate characters in his plays is not by any means incongruent with their lack, or low level, of formal Western education provides another solution to the problem. He declares that "... when we borrow an alien language to sculpt or paint in, we must begin by co-opting the entire properties in our matrix of thought and expression" (Soyinka 1988: 107). What can be inferred from Soyinka's declaration is that Rafiu occasionally handles English as competently as he would have handled his mother tongue. The implication

is that on such occasions Sofola performs no more than the office of a translator. On the whole, the second explanation seems to be the most plausible. The confusion of registers is a reflection of Rafiu's psychological disorientation which is caused partly by his mounting anger, partly by colonialism or Western education, however exiguous, and partly by Ramoni's mind-boggling intrigue.

While Rafiu and Sikira, both of little formal education, test their competence in English in the dunning scene, the highly educated Ramoni not only reverts to Pidgin but even switches over to Yoruba:

RAMONI: (groaning in the bedroom with pain) Au ... yeh ... yeh ... mo kuo (Sofola 1975: 16).

The mother tongue is used to express a deep-felt joy or pain that rids humanity of its disguises. It is the easiest and most natural language. Using a second language could be likened to wearing a mask or pretending to be learned. There is something artificial about it. The statement mo ku o 'I die' is a lie, for death is not a process but a state. The dead cannot talk. Hyperbolic and metaphoric, the utterance is symptomatic of an excruciating pain and the fear of death. It is a cry for help. Pain, though feigned, makes Ramoni lose his linguistic controls and forces him to speak in an unaffected manner. In a similar vein, Rafiu gets worked up at seeing Akpan who, he claims, has stolen his goats and greets him with a torrent of abuse in Yoruba.

RAFIU: Ole! Olosi! Agbaya! Olori buruku! 'Thief! Wretch! Miserable man! Born-loser!' (Sofola 1975: 24).

By feigning madness and epilepsy and with the active collaboration of his wife, Ramoni is able to diddle and get rid of his creditor. As Rafiu walks away, despondent and reconciled to the loss, he, according to the stage direction, curses and grumbles in the vernacular, then ends in English (Sofola 1975: 22). To be effective, the curses have to be rendered in the language in which the speaker is most articulate and competent. Otherwise, the words would not be charged with the power of magic. Besides, the mystique of the mother tongue easily recommends it as the most potent language to curse in. The variation of language is expressive of Rafiu's change of mood and reflective of his confused state of mind, a consequence of the vicious trick played on him by Ramoni.

Expressing his regret for marrying Ramoni, Sikira becomes increasingly passionate and ends a fairly long speech begun in English mixing her codes:

SIKIRA: (talking to the audience) A foolish man! Wizard of lawyers! (spits in derision and sighs) That was how he talked big twenty years ago when he came to marry me. I thought he had something so I agreed to be his wife ... That alakori! I could have

been the wife of a big man today. I could have been riding in big shiny cars today. I could have been eating moinmoin elemi meje, nba ma miliki, nba ma jaiye ori mi. But now look, buba jatijati for odun ileya. (sighs again, then spits at the absent RAMONI) (Sofola 1975: 4-5).

As the woman becomes more wistful, perhaps in remembrance of other suitors who could have made a better husband than Ramoni, she gets more emotionally charged until she loses control of her register, succumbs to the force of instinct, and ejaculates her deepest cravings. She calls her husband alakori 'a good-for-nothing person' because he has failed to supply her with material comforts that would have enabled her to live like a true sybarite. The reality of her present abject state is too painful and the possibility of wearing buba jatijati 'a ragged blouse' during the impending odun ileya 'the Moslem celebrations marked by ram-slaughtering' is too egregious a disgrace to be borne with equanimity. Derived from the English word milk, miliki is a Yoruba slang word for enjoyment or a life of luxury. Dictated by the non-occurrence of consonant clusters in Yoruba, its spelling has a touch of poetry that is absent in the woman's life. Thanks to Chief Ebenezer Obey, a popular Yoruba musician who labelled his brand of juju music and a series of record albums miliki, the word has entered into the Nigerian Pidgin lexicon and gained currency. Juju musicians entertain people at lavish social parties during which they are literally "sprayed" with money by celebrants and guests. Sometimes whole avenues are closed to create space for such parties which should be properly perceived as communal festivals. Sikira's passion for new clothes and a life of luxury induces Ramoni to swindle the velveteen lace out of Rafiu. Her complaint that Ramoni made her "tell a lie" to Rafiu exposes her as a deceptive and facetious character whose materialistic tendency jars harshly against her moralist posture (Sofola 1975: 19). The condition of cultural ambivalence imposed on her by the neocolonial character of the Nigerian society comes forcefully to the fore and is reflected in the objects of pleasure for which she longs: "big shiny cars" and "moinmoin", a Yoruba delicacy made by grinding wet beans and adding all sorts of condiments before cooking the stuff wrapped in clean leaves or aluminium foil, or measured into small cake-pans. The qualifier elemi meje 'with seven souls' signifies the degree of richness of the kind of "moinmoin" preferred by Sikira the epicurean. Code-mixing mirrors the lack of correspondence between her desires and her realities. There is a connection between the rule of passion and speech performance in the play. The characters mix or switch their codes when they get excessively excited and passionate.

The Yoruba are fond of ending utterances with an empty o. There is no utterance – be it an affirmative or an interrogative – to which the single-letter

word cannot be appended. Sometimes it is used for emphasis, as in mo ku o 'I die o'. Ramoni warns Sikira: "I will beat you-o" (Sofola 1975: 25). One of the African survivals in the Caribbean, the empty o features prominently in the Jamaican Creole used by V.S. Reid in New Day as does reduplication of words for emphasis in the novel.

On average, Akpan makes best use of Pidgin in the play, not because in nivaquin, crazy, and catch he articulates correctly the fricatives /v/ and /z/ and the affricate /tʃ/, English phonemes that are impossibilities for uneducated Yoruba users of Pidgin, but because his statements contain many features of Nigerian Pidgin and are the closest to the register (Sofola 1975: 28). Consider, for example, the omission of the conjunction and in come say and the use of wey 'that is' in something wey serious, of nobi 'is not' in Abi dis nobi Ayeye? 'Or is this not Ayeye?' and of im for 'his' in im goat (Sofola 1975: 26). He is also the most consistent speaker of the language in the play. He neither draws too close to Standard English, as do Rafiu and Sikira, nor veers off to Yoruba, as does Ramoni. Moreover, he exemplifies at least two varieties of Nigerian Pidgin, viz. those with Igbo and Yoruba substrates. Compared with Rafiu's, his dialogue with Sikira is a superb exemplification of performance in Pidgin. Take, for instance, his answer to the woman's question:

AKPAN: Yes, madam. Na lawyer Ramoni Alao I de look for. My friend tell me say 'e live for this house. Abi dis nobi Ayeye? (Sofola 1975: 26).

If that retort is too curt, consider his brief to the lawyer:

AKPAN: Na goat, sah. The man say I steal 'im goat. To God, I no steal 'im goat. Na rainy season. Rain come fall so plenty goat come sick. I tell my oga say goat deh sick; he say make I give goat nivaquin. I come ask am say how I give goat nivaquin when malaria no deh catch goat. He say make i go hang. So I say I no go die for crazy man im goat. So I go leff 'im goat so five of them come die (Sofola 1975: 28).

Akpan's competence in Pidgin is definitely greater than that of Rafiu, his oga 'master'. His high degree of versatility with the language is really not surprising, for Pidgin is used more by the ethnic groups in the south-eastern part of Nigeria from where he comes than by the Yoruba in the south-west, even though it incorporates more elements from Yoruba than from any other Nigerian language. According to Mafeni, "Nigerian Pidgin is essentially a product of the process of urbanisation. While its origins lie historically in the early contacts between Europeans and Africans on the coast, its development and

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spread is the result of contacts between Africans" (quoted in: Spencer 1971: 98). Ibadan, the setting of the play, one of the largest cities in West Africa, benefits from the phenomenon of internal migration in Nigeria. A neutral child of colonialism, Pidgin proves to be the most politically expedient language of communication between the lumpen migrants and the host tribe or racial group. Ramoni's competence is the lowest. He just does not get it right. His attempts to use the language often produce awkward, ear-jarring effects, as in the following sentence: "For such a case of deliberate and premeditation burglary, the normal fee is N500 but I shall be consideration and leniency with you and charge you N300" (Sofola 1975: 31). The problem is not that Ramoni, a fake lawyer, calls a case of misappropriation a burglary. Rather, it is that his "broken English" is artificial and stilted. Pidgin is too complex a register to be reduced to using nouns as adjectives. The farcical effect produced by the malapropisms, however, is powerful.

By and large, Sofola succeeds in experimenting on the possibility of producing literary works in Pidgin. She exemplifies, through the characters in the play, different levels of competence and varieties of the language. Her achievement lies not just in the recourse to Pidgin but in exposing the treacherous deployment of words by lawyers and traders alike. The language in which creative writing is executed matters a lot, especially in a multilingual neo-colonial society like Nigeria. More important, however, is the purpose that the language is made to serve. Much of the farcical effect and laughter in The Wizard of Law is produced, not by perversions, but by distortions of language. "Distortions" is used, not in a derogatory sense, but in terms of a literary or dramaturgic device. There is nothing to be ashamed of in the use of Pidgin. It is a register in its own right and works for its users as a medium of communication. It is probably the most effective language of commerce and unity in Nigeria. Accepted across the country, it is used by radio and television stations for advertisement, announcement, and news broadcast. Educated Nigerians need to develop a positive attitude towards the language. School authorities should stop treating it with contempt and allow students to use it outside of the classroom. The government should encourage linguists to research more into the language and fashion an orthography for it. As more Nigerians employ it in their daily intercourse, it will grow and most of the current pronunciation and graphological differences shall be eliminated, paving way for the emergence of its standard form. Nigerian writers' exploration of the creative potentials of Pidgin should continue, for it is bound to quicken the realisation of the objective of standardising the register. Sofola's example is worthy of critics' attention and commendation.

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