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Response to Ngugi wa Thiong'o

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Response

Emily Parker

Ngugi wa Thiong'o has pursued a long and distinguished career as an evangelist for the use of African languages as a means of decolonizing the African mind. His 2003 Macalester College International Roundtable address falls well within this tradition. Grappling with issues of identity, power, and voice, it offers a persuasive argument for the use of local languages in Africa as part of a project to enable Africa and African peoples.

The indispensable message of African empowerment is clearly advanced throughout Ngugi's address. Nevertheless, I encounter several concerns in regard to the three basic premises of his argument. These premises are as follows: first, that Africa exists as a cohesive entity that should be united; second, that the prevailing use of European languages by Africans inhibits Pan-African unity; and third, that the use of local languages is a feasible means of promoting stability and unity throughout Africa. In this response, I explore some of the ways in which I find these premises to be problematic. In doing so, I do not wish to undermine Ngugi's project of empowerment. Rather, my intent is to encourage a debate that will lead to a more comprehensive consideration of language and identity in a globalized world.

The first premise of Ngugi's essay is the Pan-African presumption that Africa is in fact an identifiable entity and, furthermore, one that should be united. He writes, "we know that our real strength lies in the unity of Africa and African peoples." My concern is that this premise lacks precision, simplifying a myriad of cultures, peoples, histories, and languages into one essentialized type. Under scrutiny, it appears that Ngugi's definition of Africa is not simply continental. Firstly, Ngugi excludes some groups located within the continent. By opposing African languages to European languages, he implies that mother-tongue speakers of European languages within Africa are not, in fact, Africans. Nationalized descendents of European colonizers cannot be Africans by this logic, regardless of the number of generations they inhabit the continent. Pushed to its extreme, this line of thinking denies African identity to the Arabic-speaking descendants of Arab conquerors who have lived north of the Sahara since the seventh century. Secondly, Ngugi's definition of Africa is not continental because he

includes groups beyond the continent's geographical boundaries. For example, Ngugi absorbs the literature of the African diaspora into the category of African heritage.

While precluding a continental definition of Africa, both the inclusion of the African diaspora and the exclusion of the aforementioned groups imply that race is the basis for the African identity. This seems an unlikely conclusion, considering the plethora of academic and biological research exposing the constructed nature of race. If African identity cannot be racially defined nor delineated geographically, the precise subject of the address remains ambiguous. In order to evaluate the role of language in Africa, it must be clear to whom and to what the address refers. To accurately frame this debate, Ngugi's argument cannot simply rely on Pan-Africanism as an unambiguous notion. Rather, it should strive to be as precise as possible in the definitions and identities it addresses.

Kwame Anthony Appiah writes in an essay on African identities, "Pan-Africanism...however false or muddled its theoretical roots, can be a progressive force."¹ Suppose, then, we accept as a useful postulate Ngugi's first premise of a cohesive African entity. The second premise advanced by Ngugi's essay is that the use of European languages by Africans will impede the goal of African unity and perpetuate a world system that disadvantages Africa. I would argue that this premise suffers from a sense of linguistic determinism. Ngugi writes that the metaphorical "way" that "tells people who they are" is "carried by language." This analysis claims that a language defines its speakers, ignoring the reciprocal power of humans to shape language, intentionally and otherwise.

Furthermore, this brand of linguistic determinism exhibits startling Eurocentricity by denying Africans the possibility of literary equality with other speakers when using European languages. Ngugi writes, "European languages...often dictate the space of knowledge that used to be occupied by African languages." He seems to suggest that Europeans, or perhaps so-called Western speakers of European languages, have a unique monopoly on the manipulation of European languages for self-expression. In contrast, Africans can only use European languages to mimic European thoughts. Not only does this insult the African intellect, it also denies the role of language interaction as a positive global force. As a young student, I vividly remember reading *A Legacy* by Sybille Bedford, an English novel interspersed with paragraphs in French and German. It was electrifying. I immediately

wanted to learn French and German to understand the new world into which the text had plunged me. Ngugi hints at such productive interaction when he describes the development of a common African literature, but he focuses solely on the shared characters and plots of translated stories. Ironically, he ignores the vast power of language itself to edify and expand the horizons of speakers of other languages.

The linguistic determinism of this second principle also posits language as a static force rather than as a malleable medium of interacting communities. Certainly, I share the concern over a region accepting as its lingua franca the language of a foreign center of economic and commercial power, especially when that language is heavily associated with a proselytizing religion. However, this describes not only the European languages that so concern Ngugi, but also, to a great extent, the Kiswahili that he extols as a positive development. While Bantu in grammar, Kiswahili borrows heavily from Arabic and Persian, emerging in East Africa by the ninth century C.E. as the product of intense commercial relations. Likewise, Swahili culture was characterized by the nearly universal establishment of Islam, as well as architecture and literature highly derivative of Persian and Arabic forms and themes. These facts do not remotely diminish the status of Kiswahili as a viable linguistic and literary medium. Rather, they illustrate that language is dynamic and that the influencing of language by global forces can be a constructive process.

The second premise of Ngugi's article, which asserts that the use of European languages by Africans inhibits African unity, views languages as static forces exclusive to particular groups of people, defining their cultural essence. Perhaps a more helpful view of languages recognizes that they are dynamic forces, mutually influencing and influenced by their speakers and other languages.

The third and final premise that Ngugi presents is that the use of local languages is a feasible means of promoting stability and unity throughout Africa. My concern is that this premise fetishizes language to such a degree that it predicts linguistic salvation while ignoring practical constraints. I am a strong believer in the metaphysical significance of language, particularly one's first language. However, I find the notion of linguistic salvation to be equally as suspect as linguistic determinism, although for more pragmatic than ideological reasons. Most obviously, it minimizes the other complex forces at hand — the economic situation and colonial and pre-colonial history, to name a few.

Furthermore, linguistic salvation does not fully address the power issues that could arise among local languages. Ngugi is emphatic that the “unqualified equality of all the nationalities” and their languages must be a state policy, and that the languages of larger groups should not subsume smaller languages. Nevertheless, when talking about “bridgehead” languages, he suggests that these transborder communities can be the “practical and moral basis of unity” between African countries. If certain languages form the basis of transnational unity in Africa, how can they not gain precedence over isolated domestic languages, especially as media of international affairs? Even within a given country, language demographics have power implications. Many African cities are comprised mainly of one language group. Such languages have a natural economic advantage over more isolated, resource-poor languages. It seems that the same process of linguistic domination by commercial and cultural centers would be replicated throughout African countries.

Finally, the notion of linguistic salvation ignores the current difficulty that similar projects are experiencing. The most obvious comparison is to the European Union (E.U.), a conglomeration of countries that has expressed interest in upholding the equality of its members by producing materials in each one’s official language. The E.U. is currently bound to translate all proceedings and materials into twelve official languages, Gaelic and Luxembourgish voluntarily excluded. Thirteen new countries have applied to the E.U. If the E.U. chooses to recognize the official languages of these countries, the number will rise to twenty-three. This does not include European minority languages, such as Catalan, Romany, or Yiddish, let alone the languages of major immigrant populations. Even so, the E.U. is struggling under the vast financial and bureaucratic burden of translating materials into its twelve languages, and is reviewing other options for the future. The E.U. is a rich federation of states with relatively interrelated histories, cultures, languages, and ethnic groups. By comparison, Africa is a vastly larger and poorer continent whose diversity is manifested in its number of spoken languages, estimated to be between 800 and 2,000. Even if Africans were to accept the ideological necessity of using only local languages, it is doubtful that each country could finance the implementation that Ngugi suggests. Funding for the proliferation of schools alone would be tremendous.

The premise that the use of local languages is a feasible means of promoting unity throughout Africa depends on a sense of linguistic

salvation. In doing so, it minimizes other influential factors like power relations among local languages and logistical constraints as displayed by contemporary models. To propose a successful language plan, Ngugi must address not only ideological factors but also the practicalities of language reform.

To conclude, I find that Ngugi wa Thiong'o has offered many valuable insights in his Roundtable address. Among these are the exhortation for Africans to produce both creative and academic works in their own languages, and the conviction that no government should hinder the use of local languages. At the same time, I have concerns about each of the three basic premises of Ngugi's argument. In summary, the first premise rests on an unqualified assumption of Pan-African identity. The second premise exhibits an incomplete evaluation of the relationship between languages and human cultures, resorting to linguistic determinism. Finally, the third premise idealizes the possible role of local languages, focusing on linguistic salvation while ignoring other factors. In addressing these concerns, Ngugi wa Thiong'o can offer us a more ideologically sound and attainable vision for language use in Africa.

Notes

1. Kwame Anthony Appiah, *In My Father's House: Africa in the Philosophy of Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1992), p. 180.