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**Genotext and intertext:
The grammatology of a literary idiolect**

Introduction

Contemporary literary and cultural theories hold that no literary work has meaning completely independent of social codes, cultural systems, and other literary and non-literary forms. No text, it is said, possesses any autonomous meaning in isolation of previous and future works. Every critical analysis or interpretation of a work, therefore, must of necessity involve wading through a network of textual relations, as meanings reside ultimately in those relations. The process of reading to extract or to discover meaning from a text leads further to a process of moving from one text to other texts to which it refers and relates in the network. Each specific text then, say for example, Chinua Achebe's *A Man of the People* (1966) or Ngozi Adiche's *Purple Hibiscus* (2003) becomes *intertext*, turning loose a plurality of meanings. Each new literary text is an intersection of texts and is understood to have been "woven out of numerous discourses and spun from already existent meaning" (Allen 2000, 67). Intertextuality as a poststructuralist literary theory refers to both the relationship among literary texts and the dialogue between them and other writing. Each text takes its meaning from other texts, not merely prior texts, but other concomitant texts and expressions of culture and language. As Jonathan Culler puts it in *The Pursuit of Signs*, "to read is always to read in relation to other texts, in relation to the codes that are the products of these texts, and go to make up a culture." (Culler 1981, 12). The term intertextuality has also been usefully and freely applied to other non-literary art discourse such as painting, music, architecture, and culture production in general

because it “foregrounds notions of relationality, interconnectedness and interdependence in modern cultural life.” (Allen, 5).

The apostle of the theory of intertextuality, Julia Kristeva (1984), has also established the fact of the split nature of texts (phenotext and genotext) as each text is said to move between symbolic and semiotic forces with the semiotic manifesting itself within the symbolic. Phenotext is that part of the text that exhibits the socially acceptable language of communication while genotext is the other part that emanates from the unconscious or the uncommunicable. While the language of phenotext displays definable structures, representing full acquisition of language, the language of genotext is revolutionary, lacking in regular syntax and disruptive of the established grammatical order. Phenotext expresses the desires of its speaker with child-like fluidity, ignorant or unaware of the logic of grammar.

The Death of Grammar in Saro-Wiwas’ *Sozaboy*

Roland Barthes caused not a small stir when he disturbed the ‘natural’ ideas in literary circles by proclaiming “the death of the Author” (Barthes 1977, 142-148). In the same characteristic manner, we may stand on his shoulder to proclaim the ‘death of grammar’, using Ken Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* (1994) as our exploratory text. *Sozaboy* can be said to have absorbed and transformed previous linguistic contrivances in the Nigerian novel. The particular instances of Amos Tutuola, Gabriel Okara and Chinua Achebe come to mind here as the concept of intertextuality places emphasis on echo, nuance, and difference.

In this essay, we intend to examine aspects of genotext (avant-garde elements) in Saro-Wiwa’s *Sozaboy* as a sub-culture (an intertext) within the Nigerian novel genre. Described by its author as “lawless,” “discordant,” “disordered and disorderly,” (Author’s Note) the language of this novel is a deliberate experimentation with the traditional grammatical order (phenotext) to

achieve a literary genotext. The language question has been a controversial and crucial factor in the African creative enterprise. The opinions and creative examples of eminent African scholars and artists on this subject are already too well known to require any further expatiation here. But it is important to declare at once that Saro-Wiwa's experimentation in this novel is a classic example of the creative use of the English language in African literature, perhaps the most successful use of unorthodox grammar in the African novel.

Saro-Wiwa's pen runs amuck like demented Fulani cattle in a china shop. While almost every known rule of the English tongue is broken without guilt, both the deep and the surface structures of the language come tumbling down as effortlessly as the biblical Walls of Jericho. The author has unleashed unbridled semiotic forces which could only have come from the Freudian/Jungian 'id' or the collective unconscious and re-channelled into art. After all, the subject with which the author is involved is a conflict of unprecedented tragic dimensions – a war in which primordial or repressed forces of wickedness and bestiality are made to become manifest without measure. Texts such as *Sozaboy* which unleash the genotext are naturally resistant to social standards of communication, breaking stylistic and linguistic conventions. The morphologic and syntactic forces of this novel struggle, disrupt, dismantle, and even subvert the linguistic patterns of English. Perhaps the term heteroglossia is aptly applied to describe the essentially antagonistic linguistic forces at play here because of the evident conflict between centripetal and centrifugal, and between official and unofficial discourses inherent in this text. In the "Author's Note," this is described as "a mixture of Nigerian Pidgin English, Broken English and occasional flashes of good, even idiomatic English."

Attracted by shining boots, buttons, uniforms with gold-braided collars and pretty young girls to go with, the young and naïve eponymous hero of this novel enlists in the army to help

bring the war to a quick end. Simply called Mene, alias Sozaboy, our hero is restless and loquacious. Undeterred by his limited formal education and poor command of English, this garrulous simpleton ventilates his feelings and eagerly narrates his tortuous journey from illusion to reality, from innocence through discovery to knowledge. Intending to take us along with him in this bumpy ride into his confused and totally disoriented world, he introduces himself thus without inhibitions or complex:

I am free-born of Dukana and that is where I went to school. I am the only son of my mama and I have no father. It is my mama who sent me to St. Dominic's school in Dukana where I *passed my elementary six with distinction*. In fact, I *am very clever boy in school* and I like to work hard always. It was very hard for my mama to pay my school fees but she tried hard to make me finish in that school.

When I passed the elementary six exam, I wanted to go to secondary school but my mama told me that she cannot pay the fees. The thing pained me bad bad because I wanted to be big man like lawyer or doctor riding car and *talking big big English*. In fact I used to know English in the school and every time I will try to read any book that I see. So when I see that I cannot go secondary, I was not happy. However, that is my luck (11).

And as I am going to Pitakwa every day, I am learning new new things. In the motor park, I must speak English with the other drivers and apprentice and passengers. Even some time I will see all those *small small books* that they are selling in the park. And as I used to get chop money every day, I will use some of the money to *buy the books and improve my English*. So I was getting money and learning plenty things (Saro-Wiwa, 1994: 12). (emphasis mine).

The novel *Sozaboy* is a stylistic as well as a linguistic delight. It distinguishes itself by its creative use of Nigerian Pidgin intermixed with various other conversational exchanges. The emergent sociolect is a kind of English really used by the near-illiterate, under-educated primary school graduate thoroughly fascinated by the new language he has encountered and eager to employ the little he has acquired to reassure himself and to impress his interlocutors. This is the kind of English we are likely to come across in market places and around the street corners. The use of language in *Sozaboy* is, to borrow Dathorne's and Feuser's phrase, "an uninhibited gamble with language", and "an experiment in an odd style" (Author's Note). We recall Amos Tutuola's

uneducated English in his novels and Gabriel Okara's odd English in his *The Voice*. Sozaboy's vocabulary is very limited and sparse, because of his limited education. He himself told us that he did not go beyond "elementary six", even though he boasts that he passed "with distinction" and that he is very clever and "used to know English in the school and every time I will try to read any book that I see" (11), his performance in English is still far below the standard.

Saro-Wiwa has himself informed us that the language in this text was inspired by "my fascination with the adaptability of the English language and of my closely observing the speech and writings of a certain segment of Nigerian society" (Author's Note). Sozaboy's language "thrives on lawlessness", which is part of the "dislocated and discordant society in which Sozaboy must live" and move" (Author' Note). His vigorous attempts to communicate his deeply felt experience to us in a language he is hardly proficient in gives rise to much humour as he expresses the reality he is passing through in an idiolect he has fashioned entirely for himself. We see him as he improvises, imitates, coins, adapts and interlards his expressions with linguistic items borrowed from diverse sources. He tells his story using the conversational mode most of the time to an imagined audience from whom he expects feedback.

Sozaboy's language is personal, unorthodox, disorderly, exuberant and quite rebellious, lacking in all manner of decorum. Sometimes, he struggles very hard to speak to us in Standard English, but his efforts are limited in terms of vocabulary and other handicaps that go with incompetence in the use of language. His mixing of language varieties appears unconscious, though occasionally he seems to derive some pleasure in trying to impress us with his use of highfaluting words, some coined by him and some he has just heard (Adagboyin 1992, 32). He exhibits his newly acquired linguistic arsenal and ejaculates:

a. "Otherwise someone can start *to mess up their senior commando*" (13). "...I am praying to God plenty so that I will not *mess up my senior commando.*" (125).

- b. “Zaza and his *prouding stupidity*” (38).
- c. “He ask all of us to *quashun and present arms*...Then he ask us to *ajuwaya* and fall out.” (19).
- d. “And he will always be *giving me assault*...(56).
- e. “You were talking *mambo-jambo* like stupid idiot goat.” (119).
- f. “The soza captain say we just waste *ammo*. I never hear that word before.” (106).
- g. “I like that name *kwashiorkor*” (143).
- h. “And when I see all those ‘*Simple Defence*’ people whether man of girl I will *be prouding* because now I am soza and they cannot search me as they were doing *before before*.” (73).
- i. “Very very *poongent* smell.”

Is it not paradoxical or shall we say ironical that we enjoy Sozaboy’s language because it impudently dispenses with treasured rules of grammar and morphology and that it does this with impunity and with applause from his educated listeners, among them linguisticians and erudite speakers of the language? We enjoy it because of its lawlessness and its lack of order. We enjoy it because it is deviant, rebellious and unconventional. We enjoy it because it codifies for us a new, and natural variety (sociolect) of English; ‘natural’ because of its effusion of alluring linguistic fragrances. We enjoy it because its linguistic incompetence metamorphosed into powerful overflow of linguistic *competence* and brilliant *performance*. It is, shall we say, the sweetness or delicacies of stolen bread, the secret pleasures of taboo. As it is written “Stolen water is sweet, and bread eaten in secret is pleasant.” “Bread gained by deceit is sweet to man.” (Prov.9: 17 & 20:17). “Deceit” here can be stretched to cover Sozaboy’s unconventional or unorthodox language. Stolen water may be sweet, but as that scripture concludes, it contains death in it. There is death in the sweetness of Sozaboy’s language. He is at once both a murderer of the English tongue and the creator of a new English; the English of the under-educated non-

native speaker, especially in the Third-World. Here are some of his specially brewed patent sentences:

- a. “We cannot *byforce* anybody”. “Government will talk that it is not *byforcing* anyone, still it will *byforce*” (6)
- b. “*Whasmatter* with you people?...Small thing and you begin to *formfool*” (7). “I was saying to myself that if the enemy begin *to formfool* today that I have got gun, he will see *pepper, red pepper*. Ha! Ha!” (89).
- c. “But the chiefs have known that *cunny* now”. (5)
- d. “I am *prouding plenty*” (12)
- e. “Everything in that hotel was *sweeting* me. Especially the young baby who was *making service*”. (17)
- f. “...he begin *to smile like idiot fool*, his mouth shaking”. (38)
- g. “Chief is no chief nowadays. Only *to tief*, chopping money...Chief Birabe who is *fearing* for the soza, but giving me order...*shouting and prouding and bullying*” (39).
- h. “I asked her what she is *hearing is happening* outside...”(51)
- i. “When I reached that Pitakwa everything which I saw *wondered me*.” (52)
- j. “Can woman begin to command me like that? Am I a man or what?...those girls...*making Simple Defence*.” (54).
- k. “...just *borning children* like rabbit.” (56).
- l. “And she too will *be shaming* and cannot tell me anything freely.” (58)”.
- m. “*Have I tiefed?* Have I called another man’s wife?” (117).
- n. “Where are all the young men with their *long prick and big blokkus?*”

It will take the technical tools of discourse analysts, sociolinguists and stylistic experts to describe the linguistic patterns of Sozaboy’s idiolect. But we may briefly highlight some of the peculiarities of this language which include neologisms, malapropisms, gongorisms, interlarding, code-switching, etc.

Neologisms, Malapropism & Co.

Sozaboy's idiolect has enriched the new Englishes with many new words and syntactic structures. This impudent linguist is never stranded or in want of vocabulary. He stretches his hand, without apology, to all the forbidden trees in the Garden to enrich his parole. The flexibility and resourcefulness of his idiolect are largely the cumulative result of the hilarious use of neologisms and gongorisms. He spins new words at will and becomes a sophisticated wordsmith in the manner of Mrs. Malaprop in Sheridan's *The Rivals*. Innovations in grammar, bombast, paradoxes, conceits, (un)intellectual ingenuity; name it, we have them in abundance here. Words such as *surpriseded, prouiding, gratulate, bellymen, chooking needle, formfool, give you moless, incharger, San Major, terpita, simple defence* 'civil defence', and *giving me assault* are some of the numerous coinages and corrupted versions of the original. In particular, *prouiding* occurs countless times in the text. The freshness and flexibility of Sozaboy's idiolect can be seen in the examples given below:

- a. "his trouble was *more than*"
- b. "people are *wicked more than*"
- c. "Duzia is popular man in Dukana. *Very popular at all*"
- d. "Oh, this Duzia sef. Have you people ever seen man *who useless like this?*"
- e. "I was thinking how the *war have spoiled my town Dukana, uselessed many people, killed many others*"

He also imports words freely from his mother tongue and from pidgin English: *tombo, Kotuma ashbottom, wuruwuru, ugbalugba case, kpongoss, ginkana, worwor, prick, blokkus, yekpe man*.

Sozaboy is an expert at spinning onomatopoeic words: “*Tufia!*”(30) to show disgust through spitting; “*kwa kwa kwa kwa*” (61) to denote the sound of laughter; “*gbram*” (71) to express the stamping of feet on the ground at parade; “*Heeeuun!*”(105) to represent the whirling sound of a bullet; “*dam dim dam dim dam dim*” or “*bam, bam, bam*”, “*gbum, gbum gbum*”, and “*Tam tum. Tam tum tum*” (47) for his heart beat; “*Gbagam! Gbaga gbaga gbagam!! Kikijijigim!*”, “*Tako, tako, tako*, (31 & 48) and many other onomatopoeic devices to denote the shooting of guns.

Sozaboy wants us to see him as someone who “used to know English in the school” and this accounts for his occasional affectations and sophisticated speech. He affects the educated pronunciation of certain words, for example, *praps* ‘perhaps’, *porson* ‘person’, *very poongent* ‘for pungent smell’. But he is unable to pick the correct words of his military parade commander. He renders the words as: *udad arms* ‘order arms’, *solope arms* ‘slope arms’, *hoping udad mas* ‘open order march’, *Quashun* ‘attention/squad shun’, *Tan Papa dere* ‘stand properly there’, *Ajuwaya* ‘as you were’, *staat eese!* ‘stand at ease’. He is not even conscious that he is not saying the words correctly, yet he is beginning to imagine himself as a senior officer with *plenty ropes*. In another place, he confesses that he is fascinated by the word *Kwashiorkor*, “I am telling you, I like that name kwashiorkor”(143), again, “talking mambo-jambo like stupid idiot goat.... I like that word. Mambo-jambo” (119). But sometimes, he intentionally uses some fine diction to impress us, especially if he has just heard a new word that impresses him: “Otherwise someone can start to mess up their senior commando”(13) or “he will always be giving me assault...” ‘insulting me’, “the soza say we just waste ammo. I never hear that word before” (106). Sometimes he gives up in desperation when the tortuous grammar and logic of the speaker go above his head: “Look, my friend, I no dey for all *dis ugbalugba* case. Abi, dis man think that we

are in University?”(42). Beyond the obvious humour which results, we are also left with the pleasant enjoyment of the discordant effect of his code mixing when in actual fact he does not possess the mastery of the main language he is using to communicate. Much humour is created by his various smart and ingenious attempts to redeem his linguistic incompetence. He speaks so naturally, so confidently and so authoritatively that we are forced to listen to his tale. We cannot deny the fact that the natural idiolect in which he relays his story to us helps to bring out the absolute evil and the horrible suffering of this particular war, and of wars in general. The chaotic and traumatic events of the war are re-enacted before us in a corresponding idiom.

Character and Linguistic Individuation

The other linguistic harvest that we reap in this text is the author’s attempts at matching language with character. We observe that the characters do not speak alike, though the entire travelogue is narrated in Sozaboy’s idiosyncratic speech. Individual characters still maintain their linguistic identities with this effervescent youth as our “lucid reflector.” Most of the time, he employs direct reporting in such a way that the linguistic identity of the speaker is preserved. When the “long long and the big big grammar” of the educated speaker becomes too heavy for him to handle, he attempts to paraphrase the speech in his own idiolect. Here is his paraphrase of the speech given by the army General at his meeting with the people of Dukana:

The man with fine shirt stood up. And begin to talk in English. Fine fine English. Big big words. Grammar. ‘Fantastic. Overwhelming. Generally. In particular and in general!’ Habá God no vex. But he did not stop there, The big grammar continued. ‘Odious. Destruction. Fighting’ I understand that one. ‘Henceforth. General mobilization. His excellency. Powers conferred on us. Volunteers. Conscription’. Big big words. Long long grammar. ‘Ten heads. Vandals. Enemy.’ Everybody was silent. Everywhere was silent like burial ground. The they begin to interpret all that long grammar plus big big words in Kana (46-7).

‘You boys have got excellent training. You, must be brave and proud of your country’. Fine fine grammar. ‘We shall overcome. The enemy will be vanquished. God is on our side’ (78).

We do suspect that he will appropriate into his own linguistic repertoire some of the key words used by the General: “Fantastic”, “Overwhelming”, “In particular and in general”, “Odious”, “General mobilization”, “Conscription”. In another place, he mimics the speech of another “Chief Commander General” whom he describes as “One big man... Very very tough man”; “tall man”: “speaking fine fine English.” “You boys must be smart. Salute properly.” “Behave like soldiers. Season soldiers”. “And to tell the truth, I cannot understand everything he was saying” as he was “using big big words that I cannot understand” (77 &78). We know that the error of tense in the speech (seasoned) can be traced to Sozaboy and not the speaker whom he told us speaks “fine fine English”. Bullet is another character whose Standard English speech is reflected in Mene’s consciousness and in his subsequent conversation. This Bullet, he tells us, “is proper book man”. (73). Soon afterwards, he begins to ape Bullet’s Standard English speech in his own idiolect. But we always detect Bullet’s fine English peppering behind Sozaboy’s rebellious syntax. When he reports his Company Captain as saying: “”He said that he will not worry me, because he have seen that I can be useful man especially as I have...Then he asked Manmuswak where he got idiot man like myself from...He said I have already dead sef by the time he saw me... I will have dead long ago” (122), we can see him struggling to preserve some the structures actually used by the captain.

We even detect some syntactic structures he has gleaned from the Bible: “Oh my God, why has thou forsaken me” (117); “Before I could twinkle my eye, lo and behold she have moved her dress and I see her two breasts like calabash.” (14); “I am good Samaritan several times...Forgive me my trespasses...I will be good boy from now till kingdom come” (47-8); “...he have brought back Lazarus from hell” (152); “...new country where nobody will tief,

there will be no hungry again...the sun will shine long time...and the yam and maize will grow well well...there will be life more abundant.” (155).

Sozaboy seems to possess a special kind of anointing for minting adjectives, especially each time he has to talk about the beautiful city-wise barmaid whom he later married. He goes from one level of description to another to give us the endearing portrait of this girl whom he first refers to as “service”. This is how he describes his first meeting with the girl:

So that night, I was in the Upwine Bar...I order one bottle of palmy from the service. This service is young girl. Him bottom dey skake as she walk. Him breast na proper J.J.C., Johnny Just Come – dey stand like hill. As I look am, my man begin to stand small small...The service sit near my table dey look me from the corner of him eye. Me I dey look am too with the corner of my eye. I want to see how him breast dey. As I dey look, the baby catch me.

“What are you looking at?” is what she asked.

“I am not looking at anything,” was my answer.

“But why are you looking at me with corner-corner eye?” she asked again.

“Look you for corner-corner eye? Why I go look you for corner-corner eye?” was my answer.

“You dey look my breast, *yeye* man. Make you see am now.” ...

I was beginning to shame. How can this young girl be speaking like this to me? Abi, the girl no dey shame? Anyway, I must not show that I shame pass woman...

So she put the record. Na Rex Lawson record. I stand up to dance. The service follow me to dance. I was holding her and she was holding me too. Very tight. My man was standing up. (13-14).

From this point onward, Sozaboy opens his adjectival tap till the entire landscape of the narrative becomes soaked with a cluster of endearing adjectives: “the girl”; “small girl with J.J.C.”; “this fine girl”; “this young Agnes”; “beautiful girl and smart”; “better baby who have traveled to Lagos”; “Lagos baby”; “good girl”; “very clever girl who walked with style”; “neat and beautiful”; “and slender like palm tree”; “wonderful girl”; “beautiful like full moon in Dukana”; “her teeth white like paper”; “fine Agnes with J.J.C.”; “what a fine baby Agnes is now”; “Agnes na proper J.J.C. I think she will be very good wife.” Of course he marries her and

rushes off to fight in the war only for another 'sozaboy' to commandeer her as his own war booty.

Conclusion

The hero, Sozaboy not only bastardizes and vulgarizes the English language, he forces his own authentic variety of English on us. He is constantly "giving assault" to the grammar of English. This is really not just a novel, but a Nigerian novel. Its distinctive Nigerian qualities inhere in its setting, characterization, and most evident of all, the language - a language that represents the spoken dialect of the barely-literates on the Nigerian streets. This text represents a spectrum of post-colonial English language experimentation in the Nigerian novel.

Crafted in the form of an autobiography, the participant-narrator recalls with vigour and interest, what he sees, hears, does, feels, thinks, conjectures and how these influence his emotions and reactions. He combines the strength, truth and directness of an autobiographer or a diarist. He hides nothing and shies away from nothing. The personalities, events, and things he describes come alive to us in a peculiar idiolect specially fashioned to carry the weight of his experience and the odd realities of his topsy-turvy world. The language flows naturally with child-like fluidity and this is part of the pleasure we derive from this text. Of course, the pleasure and the flavour of the narrative cannot be preserved in this manner were Ken Saro-Wiwa to write differently. "Plenty grammar" will lead to 'plenty narrative problems', thereby reducing our pleasure. We cannot but agree with Sozaboy that: "Before before, the grammar was not plenty and everybody was happy. But now grammar begin to plenty and people were not happy. As grammar plenty, na so trouble plenty..." (3). 'So therefore,' only the "death of grammar" as it is in this novel can guarantee our maximum pleasure.

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