
Reviewing a Book and How It Relates to ‘Global’ English
Ngugi wa Thiong’o, *Wizard of the Crow*

New York: Pantheon / Random House, 2006, 768 pp.

Robert Phillipson (Copenhagen Business School, Denmark)
and Tove Skutnabb-Kangas (Åbo Akademi University, Vasa, Finland)

*Paving the ways of seeing and willing a moral universe
of freedom, equality, and social justice within and among
the nations of the earth is surely the special mission of art.
Art is dreams of freedom and creativity.*
Ngugi wa Thiong’o, 1998, 131.

Many authors from the former British empire produce a wonderful range of novels. One of the most distinguished writers is Ngugi of Kenya. He is exceptional in that after writing a handful of successful novels in English he switched to producing plays and novels in an African language, Gikuyu, so as to reach a very different audience. He has also written an impressive range of scholarly books, the most famous of which is *Decolonising the mind. The politics of language in African literature* (1981), updated in a series of lectures in Oxford, published as *Penpoints, gunpoints, and dreams. Towards a critical theory of the arts and the state in Africa* (1998). Ngugi’s latest book, *Wizard of the crow*, is a landmark in African and world literature, a novel written and published initially in Gikuyu, then translated by the author into English. It is a monumental, all-embracing work in the Tolstoyan tradition, satirical in the spirit of Cervantes, and Orwellian in its moral indignation and political commitment. The narrative also draws extensively on an African cosmology of wisdom, folklore, the grotesque and the fantastic: as one of the story’s narrators puts it, ‘In his tongue the real and the marvellous flowed out of each other’ (op.cit., p. 570).

The setting is a deeply corrupt African state, dominated by The Ruler, whose grandiose project is to build a contemporary Tower of Babel, the Marching to Heaven project, for which funding is needed from the Global Bank. The Ruler deifies himself, both in the sense of living up to absolutism’s ‘L’état, c’est moi’ and in that the building will enable him to hobnob

with his equal in heaven. He is surrounded by sycophantic, scheming people whose main preoccupation is graft and staying in power. There are plenty of utterly evil characters, who subject themselves to cosmetic surgery so that they can more effectively function as the ears and eyes of The Ruler. One who falls seriously ill is diagnosed as suffering from white-ache, the urge to be a white person, and later actually goes through limb transplants in order to achieve this.

Race, and the challenge of restoring dignity to Africans, is one of the recurrent themes of the novel, always packaged subtly so that the narrative never flags. The ruler’s ideas are implemented ruthlessly in the state media and education systems in ways that remind one of Zimbabwe, Libya, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan – alas, the list is endless, and some roots European (Stalinism, Kemalism, fascism). A beautiful instance of the book’s undercurrent of irony is that the study of the wise thoughts of the Ruler, and the need to have them mindlessly internalised, is termed parratology. Another that the new colonialism of corporations is termed corporonialism.

Ngugi doubtless draws inspiration from his own experience of corruption in Kenya (portrayed in *Petals of blood*, 1977) and being imprisoned by Kenyatta (leading to his autobiographical description in *Detained*, 1981). The novel is therefore in no way science fiction, a mere comic romp, or a gloomy dystopia. It is a subtle and complex allegory of the monstrous regimes that are in place in many parts of the world, with the representatives of the Global

Bank and the US Ambassador (and Europeans in a more subordinate role) as vital links in maintaining this sort of world 'order'. A sizeable chunk of the novel is set in New York, where the Ruler has gone to plead his case for funding, unsuccessfully. He falls ill with such unique symptoms that western medical research is flummoxed, and satirised, whereas it is only the wizard's sorcery that can influence him.

This grim scene of evil does not make for grim reading, because of a compelling, varied narrative style, and comic light relief as in Shakespeare's tragedies. The counterpoint to the ubiquitous evil is the younger generation, who have formed a movement for social change, with two main characters – male and female, yes, there is a delightful and profound interpersonal thrust too – who represent the potential for achieving a just social order. They are multi-faceted characters, of varied experience: the male hero has studied in India and is deeply influenced by Indian and Buddhist thought, the female hero is an astute political organizer with a clear mission to work for change in extremely difficult conditions. The central couple find themselves obliged to take on the role of a sorcerer, a wizard, a witch doctor who attempts to heal minds and bodies. This they carry off with great human insight and wisdom, and recourse to traditional herbal craft. Even the great and good, despite being so 'modern', and monopolising the country's resources, experience a need to consult the wizard, so that the young couple, on separate trajectories, get intimately involved in secrets of state, and in the intrigues of the Ruler and those who surround him.

Gender stereotypes are challenged, partly by showing that people of either gender can work for change (so as to combat men in power, who abuse that power at the expense of ordinary people), partly by males becoming humiliated victims of husband bashing.

The language is varied and rich. There are many resonances of the King James Bible, which tallies well with the extensive Christianisation of Africa. A minister addresses the Ruler: 'Ruler who art our father here on earth, the English who gave us civilisation,

freedom, ...' etc etc (p. 237) (colonial power was transferred to those who would maintain British imperial interests). There are also poetic uses of language, for instance to tone down a polemical point (by the female hero):

'violence against women bedevils many a home – rich, poor, white, black, religious. In the world today, a husband measures his maleness by mauling his wife. A wife swallows insults in surly silence instead of resisting the violation of her sacred self. A sacred self soon becomes a scared slave, leading to a scarred life' (pp. 429-430).

At other points the use of language is more playful, taking the sting out of a home truth about how the world's resources are exploited:

When it came to forests, indeed to any natural resource, the Abur-rian State and big American, European, and Japanese companies, in alliance with the local African, Indian, and Japanese rich, were all united by one slogan: *A loot-a continua*. (p. 201)

Occasional utterances are signposted as being in English, invariably connoting high prestige. The infrequent citations in Gikuyu add to the richness of the text.

* * * * *

Ngugi's book was written in an African language – for local consumption and enjoyment, drawing maximally on local cultural and linguistic norms. Along with his earlier plays and novels in Gikuyu and their translation into Swahili, Ngugi significantly demonstrates that 'world literature' does not presuppose use of a European language or one of the Asian languages with a millennial literary tradition. In the Kenyan context, the importance of using a local language, rather than an elite language with intrinsically foreign cultural baggage, is that the reading habit can be fostered at the grassroots. In addition, the polemic thrust of the novel represents a potential for furthering political change, for consciousness-raising as a practical instrument for decolonising minds.

To classify the novel as 'postcolonial' makes the point that such literature can be written in a language that is not the language of colonisation or present-day corporonialism. On the other hand, if the label 'postcolonial' is seen as a restrictive categorisation, it should not be used. Likewise, Amitav Ghosh refused to accept a prize in 'Commonwealth literature' for one of

his splendid novels precisely because he did not accept this designation. *Wizard of the Crow* is 'world' literature, dealing with universal themes in a context where the narrative and the characters epitomise global and local corruption in the age of corporate empire.

The translation of *Wizard of the Crow* into English, and a global elite readership, raises the issue of what type of 'English' the book is written in, or rather has been translated into. Is it the new English that Chinua Achebe pleaded for 30 years ago? And if so, is this different from the standard English of the core 'English-speaking countries'? Or does Ngugi write in Afro-Saxon English, to use the term used by Ali Mazrui to refer to African elites who are switching to English professionally and even in the home? Or is the language rather 'Global English'? And if so, is this 'English' what Departments of English Studies are, or should be, concerned with in the age of globalisation?

The past twenty years has produced a large body of analysis of varieties of English worldwide. Much of it accepts uncritically Kachru's tripartite division of English into Inner Circle, Outer Circle and Expanding Circle users, a classification that has outlived its utility, since it uses vague conceptual terms to cover a huge range of contexts, drawing on unspecified types of language competence, which lead to suspect or meaningless estimates of the number of people involved in each Circle. Bruthiaux (2003) has demonstrated that this framework ignores the sociolinguistic complexity within each circle, is linguistically unsophisticated, and muddies the distinction between native and non-native users: does it make any difference whether Ngugi's English is considered native or non-native? Manifestly not.

Much of the celebratory literature on 'global' English analyses it exclusively in instrumental terms. However, as a recent work on the semantics and culture embedded in the grammar and words of English stresses, publications on 'global English', 'international English', 'world English', 'standard English' and 'English as a lingua franca' neglect the distinctive heritage embedded in the language, in its core semantic and grammatical structures, and ultimately 'in

the present-day world it is Anglo English that remains the touchstone and guarantor of English-based global communication' (Wierzbicka 2006, pp. 13-14). This Polish-Australian scholar also refers to the ethnocentricity of many theorists from the Anglo-American world who mistakenly take Anglo English for the human norm (*ibid.*, p. 12). This is the colonial universe that Ngugi was socialised into but has made a complete break from. It is worth tracing some of its roots.

The marketing of 'world English' has been part of political discourse on both sides of the Atlantic for two centuries. Efforts to make it intellectually robust have been more spasmodic (see Phillipson *in press*). I. A. Richards, who combined appointments at Cambridge and Harvard (see the analysis of his key role in literary criticism in Britain and the US from 1920-1960 in Williams 1961, pp. 239-246), made a definite attempt to do so. His book *So much nearer. Essays toward a world English* (1968) provides a rationale for taking Basic English seriously as an international auxiliary language, and lays out a case for 'successors to Basic English' (*ibid.*, p. 241). When English is approached appropriately, its acquisition is not merely for 'wealth and prestige', but because 'new levels of mental capacity are induced ... the development of those concepts and sentiments: methodic, economic, moral, political, on which the continuance of man's venture depends. We of the West have somehow – out of a strangely unself-regardful, indeed a regardless impulse of benevolence – committed ourselves to universal education as well as to universal participation in government, nominal though this last can be' (*ibid.*, p. 240). Richards considered the study of English (primarily literature) as the ultimate qualification for global leadership. His book ends with the words:

There is an analogy between the conception of a world order and the design of a language which may serve man best. The choice of words for that language and the assignment of priorities among their duties can parallel the statesman's true tasks. And it is through what language can offer him that every man has to consider what should concern him most. If rightly ordered, and developed through a due sequence, the study of English can become truly a humane education. May not such a language justly be named "EVERY MAN'S ENGLISH"?

This is the Anglo-American civilising mission of the twentieth century, to ensure that all citizens of the world (presumably females were not deliberately excluded, even if they represented only 10% of the student body in Cambridge at that time) are not confined to English for merely instrumental purposes. Its users will also adopt worldviews that will make them understand that the West, out of sheer benevolence, has taken upon itself the right to decide how world affairs should be run.

Richards' text is uncannily like the neo-conservative agenda that was elaborated in the US in the 1990s, and implemented as soon as George W. Bush became president. 'Our' values are universal, and we reserve the right to enforce them globally by all available means. Literature takes over the role of religion in concealing the special interests of privileged classes or states, and the hegemony of speakers of privileged languages.

The subordination of humane values to political forces is explored in *Who paid the piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (Saunders 1999), which focuses on how the Americans influenced intellectuals and cultural elites in western Europe, through subsidies for conferences, publications (such as *Encounter*) and other activities. Many were co-opted. The key channel for these covert activities was CIA-funded foundations of dubious pedigree. Loyalty to the system meant that ends justified indefensible means, including lying: 'ethics were subject to politics' (ibid., p. 415). An insider in the murky universe of CIA 'intelligence' over several decades wrote in 1998 that there was an underlying:

devastating truth: the same people who read Dante and went to Yale and were educated in civic virtue recruited Nazis, manipulated the outcome of democratic elections, gave LSD to unwitting subjects, opened the mail of thousands of American citizens, overthrew governments, supported dictatorships, plotted assassinations, and engineered the Bay of Pigs disaster. 'In the name of what?' asked one critic. 'Not civic virtue, but empire.' (ibid.)

The chronic lying of George W. Bush and Tony Blair are not merely personal unethical failings. They are integral to the western political system, according to the conclusions of a recent study

of British foreign policy, which is subordinate to US policy (Curtis 2004): 1) the culture of lying and misleading the electorate is deeply embedded in British policy-making; 2) by contrast the secret record of official files is quite open about goals that differ markedly from what is made public. Foreign-policy making is so 'secretive, elitist and unaccountable that policy-makers know they can get away with almost anything'; 3) humanitarian concerns do not figure at all in the rationale behind British foreign policy.

The promotion of English worldwide has been central to the foreign policy of the UK and the US (Phillipson 1992). So the immediate question is whether university Departments of English are facilitating corporate empire while still peddling civic virtue. What do we understand by 'English' in our pedagogic universes in a rapidly globalising world, which is profoundly influenced by those who wield economic and finance capital (Harvey 2005) and military might (Pieterse 2004)?

In my view, 'global English' can be seen as a *product* (the code, the forms used in a geographically diverse community of users), as a *process* (the means by which uses of the language are being expanded, by agents activating the underlying structures, ideologies, and uses), or as a *project* (the normative goal of English becoming the default language of international communication and the dominant language of intranational communication in an increasing number of countries worldwide). The processes and project are dependent on use of the product, and on ideological commitment to the project.

There is a strong measure of wishful thinking in the projection of those who claim that English is 'the world's lingua franca', since maximally one-third of humanity have any competence in the language at all. Likewise, the notion that English is *the* language of science is contradicted by the fact that many other languages are used in higher education and research. But such discourse serves both to constitute and confirm English dominance and American empire, and the interlocking structures and ideologies that underpin 'global'

English and corporate interests. If European Union policy-makers do not act to strengthen European languages, 'global' English will continue to expand at their expense (Phillipson 2003).

Investing in the linguistic capital of English (to use Bourdieu's term, 1992) is a project that transcends national borders, with the product and processes privileging users of the language in the current world 'order'. Investing in other languages, which Ngugi is doing in a pioneering

way, represents the creation of linguistic and cultural capital that can challenge English linguistic hegemony. As a writer in exile, Ngugi's efforts have gone into theorising the case for social and cultural change, and practical work to support African languages (see Ngugi 2000). With *Wizard of the crow*, Ngugi has crystallised a lifetime of creative writing and political commitment into a benchmark of enlightened entertainment and wisdom. He is an obvious candidate for the first Nobel Prize to be awarded to an east African.

References

- Bourdieu, Pierre (1992). *Language and symbolic power*. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bruthiaux, Paul (2003). Squaring the circles: issues in modeling English worldwide. *International Journal of Applied Linguistics* 13/2, 159-178.
- Curtis, Mark (2004). *Unpeople: Britain's secret human rights abuses*. London: Vintage.
- Harvey, David (2005). *The new imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1997). *Petals of blood*. London: Heinemann.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981). *Detained*. London: Heinemann.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1981). *Decolonising the mind. The politics of language in African literature*. London: James Currey.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1998). *Penpoints, gunpoints, and dreams. Towards a critical theory of the arts and the state in Africa*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2006). *Wizard of the crow*. New York: Pantheon / Random House.
- Ngugi wa Thiong'o (2000). Writing for diversity. In *Rights to language. Equity, power, and education*, ed. Robert Phillipson. Mahwah, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum, 97-101.
- Phillipson, Robert (1992). *Linguistic imperialism*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Phillipson, Robert (2003). *English-only Europe? Challenging language policy*. London: Routledge.
- Phillipson, Robert (in press). The linguistic imperialism of neoliberal empire. *Critical Inquiry in Language Studies*, 5/1, 2008.
- Pieterse, Jan N. (2004). *Globalization or empire*. New York and London: Routledge.
- Richards, I. A. (1968). *So much nearer. Essays toward a world English*. New York: Harcourt, Brace & World.
- Saunders, Frances Stonor (1999). *Who paid the piper? The CIA and the Cultural Cold War*. London: Granta.
- Wierzbicka, Anna (2006). *English: meaning and culture*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Williams, Raymond (1961). *Culture and society 1780-1950*. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Editorial Note: For technical reasons, in setting up this article in PageMaker7 I was unable to place the correct diacritics on "Ngugi" and "Gikuyu".