

The Many Voices of Postcolonial London

Language and Identity in Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004)

Bénédicte Ledent, University of Liège (b.ledent@ulg.ac.be)

Language has often been a central issue in Caribbean novels of migration to London, crystallizing the problems of communication and of identity -- both individual and collective -- that affect the West Indian newcomers and their English 'hosts'. Accent, syntax, lexicon -- all contribute to giving a picture of who the characters are, even if, in the case of the Caribbean protagonists, they just speak varieties of the same idiom as the local English population, for, as George Lamming reminds us, English is "a West Indian language."¹ Probably the best-known example of the role played by the linguistic medium in the fictionalization of postcolonial London by Caribbean writers is Samuel Selvon's *The Lonely Londoners* (1956). Written in a re-created idiom akin to English-based Trinidadian Creole, both in narrative and in dialogue, this novel renders the disillusionment of its protagonists, who end up, as Susheila Nasta puts it, "setting up home in a city of words."² If English, particularly English place names, have contributed to the characters' mental colonization and made them view London as a new Eldorado, their own creative use of the speech of the former master becomes a mark not only of otherness but also of agency, limited yet nonetheless real. For Selvon, Nasta argues, "it is only through [...] the reclamation of an authentic language for identity that [he] can begin to rescue his [...] community from the illusory myths of the imperial centre."³

More recent novels on multicultural London by writers with Jamaican roots, Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000) and Andrea Levy's *Small Island* (2004), are no exception to this almost traditional linguistic focus in Caribbean literature, even if they testify to a change in perspective.⁴ Indeed, for the younger writers the language issue is perhaps less a question of mental decolonization, which it was for Sam Selvon and other authors of the 1950s and 1960s, than a question of establishing the heterogeneous character of the city and, by extension, of the nation. I would like to argue in this essay that Smith and Levy are not so much interested in West Indian identity abroad as in the meaning of Englishness. Not only do they include in their writing 'englishes' that depart from the norm: i.e. from so-called standard British English, but they also draw attention to the linguistic processes that underlie intercultural encounters and human relationships in general.

¹ George Lamming, *The Pleasures of Exile* (1960; London & New York: Allison & Busby, 1984): 44. I owe this reference to Edward Baugh, "Friday in Crusoe's City: The Question of Language in Two West Indian Novels of Exile," *ACLALS Bulletin* 5.3 (December 1980): 12.

² Susheila Nasta, "Setting up Home in a City of Words: Sam Selvon's London Novels," in *Other Britain, Other British: Contemporary Multicultural Fiction*, ed A. Robert Lee (London: Pluto, 1995): 48-68.

³ Nasta, "Setting up Home in a City of Words," 52.

⁴ Smith's and Levy's novels also share with Selvon's the fact that they can be regarded as comedies. As Michael L. Ross has shown, the humour of these three novels is informed by their use of language. See Ross, "Samuel Selvon and the Comedy of Reverse Colonization" and "The Empire Laughs Last," in Ross, *Race Riots: Comedy and Ethnicity in Modern British Fiction* (Montreal & Kingston, Ontario: McGill-Queen's UP, 2006): 179-202 and 269-80 respectively.

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In what follows, I endeavour to show how the multiplicity of tongues in *White Teeth* informs a mongrelized speech community, which demystifies the notion of purity and therefore stands in opposition to all forms of fundamentalisms, linguistic or otherwise. *Small Island*, too, interweaves several voices which, as I will demonstrate, convey the variegated configuration of postwar London and epitomize not only its sometimes painful experience of cross-culturalism but also its inherent human richness. Language variety is thus a central preoccupation in both novels. However, while *White Teeth* seems to gesture towards the hybridity that this vocal multiplicity entails -- what Smith has called, in an article on Barack Obama's flexibility of voice, "our collective human messiness"⁵ -- *Small Island*, which is set around the Second World War, tends, rather, to focus on the difficulties arising from linguistic pluralism. It indeed presents, according to Cynthia James, "language [as] a battleground on which British and West Indian cultures and identities clash and make accommodations."⁶

It should be obvious to any reader that the reflection on English identity at the heart of *White Teeth* is underpinned by a conspicuous interest in linguistic matters. Not only does language serve as a deftly handled representational tool for the novelist but it is also an apt metaphor for a world characterized by unpredictability and teeming with diversity. An examination of Smith's treatment of the linguistic question requires a brief introduction to her impressive gallery of characters. In spite of widely different origins and diverging experiences of life, these have at least two common denominators: on the one hand, the "white teeth" of the title -- a multi-faceted symbol that, apart from being a sign of vitality in human beings, represents both their need for rootedness and their predatory impulses -- and, on the other, rather obviously, an ability to communicate through speech.

The major characters in Smith's huge human fresco, almost exclusively set in London, are Archie Jones, a generous, slow-witted white working-class Englishman, and Samad Iqbal, an educated Bengali who is a waiter in a restaurant. Smith traces fifty years of their unlikely friendship, from the end of the Second World War, when they were both fighting with the British army in Bulgaria, to the 1990s, when they both live in the North London area of Willesden. The two friends' younger wives, Clara Bowden, a woman of Jamaican descent, and Alsana, Samad's unexpectedly tenacious arranged bride, constitute another focus, together with their respective children: Irie, a bucktoothed girl suffering from teenage angst caused by weight and hair problems, who wants to become a dentist, and the twins Magid and Millat. The latter follow totally divergent paths, Magid studying law and Millat being involved in religious fundamentalism. As the novel unfolds, the two families interact and their fate becomes tied to that of a third one: the Chalfens, a white, middle-class, half-Jewish family of liberal intellectuals who have been in Britain for two generations. Many other figures people Smith's lively world and can be heard in the novel. Suffice it to say that they are all depicted with a keen sense of observation, combined with an extraordinary talent for presenting their verbal idiosyncrasies.

White Teeth is told with gusto by an omniscient, occasionally intrusive narrator in an inventive English that ranges from the formal to the utterly informal. At one point, for example, the narrator describes, in the same breath, the face of Abdul-Mickey, a Muslim pub-owner from whom a customer has just ordered a bacon

⁵ Zadie Smith, "Speaking in Tongues," *New York Review of Books* 56.3 (26 February 2009), <http://www.nybooks.com/article/22334> (accessed 26 February 2009).

⁶ Cynthia James, "'You'll Soon Get Used to Our Language': Language, Parody and West Indian Identity in Andrea Levy's *Small Island*," *Anthurium: A Caribbean Studies Journal* 5.1 (Spring 2007): para 1, http://anthurium.miami.edu/volume_5/issue_1/james-language.html

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sandwich, thus: "Oh, the struggle that could be seen on Mickey's *kisser* at that moment! Oh, the *gargoylian contortions!*"⁷ This juxtaposition of a colloquialism, "kisser," and quasi-academic terms, "gargoylian contortions," characterizes a highly hybrid medium, a kind of self-contained linguistic continuum, where "mad" alternates with "nutso" to describe mentally ill people. This language is also peppered with Latin and French phrases, and with innumerable, often hyphenated compounds, the appropriate embodiments of the characters' cultural or racial in-betweenness. Yet, far from being fully in control of the tale, the main narrative voice seems to absorb the features of all the other surrounding types of language and weave them into a kind of verbal kaleidoscope, a possible reflection of the process of cultural cross-breeding constantly at work in globalized spaces like contemporary London.

White Teeth is basically a polyphonic novel, integrating dozens of different voices. The major yarns in its fabric are Bengali English, Jamaican patois, and north London slang, three language varieties that surface in the morphology, lexicon, syntax, and phonology adopted by the characters. The Iqbals often use run-on words, like "whateverhernameis" (235) or "whitecliffsdoover piesnmash jellyeels royalvariety britishbulldog" (241), a feature which has been described as a typically Rushdie-esque linguistic marker inherited from South Asian speech.⁸ In the Bowdens' lilting language one finds "ting" instead of "thing" and "me kyant" for "I can't." And Ryan Topps, a white man with a Cockney accent, says "somefing" and "nuffink," in a voice presented as "missing key consonants and adding others where they were never meant to be" (388). These three tongues are, together with Gujarati, the components of the language spoken by the Raggastanis, a street crew with a hybrid ethos led by Millat Iqbal. Appropriately described as a "social chameleon" (269), the boy seems to personify the mongrelization that typifies a new generation of Londoners, whose cultural references combine hip-hop, brand names like "Nike" and "Adidas," and Shakespeare.

Quite a number of other varieties and tongues, sometimes only snatches of conversation, resonate around this pied linguistic kernel: the English written by Horst Ibelgaufts, Archie's Swedish pen-friend; that spoken by Archie's Italian first wife and his Spanish home help; the Irish English spoken by one of Mickey's customers; the Indian English spoken by a shopkeeper; or the pidgin spoken by the Bulgarian children asking Archie and Samad for chewing gum and "mixing up the few words they had learnt, placing them in any order" (94). Zadie Smith is an astute observer of linguistic phenomena and does not limit her scrutiny to languages that are, in origin at least, geographically determined. She also explores social registers and repeatedly describes how her characters adapt to circumstances, whether it is the voice put on by Hortense, Irie's grandmother, "when she had company -- an over-compensation of all the consonants -- the voice she used for pastors and white women" (40) or the "*bud-bud-ding-ding* accent" (319) put on by Millat to mock the Chalfens' thirst for exoticism. Unlike skin colour or hair texture, language is an identity marker that can easily be modified, and therefore may be more "[resistant to] easy categorization," a feature which, as Caryl Phillips points out, also applies to *White Teeth*.⁹

(accessed 24 November 2008).

⁷ Zadie Smith, *White Teeth* (2000; London: Penguin, 2001): 450. (My emphasis). Further page references are in the main text.

⁸ Agnes Scott Langeland, "Rushdie's Language," *English Today* 45.12.1 (January 1996): 20. In her analysis of *White Teeth*, Claire Squires concludes that "the greatest influence that Rushdie may have had on Zadie Smith is linguistic" and mentions Rushdie's "technique of creating neologisms by running words together." Squires, *Zadie Smith's "White Teeth"* (New York & London: Continuum, 2002): 16. In a 2000 interview, however, Zadie Smith pointed out that she had not read Rushdie when she wrote *White Teeth*, which, of course, does not exclude the possibility of South Asian English influencing her writing. "Zadie Smith with Gretchen Holbrook Gerzina," in *Writing Across Worlds: Contemporary Writers Talk*, ed. Susheila Nasta (London & New York: Routledge, 2004): 273.

⁹ Caryl Phillips, "*White Teeth*, by Zadie Smith" (2000), in Phillips, *A New World Order* (London: Secker & Warburg, 2001): 284.

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In addition, Smith also tracks the language distortions or euphemisms brought about by the socio-political context, as in her rendition of linguistic political correctness in two scenes. The first of these is a meeting of "parent-governors," taking place at the school of Archie's and Samad's children in 1984, of all years, perhaps an allusion to George Orwell's "Doublespeak." During the meeting, a woman insists on being called Ms -- instead of Mrs -- which makes Samad say:

"And this is some kind of linguistic conflation between the words Mrs and Miss? [...] Something to describe the woman who has either lost her husband or has no prospect of finding another?" (128)

-- an unwittingly challenging remark which somehow humorously questions the validity of this title adopted by US feminists in the 1970s.¹⁰ The second episode focuses on the comprehensive school attended by Irie and Millat, whose headmaster announces a "move *away* from behaviour chastisement and *towards* constructive conduct management" (302-303), and speaks of "post-class aberration consideration periods" instead of "detention" (304, 308). Apart from their strong potential for humour,¹¹ these examples also remind us of the power of language to hide, distort or blur reality, which may also be Smith's indirect challenge to the power of fiction to render this reality, thus questioning the factual reliability of her own work. This ability of speech to conceal appears clearly at many points in the novel. For example, "KEVIN," an acronym that immediately evokes a very common English name, stands for "Keepers of the Eternal and Victorious Islamic Nation," a Muslim fundamentalist group. Likewise, O'Connell's Pool House, the name of Archie and Samad's hangout, is rather misleading, as it is "neither Irish nor a pool house" (183). The deceptiveness of language is also memorably illustrated by the word "chief," which,

for some inexplicable reason hidden in the etymology of North London slang, [is used by young people to mean] *fool, arse, wanker*, a loser of the most colossal proportions. (163)

Language, like appearances, the novelist suggests, cannot be relied on to get at the heart of the real.

Smith's novel has been said to provide a survey of the linguistic landscape of postwar London;¹² it has also been praised for capturing each voice with proficiency.¹³ I am not going to dispute this. However, beyond the mimetic representation of a Babelian world -- in some areas of London, such as Brent, the novel says (292), as many as 123 different languages are reported to be spoken -- it is important to perceive that Smith's juxtaposition and intertwining of divergent voices have subversive overtones that bear upon the construction of a new Eng-lishness. By presenting language, a crucial identity marker, as inherently multiple, impure, and unpredictable, *White Teeth*, indeed, undermines what Caryl Phillips has called "the mythology of homogeneity," which endures in Britain in spite of evidence to the contrary and "prevents countless numbers of British people from feeling comfortable participating in the main narrative of British life."¹⁴

Appropriately, in *White Teeth*, so-called standard British English is no longer the major language; it is de-centred, as it were. The 'Queen's English' is spoken by only a handful of characters, among them the smug

¹⁰ See Eve Kay, "Call me Ms," *Guardian* (29 June 2007), Comment & Features Section: 12-13. For the *Oxford English Dictionary* the neutral alternative 'Ms' goes back much earlier, around the 1950s.

¹¹ For some critics, humour is the primary effect of Smith's use of an "intermix of languages." See Melita Glasgow & Don Fletcher, "Palimpsest and Seduction: *The Glass Palace* and *White Teeth*," *Kunapipi* 27.1 (2005): 82.

¹² Maya Jaggi, "The Power of Babel," review of *White Teeth*, *Guardian Weekly* (3-9 February 2000): 19.

¹³ See, for example, Jan Lowe, "No More Lonely Londoners," *Small Axe* 9 (March 2001): 174.

¹⁴ Caryl Phillips, "Extravagant Strangers" (1995), in Phillips, *A New World Order*, 288.

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Chalfens, the "stuffy registrar" (50) who deals with Archie's and Clara's wedding, Mr Hamilton, an old man who reminisces about colonial Congo in a voice "from a different class, a different era" (169), and, finally, BBC presenters (197). In short, Standard English is spoken by the representatives of institutions and of some form of paternalism, like the Chalfens, whose feeling of superiority is conveyed again and again in linguistic terms, since they refer to themselves

as nouns, verbs and occasionally adjectives: *It's the Chalfen way, And then he came out with a real Chalfenism, He's Chalfening again, We need to be a bit more Chalfenist about this.* (314).¹⁵

Quite ironically, Standard English is also spoken by Magid, one of the twins sent by his father to Bangladesh in order for him to be brought up far from the corrupting influence of the West. On his return to England, the boy is "more English than the English" (365). His careful choice of words and sophisticated grammar prompt the following observation by one of his father's friends: "Speaks fuckin' nice, don't he? Sounds like a right fuckin' Olivier. Queen's fucking English and no mistake" (449). Clearly, in Smith's London, the vernacular seems to have become the norm, but a norm that cannot be pinned down, because it is heterogeneous and always in flux. Therefore, if *White Teeth* can be said to describe what is called a 'speech community', this socio-linguistic notion can only be understood here as a group of people who "share not just a single language but a repertoire of languages or varieties," as "a complex interlocking network of communication whose members share knowledge about and attitudes towards the language use patterns of others as well as themselves."¹⁶

Smith's focus on linguistic heterogeneity has a second implication: none of the voices is pure -- they either undergo the influence of the others or exert some influence over them. In short, they interact closely in a web-like manner. For example, the Jamaican idiom spoken by Hortense Bowden is laced with quotations from the Bible, and the language spoken by Alsana and Samad misuses, though one could also say revises, English idioms, collocations, or words. In Alsana's mouth, "squeeze water out of a stone" becomes "squeeze water out when you're stoned" (78); in Samad's, "as nutty as a fruitcake" becomes "many raisins short of the fruitcake" (198) and "reveries" becomes "revelries" (84). So, if the Chalfens, in their missionary zeal, can be said to "Englishify" (345) Millat and Irie -- that is, influence their manners and language -- the Samads in turn "Bengalize" English vocabulary, a double process whose reciprocity has often been ignored. For, usually, English people are seen as teachers of the proper tongue while so-called aliens are supposed to be either dangerous contaminators or grateful learners. Admittedly, a thirst for purity exists in every people. It even surfaces, according to the narrator, in Jamaican grammar, where "there is no choice of personal pronoun, no splits between *me* or *you* or *they*, there is only the pure homogenous *I*" (327). Yet, the novel shows, this purity is only a myth. As Alsana points out,

"you go back and back and back and it's still easier to find the correct Hoover bag than find one pure person, one pure faith, on the globe. Do you think that anybody is English? Really English? It's a fairy-tale!" (236)

If the linguistic motif in *White Teeth* calls into question the notions of unity and purity, it also challenges the concepts of predictability and determinism that are at the core of all fundamentalisms, represented

¹⁵ Note the pun on the notion of Queen's English: a flashback on Archie's life turns out to be "a short, unedifying viewing experience, low on entertainment value, the metaphysical equivalent of the Queen's Speech" (13-14) and Mr Hamilton, with a clear inflection of public-school homo-sociality, describes himself and some fellow settlers in the Congo as "old Queens" (172).

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in the novel by science and religion, whose discourses strangely converge. There is, on the one hand, Marcus Chalfen with his genetically programmed mouse, called the Future Mouse, which

holds out the tantalizing promise of a new phase in human history where we are not victims of the random but instead directors and arbitrators of our own fate. (433)

On the other, we have Hortense Bowden who, as a Jehovah's Witness, keeps announcing the apocalyptic end of the world, as well as the Muslim extremists, who all want to "eliminate the random" because, as Marcus Chalfen says, when "you eliminate the random, you rule the world" (341). Although these ideologies -- scientific and religious -- first bring people from different ethnicities together (Marcus and Millat; Hortense and Ryan; Millat and his group), they eventually promote an essentially divisive ethos, since they require separating the "sheep from the goats" as in the Scriptures, quoted by Hortense (34, 43), from which she concludes:

"Black and white never come to no good. De Lord Jesus never meant us to mix it up. Dat's why he made a hol' heap a fuss about de children of men building de tower of Babel. 'Im want everybody to keep tings separate." (385)

Even more important, scientific and religious discourses, which are messianic in nature,¹⁷ make people believe that "the past is always tense and the future, perfect" (541). This almost incantatory sentence with recurrent echoes in the novel highlights the tension between past and future that marks human life, in particular that of the migrant. At the same time, with its inbuilt pun, this quotation is a tongue-in-cheek expression of the close link that Smith's novel establishes between existential issues and grammar, which could be defined, in the words of George Steiner, as "the articulate organization of perception, reflection and experience, the nerve-structure of consciousness when it communicates with itself and with others."¹⁸

However, even if *White Teeth* deconstructs the hope offered by science and religion by exposing their deceptive agendas, it is not based on a grammar "of nihilism."¹⁹ As its structure indicates (the first six chapters go forward then backward in time, while the last two go forward), it is resolutely turned towards the future. Not a perfect future, but still a promising one made of ambiguity and embodied in Irie's unborn baby, whose father may be Magid or Millat, the twins whose "genes, those prophets of the future, have reached different conclusions" (463). Unlike the allegedly predictable and controllable future promised by science and religion, this future contains its fair share of randomness and uncertainty -- just like the language of postcolonial London.

Very much like *White Teeth*, *Small Island* is a thick, plot-driven novel which gives pride of place to language -- both as a major instrument in its narrative strategy and as a theme -- to convey the cultural plurality of postwar London. However, while *White Teeth* is mostly interested in depicting a Babel-like city to represent the diversity and vigour of today's English heterogeneous society, *Small Island* has an apparently more 'intimist' canvas and uses language and linguistic varieties mainly to underline the difficulties of postcolonial relationships. As an historical novel ending in 1948, it might also be read as providing a contextualization for the contemporary London that is depicted in Smith's fiction.

Like *White Teeth*, *Small Island* is a polyphonic novel. It alternates among four characters, two Jamaican

¹⁶ Bernard Spolsky, *Sociolinguistics* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1998): 24-25.

¹⁷ George Steiner, *Grammars of Creation* (London: Faber & Faber, 2001): 7.

¹⁸ Steiner, *Grammars of Creation*, 5.

¹⁹ *Grammars of Creation*, 9.

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and two English, and between two different time periods. There are four sections titled "before"; in each of them, only one of the four protagonists speaks. The other five sections, which interlock with the former, are titled "1948," the year of the first massive arrival of West Indians on English soil, and they contain several voices, a gradual vocal heterogeneity which reflects the increased diversity of London and England in general. The four main characters speak English, and their speech habits match both their background and their personality. Like Smith, Levy has been praised by reviewers for her ability to render her characters' "individual timbres and rhythms" skilfully.²⁰ Mild-mannered, easy-going Gilbert, a former RAF serviceman, who arrives in England on the *Empire Windrush* in 1948, unashamedly speaks a form of Jamaican English, including the legendary habit of teeth-sucking, which a sergeant in charge of the West Indian RAF volunteers finally forbids because he views it as "an act of insubordination."²¹ Gilbert is joined in London by his priggish, educated wife Hortense who prides herself on using hypercorrect, occasionally old-fashioned Standard English as a means of escaping her mother's peasant origins, of living up to her father's position as a government man, but also of making good in the former imperial centre. Another instance of 'upward linguistic mobility' is Queenie, an outspoken, pragmatic, English woman, a butcher's daughter, who starts taking elocution lessons when she settles with her aunt Dorothy, "[her] Mother's posh sister from London, who pronounced her aitches with a panting breath even where there were no aitches to be pronounced" (247). Incidentally, this idiosyncrasy is very close to the typically Jamaican habit of placing "aitches" everywhere. Queenie lives in Earl's Court and rents rooms to black lodgers, Gilbert among them, while her boring, taciturn husband, Bernard, has in 1948 not yet returned from his war posting in Asia. "Proud to be part of the British Empire. Proud to represent decency" (379), he constantly refers to the "gibberish" (361) spoken by the Indian "natives," whom he calls, among other things, a "ragged bunch of illiterates wanting to run their own country" (375).

This brief synopsis suffices to show how central and recurrent linguistic references are in *Small Island*. As John Mullan rightly concludes, "this is a novel whose characters are preoccupied with how they and others speak."²² My aim in the remainder of this essay is to analyse the role played by language in how the characters interact with each other and with society at large, and, at a further remove, to explore how linguistic mechanisms inform the prejudices that human beings entertain about each other, particularly in the context of post-colonial migration to London. In other words, while the novel clearly shows that speech is a determining element of individual identity, whether social or psychological, it is also a major factor in the complex web of communication or, rather, miscommunication in which the characters are involved. A case in point is what Hortense calls the "silly dance of miscomprehension" (332) when, in spite of her well-rehearsed English accent, she fails to get her message across in a London grocery shop.

The novel contains dozens of other scenes where a failure to make oneself understood or to understand others triggers intolerance or disappointment on both sides of the cultural divide. Clearly, "incomprehension" often goes hand in hand with sheer prejudice, both individual and institutional. The case of Hortense might again

²⁰ Elizabeth Kiem, "Lives hop from Jamaica to Britain, yet they never actually leave home," *San Francisco Chronicle* (29 March 2005), <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2005/03/29/DDG8RBV8321.DTL> (accessed 4 July 2005). See also Mike Phillips, "Roots Manoeuvre," *Guardian* (14 February 2004 <http://www.theguardian.com/books/2004/feb/14/featuresreviews.guardianreview10> (accessed 17 April 2004), and Dan Silkstone, "Small Island," *The Age* (17 April 2004), <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/04/14/1081838786858.html> (accessed 12 September 2009).

²¹ Andrea Levy, *Small Island* (London: Review, 2004): 135. Further page references are in the main text.

²² John Mullan, "Mind Your Language," *Guardian* (11 December 2004), Review Section: 23.

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be used to illustrate this point She has been conditioned by the colonial system to think of England as a paradise on earth, so she arrives in London fully convinced that, as a qualified teacher in Jamaica, she will get a suitable job in England. She fully trusts her English accent, dutifully imitated from the BBC, to do the trick, as well as "two letters of recommendation [which] each contained words that would open up the doors of any school to [her]" (448). But she soon realizes that words cannot do much against the discrimination enforced by a system that refuses to recognize her Jamaican qualifications, so that, in the end, "[her] voice faltered into a tiny squeak" (452), an appropriate vocal expression of her powerlessness. In a sense, Hortense's misadventures might be viewed as the result of an attitude that Mr Todd, Queenie's racist neighbour, sums up as follows: "'You'll never understand, let alone believe, a word that any of those worthless people say to you'" (116).

The linguistic motif in *Small Island* seems to send us back again and again to the question formulated by Bernard about the victims of the Blitz whom Queenie is trying to help: "'Are these people our sort?'" (285). However trivial, this question encapsulates much of what is going on between the communities represented in the novel. Indeed, language is repeatedly used in this context as a way of gauging people's degree of otherness or belonging, in many cases just to confirm the information apparently conveyed by their complexion. These linguistic and racial assumptions are, however, often proven wrong, being, as they are, the result of ignorance or paternalism, as the following instances demonstrate. At one point, villagers approach West Indian soldiers, wondering whether they actually speak English (138) and then conclude "'There, I told you. They speak it just like us, only funnier'" (138); some people even expect them not to be able to speak at all. As Gilbert remembers, a little boy calls after him: "'It speaks, Mummy, it speaks'" (165).²³ But such biases run both ways, as some educated West Indians, obviously unaware of the English class-system and the attendant sociolinguistic variations in England, also wonder "how so many white people come to speak so bad -- low class and coarse as cane cutters" (140). Clearly, then, in a multicultural society, language no longer functions as a reliable way of placing people, as Queenie learns when, as a young girl, she visits the African pavilion at the Empire Exhibition in the mid-1920s. There she comes face to face with an African, to her child's eyes, a "monkey man [...]. Blacker than when you smudge your face with a sooty cork"; Queenie is quite surprised when he expresses himself in "clear English" (6) because this seems to run counter to what she expects of an alleged savage. For her father, this man could only "have been a chief or a prince in Africa, [because] when they speak English you know that they have learned to be civilized -- taught English by the white man, missionaries probably" (7). For Queenie, however, this experience is formative and could explain her later relative colour-blindness, since it intimates to her that this man is like anyone else (6), his accent possibly illustrating what it means to be both black and British.

Small Island attempts to challenge these language-related prejudices by showing that thoughts and actions might eventually matter more than words, or should at least be taken into account as well, even if the novel also substantiates the fact that, as Queenie says, "there are some words that once spoken will split the world in two" (491). So, while recognizing the unquestionable power of language in shaping human relations, the novel is also replete with acts of generosity which go well beyond words, even if these kind gestures are

²³ One cannot help recalling here the classic instance of racist identification -- "'Look at the nigger!... Mama, a Negro!'" - that pursues Frantz Fanon obsessively in his chapter "The Fact of Blackness" in *Black Skin, White Masks*, tr. Charles Lam Markmann (*Peau noire, masques blancs*, 1952; tr. 1967; London: Pluto, 1986): 113.

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occasionally somewhat clumsily rendered. Gilbert and Hortense's eventual adoption of the baby that Queenie had by a Jamaican airman, who happens to be Hortense's cousin, is a case in point, even if this ending also seems to undermine the narrative's cross-cultural potential. Another, less striking but nonetheless telling, example occurs when Gilbert, whom Hortense regards as an "uncouth ruffian" (323), proves "true to [his] word" (104) and sends for his bride to join him in the "Mother Country," in spite of their initially loveless marriage. Similarly, at one point, when Gilbert is depressed by the discrimination around him, which is often expressed verbally, he meets a middle-aged English lady in the street who gives him a cough sweet; Gilbert concludes:

it was a salvation to me -- not for the sugar but for the act of kindness. The human tenderness with which it was given to me. I had become hungry for the good in people. Beholden to any tender heart. All we boys were in this thankless place. When we find it, we keep it. A simple gesture, a friendly word, a touch, a sticky sweet rescued me as sure as if that Englishwoman had pulled me from drowning in the sea. (328)

Interestingly, there is an enigmatic character in *Small Island* who seems to embody the necessity of going beyond language in order to capture man's essential nature: Bernard's father, Arthur Bligh, whom Queenie significantly views in grammatical terms as "a human apostrophe," that is, "a mark to show where something is missing" (288). Arthur, who has lost his voice after taking part in World War One, is a sensitive man, generous and devoted entirely to Queenie while her husband is away. His only words, expressed in a voice as "posh as the BBC" (308) and pronounced when Queenie has been injured in a bombing, are a sort of declaration of love ("I would die if anything happened to you," 308). His death during a race riot involving soldiers and military police might express his insignificance in a world dominated by verbal and physical violence, whether actual or racial, where being inarticulate is synonymous with being practically non-existent.

In addition to seeing how language defines human relationships -- for better or for worse -- in *Small Island*, it is also worth examining the stylistic features of the narrative, in particular its extensive use of similes. The novel contains dozens of them, not always very effective, in my opinion. Ideally, these should be classified and carefully analysed, but this would require another essay altogether. Suffice it to say here that by associating words or ideas that do not automatically belong together ("flattened like a hut before a tank," 170) or, in some cases, by introducing apparently 'exotic' elements into the narrative ("her wide brown eyes alert as a cobra's," 26), these similes indirectly draw attention to the fusion and confusion that characterize London, especially in its post-*Windrush* phase. A similar alchemy of words operates in the polysemic title. Obviously, "Small Island" refers at once to Jamaica, England, and London. At the same time, however, it suggests that each individual, too, is a small island, unable to cross the often linguistic divide separating him or her from others.

In sum, both *White Teeth* and *Small Island* contribute through their focus on language to a reflection on what it means to be English. In *Small Island*, Englishness is presented as the outcome of an ever ongoing process of occasionally painful mutual adaptation and compromise whereby, to quote Cynthia James, people have to literally and metaphorically "get used to each other's language."²⁴ It seems, however, that *White Teeth* goes further in its exploration of identity than *Small Island*, in part thanks to its contemporary setting, for it suggests a redefinition of Englishness, one that jettisons concepts of fixity and unity and more confidently expresses the

²⁴ James, "'You'll Soon Get Used to Our Language'," § 29, p. 11.

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human diversity at the heart of contemporary London.²⁵

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