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# Introduction: Digging into Language

FLORA VEIT-WILD AND CLARISSA VIERKE

The original impetus for this special issue arose out of the research project “Changing Patterns of the Shona Novel from Zimbabwe: A Linguistic Literary Analysis” directed by Flora Veit-Wild at Humboldt University in Berlin. Starting from the premise that one of the glaring gaps in contemporary African studies is the fact that linguistic and literary scholarship have largely existed side by side instead of collaborating for mutual benefit, the project aimed to establish a model for bringing together literary and linguistic research tools and methods in the field of African-language literatures. The main work of the research team consisted in establishing a computer-generated linguistic corpus from three prominent Shona novels (*Berlin Shona Novel Corpus*) and, on this basis, in exploring perspectives for new readings of these literary works (for details see Veit-Wild’s essay in this volume). The project, which was funded by the German Research Council (DFG) and ran from 2013 to 2016, was carried out in close cooperation with a number of Zimbabwean scholars.

In a similar vein to the Berlin-based project, Clarissa Vierke and a group of researchers at the University of Bayreuth embarked on an investigation into poetry as aesthetic practice in eastern Africa. Their research project, which began in 2016 and is also DFG-funded, seeks to consider the specific effect of poetry on life worlds in eastern Africa. Language is attributed a particular importance in this project since, according to its fundamental hypothesis, language in poetry has its own way of “speaking,” i.e., it evokes a specific aesthetic experience that makes it essentially different from non-poetic discourse.

The common interest of the two research groups in looking into the linguistic set-up of literary texts and aesthetic practices gave rise to the idea of co-editing a special issue of *RAL* entitled “Reading Closely: Investigating Textuality in Afrophone Literatures.” The epithet “reading closely” marks the stance and the motto behind this collection of articles that aims to put literary texts from Africa and their critical reception on a par with other major literatures of the world, for whom “close reading” has long since been a widely used term and method of analysis. For reasons explained further below, our focus is on literary texts in African languages. The term “Afrophone” is used to distinguish them from texts written in languages of European origin (Europhone) such as Afrikaans, Nigerian English, or hybridized languages with a European language as a base. Our declared aim of “investigating” their “textuality” emphasizes the craftsmanship

that is at stake: language is the clay in the writer's workshop and its literary usage needs to be examined with appropriate tools.

Accordingly, our approach is guided by the following main questions: What does writing do in a particular text and how does it do it? (See the title of Bazerman and Prior's book). And in our context, how do the specificities of an African language shape a literary text? How do authors writing in an African language creatively explore the linguistic particularities of the language they write in?

Our endeavor can be considered as a plea not only for a more balanced consideration of African languages and the literatures written in them, but also for a more language-centered approach to literature from Africa, generally speaking. Contrary to many prevalent forms of textual analysis of African literatures that tend to quickly step over language to dig for the "meaning" of the text, the contributions in this issue dive into texts and unearth their coming-into-being in and through language. The focus on language rather than on a primarily "referential reading" is reminiscent of Roland Barthes's position: "what takes place in a narrative is from the referential . . . point of view literally nothing; 'what happens' is language alone . . . the unceasing celebration of its coming" (124). In "Against Interpretation," Susan Sontag pleads in a similar vein: "Interpretation, based on the highly dubious theory that a work of art is composed of items of content, violates art. It makes art into an article for use, for arrangement into a mental scheme of categories" (10). She continues by arguing for an approach to art that seeks to understand how art and "the sensory experience of the work of art" (13) come into being in its unique form: "What is important now is to recover our senses. We must learn to see more, to hear more, to feel more" (14).

In *Real Presences*, George Steiner emphasizes: "Each language speaks the world in its own ways" (56–57). So how much do we lose if we only impose "one way of speaking" on a much more complex world? Language needs to be taken seriously, not merely as an arbitrary medium of the text that could be replaced by any other language or a translation. The imaginative space of a novel or a poem needs to be considered as being born *in* a language, with all its specific possibilities of construction, form, and semantics.

## HISTORICAL TRAJECTORIES

A rather acute blindness toward African languages and the role and importance of language in literary discourse more generally speaking has characterized different strands of research in African literatures. In a colonial and postcolonial setting there are usually two types of literary production and, accordingly, two types of scholarly engagement with them: a) orally transmitted texts and literature in the local African languages and b) literary texts in the (ex)colonial languages. Owing to historical circumstances, these two types of literature have developed separately from each other (see Veit-Wild, *Survey*, esp. chapters 7 and 22, regarding the case of Zimbabwean literature; Diegner and Schulze-Engler 2–12, concerning Kenyan and Tanzanian literature). This divide has been reproduced in the realm of scholarship. Whereas scholars familiar with African languages have generally received no, or very little, training in literary criticism, critics of literature usually lack the necessary language skills for dealing with Afrophone literatures. While literary scholarship, where the decisive theoretical debates have taken place, has

taken little notice of Afrophone literatures, the research on these literatures has made little effort to play a role in such theoretical debates (see also Adejunmobi 592, 593; Marzagora, "African Language" 42–49).<sup>1</sup> Both camps are not only defined by their respective competences, or lack thereof, but also by their academic affiliation, orientation, and tradition.

Moreover, while research into Afrophone literatures has a history of more than one hundred and fifty years (for an overview, see Finnegan), in academia, it has been tied to African linguistics (*Afrikanistik*) or to folklore studies within anthropology, with an increasingly functional understanding of text.<sup>2</sup> Meanwhile, literary analysis in the contemporary sense has developed in a completely different domain and has mostly been "appendixed" to the academic study of European literatures (*Anglistik*, *Romanistik*) (see Veit-Wild, "Einleitung," "Etudes"). The rift between the two "camps" has been enhanced by the fact that literatures in European languages have enjoyed both exposure to an international readership, linked to an increasingly global literary market, and, thus, greater critical esteem than texts in African languages (Ricard and Veit-Wild ix).

Furthermore, the most prominent literary debates concerned with Africa have focused almost exclusively on Europhone literatures, with the paradigm of postcolonialism at the forefront. Building on third-worldism and a rhetoric of liberation, which can be traced back even further to the 1960s and 1970s, postcolonial approaches have clearly enhanced the visibility of African literatures. Yet, paradoxically, while fighting for the recognition of previously "muted" positions from the "periphery," postcolonial approaches have also entailed a "silencing" of literatures in African languages as well as authors writing in African languages (Barber, "African-Language Literature" 3–7; Ricard and Swanepoel 1). As critics, like Evans Mwangi in his *Africa Writes Back to Self*, have pointed out, postcolonial approaches have displayed a remarkable ignorance toward and lack of interest in African authors, as well as texts and languages, which do not concern themselves with the hegemony of the West and do not participate in the global circulation of texts—or at least not in the way in which they are expected (Furniss 100; Barber and Furniss 5, 6). Working within pre-established categories of identity, race, and gender to unearth patterns of inequality, and obsessed with the logic of center and periphery, these approaches have favored literary texts written in the former colonial languages that speak to these concerns. Postcolonial theory and its offshoots have thus also helped to streamline the literary market. As Barber notes in "African-Language Literature and Postcolonial Criticism" (3), "writing back" paradoxically helps to perpetuate the notion of the West as the center of reference for any writing:

Despite intermittent claims to specificity, this model blocks a properly historical, localized understanding of any scene of colonial and post-Independence literary production in Africa. Instead it selects and overemphasizes one sliver of literary and cultural production—written literature in the English language—and treats this as all there is, representative of a whole culture or even a whole global "colonial experience." (3)

In a kind of complementary endeavor, research into popular cultures has gained in prominence since the 1990s. Focusing mainly on contemporary urban cultural practices, with studies on African hip-hop and other forms of popular

music like *taarab* in Tanzania (Askew) or high life in Ghana (Pageman), as well as theater (Kerr), this strand of research has tuned in with the growing transdisciplinary interest in African urbanity. Karin Barber's efforts to define the field in her introduction to *African Popular Culture* set the ground, followed by numerous studies emanating from the Birmingham Centre of West African Studies. The paradigm of globalization (the local vs. the global), which has prevailed since the turn of the millennium, has further added to this trend. The agency of local artists, musicians, and writers, who creatively adapt global techniques and influences to voice their own concerns, has been brought to the fore. These cultural "texts," seen as fundamentally linked to wider social and political discourses, are even considered to not only reflect, but to play a key role in producing, reproducing, and altering categories like "identity" as well as in imagining the "nation" (e.g., Askew's *Performing the Nation*; Rosenberg's *Verbal Art*). Vested with new political relevance, local languages, and the "texts" composed in these, have gained in prominence in research in African studies more generally speaking.

Nevertheless, the question of language continues to be largely neglected not only in the context of studies on popular culture, but also postcolonial approaches. In the study of Afrophone literatures, and even of literatures from Africa in the former colonial languages, language has been primarily treated as a means to an end or a symbolical token for constructing and deconstructing categories of identity. As Russel West-Pavlov and J. K. S. Makokha contend, postcolonial literary studies have "eschewed any sustained engagement with the topic" (17).<sup>3</sup> Emphasis has been placed on the link between cultural products and "economics, history or the politics of development," which "perpetuates a curious blindness to the linguistic underpinning of all these domains" (West-Pavlov and Makokha 17). This is again not without irony. Quite a number of postcolonial approaches have "from the outset contained important elements of linguistic critique" (Ibid. 17). They highlight language as an important part of identity construction or a subversive tool against symbolical monopolies (18), acclaiming hybridized narratives in English for their "African flavor." However, the "othering" of literary texts through their selective features of oral literature or African languages, as Barber has pointed out ("African-Language Literature" 7–11), has attributed to African languages the mere role of supplying the English text with its "Africanness." The languages themselves constitute a blind spot. They continue to be reduced to a symbolical token affirming the text's "difference" instead of being investigated for what they are. Furthermore, with the exception of Swahili, in which a rather well-established scholarship on the novel and "modern" poetry has emerged, "modern" writing in "new" genres, like the novel, in African languages, which exists alongside texts in the former colonial languages, is still largely pushed aside.

In reaction to such developments, debates on language and Afrophone literatures have recently regained in importance. The Janheinz Jahn Symposium at the University of Mainz in 2004, "Creative Writing in African Languages: Production, Mediation, Reception," focusing on the vivacity of local literary creativity and its specific forms of production and reception (Oed and Reuster-Jahn), was an important step in this direction. The binary opposition between European language writing, on the one hand, and Afrophone literature, on the other, is also sidestepped in recent research into zones of contact; debates about the Indian Ocean as a literary space as well as African and Asian points of contact have

fueled the interest in specific literary zones in Africa and beyond (Diegner and Schulze-Engler 7). Such studies demand more contextualized approaches where the interrelationship of literatures has to be empirically investigated. The “Habari ya English? What about Kiswahili?” Symposium at Goethe University, Frankfurt, in February 2011, also made significant inroads, since it set out to consider eastern Africa as a literary contact zone where literary productions in Swahili and English cross (Ibid.).

Furthermore, the question of language policies and writing in African languages has recently gained momentum in various contexts. A combination of factors has fostered the recognition or even acceptance of multilingual language practices and literary texts. One such factor is the emergence of new media that facilitate publishing and publicizing against or alongside a monolingual hegemonic mainstream. Another is the increasing deconstruction of stable categories of belonging like the nation-state, the construction of which was the biggest post-colonial project in Africa. In post-apartheid South Africa, the implementation of the official African languages as a means and object of instruction has gained in importance, as has the publication of literary texts in African languages—often driven by the keen search for ethnic roots. Even in Kenya, where apart from Swahili, English has always had a stronghold, and where Kenyan-English literature has boomed in the last ten years and acquired global recognition (Ogude, Musila, and Ligaga; Diegner and Schulze-Engler 10), the 2015 Kwani literature festival, with its title “Beyond the Map of English,” brought together African authors from all over the continent and the diaspora as well as local Kenyan authors writing in “vernaculars” in order to reflect on their choice and use of language. What was remarkable about this event was the openness of the dialogue about language choices and its evasion of essentializing ideas about authenticity. It thus sidestepped a dichotomy between authentic African literatures in African languages and alienated literature written either from or for the diaspora.

Leaving behind the compartmentalization of studies of African-language literatures has also been the concern of quite a number of scholars working on so-called “small languages and their literatures” (see, e.g., Gérard, *African Language Literatures*; Ricard, *Littératures d’Afrique noir*). In the introduction to their coedited special issue on African-language writing, Karin Barber and Graham Furniss set out to go beyond the overviews of African-language literatures and define African-language writing as a field. To this end, they define leading questions, like the constitution of audiences and the literature’s proximity to local readership (3) and to a “local cultural repertoire” (4), the “purposive dimension” (6), the multitude of local experiences embedded in various forms of morality (6), while at the same time underlining the culturally specific forms of speech, foremost genres that raise expectations about language use (6)—it is this latter point that this special issue seeks to explore further.<sup>4</sup>

Thus, more recently, we have not only seen Afrophone literatures becoming the subject of more serious consideration; we can also observe a modest but increasing demand for more language-based and text-centered approaches that go beyond the listing of stylistic devices and replace a merely functional examination of African-language literatures. Again, Swahili scholarship is one of the few exceptions to this; it boasts a fairly established field of literary analysis in which single literary works have been subject to thorough stylistic analysis, such as, for

instance, in Lutz Diegner's recent investigation of the changing style of the novels of the Zanzibari author Said Ahmed Mohamed (e.g., Diegner; see also Gromov). In *The Anthropology of Texts*, Karin Barber embarks on a more comprehensive approach to Afrophone literatures. Though her primary focus is anthropological, she highlights genre as an important frame for the production and reception of a text (see also, e.g., Rettová), which also implies the choice of specific motifs as well as linguistic form. She provides examples not only from the Yorùbá genre of *oríkì*, but also from various other literary genres in a variety of African and non-African languages. In her book on the Swahili *utendi*, Clarissa Vierke analyzes the interrelationship of the genre and the structure of a text and their impact on literary production and reception (Vierke, *Poetics*).

### THE LANGUAGE-CENTERED APPROACH: THE METHODOLOGICAL CHALLENGE AND COMPARATIVE PERSPECTIVE

Challenging the dichotomy of form and content, the contributions to this special issue concentrate on how literary text emerges not *out of* but *in* language. They examine the way in which texts in African languages explore, or even exploit, the potential of their unique linguistic forms. At the same time, the endeavor of plunging into language implies a larger project of revisiting our terms of literary analysis. Our analytical terms of narratology and poetics have been largely adopted from European languages, texts, and scholarship. Thus, there is a large part of literary creativity and imagination that escapes our consideration. The ongoing challenge lies in engaging in a culturally and linguistically specific form of "reading closely," which does not seek to impose preconceived terms, but rather enters into a dialogue with the text and its features.

The common interests of the Berlin and the Bayreuth research projects that laid the foundation for this special issue have determined its comparative, but also regional and linguistic focus: most contributions deal with literary texts in Shona or in Swahili. However, in its implications, our intervention seeks to have more than a regional relevance. It seeks to present models for the analysis of Afrophone literatures to be further explored in the future. It is for this reason that the contribution on Yorùbá literature (by Anja Oed) that we have coopted for this issue is not the "odd man out" but a reflection of the comparative agenda inherent to the special issue, which goes beyond regional specifics.

Flora Veit-Wild's contribution raises the question of how far the category of voice needs to be reconfigured once the features of Shona are taken into consideration. While she problematizes the use of computer-generated data for literary analysis, she also presents examples of how such data can be used to backup literary analysis. Drawing on the newly established text corpus born out of the three-year research project (*BeShoNo*), she focuses on *how* the Shona authors draw on Shona-specific resources, but also stretch the language to its limits to make their texts speak.

Lutz Diegner's article on metatextuality as a feature of contemporary Swahili novels from Zanzibar/Tanzania and Kenya takes the issue of linguistic tools in a literary text to a further methodological level. While these Swahili novels have mostly been discussed for their departure from realism, he posits metatextuality as one

of their central literary features. Applying a close reading to passages from three selected Swahili novels, Diegner classifies an array of different ways in which the literary texts reflect on themselves, on other texts, or on literary narration as such. As a result, an alternative kind of literary theory emerges in the novels.

In a comparable vein, Maurice Vambe develops his own methodology in his multilayered reading of Ignatius Mabasa's most recent Shona novel, *Imbwa Yemunhu* [*Youdog*] (2013), which, like his first novel, *Mapenzi* [*Madmen*], included in the Berlin corpus, is also a work of postmodern, non-realist fiction. Vambe perceives the various narrative strands of the novel as allegories revolving around the central allegory of the "dogification" of the individual. The Shona concept of *humbwa* (doggishness), he argues, can in turn be linked to the decline and crisis of the nation-state.

Yet another theoretical angle is introduced by Rosanna Tramutoli, who applies concepts from the field of cognitive linguistics to the reading of two Swahili novels. Taking as a point of departure Lakoff and Johnson's contention that metaphors are not stylistic devices but cognitive mechanisms, she sets out to analyze the usage of metaphors in literary texts. Drawing also on the Neapolitan Swahili literary text corpus (*NaSwaLi*), she asks, do metaphors in literary discourse differ from metaphors in other non-literary registers? How do they differ and what makes them poetic?

Anja Oed's close readings are situated on the methodological level of motifs. She offers a differentiated reading of the first two novels of the pioneer of Yorùbá literary writing, Daniel Olorunfẹmi Fágúnwa. Focusing on the motif of the antelope woman, she argues against a reductive interpretation of his writing, which has recurrently portrayed him as simply reproducing motifs of Yorùbá oral tales. Instead, she shows how his narratives' construction draws on various Western and Yorùbá discourses and concepts with the intention of addressing burning issues in his society. Her article calls into doubt the dichotomy of orality and writtenness, tradition and modernity, so often explored in relation to African-language literatures.

The construction of the city, a central concern in recent studies on popular cultures, is at the heart of Katja Kellerer's and Nikitta Adjirakor's essays. Kellerer examines the city as a trope in two Shona novels from different historical epochs. While in both novels the city figures prominently, she argues against a recurring and simplified reading that would treat the city as continuously and simply standing in for modernity in contrast to the tradition of the village, as in so many African novels. Similarly to Anja Oed, she argues for a more text-centered approach and provides the reader with an analysis that brings out the subtleties and differences in the novels' use of the city as a way of voicing social criticism. As her article also emerged from the Berlin-based research project, she examines two novels from the same corpus as Flora Veit-Wild. Adjirakor analyzes a hip-hop text by Muthoni, the Drummer Queen from Nairobi, which has the city of Nairobi as its main topic. Arguing against a reading commonly applied to hip-hop texts, which considers them as direct reflections of reality, she examines a variety of textual elements, like the language (predominantly Swahili and the youth language Sheng), discursive strategies, and recurring topoi that construct the city in the text. In this way, rather than considering the text as mirroring the city, she studies how the text creates an *effect* of it.



Clarissa Vierke's contribution deals with the prison poetry of the Kenyan poet Abdilatif Abdalla, which has hitherto been treated more as political commentary, despite the fact that his language has recurrently been praised for its sophistication. Focusing not only on prosodic patterns, but also the adaptation of topoi from an existing poetic repertoire, her article argues that his poetry is strongly rooted in his language and poetic tradition. Similarly to Katja Kellerer and Anja Oed, who highlight the specific adaptation of motifs in each literary text, Clarissa Vierke focuses on the creative appropriation of form.

Alena Rettová's exploration of sci-fi and Afrofuturism provides a fitting closure to the close readings presented in this volume. Dealing with literary texts both in Shona and in Swahili, her contribution is truly comparative. Furthermore, it breaks new generic ground: rather than considering futuristic novels as a form of magical realism that roots them in some kind of pristine past, her discussion tunes in with contemporary discussions of sci-fi and futurist literature. She thus places Afrophone literatures firmly in the middle of international literary and theoretical debates.

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