

Decolonizing Western Phonics: Children's Humour and *Uncle Wowo's* Pedagogical Performance

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Abstract

Studies have focused on written children's literature, and only recently have those on performances for children concentrated on social effects. However, there is a novel strand of children's performance, *Uncle Wowo* (a Facebook/YouTube performance page), whose anchor, Uncle Wowo, resorts to a performative mode that draws on the Idoma (an indigenous Nigerian language) alphabet to spell-read English words, thus generating a humorous 'misarticulation' of the words. First, he spells each alphabet. Then, he proceeds to spell-articulate the English words in a fashion that is usually different from conventional English pronunciation. This study draws on Idoma spelling and articulatory systems, English pronouncing conventions and sundry concepts of decolonization to unveil how Uncle Wowo guides his humorous purposes for online child auditors. The most defining skits containing words capturing the fragmentation of the autochthonous African worldview were purposively selected and analysed. These words range from the names of countries, places of worship, and acts or items of worship embodying foreign thoughts and ethics to those serving as impediments to the indigenous group's complete humanization, especially because they were the heritage of colonialism alien to the indigenous users. This essay postulates that Uncle Wowo's performance was a decolonising performative act that retrieves the African language from the sphere where it symbolises the language of the oppressed to that which it figures actual liberty, even if linguistically. Paulo Freire's theory of critical pedagogy assists in this symbolic retrieval, revival and liberation of the oppressed through the restoration of the thought-language of the dehumanized and colonised. The essay concludes that, as insignificant as children's humorous performances, Uncle Wowo dares to upstage Western pronouncing patterns in obviously negligible ways while significantly decolonising of Western linguistic pedagogies.

Keywords: *Uncle Wowo, western phonics, children's humour, pedagogical performance.*

I am commissioned by the world
growing body of alphabets to fight
for those letters that cannot fight

for themselves [themselves]. Yes, I
am fighting for the oppressed –
those ones that they [who] have
[been] robbed [of their articulatory
sounds] them of their shout of
pronunciation. [. . .] I am an

alphabet fighter. [. . .] I am going to unlie all the lie.

– Uncle Wowo, “What your teacher would never tell you.”

Introduction

African children's literature – a body of aesthetic writing or performances embodying the African child's experiences and targeting children readers or viewers who “are still under the care and control of their parents or other adults” (Apeji 46) – has come a long way. Its pre-colonial robustness is mainly evident in folktales and performances enjoyed under moonlit evenings. When colonialism facilitated the emergence of written children's literature in English, even as it conveyed Western culture and worldview, it did so rather as a transfer of a literary product to a reading Other than as a transplant of foreign literature onto a local one. Later, African writers would respond to this scenario by writing stories imbued with indigenous African culture. In Nigeria, written African literary form can be traced back to the publication of the *First book of spelling and reading lessons for the Old Calabar Mission Schools* by Reverend Hope Waddell and *Miqua usuana esup nweed (School Closing Songs)* by Samuel Edgerley published in Calabar in 1846 (Apeji 46). Since then, this literature has grown to include such works as Cyprian Ekwensi's, *An African Night's Entertainment* (1962); Kola Onadipe's *Sugar Girl* (1964); Onuora Nzekwu and Michael Crowder's, *Eze Goes to School* (1966); Cyprian Ekwensi's, *The Great Elephant* (1970).

Of the above literature, comedy in print or performance has attracted the least academic attention. Yet children love comedies (Norvell, *The Reading Interests of*

Young People; Greenlaw, *Reading Interest Research and Children's Choices*; Cart, *What's so funny?*; Galda, Ash & Cullinan, “Children's Literature”; Sebesta & Monson, “Reading Preferences”), even though it is rare to find works relating comedy to fantasy or humour in children's literature texts (Darrigan, Tunnell & Jacobs, *Children's Literature*; Galda & Cullinan, *Literature and the Child*; Huck & Kiefer, *Children's Literature*; Norton, *Through the Eyes of a Child*). In Nigeria, children's performative comedy – including Mark Angel comedy, *Tegwolo* comedy, and *Uncle Wowo*, abounds in digital formats, owing to the widespread access to the internet by online liveness, “a social co-presence on a variety of levels from very small groups in a chat room to huge international audiences” (Couldry 8), via smartphones.

Few studies exist on children's performative comedy. Ndifon et al, (150-168) argue that the Mark Angel comedy could instill social values in children. Idowu and Ogunnubi (n.p.) go beyond the idea of imparting values to contend that the Mark Angel children's comedy skits have the potency of serving as Nigeria's soft power to the world, especially Africa. This became possible because the Nigerian children's socio-cultural environments were appropriated by these humoristic performances (Olajimbiti 1-18). These studies have however overlooked another significant comedic performance, *Uncle Wowo* (a Facebook and YouTube page for children's pronunciatory performance) which offers profound data on the decolonising process undertaken by Uncle Wowo (unbeknownst to him, the performance anchor), on African language.

Some Facts about Uncle Wowo

Commencing his pedagogic performances on April 9, 2021, even though he had published several non-pedagogic performative skits before then, Uncle Wowo went on to establish himself as a foremost comedic skit creator in Nigeria, catering to children's audiences. From the above date to September 16, 2022, a total of 56 pedagogical skits were published. They range from the names of countries, places of worship, and acts/items of which worship embody alien thoughts and ethics that serve as impediments to the indigenous group's complete humanisation, especially because they were the heritage of colonialism and have never been indigenous to their users. For example, we have the names of things such as *malt and small, shirt, pant, school, winning, stamina, congratulations, Google, eminence, ant, orphanage, congratulations, party, scatter, embarrassment, synagogue, hymn, choir*. These do not indicate a fragmentation of the people's worldview when compared to the names relating to religious worship such as *bishops, synagogue, hymn, and choir*. The last three, more significant in conveying the disruption of the people's indigenous mode of worship than the others, were selected for analysis. Again, of the names of countries misarticulated by Uncle Wowo such as *Uganda, Ethiopia, Tanzania, Rwanda, Ethiopia, Sierra Leone, Guinea, Madagascar, Ethiopia, Russia, Tanzania, South Sudan, Nigeria, and Senegal*, only *Tanzania* was derived from the logic of neologism, derived from the first syllables of Tanganyika and Zanzibar, the names of two separate regions. And the principle informing this combination is Western, not African. The name *Sierra Leone* is the most recent of all the country names (since *Sudan* has a far

longer history than it) and the only region deriving its term from outside of its territory and unanchored in the geographical features of an African location. The others are not so; *Senegal* was derived from the river Senegal, *Nigeria* from the river Niger, *Uganda* from the majority tribe, Buganda people, *Rwanda* from the major language of the country, Kinyarwanda, *Guinea* from the ancient coast of Guinea, etc. Out of this number, I purposively selected the most defining skits, and out of these, I selected: *Tanzania, Sierra Leone, synagogue, choir, and hymn*, words capturing the crumbling of the autochthonous African worldview, for analysis. So these five words from many others that Uncle Wowo misarticulated were thus carefully chosen for analysis.

Although Uncle Wowo engages in anti-colonial linguistic revisionism without the hindsight of some critical principles—he told me so—I postulate that the humour arising from the chaoticity of the English words he (mis)articulates and their reception by online liveness guided and sustained the continual creation of his pedagogical skits. To the casual (child) viewer, Uncle Wowo was only making fun of the clumsiness of some English words using his native, straightforward Idoma syllabic articulatory patterns and principles. As a first step, he spells each letter and then proceeds to spell-read, syllabically, the English words, conveniently running through the complex consonant clusters or multi-syllables in a fashion usually in contrast to conventional pronunciation. But in his seemingly innocuous reading, performative acts can be deciphered into a complex decolonising mode that critiques the coloniser's language and the history of

atrocities against peoples, contrasting the coloniser's race, and all the rapacious activities that this language gave expressions to. The language thus reminds one of the haunting relics of the departed coloniser within which the once-colonised African still expresses his thoughts, in instances mandated by national language policies. It was therefore important that this emblem of oppression, the vestiges of violence embodied in language and the sad reminder of the evils of the past, undergo some sort of paring back and decrypting its extant, intact prestige, even if to shred it. And the approach Uncle Wowo chooses, indigenised articulation, seems spot on.

By successfully agitating English linguistic items with the Idoma phonemic repertoire, the pedagogic humour validates the Indigenous and the African. It thus reclaims from the panicky English language the vitality and substance that the African language once had before colonialism snatched it from it. This is what one scholar referred to as "the epistemicide of their [Africans] languages and substitution of these with the coloniser's language," which has led to "disorientation of the lenses of their world" (Lamola 30; Marilelea 2013, xiii, 282). The decolonising process therefore will be piggybacked by Paulo Freire's pedagogy (enlightening) as it retrieves the lost privilege, substance, disorientation, and virility of the indigenous language, encapsulating the values and cultural mandates of the African, the language of the oppressed people. The study will draw on Idoma's spelling and articulatory system, Debbie Hepplewhite's English pronouncing conventions, and Paulo Freire's concepts of decolonization such as

conscientisation, which embraces dialogue, reflection and action, and rehumanisation. These three spheres will assist in unveiling how Uncle Wowo uses his language to serve humorous purposes to child auditors, as well as contending that even as purportedly insignificant as Uncle Wowo's children's pedagogic performance was, it threatens the English pronouncing norms and patterns in ways appearing negligible but symbolically weighty in terms of decolonisation.

Idoma Alphabet

Idoma, unlike Jukun which still has problems of standardization (Idris 70-78), has a thirty-six-sound alphabet (seven vowels, twenty-nine consonant sounds), greatly derived from the foundational works done by R.C. Abraham on the Idoma language and alphabetisation (Amali 125; Apeh 30-54). The alphabet includes (phonetic sounds that are inserted to provide near equivalents of the sounds in English): a /æ/, b, gb, d, e (as in the /e/ in /ei/), ɛ (as in the /e/ in bed), f, g (as in the /g/, sound in goat), I /hi/, I /i:/, j /dʒ/, k, l, m, n, ŋ, mŋ, o (as in the first vowel in diphthong /əu/), ɔ (as in the vowel in pot), p, kp, r, s (as in the articulation of see /si:/), t, u /u:/, v, w, y, c /tʃ/, gw /gwi:/, tw /twi:/, ts /hwi:/, ny /nyi:/, ts /tsi:/, z /zi:/, sh /ʃ/, fl, kpl, kwl (Agwu n.p). Out of this alphabet, we have seven vowels, which are: i, e (as in the first vowel of the diphthong in *take* /ei/), ɛ (as in the vowel in *bed* /e/), a /æ/, o, ɔ, u, fl, kpl, kwl. Add these three to the alphabet, minus the vowel sounds. This gives us twenty-nine Idoma consonant sounds.

In juxtaposing the above with the English pronouncing code, a sharp contrast emerges. Debbie Hepplewhite, one of the most practical phoneticians for kids at the

nursery/elementary level and who has greatly simplified the complexities of English sounds, has posited with concrete details that the English pronouncing code is heavily varied and chaotic (n.p.). Generally, the English alphabet has twenty-six letters, which translates to forty-four consonants and vowels; these sounds are how the English alphabet,

within the arena of letter combinations, assumes its pronunciatory shape and articulation. They are also known as phonemes. Table 1 shows her principles:

S/N	Sound/letter	Nature of Representation
0		
1.	One sound/phoneme	<u>By one, two, three, or four letters</u> in English autography: e.g. (a) k for /k/ <u>kit</u> , <u>duck</u> , <u>plaque</u> (b) /ai/, <u>thigh</u> , <u>eight</u>
2.	One sound/phoneme	<u>By different spellings</u> (graphemes): e.g. / əu/ is represented by: <u>lo</u> , <u>boat</u> , <u>bow</u> , <u>hoe</u> , <u>beau</u> , <u>bough</u> ;
3.	One group of letters	By multiple sounds, eg, 'ough': <u>though</u> /əu/, <u>thought</u> /ɔ:/; <u>through</u> , /u:/, <u>plough</u> , /au/ <u>thorough</u> (θʌrə).

Above are the general keys to understanding English pronouncing codes as well as the general delineation the English sound presents to non-native learners. Because the above are guiding principles of operation, we will repeatedly make reference to them as occasions of contrast with Indigenous Romanized African languages, such as Idoma, warrants. Most of Uncle Wowo's decolonizing humour is rooted in this complexity and chaoticity of the English articulatory system.

Contemporary African Writing System

Africa has had writing skills for more than two thousand years. However, colonialism brought with it a novel system of writing, with which their thoughts have since been expressed. It also meant that colonial languages became sufficient for building languages that had

not yet adopted their written forms. Thus, many of these later languages adopted romanised forms, that is, the European alphabet, as their written forms, sans their chaoticity. Articulative order is a major advantage for Indigenous languages; however, the advantage became in turn the weapon, as we would notice in Uncle Wowo's online performance, with which it critiques English in his attempt to make sense of the received non-native language as it decolonizes the indigenous one, Idoma.

But we must note that with the above linguistic heritage bequeathed to the African, he became no more than what Fanon calls a being for others (17). A being existing for others does not own the production of episteme; rather, it is owned for him, even though these epistemes rarely capture the true state of his reality or existence. This episteme can only be

crafted in and by language, yet this being does not own the means for producing it. Ngugi (86) was emphatic in declaring that the mind, the seat of production of all epistemes and thoughts—in the case of the African—has to be decolonised. The African then needs to brace up to the urgent issue of raising himself above the language that consigns him to an inferior space and recognizes his group as an “inferior people” (Grosfoguel 211). Even when his “local cultural originality has been committed to the grave” (Fanon 18), he would still be required to resurrect the remnants for future cultural buoyancy and liberation. This parallels Boucher’s contention that “language is one of the principal instruments of control and oppression through which the superiority of the colonising culture is imposed, not only as the language of officialdom but also through control of the curriculum in schools and universities” (1).

Decoloniality and Decolonisation

The oppressed need to be freed and absorbed back into a new humanity free from racial hierarchisation and asymmetrical power relations that have endured since colonial conquest, thus bringing to mind the twin concepts of decoloniality and decolonisation. Decoloniality speaks to the deepening and widening of decolonisation movements in spaces that have experienced the slave trade, imperialism, colonialism, apartheid, neocolonialism, and underdevelopment (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality,” 485). This is because the domains of culture, the psyche, mind, language, aesthetics, religion, and many others appertaining to once colonised peoples have remained colonised, even after their so-called independence (Ndlovu-Gatsheni, “Decoloniality,” 485). As Sibanda opines,

decoloniality “is a philosophy and practice that seeks to liberate both the colonised and the coloniser from *linguicides*” and also retrieve both from “social construction of not seeing,” as well as the condition of “willful blindness” to not being critical about, the need to be decolonial in the scholar’s attitude to cultural phenomena surrounding him, especially the African (Sibanda 47, Macedo 1993: 189). Sibanda and Macedo thus envisioned a novel refreshing humankind where “*linguicides* and reverse *linguicides* have no space” in the quest to erect mutual respect for the various strands of epistemes in the world (47 & 189).

Decolonisation, on the other hand, “requires the liberation, revival and restoration of indigenous languages through which re-engagement with the interrupted flow of time and history may be attained in order to re-establish continuity” (Boucher 8). There is a significant sociolinguistic factor in the decolonial process, which arose because Africa had experienced “colonial disorientation” which came with “the disorientation of the lenses of their world, the epistemicide of their languages and substitution of these with the coloniser’s” (Lamola 30; Masilela xiii, 282). Decolonisation will therefore ensure that there is “co-existence of colonial and indigenous languages as part of the new non-imperial universality in which all languages have their space and recognition outside the racialised hegemonic linguistic hierarchies” (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 489). His other term describing the fate of indigenous languages is “[o]rchestrated colonial *linguicide*” (Lamola 30), a circumstance where the indigenous language faces

threats of extinction from colonial languages. “Linguistic classification through the coloniality of language should be understood as equivalent to colonial racial classification” (Sibanda 51; Veronelli 108). It was therefore needful to engage in what Craggs and Wintle call the “cultures of decolonization” (Craggs and Wintle, “Introduction.” 3), a retrieval mission, and it strictly applies to every such retrieval action in the post-imperial and postcolonial era by a people once brutalised and dehumanised. So decolonisation thus refers to the very act of recovering the battered, bartered indigenous language from its charred residual inauthenticity assigned to it by the coloniser’s language and other substitutive cultural imperatives in order to free the humanity of the Indigenous Africans who own the language from dehumanisation.

Rehumanisation and Friere’s Pedagogy of the Oppressed

Rehumanising the dehumanised man is at the core of the Brazilian Marxist, Paulo Freire’s seminal contribution to decolonisation, especially with regard to freeing not just the mind of the oppressed but also his social reality. This reality has been inhibitive and antagonistic to his fate and which has made his quest for freedom or his attitude to freeing himself from bondage a lackluster one. Dehumanisation, which marks not only those whose humanity has been stolen, but also (though in a different way) those who have stolen it, “is a *distortion* of the vocation of becoming more fully human.” (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 44).

Freire privileges education for critical awareness, an “educative practice,” which “is a commitment to life and the world,” as

opposed to education as a tool (problem solving education, also known here as skills acquisitive education, which our conventional education is), in his quest to retrieve man from this dehumanisation, this rehumanisation (Freire, *Pedagogy of Commitment* 7). Freire’s educative practice comprises the idea of dialogue which aims “to create a process of learning and knowing” (Donaldo, “Introduction” 17) via *conscientização* (conscientisation), stimulating “a critical consciousness” (36) that entails “learning to perceive social, political and economic contradictions, and to take action against the oppressive elements of reality” (Freire 36). *Conscientização* is the erecting of an evaluative propensity in the oppressed in order to reveal to him modes of liberation from the economic hamstrings holding him down (Boucher 19). To this, Araujo adds *oprimado* (oppressed), those whose rights have been denied by the Other, coloniser (I adopt this term throughout this piece because of its profound import), and *libertação* (liberation), the retrieval of those rights that frees the once deprived and changes his status to that of a free man. Freire argues that, as beings in the world and with the world, dialogic education seeks to pursue “the yearning of the oppressed for freedom and justice, and by their struggle to recover their lost humanity” (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 44), instead of being afraid of freedom. Dialogue, a component of conscientisation, is with the word, and “[w]ithin the word which is in two dimensions, reflection and action,” where “to speak a true word is to transform the world,” to present a better reality espousing one’s true state and aspirations (87). Reflection commences with the identification of the generative theme, [generative] because it contains “the

possibility of unfolding into again as many themes, which in turn call for new tasks to be fulfilled" (102). "The concrete representation of... ideas, values, concepts, and hopes, as well as the obstacles that impede the people's full humanization" which "constitute the themes of that epoch," are encapsulated in the generative theme or word introduced for analysis (102). Yet the theme needs to be evaluated by inquiring into its components—its connotative and denotative markings (87), that is, its letters, the history of its usage, and the echoes across its historical space. In dialoguing with the thought-language, men, and women seek to free themselves from the word and all the meaning-appurtenances it has carried since its introduction to English and its usage over some time. The task of the dialogic liberator or "investigator" (106), in this case, Uncle Wowo, ably supported by my interpretive undertakings as a critical scholar, is therefore "to stimulate people's awareness regarding these themes" through translating reflection into action in such a manner that the dehumanised peeks into the condition of his existence as language holds it for him (97).

Above is substantially what Freire terms the pedagogy of the oppressed, where the world of oppression encoded in the word is uncovered to the learner-oppressed via dialoguing with the word. He insists, "There is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (87). In a way, the word is not just used for communication (Taylor 254). I agree with Freire that, as humans, "to exist . . . is to name the world" and "to change it" positively or negatively (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 88). Humans are built in word and in work which imbues the spoken

word with action, the taking place or coming into being as a result of naming. Freire's idea on the dialogue veritably touches on colonialism, with a major hint of its relevance to this study. Hear him:

Dialogue cannot occur between those who want to name the world and those who do not wish this naming—between those who deny others the right to speak their word and those whose right to speak has been denied them. Those who have been denied their primordial right to speak their word must first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of this dehumanizing aggression. (88)

If it is in speaking their word that people, by naming the world, transform it, dialogue imposes itself as the way by which people achieve significance as human beings, and I must say that Africans since the colonial era have been denied the right to speak their word back to the world of the oppressor (coloniser) and the need to begin to do that speaking is now.

Freire contends that "[i]n order for this struggle of freeing oneself to have meaning, the oppressed must not, in seeking to regain their humanity (which is a way to create it)," replace the oppressor but should rather restore both to the noble, discarded humanity (44). The oppressed should rather aim to set himself at liberty as he articulates the restoration of proper and peaceful humanity (44), a circumstance similar to what Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes in terms of decolonising the African language as the elevation of both colonial and Indigenous languages to the level of "new post-imperial universality in which all languages have their space and

recognition outside the racialised hegemonic linguistic hierarchies” (489). In the above, both humanity and the language in which a people’s humanity is expressed—this transferor of a group’s worldview (Thiong’o & Hansen 156–160)—are one and must be reciprocally treated with respect after the Indigenous one has been retrieved from the clutches of the oppressor. Herein is the convergence between decolonisation and Freire’s pedagogy of the oppressed..

As can be observed, decolonisation and Freire’s unique pedagogy, the pedagogy of the oppressed, both focus on language. The relationship between the decolonising enterprise in this study and Freire’s critical restorative reflection is hinged on decolonisation, which is the purpose, but the pedagogy of the oppressed is the analytical tool for this purpose. So whereas decolonisation is, in general, the process of retrieval of the lost word through any theoretic and analytic method aimed at restoring the lost or threatened Indigenous linguistic mode, which ultimately figures the restoration of the humanity of speakers of such Indigenous languages in Africa, Freire’s analytic method establishes itself as a specific example of that process. In this essay, Freire’s outlays of subconcepts, ranging from dialogue, the word, the oppressed, conscientisation, reflection, action and liberation, and generative themes, will be deployed for analysis of the word. If Freire’s pedagogic critical analysis restores human dignity through the awakening of the subject via the constituent parts of the word, decolonisation seeks to restore the indigenous language of the oppressed subject from the clutch of linguicides to a level of universal equality and mutual

linguistic existence and respect. Cutting off much of Paulo Freire’s practical process of pedagogy of the oppressed such as fieldwork and physical interactions with the learners and others, which are not germane to this study, this essay will only deploy the above-listed concepts on *Uncle Wowo’s* performances in an attempt to rehumanise the oppressed and restore the oppressed subject from dehumanisation to free humanity. This restoration lies in the fact that the articulation using the indigenous language phonetic parameters exposes the oppressor and his linguistic mode while at the same time retrieving and consequently reviving the crushed status of the indigenous language and the persons who speak it, the once) colonised. In the revival, therefore, is the freeing of the indigenous language and selfhood, even if symbolically, from the stranglehold of the oppressor and the thought system he espoused, thus achieving liberation for the oppressed through the regaining of equality for the language the oppressed speaks. I begin with the first term, *Tanzania*.

Tanzania: (English) /tænzəniə/ vs (Idoma) /tænɛzənyæ/

I will commence analysis using the names of countries (countries using English as the official language were chosen for analysis) because they contain the space of persons where the oppressed, by virtue of having been previously colonised live. I start with the generative theme of Tanzania. Although the nation was once known as Tanganyika and Zanzibar, the later name, Tanzania, is a neologism, a linguistic principle of forming a word from two or more words learned from the colonialists. So by drawing on it to form a new term, the word so formed becomes a

creation of colonial wisdom, and it is with it that certain images of exploitation and negativities accompanying their history in the post-colonial epoch can now be viewed. Captured in the English phoneme as /tænzəniə/, Tanzania brings to mind a nation once peopled and governed by Africans before the interventions of first the Arabs, then the Portuguese, and thereafter the British. The last had the most lasting and profound impact. Then, the Africans under British rule fought for liberation with Dr. Julius Nyerere in the vanguard. After independence, the once self-sustaining country or group of ethnic nationalities could no longer sustain themselves, owing to a drastically changed world economic system introduced to them in which they must now participate. They then depended on aid from rich Western nations and loans from banks controlled by Western economies; even English became the official language until Kiswahili was introduced years later after independence, a country that was taking care of itself before the colonialists came. However, English remained its medium of communication with the outside world.

Reflecting on the above in this way bares certain spaces of pain that need to be remedied through action, which is what Uncle Wowo does when he “misarticulates” the term as /tænɛzænənyæ/. The term formulated by the English principle of neologism espouses the quest “to be like” the colonizer, the introducers of the English language, but with the Idomaic articulation by Uncle Wowo, the African’s desire for copying the received model is hampered; that desire becomes *to be like* the envisaged unknown, the freed man—to be better today than yesterday in

becoming a liberated individual who has symbolically halted the invading language, thereby taking a major step in achieving humanization and the decolonization of the indigenous language. The history of this country forms what Freire terms the generative theme, all associated with the term Tanzania, and they are not positive ideas or values owing to their being once colonised and presently poor. It refers to the horde of information that comes up when anyone tries to look up what that means or what one would say to a novice wishing to learn more about the term. Uncle Wowo thus invites us to reflect on the term this way before taking action, the sort he has initiated for us by re-articulating the word *Tanzania*.

With Uncle Wowo’s articulating /tænzəniə/ as /tænɛzænənyæ/ using Idoma sound features, something facetiously ordinary, he seems to reverse these echoes by recreating and retrieving the word from the colonialists. This can be better viewed through Freire’s argument that to “speak a word” is to “transform the world,” to enunciate either a positive or negative praxis (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 87). By his term, he invites an action concerning. Uncle Wowo’s articulation upstages the standard pronunciation that carries with it the history of this nation and its status as a place for oppressed people when viewed from the perspective of generative themes. He thus makes the provincial articulation, thought to be a misarticulation, of equal status and value, hence possessing equal function in projecting the word-view of the indigenous peoples.

Since to exist is to name the world through the word, as I argue, following

Freire, Uncle Wowo's indigenous articulation of Tanzania names the world in which the hope of reversing the earlier naming informed by foreign colonial wisdom that has strangled the indigenous verbal expression is possible. He could be said to be recovering Africans, symbolically, from that initial loss, since they were once denied "the right to speak their word" (*Pedagogy of the Oppressed* 88). He was thus attempting to "first reclaim this right and prevent the continuation of the dehumanizing aggression" has caused (88). Through the above Indigenous articulation, Uncle Wowo initiates a dialogue with the colonial word, contesting every bit of it, from the vowels and syllables to the entire word. He is, therefore, a decolonising dialoguer, unbeknownst to him, imploring us to take back our humanity and reclaim it from the dehumanisation that has befallen it. And this reclamation completes the cycle of conscientisation he, as a dialoguer-liberator, expects his listeners-learners to imbibe.

Sierra Leone: (English) /sierə liʊn/ vs (Idoma) /esiiræræ eleone/

Brooding over another word, Sierra Leone /sierə liʊn/, another African location, complete with all its historical echoes, mostly negative, by which it is known and characterised, the name becomes the generative theme as a word embodying the values, ideas, etc. of the (post)colonial given epoch. Sierra Leone was founded in 1808 by the British as a crown protectorate for returning slaves. It later became a colony of the British until 1961, making it one of the many places colonized by the West. English is its official language. Though rich in diamonds and other natural resources, the country since independence has not been

able to create a developed economy. The high point of this colonially-induced backwardness was the civil war, a spillover war from Liberia, of 1991–2003, which led to over 6,000 deaths. This generative theme, the history informed by colonialism, which the mention of the term calls to mind, Uncle Wowo invites us to reflect and act on, he being in the vanguard of these. With this, he seems to be the intervention, replacing pronunciation with Idoma's. He symbolically attempts to resist the order bequeathed to the dehumanised Sierra Leoneans through the English language by breaking into the false units of sound and replacing them with a strictly Idoma articulatory system.

Following Freire, an analyst-investigator would see Uncle Wowo conscientising or awakening them to a new reality. His conscientisation involves dialoguing with the word Sierra Leone by articulating /sierə liʊn/ as /esiiræræ eleone/. He enters the dialogic fray with his indigenous language by inviting reflection and action on and through the word in order to decolonize the language that has formed the existence of oppressed people in Sierra Leone and, by extension, Africa. By this act, he elevates the indigenous language to the level of a "new post-imperial universality in which all languages have their space and recognition outside the racialised hegemonic linguistic hierarchies" (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 489). This we could see when Uncle Wowo, as a sort of linguistic activist, tries to awaken in listeners a critical consciousness towards the linguistic hamstrings holding oppressed people down. Because every word uttered is a transformation of reality and of the world, Uncle Wowo is thus attempting,

through his articulation using the Idoma alphabet, to transform colonial reality in order to effect the humanisation of the oppressed. He begins by replacing the received phonemes with Idoma ones at the constitutive level of the word, such as letters/phonemes, syllables, before articulating the word. When he does this, it is not just to communicate using the word; it is to name a new world, to change it from the oppressor's to the oppressed in order to humanise the latter. This dialogue with the English term, which is then later articulated in the substitutive Idoma alphabet, epitomises the assertion of the rights of persons to speak their own words that were once denied. This primeval right to utter their word is therefore reclaimed, along with the prevention of "dehumanizing aggression" via language (Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 88). He therefore aims to set the oppressed the oppressed at liberty by initiating the erection and restoration of proper and peaceful humanity (44). This circumstance is similar to what Ndlovu-Gatsheni describes as decolonising the African language via the elevation of both colonial and Indigenous languages to the level of "new post-imperial universality in which all languages have their space and recognition outside the racialised hegemonic linguistic hierarchies" (489). In the above, both humanity and the language in which a people's humanity is expressed are one and must be reciprocally treated with respect after the Indigenous one has been retrieved from the clutches of oppressors. Herein lies the convergence between decolonisation and Freire's pedagogy of the oppressed. Uncle Wowo has consequently concluded the dialogue begun with his earlier reflection, which has resulted in an attempt to halt the current linguicide.

In the above circumstance, there will be no case of linguicide, only mutual respectful existence for the Africans who would choose to articulate term as /esiiræræ eleone/ and for the non-Africans who would rather prefer the colonial appendage. But the instance of the Africans to stick with their articulation releases them from dehumanization to humanization, and to the liberty of the oppressed. .

Choir: (English) /kwʌiə/ vs (Idoma) /tʃoire/:

If the synagogue, representing all foreign faiths in Africa, is contested by Uncle Wowo's pedagogical performance, *choir* /kwʌiə/, the song-rendering section of this faith did not miss his focus. The choir rends songs to put the worshippers in the right mood for the sermon to be delivered. It is related to the choral rendition of the Greeks in Dionysian festivals. However, it became a predominant practice amongst such alien faith as Christianity and has been passed on to present generation of Africans as indicative of songsters in the church. The missionaries who accompanied the colonialists to Africa, including Tanzania and Sierra Leone, have helped to retain this very important arm of the church that has had a major religious impact on the growing Christian communities. To worsen matters, the missionaries were in charge of educating Africans in the colonial era. Above is the generative theme *choir*, the histo-temporal context of the term and the denotative echoes it bears in this era. *Choir* was therefore a linguistic item belonging to the coloniser/oppressor before it was handed over to the colonised/oppressed. This remained so, substituting for the local

choral mode because Christianity does not allow competing modes of worship. The oppressed retaining *choir* was therefore, in Freire's viewpoint, dehumanizing because it stunts the indigenous linguistic mode, replacing the autochthonous reality it met on ground leading to erasure of culture. Rehumanising the African so addicted to this erasure would require conscientisation through dialoguing with the word, which Uncle Wowo now does.

So when Uncle Wowo articulates *choir* /kw^iə/ as /ʃoire/, it became clear that he was making sense of this term using Idoma alphabet and phonetic properties. He tries to dialogue with the received, transplanted colonial thought-language, the sort that bears imprints of Africans' oppression and colonial linguistic tendencies. He seems to be saying that if the group of singers in an alien faith must only be apprehended in the tongue of the foreigner, then it should make sense that it could only be articulated using the indigenous alphabetical system for the term's linguistic propensities to be halted. It is only then that the colonial dehumanization could be unmade and remedied, as the African strives to regain his proper personhood and humanity from the long history and relics of oppression.

A Unique Case

However, *choir* presents a unique case of complication in English that has eluded Debbie Hepplewhite's sophisticated explanation of English orthographic description for the learners of the language. By articulating /ʃoire/, the chaoticity labelled complexity by Debbie Hepplewhite comes to mind here, where she asserts that one sound (phoneme) can be represented by 2-4 letters and one sound can be represented by different

spellings (graphemes), by which she means that one sound can be represented by up to four alphabets, as in the diphthongs /əu/ bow, beau, bough, as well as a group of letters representing multiple sounds such as "ough," etc. We have this as plough /au/, though /əu/, and thought /ɔ:/. However, when the choir is subjected to these principles, it seems elusive that the sound /kw/ in /kw^iə/ does not relate to the first code where one sound can be represented by different graphemes or spellings because there is no articulatory relationship in terms of similarities of sound between the phonemes /k, w/ and the grapheme "ch," let alone the other graphemes "oir." Under what principle could the grapheme "ch" or "cho" be phonetically articulable as /kw/ or /kw^/ or even the entire term /kw^iə/? The intricacy is especially worsened by the fact that the challenge runs through the entire term and not just a syllable or cluster of sounds in the word. In fact, it is only in articulation that the syllabic component becomes visible; otherwise, it could be easily mistaken for a monosyllabic word instead of the bisyllabic term that it is. What we find in /kw^iə/ is a total substitution of phonetic parameters, eliding the applicability of Hepplewhite's three rules, which have been applied to explain the unique articulatory chaoticity of the English language system.

It seems plausible to argue that Uncle Wowo's /ʃoire/ not only contests the received oppressive colonial linguistic element but also offers a plausible resolution to the articulatory impasse that has defied identification by a renowned English orthography expert, Debbie Hepplewhite. This is especially so as it offers phonetic equivalents for /kw^/ as

/ʃo/ and for /iə/ as /ire/. In the above instance, the indigenous language has helped to resolve the chaoticity providing a scholarly explanation to the experts of the language of the oppressor. This signifies that the indigenous could actually assist in resolving the imbroglio evident in the linguistic make-up of the oppressor, whose world, as constituted by this same wobbly language, could not have been a perfect one. In fact, the oppressor's word was actually in dire need of remaking by someone else, most significantly by the oppressed, whose dehumanized life can only be undone by himself in the form of self-liberation and rehumanisation.

So through Uncle Wowo's /ʃoire/, we glimpse at the reflection that is embedded in the word and which opens up the socio-linguistic condition the learner-oppressed grapples with. He wishes us to perceive the "social, political and economic contradictions, and take action against the oppressive elements of reality" (Freire 36), in this case the damage language does. His enlightenment would then liberate the learner-oppressed from the clutches of the oppressor and make him yearn for freedom, which forms the other arm of the act of dialogue-action—initiating and sustaining the act of acquisition of freedom. His new term, a word articulated using the Idoma alphabet, recreates the world where rehumanisation is possible, since "to speak a true word is to transform the world" (87), and to do this, he begins by substituting his Indigenous alphabet and sounds with the English ones that should be investigated—these "constitute elements or letters comprising the term examined. "To exist" in liberation, in freedom, it seems for Uncle Wowo, "is to name the world" in which his humanity

can be rehumanised and rehabilitated from existing dehumanization (88). Belonging to a group whose "right to speak their word has been denied," he resorts to the Idoma alphabet to be able to speak their own word, an event that restores the suspended primal right suspended by the colonial intervention (88). By decolonising the African language this way, it is pushed several wrungs higher to the level of the colonial language, where a new and fresh linguistic order of recognition devoid of racial and power-induced hierarchical order (Ndlovu-Gatsheni 489).

Hymn: /æyɛmunɛn/ vs /him/

The primary duty of the choir, as earlier asserted, is to sing in the church. A major component of its songs is *the hymn* /him/, a religious item bearing the same history as the choir. Because of the similarity of contexts, *choir* and *hymn* possess almost the same generative theme, with only their denotative meanings differentiating the terms. With Uncle Wowo, the activist-investigator, articulating it through the lens of the indigenous African articulatory model as /æyɛmunɛn/, he seems to be contesting the linguistic and discursive strangeness of the word. So we dwell mainly on the action—the anticipated action to be taken—that the author expects us to take: reclamation of the indigenous language and the African who speaks it.

It is true that the term conforms to Debbie Hepplewhite's first rule, where a sound/grapheme could be represented by two or more letters—two in the case of *hymn* /him/, The chaoticity brought about by the "y" and the non-articulation of the "n" in the word seems astounding and must be explained or made sense of. If

anything, the English word *him*, the third-person pronoun object, should have been used orthographically, in which case the word *him* could have been a synonym of the church song. The English language is replete with such homographs. But the nonsystematicity of the English convention of spellings and articulation never allowed that, a circumstance Uncle Wowo has proffered a modest alternative to. His articulation was therefore a dialogue with the word, which he changes by indigenously articulating it in order to create a new reality where the African can be humanised, liberated from the linguicidal acts of the colonialists and oppressors.

But while at this, Uncle Wowo conscientises people who currently sing the hymns long after the white man or the first priest of the white man's church had gone that they were currently under the oppressive linguistic regime of the oppressor-coloniser. The linguistic instance of this dominion has been kept alive by the African himself, sustaining the language that subjugated Africa in colonial times, out of which they should commence extricating themselves. One such avenue for commencing the extrication is by allowing the indigenous language of oppressed peoples in Africa to make sense of their condition and to aid in their liberation. By articulating him as /æyɛmunɛn/, Uncle Wowo contests the sophistication of the colonialists' language and puts in doubt its long-held notion of superiority and 'globalness'. And this contestation takes place at the level of thought language before the liberation of the oppressed from the dehumanization of the past becomes effective. By staging an indigenous articulation, Uncle Wowo suggests a return to the African mode of

worship, of singing to our supreme being—not the hymn, but the African religious songs. This way, the colonial and Indigenous languages would be on par, thus ushering in a new linguistic regime of recognition for the Indigenous language that is devoid of racial and power-induced hierarchical order (Ndlovu-Gatshehi 489).

Conclusion

This study, dwelling on children's pedagogical humour, has unveiled Uncle Wowo's decolonising process in language from the most unfamiliar arena: popular culture. I drew for my analysis on the Idoma alphabet and articulatory pattern that is syllable-guided and where consonant clusters are rarely found; the English pronouncing conventions; and some concepts of decolonization, especially Paulo Friere's pedagogy of the oppressed. These were deployed to analyse selected Uncle Wowo's humorous terms aligning with Freire's generative themes, albeit in a decolonising fashion. I would like to conclude that, as insignificant as children's performance, which forms the main audience, Uncle Wowo has significantly attempted to upstage Western pronouncing patterns in English in ways that are negligible but outrightly consequential to extant decolonising processes in African studies. Representing those who have been denied their primal right to express their word, their own reality, we have now repossessed it, and with this, their rehumanisation. This was shown through an analysis of purposively selected words: *Tanzania*, *Sierra Leone*, *choir* and *hymn*—words apprehending the disintegrating autochthonous African worldview. Thus, Uncle Wowo, the linguistic activist-investigator, was right when he said his

mission was: “Yes, I am fighting for the oppressed—those ones that they [who] have [been] robbed [of their articulatory sounds] them of their shout of pronunciation . [. . .] I am an alphabet fighter. [. . .] I am going to unlie all the lie.” (Uncle Wowo, “What your teacher would never tell you”). Like the activist that he calls himself, in the above analysis, he has proven to be a profound fighter indeed.

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