

## Linguistic Counterpoint in Gbenga Agbenugba's *Another Lonely Londoner*\*

Daria Tunca, University of Liège, Belgium

**Abstract:** This essay examines Gbenga Agbenugba's *Another Lonely Londoner* (1991), a rarely discussed novel recounting the experiences of a young Nigerian man living in London. The narrative is written in an experimental style mixing English with Nigerian Pidgin, and including elements of Nigerian English, Black British English, Cockney, and Yoruba. By way of introduction, Agbenugba's work is briefly discussed in relation to the novel that inspired it, Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). An analysis is then undertaken of the interaction between English and Nigerian Pidgin in *Another Lonely Londoner*, both in dialogue and in narrative passages, with a view to assessing the impact of the combined use of these languages on possible literary interpretations of the novel. The other codes, varieties, and linguistic influences revealed in the book also receive systematic treatment, and it gradually appears that all these elements combine to produce a complex polyphonic work mirroring the main character's multifarious identity.

Nothing can contain me<sup>1</sup>

Singing a piece in counterpoint is a difficult exercise. The performers must intently follow the conductor's directions while keeping their eyes on a series of elaborately disseminated notes and bars; despite their concentration, they may at times fail to hear their own voices, take in all the mingling tunes, and be in turn absorbed into a polyphonic whirlpool. Let us now go beyond this brief sensory description, and imagine an attempt at transposing such a chorus of intertwined voices into language. The result of this endeavour could well be *Another Lonely Londoner* (1991), Gbenga Agbenugba's rarely discussed novel.<sup>2</sup>

Admittedly, the musical concept of polyphony has been widely applied to the field of literature, from Bakhtin's pioneering work to recent applications in the context of postcolonial studies. In Agbenugba's case, however, polyphony transcends the Bakhtinian paradigm according to which "a plurality of independent and unmerged voices and consciousnesses" may coexist in a single text.<sup>3</sup> Indeed, in *Another Lonely Londoner*, the multiplicity of voices

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<sup>1</sup> Diran Adebayo, *Some Kind of Black* (1996; London: Abacus, 1997): 1.

<sup>2</sup> Gbenga Agbenugba, *Another Lonely Londoner* (London: Ronu, 1991). Page references to this edition are in the main text.

<sup>3</sup> Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, ed. & tr. Caryl Emerson (*Problemy poetiki Dostoevskogo*, 1963; tr. Minneapolis & London: U of Minnesota P, 1984): 6.

seems to have been internalized by a multi-faceted, yet unique, narrator. This entanglement of speeches finds expression through constant linguistic shifts, resulting in the creation of an unconventional literary idiolect. This experimental style, I intend to demonstrate, acts as a crucial complement to the thematic developments found in the novel.

As the title of Agbenugba's book indicates, the narrative echoes Trinidadian Sam Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners*.<sup>4</sup> First of all, Selvon's influence can be felt strongly in terms of subject-matter, since both novels relate the day-to-day experiences of black immigrants who have settled in London in the hope of finding work, and more generally a better life. Even though Selvon's and Agbenugba's protagonists come from regions as distant as the Caribbean and Africa – Selvon's Moses and Galahad are of Trinidadian origin, while Akin, Agbenugba's central character, spent his childhood in Britain before returning to his parents' native Nigeria – both novels tackle the phenomenon of "colonization in reverse," as Louise Bennett put it,<sup>5</sup> in a somewhat tragicomic mode.

Thus the observation of Selvon's narrator is echoed by Agbenugba's: the West Indians "invading the country by the hundreds"<sup>6</sup> have given way to the "Nigerian Brothers and Sisters who invading London" (29).

Numerous as the thematic convergences may be, the most striking parallel between the two books is the originality of the language used. Selvon's novel develops, in narration as well as in dialogue, a fabricated idiom that mainly bears features of Trinidadian English and Trinidadian Creole,<sup>7</sup> alternating with Standard English (henceforth SE).<sup>8</sup> The linguistic code used by Agbenugba may be said to be even more daring than Selvon's, as it mixes not only SE and Nigerian Pidgin (henceforth NP), but also Nigerian English,<sup>9</sup> Black British English<sup>10</sup> and,

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<sup>4</sup> Samuel Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956; London: Longman, 1972).

<sup>5</sup> Louise Bennett, "Colonization in Reverse," *Jamaican Labrish* (Kingston: Sangster's, 1966): 179-80; repr. in *The Penguin Book of Caribbean Verse in English*, ed. Paula Burnett (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1986): 32-33.

<sup>6</sup> Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners*, 9.

<sup>7</sup> As is the case for other varieties of Creole and English in the Caribbean, these two languages are generally not regarded as watertight codes. Admittedly, the notion of a 'creole continuum' popularized by DeCamp and Bickerton has been widely denounced for its oversimplification; see John Holm, *Pidgins and Creoles*, vol. 1: *Theory and Structure* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1988): 52-60, for a brief historical overview of the reception of the concept. Nevertheless, it is still widely acknowledged that Caribbean creoles are currently in a process of decreolization, and that their various registers range from a 'basilect' to an 'acrolect' that approximates Caribbean English.

<sup>8</sup> For an analysis of the language used by Selvon in his fiction, including the novel *The Lonely Londoners*, see Clement H. Wyke, *Sam Selvon's Dialectal Style and Fictional Strategy* (Vancouver: U of British Columbia P, 1991).

<sup>9</sup> Unlike Caribbean Creoles in relation to varieties of Caribbean English, NP and Nigerian English are distinct languages. See Dagmar Deuber, *Nigerian Pidgin in Lagos: Language Contact, Variation and Change in an African Urban Setting* (London: Battlebridge, 2005).

<sup>10</sup> The common phrase 'Black British English' here refers to 'black London speech' (which has developed under the influence of Caribbean Creole), but I use the term with caution, not wishing to imply that there is an essentially 'black' speech. Moreover, I realize that, as Mark Sebba puts it, "Caribbean usages have spread

to a lesser extent, Cockney and Yoruba.

The authors' decision to depart from SE<sup>11</sup> and its many imperialistic connotations is, of course, not without significance. Both novelists have deliberately chosen to 'abrogate' SE and 'reappropriate' the language on their own terms<sup>12</sup> by incorporating elements of so-called 'dialects' and allegedly 'inferior' languages – when they are considered languages at all. The disparaging attitudes towards regional varieties of English, pidgins, and creoles signal that the writers' chosen media of expression do not simply consist of words inscribed on a blank page: these languages carry the burden of prejudices accumulated through the centuries.

In this regard, one of the objectives behind Selvon's and Agbenugba's respective uses of creole and pidgin may be the rehabilitation of 'vernaculars' that have long been stigmatized. NP, for example, still tends to be associated with ignorance, poverty, and a lack of education, even though scientific studies have consistently reported that its use has spread to all socio-economic groups in Nigeria.<sup>13</sup> NP is said to be the most widely spoken language in the country,<sup>14</sup> and it is used in radio programmes, television shows, newspapers, songs, and even creative writing.

Among the research that focuses on the presence of NP in literature, the most wide-ranging study seems to be that by Chantal Zabus, who, in her extensively documented analysis, argues that, since NP is not intelligible to the average speaker of English, the forms of pidgin found in most West African europhone novels only qualify as "pseudo-pidgin." Nigerian writers, she states, regularly "[retain] the 'feel' of NP but not its deep structure, possibly as a concession to a non-Pidgin audience."<sup>15</sup> The literary functions assigned to this "pseudo-pidgin" largely reflect the purposes fulfilled by its counterpart in reality. In line with the dismissive attitudes mentioned above, the language is often attributed to uneducated characters.<sup>16</sup> Nevertheless, NP is also assigned the more neutral role of lingua franca between protagonists of different ethnic backgrounds, especially in urban contexts, where it serves as a

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outwards beyond the Caribbean community itself, so that there are a number of expressions of Caribbean origin now in use in London both within and outside the black community"; Sebba, *London Jamaican: Language Systems in Interaction* (London & New York: Longman, 1993): 59.

<sup>11</sup> I am aware of the artificiality behind the theoretical notion of a 'standard'. SE here refers to the standard British English used in prescriptive grammars: i.e. the grammatical equivalent to Received Pronunciation.

<sup>12</sup> This terminology was used by Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989; London & New York: Routledge, 2002): 37-76.

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Rebecca N. Agheyisi, "Linguistic Implications of the Changing Role of Nigerian Pidgin English," *English World-Wide* 5.2 (1984): 212, and Nicholas G. Faraclas, *Nigerian Pidgin* (London & New York: Routledge, 1996): 2.

<sup>14</sup> Faraclas, *Nigerian Pidgin*, 1-2.

<sup>15</sup> Chantal Zabus, *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel* (Cross/Cultures 4; Amsterdam & Atlanta: Rodopi, 1991): 67 (2nd rev. ed. 2007, 73).

<sup>16</sup> Zabus, *The African Palimpsest*, 70 (2nd rev. ed. 2007, 77).

language of integration.<sup>17</sup> Moreover, it can act as an intra-ethnic medium of communication, in which case its utilization is, according to Zabus, motivated by "a panoply of human emotions and 'acts of identity' ranging from solidarity to small talk."<sup>18</sup>

Unlike many of the novelists examined by Zabus, Agbenugba does not restrict NP to occurrences in dialogue. Challenging established literary practices, as Selvon did with the use of Trinidadian English and Creole, Agbenugba recurrently (yet unsystematically) introduces a number of NP characteristics into narrative passages.<sup>19</sup> The rendering of NP in dialogue and the presence of features of the language in the third-person narration rapidly emerge as different stylistic exercises; for this reason, they will be examined separately. This double analysis will be followed by an overview of the other languages and varieties used in the novel and a brief commentary on the meaning of their inclusion.

The overwhelming majority of the conversational passages in NP contained in Agbenugba's novel are broadly intelligible to the English-speaking reader. Therefore, on merely empirical observation, it may be posited that the language found in these dialogues are adaptations of the language rather than accurate transcriptions. This is clearly illustrated in the following extract, in which Debo, a young Nigerian, complains to his cousin Akin about how difficult it is to find a job in London:

"See me, see trouble. This your London na wa O. How person day day over-qualified? Tell me my Brother. [...] *Sebi* if you day overqualified for a job that mean to say you go fit do am well, well?" Debo clap him hands together again. "Hey-ei-ye! Hm! Hmmm! For Monday I go interview, them tell me say I day too old for the job: Sorry, we day look for someone who be teenager, patapata 20, 21. For Tuesday I go interview, I talk about all the things way I know, them ask me about myself, them ask me about my father, about my mother, even grandfather self, all of them I answer. For Wednesday them come knock me letter: you are too inexperienced for the job. Today now I go interview, Sorry you are overqualified. I don tire O. Them no go kill me for this London!" (86)

While the above passage may be perceived by the layman as being in NP, understanding the

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<sup>17</sup> *The African Palimpsest*, 68-69 (2nd rev. ed. 2007, 75-76).

<sup>18</sup> *The African Palimpsest*, 81 (2nd rev. ed. 2007, 89).

<sup>19</sup> The main sources used in this essay for the analysis of NP elements in Agbenugba's work are Faraclas, *Nigerian Pidgin*, Deuber, *Nigerian Pidgin in Lagos*, B.O. Elugbe & A.P. Omamor, *Nigerian Pidgin: Background and Prospects* (Ibadan: Heinemann, 1991), and Smart N. Eze, *Nigerian Pidgin English: Sentence Complexity* (Vienna: Veröffentlichungen der Institut für Afrikanistik und Ägyptologie der Universität Wien, 1980). Owing to the high number of NP lexemes examined here, precise bibliographical references will not be included after every single item.

drift of Debo's intervention does not require an initiation into pidgin. At first sight, one could then postulate that Agbenugba, like the writers whose work was examined by Zabus, fails to capture the deep structure of NP to privilege surface elements intelligible to the non-NP speaker. However, a rigorous linguistic analysis of this passage invalidates this hypothesis. The language used in the extract can clearly be distinguished from English, whether standard or 'broken', by the introduction of a high number of distinctively NP features, including the NP tense/aspect/modality system, the NP preposition "for," which can express a wide range of spatial, temporal, and other relationships,<sup>20</sup> and NP pronouns.<sup>21</sup> Admittedly, the passage also contains a few un-NP features that rule out the possibility of regarding Debo's speech as NP 'proper', e.g., the SE indefinite article "a" (in "overqualified for a job"), which is not an established determiner in NP, and the SE relative pronoun "who" (in "who be teenager"), used instead of the NP relative clause introducer "way."<sup>22</sup> Yet it is in my view significant that these SE components do not necessarily have a decisive impact on the linguistic transparency of the text. This highlights the fact that the author's use of a modified form of NP is not motivated solely by a concern to be understood by the English-speaking audience; rather, his hybrid code (i.e. language) aims mainly at capturing the influence exerted by Western values, linguistic habits, and even music on the younger urban generation in Nigeria and abroad. The use of a modified form of NP by young educated Nigerians also indicates that the language is no longer used exclusively by the unschooled who do not master SE. Quite the opposite: NP has become a trendy code used by youths in informal situations, even when they have other languages in common.<sup>23</sup>

If the use of NP in conversational passages may be interpreted as an attempt to enhance the image of a language often looked upon with contempt, the insertion of NP features into the narrative account may be viewed as a continuation of this effort, insofar as it confirms the language's ability to perform ideational and poetic functions simultaneously.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> See Faraclas, *Nigerian Pidgin*, 60-61, and Deuber, *Nigerian Pidgin in Lagos*, 100-101.

<sup>21</sup> It must be noted that, since NP does not have an official orthographic system, creative writers are forced to make a personal decision as to the spelling they use. Agbenugba has, as is usual among Nigerian novelists, made a choice that does not reduce readability for the English-speaking audience.

<sup>22</sup> The relative pronoun 'who' may occur in what Eze calls "hyper-anglicised" NP (Eze, *Nigerian Pidgin English*, 54-58).

<sup>23</sup> Another linguistic strategy that abounds in the novel's conversational passages is code-switching between NP, SE, and sometimes Yoruba. Like the use of pidgins and creoles, codeswitching was long considered a sign of linguistic incompetence rather than a motivated conversational performance; see, for instance, Carol Myers-Scotton, *Social Motivations for Codeswitching: Evidence from Africa* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1993): 47-48.

<sup>24</sup> The "ideational function" is one of the three metafunctions of language identified by M.A.K. Halliday & Christian M.I.M. Matthiessen, *An Introduction to Functional Grammar* (1985; London: Hodder Arnold, 2004); in simplified terms, it corresponds to the "us[e of] language as a symbolic code to represent the world around us," Geoffrey Finch, *How to Study Linguistics* (Basingstoke & London: Macmillan, 1998): 42. The poetic

The second function, which emphasizes the creative potential of language, is far more prominent in narration than in dialogue. Indeed, in narrative passages, the constant alternation between SE, NP, Caribbean Creole/English, and sometimes Yoruba, indicates that the linguistic flexibility displayed by Agbenugba's narrator far exceeds the variations typically recorded in studies of codeswitching.<sup>25</sup> In other words, unlike the conversational passages of the novel in which different languages occur, the heteroglossic variation found outside dialogue is so dense that the narrative lect may not reasonably be considered an "artistic [image]"<sup>26</sup> of an existing sociolect. If the NP lexical and grammatical items scattered throughout the narrative passages are not fundamentally different in nature from those found in conversation, the fictional singularity of the narrative idiolect adds another layer to the novel's stylistic strategy. I shall briefly develop this statement by referring successively to the conventional linguistic categories of lexis and grammar.

The NP lexical items found in narrative passages seem to serve a double purpose: first, the use of NP words alternating with SE ones points to the presence of several cultural influences within the narrative discourse. Secondly, the fact that they are mostly integrated into this discourse: i.e. contextualized rather than cushioned,<sup>27</sup> suggests a 'blending' of languages that highlights the dynamic, absorbent nature of codes: there is no isolated language, just as there is no pure ethnic identity. This flexibility also identifies language, which cannot be dissociated from society, as a prime site of cultural interaction.

This linguistic decompartmentalization is also perceptible in the novel's use of NP grammatical words. Most of the auxiliary verbs, relative pronouns, and prepositions found in narrative passages are akin to those previously encountered in dialogue, but when these NP function words are introduced into an SE context, their similarity to SE words becomes even more clearly marked:

[1] Akin thinking about the Y.M.C.A. way the Old woman done mention [...]. (15)

[2] The physical condition of the lift been look alright, if not for the cigarette burns and,

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function, extensively discussed by Roman Jakobson, is the "focus on the message for its own sake, [...] the dominant, determining function" of verbal art; Roman Jakobson, "Linguistics and Poetics," in *Style in Language*, ed. Thomas Sebeok (Cambridge MA: MIT Press, 1960): 356. The idea of grouping these aspects of Halliday's and Jakobson's theories into a single model is not mine, but Finch's, see Finch, *How to Study Linguistics*, 42-47.

<sup>25</sup> By way of example, a close examination of a narrative passage of Agbenugba's novel (55-56) reveals a minimum of twelve code-switches involving four languages, varieties and/or registers – all in fewer than one hundred words.

<sup>26</sup> Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination: Four Essays*, ed. Michael Holquist, tr. Caryl Emerson & Michael Holquist (Austin: U of Texas P, 1981): 417.

<sup>27</sup> In Zabus's words, to contextualize is to "provide areas of immediate contexts" and to cushion is to "tag an explanatory word or phrase" onto an African word, see Zabus, *The African Palimpsest*, 158 (2nd rev. ed. 2007, 176).

- the floor of the lift which look like it could cave in at any moment. (24)
- [3] Akin had said it at last, now him waiting, he soon hear waiting him day expect. (31)
- [4] Him Cockney soon better pass Prince him own, and Akin trying it on everywhere he went. (33)
- [5] [...] Prince only talking that way because of him present condition, and when him back hale and hearty, him go want to resume him retailer business. (51)
- [6] So Akin all dressed up, he ready to go to the Jobcentre when Bisi appear for him doorstep. (54)
- [7] Akin about to ask how him know say na because of him accent that them no give am the job, but him check himself, him say OK, and accept the man's apology. (62)

The majority of the NP function words contained in these sentences, in the spelling opted for by Agbenugba, find their homographic equivalents in various registers of the English language. For example, the relative clause introducer "way" found in [1] is also a noun in SE and an adverb in informal English; the NP auxiliary "done," which appears in the same sentence, is optionally used to mark the completive aspect of a non-stative verb, but it has the same form as the SE past participle of the verb 'do'. The NP auxiliary "been" (see [2]), which signals incomplete aspect, is spelled like the past participle of the SE verb 'be', while the NP question word "waiting" ([3]), meaning 'what' and used in headless relative clauses, is sometimes found in the novel with the same spelling as the present participle (or gerund) of the SE verb 'wait'. Both the NP and the SE form can be found in [3]. In the same sentence, the NP auxiliary "day," used with non-stative verbs to indicate incomplete aspect, is spelled like the SE noun 'day', and the NP verb "pass," part of a serial verb construction expressing a comparative relation in [4], also has a homograph in SE. In [5], NP "go," which is both a content word and an irrealis modality auxiliary indicating future tense, corresponds to the SE infinitive of the verb 'go', while in [6], the NP preposition "for" has the same formal characteristics as the SE preposition and coordinating conjunction 'for'. Sentence [7] further contains the optional complementizer "say," which introduces a subordinated object noun clause and finds orthographic correspondence in the present infinitive of the SE verb 'say'. Also found in [7] is NP "no," which can be a determiner or, as is the case here, a marker negating an entire sentence; both forms are spelled like the SE determiner 'no'. Finally, the bound personal pronoun in object position "am" has the same spelling as the SE verb 'be' in the first person of the present indicative.

Although the implied author may not have gone through this extensive analysis<sup>28</sup> and may have applied the spellings somewhat instinctively, the presence of these words need nevertheless not be considered coincidental. Indeed, whether the technique be unintentional or carefully planned, it achieves a similar result: as grammatical categories and semantic boundaries collapse, the gap between SE and NP is bridged, and the two languages are merged into a cross-cultural code that lies even beyond the hybridity suggested by NP.

The narrative sections of the novel do not appear to follow coherent grammatical patterns. For example, an SE preterite form can be preceded by either "he" or NP "him"; for no apparent reason, the novel abruptly shifts from the SE system to the NP one, sometimes within a single sentence, or indeed within a single phrase. The lack of a prescriptive system results in a sense of linguistic imbalance, most perceptible in the alternation between SE preterites and NP uninflected verbs. Because the latter are formally similar to SE present-tense forms, the confrontation of the two systems introduces constant temporal disruption into the narrative. This absence of linearity may parallel the protagonist's switchback course in London, which ends with a return to his point of departure. The heterogeneous linguistic influences may also reflect the manifold facets of Akin's cultural background and symbolize the impossibility of indefinitely circumscribing his fluctuating, ever-evolving identity.

In this linguistic crisscross where codes and cultures collide and intertwine, some features seem to belong neither to SE nor to NP, the two systems mainly considered until now. In the search for the possible sources of these additional linguistic traits, the most obvious pointers for further analysis are provided by the novel itself. This is more grist to my methodological mill, so to speak, for these textual indications emphasize the connection between the book's thematic developments and its formal components. One such clue can be found in the narrative when Akin is introduced to Liz, the white partner of his Nigerian friend Prince:

[Prince:] "Liz meet Akin; Akin, Liz my wife and, Rob my son." [...]

Liz been nod her head at [Akin], and ask the customary "How are you?", to which Akin give the expected "Fine" and go on to add "Thank you." For many Nigerians always switch on their best manners when them meet up with Europeans.

[Prince:] "This is my friend I told you about. The one whom we both went to school and got into a lot of trouble together." (25)

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<sup>28</sup> He probably has not, for "done" is sometimes spelled "don" (15, 23, 24, 50, 98, 141, 195, 225), "waiting" is more often than not spelled "wetin" (14, 23, 50), and the NP copula "na" found in [7] has no equivalent in SE.



Prince utters the slightly awkward "this is my friend I told you about," followed by the contrived and ungrammatical "the one whom we both went to school," which contains the relative pronoun "whom," rather formal and uncommon in spoken discourse. The linguistic clumsiness displayed by Prince in this passage might at first seem out of character, for his command of English is usually flawless. However, his self-consciousness may be an allusion to the fact that "many Nigerians always switch on their best manners when they meet up with Europeans." This passing comment can, of course, be read as a veiled reference to colonial history – all the more so since "switch[ing] on [one's] best manners" involves another switch: namely, a codeswitch to a (supposedly) sophisticated register of the former colonizer's language.

As a result of Nigeria's colonial past, English is still the most widely used medium of formal instruction in the country. Nevertheless, after the coming of independence in 1960, most British teachers of English residing in Nigeria went back to Europe, and pupils were sometimes taught by local instructors with limited competence in the language. As there has been no policy determining which linguistic standards should be adopted, Nigerian varieties of English are said to be "drifting away from the proclaimed ideal of [British English]."<sup>29</sup> As a consequence, Nigerian English appears to be used, often inadvertently, by those who want to signal their high level of education and are in fact just attempting to speak SE.

In the novel, these sociolinguistic associations seem to be occasionally reflected in dialogue – for instance, in Prince's convoluted relative clause mentioned above – and they are frequently mirrored in narrative passages. The relative pronoun "whom," which Prince uses in his infelicitous replica, is used hypercorrectly by the narrator on several occasions (30, 75). Even more conspicuous than such grammatical 'errors' are some of the stylistic peculiarities associated with NE. Because English is, in Nigeria, used in formal rather than informal situations, where NP or African languages are preferred,<sup>30</sup> formal styles tend to predominate over informal ones.<sup>31</sup> This pompousness, combined with a willingness to adhere scrupulously to SE stylistic models, sometimes results in pleonasm, clichés, or a mixing of registers.<sup>32</sup> It is thus not surprising that Agbenugba's novel should contain semantic redundancies (e.g.,

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<sup>29</sup> Manfred Görlach, *Even More Englishes: Studies 1996-1997* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia PA: John Benjamins, 1998): 127-28.

<sup>30</sup> A.E. Odumuh, *Nigerian English* (Zaria: Ahmadu Bello UP, 1987): 66.

<sup>31</sup> This is also the case in other varieties of African English. See Joseph J. Schmieid, *English in Africa: An Introduction* (London & New York: Longman, 1991): 53.

<sup>32</sup> Listed as being features of Nigerian English in Görlach, *Even More Englishes*, 134, and David Jowitt, *Nigerian English Usage: An Introduction* (Ikeja: Longman, 1991): 142-47.

"another black man other than himself" [172]), clichés (e.g., "To cut a long story short, it was a close call" [37]), and passages that mix several registers (e.g., the noun "faction," generally found in political contexts and implying dissent or hostility, is employed to refer to the families who peacefully share a house with Akin in *Forest Gate*: "Akin always polite whenever him meet any member of the household while using the shared facilities, but none of them was he close to, every faction doing their own thing" [40]).

In comparison to these stylistic elements, the grammatical 'deviances' typical of Nigerian English are rather modestly represented in the novel. Therefore, what Agbenugba seems to mildly mock are not so much the features of an imperfectly acquired second language as the traces of mental colonization that underlie efforts at excessive linguistic conformism, apparent in the presence of formal structures, pleonasms, clichés, overused literary quotations, and hypercorrect forms.

If the stylistic features of NE betray the influence of (neo)colonial values on its speakers, Caribbean Creole (henceforth CC), which has heavily influenced Black British English (henceforth BBE), occupies the other end of the sociolinguistic spectrum: it is spoken in informal or intimate situations – for example, by Akin's Caribbean friend Doreen when she tells him about her failed marriage. In British society, second- and third-generation black Britons of Caribbean descent are typically fluent in SE, and the presence of CC features in their speech has above all "symbolic significance" and acts "as a marker of black identity."<sup>33</sup> This is, to some extent, replicated in the novel, for the introduction of CC features into dialogue represents a move away from SE that achieves an identificative purpose, not unlike the one carried out by modified NP.

The comparison between CC and NP does not end here. As Eva, a Barbadian girl with whom Akin briefly talks in a night club, puts it: "your pidgin English is very similar to our patois" (114). This similarity, which characterizes pidgins and creoles worldwide,<sup>34</sup> is particularly marked in the case of West African pidgins and CC, since the former were "learnt by the [African] slaves [...] before, during or after their passage across the Atlantic to the Americas,"<sup>35</sup> and evolved into the latter in the 'New World.' This linguistic proximity emphasizes the diachronic similarities in the Afro-Caribbean and African experiences, while the differences between the two codes occasionally appear in the novel as markers of the interaction between the Caribbean and African communities in present-day London. For

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<sup>33</sup> Susanne Mühleisen, *Creole Discourse: Exploring Prestige Formation and Change across Caribbean English-Lexicon Creoles* (Amsterdam & Philadelphia PA: John Benjamins, 2002): 168.

<sup>34</sup> See Isthla Singh, *Pidgins and Creoles: An Introduction* (London: Arnold, 2000): 37.

<sup>35</sup> Sebba, *London Jamaican*, 3.

instance, West Indian forms such as "gwan" are used in dialogue by characters of Caribbean and African descent, showing the influence of CC on non-Caribbean black people. This linguistic intertwining is also echoed in narrative sequences, where CC traits that are not shared by NP, such as the absence of an equative copula between a subject and a predicative noun phrase, regularly occur. The parallels between and interlacing of these languages may reflect not only the Afro-Caribbean and African communities' shared roots but also their common struggle for the assertion of a new identity in Britain.

Unlike most Caribbean people, however, Africans usually have "a different language other than English" (67) to fall back on. Such is also the case of the Yoruba characters in *Another Lonely Londoner*, who occasionally converse in their mother tongue, thereby appealing to their common ethnic origin and, in a manner not dissimilar to NP, creating a feeling of community. Since knowledge of Yoruba is not possessed by all – especially by white Britons – in the novel's London setting, mastery of the language becomes an asset to be exploited by the Nigerian characters. Debo, who is tired of working in a security firm, applies for a position as an administrative officer in a company, filling in the application form "with unlimited lies" (159). He lists, among his many imaginary qualities, fluency in Yoruba, Russian, and Swahili. Following his second interview with the firm's representatives, he learns that he has been appointed to the job. As he is about to leave the room, one of the interviewers asks:

"Just out of curiosity, how do you say 'see you later,' in Russian?"

[...]

[Debo:] "See you later, in Russian? That is: *Ko ni da fun awon Baba E.*" Debo had uttered the first words of Yoruba that had come to his mind.

[Interviewer:] "Very impressive, brilliant. Maybe you'll teach us all Russian then. Bye, Ta-ta." (161)

This incident demonstrates Debo's resourcefulness and exposes the interviewer's ignorance, but also confers on Yoruba an opaque quality, since the code is neither understood nor recognized by Debo's future employer. The veil is only partly lifted by the narrator, who identifies the language but does not translate Debo's utterance. As a result, the reader who does not speak Yoruba is unable to understand Debo's words and fails to appreciate fully the comic impact of the sentence – a curse which could be translated as 'may your fathers always experience misfortunes'. The elusiveness associated with Yoruba is illustrated on another

occasion by the presence of an untranslated saying, which concludes a letter that Tolu, Akin's fiancée, writes to him: "Oju lon pe si" (219).<sup>36</sup> In both cases, the language is synonymous with a form of empowerment: Debo deceives the interviewer with his use of Yoruba, and the code in which the proverb is rendered forbids access to the outsider, perhaps hinting at the fact that certain cultural values remain inaccessible to whomever does not master the language associated with them.

The link between knowledge of a linguistic code and efforts to fit into a community is also represented in the novel by Cockney. Often dismissed as the speech of the working class, the variety loses its usual negative connotations in Akin's eyes:

Akin learning from Liz, he quickly re-learning the English he once spoke as a child living in East London. All the slangs and terminologies returning to him speech. Him Cockney soon better pass Prince him own, and Akin trying it on everywhere he went.

At work him white colleagues telling him how he quickly pick up the way them speak; that some people would arrive in London and still have an accent after two, three years. Them say him doing very well, and Akin feeling very proud of this. Him trying harder to polish him Cockney. (33)

Cockney is, just like NP, no longer disparaged as the speech of the uneducated but is associated with integration in urban circles, considered a way of "successfully blend[ing] in with the crowd" (130). Akin's re-acquisition of Cockney may be instinctive, but his use of the variety is part of a conscious process: just as "him trying harder to polish him Cockney" (33) to be accepted by his white workmates, he later seduces Bisi, a young Nigerian woman who wants to marry the holder of a British passport, by "impressing [her] with him Cockney talk" (52). Akin's impeccable mastery of the London slang and accent certainly disrupts the racist cliché claiming that "Africans speak 'Hula! Hula!'" (150), and it demonstrates the protagonist's potential for absorbing different cultures. Nevertheless, this act of linguistic mimicry never allows Akin to be regarded fully as a British citizen. His colleagues' praises are tinged with condescension, as their racist jokes later reveal, and even though Akin is British, his fiancée Tolu is denied access to the country. His return to Nigeria at the end of the novel clearly suggests that, unless white Britons adopt a more positive attitude towards racial and cultural diversity, all attempts at adaptation on the part of immigrants will be in vain.

Perhaps because of Akin's limited success with Cockney, typical features of the

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<sup>36</sup> This proverb is used to assert the fact that time flies and that, with patience and courage, a long period will

variety are relatively few in narrative passages. Yet various instances of slang, not specifically identifiable as Cockney but more generally associated with urban speech, can be found throughout the novel. One may, for example, cite numerous examples of drug-related vocabulary, including "E" (91-93), "reefer" (32), "hash" (37, 92, 201-206), "dope" (50), and the West Indian "ganga" (201), all of which are typical of colloquial speech. This informality is also reflected in the use of discourse markers, conjunctions, and prepositions: for instance, paragraphs in the narrator's account are sometimes introduced by words such as "anyway" or "well," which are markers of spoken rather than written discourse.

If linguistic casualness, Cockney, and urban slang bring to the fore associations with London and its fast city life, these types of speech seem to have been blended with another, altogether different form of oral discourse: namely, that associated with African rhetorical strategies and storytelling. Indeed, several passages contain repetitions typical of orature, but the words repeated in these sections – for example, "business" (117), "queue" (217) or "guy" (213) – are not items one tends to relate to traditional African tales. This linguistic tight-rope walking is also illustrated by the use of proverbs, a feature frequently found in African oral and literary discourses. Throughout the novel, Yoruba and pidgin proverbs alternate with awkwardly 'pasted' English ones that seem quite out of place,<sup>37</sup> thus illustrating the difficulty of transposing African cultures into a European context, and vice versa.

In conclusion: I hope that I have managed to establish the fact that all languages and registers used in the novel carry their own significance. African languages and non-standard varieties of English are, in dialogue, largely associated with a will to integration within a community: NP and Yoruba are used among Nigerian family members and friends; CC and BBE evoke the historical and contemporary connections between the Caribbean and African communities; and NE and Cockney symbolize Akin's need for acceptance into white urban circles. The heteroglossia of narrative passages is different on a number of levels. Formally, the narrator's idiolect diverges from the artistic representation of reality found in dialogue. The high number of languages, varieties and registers involved in individual paragraphs or even single sentences results in a mingling of competing voices that offer an imaginative portrait of the main character's heterogeneous linguistic and cultural background. Not only are

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come to pass.

<sup>37</sup> This rather incongruous use of SE proverbs is exemplified in the intrusion of the clichéd "Once bitten, twice shy" into a passage set after Akin's misadventure with Bisi: "Anytime him come across a Niger girl way him fancy, the first thing Akin want to determine was if the girl a Britico or not; from she not a Britico, Akin would give her a wide berth. Na the *oyinbo* man talk: 'Once bitten, twice shy,' and Akin not about to allow himself get caught in the same trap twice" (109). "Oyinbo" is a Nigerian Pidgin term of Yoruba origin meaning "white man," see Herbert Igboanusì, *A Dictionary of Nigerian English Usage* (Ibadan: Encrownfit, 2002): 214.

the voices that have been identified different in terms of the language they use, but they also express an attachment to different areas, different traditions, different belief-systems, and each bears witness to a specific cultural heritage. Although they ultimately extend beyond individual experiences, they can all directly or indirectly be linked to the protagonist, Akin. The voices of narration can be isolated from each other on a theoretical level, as I have done in this essay, but they emanate from a single multilingual consciousness symbolizing the character's struggle with the many facets of his identity. In my view, the fact that the multitude of languages can not only be attributed to one narrative consciousness but also linked back to a single character distinguishes Agbenugba's strategy from typical applications of polyphony like those examined by Bakhtin.<sup>38</sup>

While the novel's cross-linguistic code represents, or at least should embody, the richness of cultural diversity, the abrupt changes of languages and registers at times convey a sense of inadequacy. The apparent linguistic instability, which is never resolved, seems to express the difficulty – or, indeed, impossibility – for Akin to reconcile, in this time and place, all the voices he has unconsciously interiorized. Cross-culturality is counterbalanced by remnants of colonialism, and Akin is caught between traditions, as suggested by the final image, where, on his way to Africa, he is floating in mid-air between "the City aglow and the starry overhead sky" (233). His return to Nigeria may also be viewed in more positive terms, since he escapes the gloomy prospect of becoming one of those immigrants who have no place to call home, who have "adjusted to London the best they could, [...] [and have] accepted the fact that they would never entirely fit in with the indigenous race of England" but who "[can] no longer relate to [Africa]" (169), either. Akin's vow never to return to Britain as "Another Lonely Londoner" (233) illustrates his resoluteness not to passively experience rejection again or ever be left in a state of emotional limbo, thereby hinting at the possibility of a Utopian moment of racial, cultural, and linguistic reconciliation.

Agbenugba's formal experiment is undeniably creative and reveals the writer to be a Selvon-like "alchemist of style,"<sup>39</sup> but the novel's original use of language also appears to be a highly appropriate way of rendering migrant experience. Exiles are catapulted into a new or, at most, vaguely familiar landscape, and have to make sense of it; such is also the case, on a linguistic level, for the reader of *Another Lonely Londoner*. The defamiliarizing effect of NP entraps one in a semantic guessing-game, and the interaction between SE, NP, NE, CC, and Yoruba also demands constantly renewed adjustment. As languages, varieties, and registers

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<sup>38</sup> See Mikhail M. Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, 302-24.

<sup>39</sup> Susheila Nasta, "Introduction" to Sam Selvon, *The Lonely Londoners* (1956; London: Penguin, 2006): vii.

mingle throughout the novel to the sounds of dance, house, reggae, and afrobeat, one can only attempt to grasp a multifarious identity that no country, no culture, no single language can contain.

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