

Multilingual Situations in Femi Osofisan's Plays: A Perspective

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Abstract

This article examines the English language as the dominant language in Femi Osofisan's plays and its various linguistic manifestations vis a vis the Nigerian indigenous languages. It presents the multilingual nature of Osofisan's plays as copiously shown in the language used by his characters to depict the influence of English on the Nigerian languages, and also to reflect the linguistic diversities in Nigeria. It also discusses, with copious references, Osofisan's resort to the use of Standard English, regional varieties of English and the Nigerian varieties of English to make his plays accessible to a wide audience without compromising standard and intelligibility.

Keywords: Femi Osofisan, Drama, Language, Multilingualism, Linguistics.

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Introduction

Nigeria is a heterogeneous and multilingual nation with over 500 languages and dialects spoken across the country. The English language is the official language, while Yoruba, Hausa, and Igbo are the dominant indigenous languages. In order to enhance the growth and development of these indigenous languages along with the English Language, the *National Policy on Education* (2004) makes it mandatory that the medium of instruction in the primary school shall be the language of the immediate environment for the first three years while the English language will be used both as a school subject and as the language of instruction from the fourth year.

Even at the secondary school level, the students are to offer one of the indigenous languages as a compulsory subject at the school certificate level. Besides, French is listed as the second official language in Nigeria. Consequently, the document says it shall be mandatory in Primary and Junior Secondary Schools and as a Non-Vocational Elective at the Senior Secondary School (4).

The Nigerian drama reflects this multifaceted linguistic and ethnic structure very copiously. This is in tandem with the observation made by Ogundesi (2004) that “it is in drama more than in other literary forms, that the complexity of the Nigerian multilingual situation is best appreciated because of its mimetic form.” (670)

Adegbite (2010) has shown that the earliest works by Tomori, 1967, Adesanoye, 1968, Adeniran, 1969, Afolayan, 1973, Banjo, 1977 and Goke-Pariola, 1987 were concerned majorly with the negative interferences of English language on the indigenous Nigerian languages, while Achebe, 1975, Bambose, 1995, 2004 focused on issues of domestication, *nativization* or indigenization of English. Recent studies by Bambose, 1995, Ikotun, 1999 and others are primarily preoccupied with the influence of English on the indigenous languages, which addresses issues of code-mixing, code-switching, standard English versus non-standard English, pidgin English etc., which form the nucleus of this article.

The Use of Standard English

The use of Standard English in Osofisan's drama is restricted to characters of high socio-economic and educational background. And naturally, it is expected that such characters will speak the Standard and impeccable English language to justify their delineation by the artist.

In *The Oriki of a Grasshopper* (1986), Cladius and Imaro speak Standard English and that is because of their level of education. The language of Imaro and Cladius in the following statements is very captivating and highly elevating as they express their past experiences in clear and powerful imagery:

Imaro: And they continue to sell our people. Once it was for mirrors, for cheap jewelry, for cowries. The rich men raided the poor, captured them, and sold them off to the slave ships. Then came the age of palm oil, of cocoa, timber and of cotton. The rich men made their slaves work on their plantations, carting off the products of their labour into the white ships. Always into the white ships. Then came the age of mineral ore, of tin, marble, and gold dust. And the rich now have policemen. They have soldiers, with numbers and uniforms. They make their numerous Luckys go down into the mines and bring out the ore. And then straight into the white ships. Always, always into the white ships. Into the insatiable white ships. While they send us their second-rate experts, their second-rate machines, their mind-destroying music, their corrupting culture, their consoling bible. (19-20).

Claudius: It's all a game, a riddle, and it has a formula. Every contractor knows it. Poverty is like that, it has fenced our lives round with so many riddles of deceit. And you cannot advance past them without the right response. But it's not hard to learn... (33)

Apart from Imaro and Cladius, Governor Carter-Ross and Capt. Allan Jones in *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (1999) also speaks British English. The conversation between Allan Jones and the

Governor is an example.

Jones: She came to me for refuge. At the beginning that's all it was. A terrified woman, trying to affirm her independence against an unreasonable tradition. They were going to have her fingers burnt out, as they treat witches. So she ran to me, and when I listened to her, I decided to offer her our protection. I helped her to build her workshop and got some tools for her from Lagos. And, then I began to see the products of her work.

Governor: I am an old warrior. I grew up in an age when certain things were taken for granted. We did not need to write the rules down, everybody knew what you had to do, and the options were simple. You came with the gun in one hand, and the whip in the other. You barked out orders, and you punished, summarily. You knew you were right, because you were white, and you believed in the cross and in the Empire. You hammered the Union Jack down their throats, and made them sing "God save the Queen"! For if you didn't do that, they would quickly resort to barbarism, to cannibalism, to living like apes. That's why we have endured to stay here, in spite of the heavy toll we pay, we ourselves, in human lives! Against the fearsome fevers, the murderous dysentery, the foul and fetid air!... (130-131)

The speech of the Governor, an English man, contains very elevating imagery that suggests the future collapse of oppression and neo-colonialism. In this grand fashion, Osofisan arrests the attention of his audience and causes them to stay on in the theatre through his profound use of the Standard English variety.

The Use of Indigenous Languages

No doubt, Osofisan's plays are replete with African and Yoruba imagery, proverbs, maxims, axioms, incantations, and riddles. Some examples from *Yungba-Yungba and the Dance Contest* lend credence to the observation above:

- Aperin: As Yeye herself will tell you, my daughters, Igbin, the snail, has no horns. No, it did not even have the good fortune to be at home on the day the lord of creation was going round, distributing teeth to others to protect themselves. But still, my daughter, the snail knows what it must do to survive in a land full of skilful hunters and hungry men. (38).
- Iyerin: A snake has many colours, but how many heads, Aro? Just one! And when the head is severed? So, Aro, why are you our channel in Osugbo? (62)
- Akosin: Not at all! For the crab, as they say, may not have much to project itself. But it has its eyes, and has put them where it believes they will be most effective-on its forehead! (89)

Similar examples are also in *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1997):

- Ba Nonhun: True, the child boasts of fine clothes, more numerous than his father's. But suppose it is rags that are needed? How many can he count? (18)
- KANS: Greetings my friends! When you see the elephant, do not say, ah, I felt a whiff of wind! The king of the forest takes the forest itself along, whenever he travels! (39)
- Bale: It's too late for that! When you drop something in the communal pot say it is a spice you must prove it by first licking the stew! (50)

In *A Restless Run of Locusts* (1975), the speech made by the elders who are sent by Kabiyesi to Sanda is full of Yoruba proverbs and idioms:

- 1st Elder: That's enough! You're not in a classroom castigating school children. You're before your elders and you have climbed your tree past the highest leaf. Beware; you are on the edge of tumbling down. The bird which flew too

close to the sun got himself burnt. You throw stones at the throne. Have you a place to hide when it starts throwing curses back? (29)

In the confrontation between Alaafin Abiodun and Latoye in *The Chattering and the Song* (1976), there are exchanges of incantations and display of magical charms and spells. These incantations contain proverbs and axioms:

Abiodun: Shall the scorpion sting, and claim youth as an excuse?
He wants to die, let him!

Latoye: Look at my muscles ripple with life. The blood pulses in them like chattering birds. But your time is up. The death that is coming is for you. Yes! Because the earth, fouled with your contagion, cries for cleansing! Your fat buttocks are the rotten weight of plague choking the neck of the nation and your smirking lips are full of the breath of germs and contamination... Nonsense! When the wind changes direction, all the branches bend with it! Ha! Ha! Alafin, you forget, I am the whetstone on which many of your men sharpened their swords of valour... The sapling which tries to halt the passage of the elephant will be plucked from its roots! Whenever the storm starts on a journey, not all the branches in the forest can bar its way! If the hill will not yield to the flow of the river, it will have its bosom furrowed! And now I say wind! And I am wind! I say river! I say elephant! Let all your forces melt before me! Freeze!
(The guards freeze.)

Abiodun: Ah! The toad puffs its belly, and boasts of growing fatter!
Will self-deception hide the festering sore in Edun's arse?
Latoye, you bushrat, you have challenged the king of the forests to combat, now watch the lion gobble his prey!

Alafin: Animals! Spiteful rodents! You talk of the king's demanding, but will the leopard feed on grass? You complain of toiling, but when the land withers in a season

of white spots, and Obaluwaye thirsts for blood, whose voice will pronounce the message, whose hand wield the knife that will spill the vital fluid? Answer me! When the season insists that Bata drums be unleashed like hunting dogs, and Sango roams the land with his double-headed axe, whose body will revive the ancient dance to calm the fiery eyes, stay the menace of thunder? Answer! When the new moon summons into chorus the sixteen voices of Igbin, and the earth lays open for its ritual of cleansing, tell me, who will chant Orisanla's sacred incantation? (39-44).

Also, Aafaa in *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980) teaches the robbers the following incantations that will help them to rob people successfully. The verse rendered in Yoruba presents:

Omo Enire
Omo Enire
Omo enikan aka bi agbon
Ifa ka rele o
Ewi nle Ado
Orisa ni Deta
Erinmi lode Owo
If ka rele o
Gbolajoko, omo Okinkin
Tii merin fon
Ifa ka rele o
Omo opolopo imo
Titi tu jijia wodo
Omo asese yo ogomo
Tii fun nigin nigin
Omo ejio meji
Tii sare ganranganran lori irawe
Omo ina joko mo jeeluju
Ifa ka rele o. (22)

The above Yoruba text translated into English is in the glossary of the play and reads:

Son of Enire
Son of Enire
Of those who strike sudden and sharp
Ifa, we invite you home!
Ewi of Ado
Orisa of Deta
Erinmi of Owo
Ifa, we beckon you here!
Gbolajoko, who seats wealth
On sedate throne,
Offspring of elephant
With ivory trumpets
Ifa, hearken to our call!
Source of grateful palm fronds
Which dance and hum by the river
Ifa, we invite you home!
Shoot of tender palm fronds
So fresh and frail and young
Offspring of two snakes
Which slide so fast on trees
Offspring of bush fire
Which spares the Oorun branches
You offspring of bush fire
Which skirts the heart of forest
Ifa, hearken to our call! (78-79)

These incantations contain some African mythical metaphors and names of some Yoruba legendary figures. The incantations also comprise certain Yoruba and African perceptions that echo the concepts of origins or creation allegories. Such mythical concepts remain limited to persons embedded in Yoruba culture and tradition.

The use of Pidgin English

Another Nigerian variety of English that Osofisan uses is Pidgin or Creolised English, which is often spoken most especially by the characters who are from the lower classes of the society. Such are messengers, house-boys, servants, and housemaids. The thugs of Chief Kuti, a political opponent of Sanda in *A Restless Run of Locusts* (1975) use the Pidgin English as a demonstration of their brutal and violent inclinations:

1st Thug; All done, Chief
Chief Kuti: You got him?
1st Thug: Sure!
2nd Thug: Him an' three other bastards
1st Thug; Yes, And his brother too
Chief Kuti: You mean, Sanda?
1st Thug: Yes, Sah! An' the house too, we finish am.
Chief Kuti; Sure there was no mistake?
1st Thug: No worry, ogah. We sabi our job well. See?
2nd Thug: We break the house so-tay people go say na tief
1st Thug: Only thing be say we no find money. (12)

Pidgin is also used by the soldiers in *Tegonni: An African Antigone* (1999) to comment on the arrest and detention of Tegonni and her friends on the order of the Governor. They also use the language to express their frustration and disillusionment with the military profession:

1st Sol: How now? You don watch woman tire?
3rd Sol: Shorrop your mouth?
2nd Sol: See? Solid! Even the Queen of England go want to die here?
3rd Sol: Go bring am quick, come shoot am! Idiot Soldier!
Queen of England indeed! She be rebel like de girls wey you tie up there?
2nd Sol: But wetin? Before-before, you no want talk to anybody. Now dat you open your mouth, na to curse person.

- 4th Sol: Wetin dey bite you self? Abi you swallow scorpion last night?
- 3rd Sol: Na your mama swallow scorpion. Plus cobra. And lizard.
- 1st Sol.: Abi you want marry one of de womans? Like the D.O.?
- 2nd Sol.: For where? Yeye person like him go fit find dowry to pay?
- 1st Sol: E no matter sha. By dis afternoon Gomina for don kill all of dem.
- 4th Sol. Womans! I no dey understand dem at all-at all! Too too strong head. Instead of dem to beg de Gov'nor! Do men put dem here, to watch de stake as we dey build am. He want do thing to frighten dem, for dem to begin to shake, but see.
- 3rd : You see! Na dis kind work a person wey get sense dey do? No self – respect at all. “Build stake!... Go kill dat one!... And dat odder one, arrest am!... Slap woman!... Bully small pickin!... Break him leg!” useless soldiers.
- 2nd Sol: Who tell you say, me too, I like am? But since na Antigone give us de role for dis play, wetin we go
- 3rd Sol: We fit refuse. Me I no want to be soldier again (Throws down his gun)
- 2nd Sol: (Doing the same). Me too, He don tire me too true-true!
- 1st Sol: (following suit). All of us don! Me too, I no want de role again. (71-73)
- Soldier 1: Well, I am tired of these last-minute orders. I can just picture the Sergeant calling his wife one day. Darring!...
- Soldier 2: Yessaaah!’
- Soldier 1: Darrring mi!’

Soldier 2: 'Yes, di' yah! I'm here'
Soldier 1: "How many pickin we get?
Soldier 2: 'Pardon?'"
Soldier 1: 'Picking, we pickin. How many we get now?'
Soldier 2: 'Hm, which kin' question be that? Why you dey axe me? You know say na two I born;
Soldier 1: 'Na this tax form here. E say tht if we get three children, we go qualify for rebate'.
Soldier 2: 'I no tell you before? You see yourself now!'
Soldier 1: 'Shrurrup! By this time tomorrow, you hear?
Soldier 2: 'Hen-hen?'
Soldier 1: 'By this time tomorrow, I order you to born anodder picking!' (43-44)

Polycap, the houseboy of the Chairman of the Local Government Council in *Who's Afraid of Solarin?* (1978) talks to Isola Orieko in the Pidgin English on why the Chairman and his Councillors are afraid of him:

Isola: But tell me, why do you think I can do it? Why are they afraid of me?
Polycap: Ah everybody here don hear of you sah, the way you dey manner all those people for Ibadan and Lagos! Nor to you be Mrs. Solarin, the Commissioner of Complaint.
Isola: Ah! How did you know?
Polycarp: We don see your anthem for radio. My pickens dey sing as sotay! 'For dis cornber, you dey there... for dat corner, you dey there!' Ah, Master, you no go die! You know, all dis morning, my Master and him friends, Councillor Abeni and Kaokudi, Chief Force is Force, the Dokita and the Judge, they meet and begin to halla because they hear say you dey come. Ha ha, they no know say you don arrive already! You too cunning sha! The Pastor too, he begin to shake because of the church money we lost last month. Ah sah, you too terrible. The fear

wey you give everybody! And all because they don hear say you no dey take bribery and corruption from nobody – ah, that remind me. Take care sah. They go try to bribe you. (49).

The use of the Pidgin English by Polycap provides humour in the text, and it also creates a contrast between the dialogue with Isola and other dialogues in the text that uses Standard English.

Bicycle, a hotel assistant in *Midnight Hotel* (1986) also speaks in the Pidgin English. His speech always enhances the comic essence of the play. For instance, when Bicycle appears in the foyer and discovers a chain broken by Suuru, he expresses his fear and uneasiness in the Pidgin English to Awero:

Bicycle: Whetin! No be de chair for room 6 I see so? Broken! Na who day break chair for dis place again since I commot? Small time now, dem go say na me broke am. I beg sah! Madam! I beg, make una no vex. Na chair I see for corriodor, and... and ... (23)

Also, Oge, Waje's assistant in *Another Raft* (1989) speaks the Pidgin English. Oge even blasphemes the gods in his reaction to the question posed by Lanusen: 'Oge: Why ask me sah? Why not ask Baba? Supposed your goddess Yemosa or wetin dem call am, supposing he wan' punish you for somet'ing" (23).

The Pidgin English is a Creolised English Language. There are many variants of the Pidgin English among the English-speaking West African nations. The Pidgin English variations in Nigeria are also complex. The table to follow below provides an approximation of parallel meaning to some common expressions in the Pidgin English and their equivalent meaning in the standard English language:

Pidgin	Standard English
We don see	We have seen
My pickens	My children
Dat	That
you don arrive	you have arrived
But wetin?	But what is it?
Yeye person	Useless person
Womans	Women
Tief	Thief
odder one	other one
another picken	another child

The Use of Code-Mixing

Apart from the use of the Creolised English language, Osofisan also does code-mixing in his texts. He frequently spices English with Yoruba, Hausa, Arabic, Igbo, French and Latin expressions. In the following examples, the English language and Yoruba expressions exemplify instances of code-mixing; where the underlined phrases are in Yoruba:

1. *Morountodun* (1983)

Mama Kayode: So hand it over at... yeee-pah! **Ori mi o!**
(63)

Mama Kayode: We have no electric and we sill drink **tanwiji** from the stream. (65).

2. *Another Raft* (1989)

Ekuroola: You too! **O ma se o!** What do they say? (27)

3. *Many Colours Make the Thunder-King* (1999)

Oya: Oya I'm your **Iyaale!** But my life is nothing but misery! (189)

Oya: Yeepah! **Eewo!** My husband! Your son, our son is gone! (226)

4. *The Chattering and the Song* (1976)

Sontri: Then Answer me! **Iwori Otura** (2)

Sontri: Ah never! **Didun nile Oloyin** (6)

Funlola: Affection intrudes, **abi?** (10)

5. *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980)

Alhaja: Lagbe jino o! Hot steaming corn! (47)

Alhaja: Slim, so slim they called her **opelenge** (52)

Robbers: **E ma jo-ooo!** Dance! (71)

6. *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle* (1995)

Baba Ibeji: That's right! **We-e-ere** (1)

Taye: My people! **Eyin eniyan me! Ore Gbogbo!** (77)

Citizen: Forgive us, **Ore wa.** (77).

The following examples show English mixed with Hausa

Expressions; where the underlined phrases are in Hausa:

1. *Altine's Wrath* (1986)

Alhaji: Ink pad! **Wallahi**, Mr. Jatau, you don't mean your wife, that she can't... (76)

Lawal: Come here will you! **Zo mana!** (76)

2. *Aringindin and the Nightwatchmen* (1992)

Gbadegesin: *Wallahi* And death is its accomplice! (5)

3. *Morountodun* (1983)

Alhaja: Ah **Allah**, what on earth could she have done? (19)

The Arabic language is next in the instances of mixed coding in Osofisan's work as the underlined words indicate.

Midnight Hotel (1986)

Asibong: I see. **Alhamidu lilai!** Darkness doesn't frighten me. (10)

Asibong: I see. Ah, **bissimilahi** (11)

1. *Morountodun* (1983)

Buraimoh: Hear that! **Allah-Akbar!** Where do you think you are? (50)

2. *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980)

Aafa: **Robi najini wahaali mimo yahamalum!... Walahu hairu hafizan, wauwa arihamu rohimin!** (11-12)

Alhaja: **Sallu ala anbiyyi Karim!** (12)

Aafa: **Sa ila lahu alayhi wasalam.** I see you have been able to pick up a few things from your lovers. (12)

Aafa: **Alhamidu lilai.** Your husband was it? (13)

Aafia: **Allah akbar!** Grey hair is not sold in the market. (14)

3. *The Engagement* (1997)

Elemude: The fact is, you see...**bissimilai!** (2)

Elemude: Ah my dear sir! My dear sir! I mean ... **bissimilai** (9).

Moreover, Osofisan also splices English with Igbo lexis and expressions. In *The Album of the Midnight Blackout* (1994), the underlined phrases in the following examples are Igbo expressions:

- Juokwu: When I saw you storming in like that,
Eziokwu!... I'm sure the story must be going
round the campus now. (8)
- Juokwu: You do! **Igbwekala!** (11)
- Juokwu: **Ihukwalam eshi-shi!** My God! (11)
- Chinwe: **Anwualam!** So Prof. knows!... It's true Sir,
I confess... (20)
- Iberibe: A marriage for the sake of bedsheets!
- Juokwu: **Eze eli-igwe**, my wife! She's awake (61)
- Iberibe: Play **neholokoto!** At this hour? (71)

It is in *Twingle-Twangle: A Twynning Tayle* (1995) that we find the mixture of English code with Latin phrases and expressions by the Professor, one of the suitors of Tinuade, the princess of Oba Elenon:

- Professor: Friends, Erekoans, gentlemen, **De gustibus non est disputandum!**... What you lay men vulgarly refer to as stew in fact, is more properly known in learned circles as **corchorus olitorius, Celosia Argentea**, or **Vernonia Amygdalana**. And it is particularly irresistible when accompanied by **orisa sativa**. You follow me? Its origin, a veritable **bello gallico**, is a mystery only to illiterates. **Cui bono?** You place a receptacle on an ignis, and add, **mutatis mutandi**. Some **aqua vitae**. This you quickly follow with a coalition of **allium cepa, citrullus vulgaris**, and **Zingiber officinale**, plus some **granum salis**. Then...
- Voices: (Shouting). The stew! Drink the stew!
- Professor: Patience, patience, **mes amis, Da, mihi locum standi, et mendum moveulos.**

In *Nkrumah-Ni... Africa-Ni!* (1999), we find the mixture of English code with French expressions:

- Toure: It's the Americans **mon President!**... We are going to reply in equal force!
- Andree: **Mais non, Tonton!**: Surely you can't support Sekou! (46)
- Toure: Andree and the kids! **Andree, et les gosses!** (108)

The Use of Restricted Code

The use of restricted codes like slang is also a feature of Osofisan's texts. The members of a particular group use such slang expressions. For instance, in *Once Upon Four Robbers* (1980), the robbers have certain registers that are peculiar to their members such as:

- Major: **Lamilami, Sir Love, De Niger Nigger**
(9)
- Hasan: **Ebiti** (9)
- Major: **Sago, Bente, Mada** (10)
- Soldier 3: For the **Baba Ke!** (45)

Also, there is a deliberate corruption of the English language especially in *Morountodun* (1983) where Mama Kayode says:

- Mama Kayode: **Shorrop! Concobility!** ... this dirty smoky, cob-infested **jagbajantis!**... Queen versus Baba Alabi, alais Titus, nineteen **gbongbonrongbon.** (62-63)

These underlined expressions are markers of illiteracy. "Shorrop" is a corruption of the English phrase "Shut up" while "concobility" is an abusive word that is often used by the uneducated people but which is non-existent in the English lexicon. "Jagbajantis" is a Yoruba equivalent of "nonsense" in English while "gbongbonrongbon" means infiniteness or endlessness.

Conclusion

Osofisan's resort to the use of regional varieties of the English language and the Nigerian varieties of Creolised English makes his plays accessible to a wider audience. Besides, the use and adaptations of such varieties give his plays some simplicity and therefore makes his drama relevant to the African public. Osofisan shuns and spurns the use of complex structures, bombastic expressions, exotic metaphors and esoteric concepts. Rather, he chooses to express himself in such a simple but coherent and elevated way that do not compromise intelligibility and comprehension. His style adds beauty and flavour to his drama and makes it a new model worthy of imitation and emulation by other African dramatists although he did not originate the approach to drama narrative style.

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