

Communication across cultures: ideological implications of Sam Selvon's linguistic inventiveness

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Abstract:

*In the postcolonial context, language represents one of the crucial tools of cultural communication and is therefore often a subject of heated discussion. Since language constitutes the framework of cultural interaction, postcolonial authors often challenge the privileged position of Standard English within their writing by modifying and substituting it with new forms and varieties. The Trinidad-born writer Sam Selvon belongs to a handful of Caribbean authors who initiated linguistic experiments in the context of Caribbean literature and is considered one of the first Caribbean writers to employ dialect in a novel. His 1956 novel *The Lonely Londoners* reflects the possibilities of vernacular experimentation and thus communicates the specific experience of a particular cultural group in an authentic way.*

The discourse on language, its usage and implications, both for the writers and readers of postcolonial literature, forms the backbone of postcolonial literary theory. Language, "the medium through which a hierarchical structure of power is perpetuated", was seen as the main tool of imperial oppression (Ashcroft et al., 2005, p. 7). The implications of linguistic practices stemming from the colonial era have stirred up numerous heated discussions about what kind of language to use in postcolonial literature. From Achebe who, in his essay "The African Writer and the English Language", advocated the use of a *different* English "which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience"¹ to the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong'o who rejected the language of the former empire "as a suitable vehicle for local expression,

¹ Available at: chisnell.com/APEng/BackgroundNotes/achebe/tfasubaltem.rtf

asserting the incompatibility of local thought and English words, English syntax, English style" (New, 1978, p. 303), postcolonial authors have taken various stances towards this matter.

Even though most postcolonial writers from the Anglophone sphere take English as the main medium of communication and literary representation, the rejection of its privileged position as a standard linguistic norm is a common practice. Utilizing various linguistic strategies, such as code-switching, syntactic fusion, appropriation, vernacular transcription, use of neologisms etc., enables them to adapt the language to such an extent that it can "express widely differing cultural experiences" (Ashcroft et al., 2005, p. 38). These modifications are then instrumental in capturing specific cultural sensibilities and in articulating the voices of the stated communities. More often than not, they are also regarded as statements of the writer's ideological position.

The rejection of the normative concept of Standard English presupposes a redefinition of its conventional role in the setting of the former colonies and is achievable by the use of abrogation and appropriation. Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin view abrogation as "an important political stance, whether articulated or not, and even whether conscious or not" (2006, p. 5) by which postcolonial writers dismantle the dominant discourse "to resist its political or cultural control" (2006, p. 19). The colonial language, installed as a norm in colonies, is thus appropriated to such an extent that it suits the diverse expressive needs of the (formerly) colonized subjects. By deploying various modifying strategies, the new English bears a certain degree of "sameness that enables comprehension outside of its specific site of enunciation (McLeod, 2000, p. 123), yet it also contains elements that "remain distant to the standard English reader and defy their powers of comprehension" (ibid., p. 124).

In the context of Caribbean literature, which is the main focus of this paper, language naturally bears out the complexity of the regional history. The multilingual nature of the Caribbean stems from the cultural diversity of the settler nations, ranging from African, French and Spanish to British and Dutch influences, which are necessarily reflected in the language of a particular island. The linguistic situation in the Caribbean region is thus a bit more complicated than in other colonies. As Edward Kamau Brathwaite explains: "We had Europe 'nationalizing' itself into Spanish, French, English and Dutch so that people had to start speaking (and thinking) four metropolitan languages rather than possibly a single native language" (1984, p. 309).

Moreover, the need for a common language that would facilitate communication among settlers from various parts of the world eventually led to the creation of Creole. Yet since the Caribbean islands are "outposts of several metropolitan languages, not only do their Creoles

carry different lexical bases, but even Creoles using the same lexical base show variations from island to island with regard to pronunciation systems, intonation patterns, syntax, idiom, lexical inventory, and signifier-referent correspondence" (Warner-Lewis, 2001, p. 28). In other words, there are over fifty Creole languages spoken in the Caribbean (Muysken, 2001, p. 399), so comprehension gaps between various islands are unexceptional. Therefore, this situation makes the use of an *authentic* Caribbean voice in literature all the more complicated and necessarily engages local writers in developing special linguistic strategies.

Concerning the use of Caribbean Creole in literature, West Indian writing underwent a tremendous development throughout the second half of the 20th century. While in its early stages (around the 1930s) using Standard English exclusively was a norm, the 1950s brought a dramatic turn. In the early phases of Caribbean writing, the primary focus of fiction was centred on the upper social classes, which spoke in Standard English. This period is marked by a reluctance to use Creole in a literary setting since it was seen as unaesthetic and "limiting in its expressive and ideational range, restrictive in its communicability with an international readership" (Warner-Lewis, 2001, p. 26). Latter attempts to include wider social circles in literature necessarily demanded a change in the linguistic medium of the novel. The need for an authentic representation of Caribbean culture called for the deployment of Creole, which was first reserved primarily for dialogues, "for the speech of uneducated characters" (ibid.), while the narrative voice spoke in Standard English only. According to Maria Grazia Sindoni, such a linguistic compromise marks an unconscious shame towards local idioms (2006, p. 126).

Samuel Selvon, a Trinidad-born writer, was one of the first authors to employ *authentic* Caribbean speech in a full-length novel, both in dialogue and the narrative voice. Usually overshadowed by the work of better-known fellow writers, such as Lamming, Walcott and Naipaul, Selvon's pioneering efforts in the sphere of linguistic inventiveness should not be underestimated. In his third novel, *The Lonely Londoners*, published in 1956, Selvon attempts to articulate the experience of West Indian immigrants in 1950s London while making use of vernacular experimentation. In the context of Selvon's work, *The Lonely Londoners* is his first book to tackle the issue of the immigrant experience. Through a succession of episodic narratives centred on the character of Moses, Selvon uncovers the particularities of immigrant conditions in 1950s Britain and voices feelings of alienation and disillusionment. The multitude of Caribbean characters, ranging from Jamaicans and Trinidadians to Barbadians, who share a similar fate in a new and somewhat hostile environment, also give rise to the atmosphere of kinship.

The novel oscillates between the story of Moses Aloetto, a Trinidadian immigrant who has been living in Britain for the past ten years, and several fellow immigrants from the Caribbean and other parts of the world who are trying their luck in metropolitan London. Selvon's novel is built upon short anecdotes from their lives which uncover the alienation of the immigrant figure in the metropolitan centre. The stories of Moses, Sir Galahad, Tolroy and Big City provide a glimpse into the hardships of the immigrant community and produce a collective narrative of isolation, destitution and loneliness. As Moses explains: "This is a lonely miserable city, if it was that we didn't get together now and then to talk about things back home, we would suffer like hell [...] Nobody in London does really accept you. They tolerate you, yes, but you can't go in their house and eat or sit down and talk. It ain't have no sort of family life for us here" (Selvon, 2009, p. 139).

In fact, "the novel arises out of and speaks back to the shifting racial politics involved in the contraction of the British empire and Britain's consequent need to re-imagine its relationship to its colonies" (Kabesh, 2011, p. 2). It unmasks the social and racial hierarchy in post-war Britain, a consequence of mass migration from its former colonies, which prevents the new arrivals from realizing their dreams of prosperity and well-being. But it also points to the willingness of some of the immigrants to exploit the social system of the former mother country (a critique of which is also articulated in Louise Bennett's poem *Colonization in Reverse*). The act of transformation, of the metropolis and both its old and new inhabitants, is thus mutual and implies an inevitable renegotiation of identities.

While the thematic scope itself offers exciting material for analysis, this paper will focus solely on the linguistic aspects of the novel. As mentioned above, the linguistic choices of postcolonial authors can be regarded as powerful political statements and according to Nick Bentley, "[m]anipulation of linguistic forms is an important means by which [...] writers [...] proclaim their sense of place (and displacement), and construct a distinct identity in terms of difference to a dominant construction of Englishness" (2005, p. 74). In this respect, Selvon's original approach to language, marked by a departure from Standard English, is worth examining since his language modifications can be viewed as a textual manifestation of the decolonization process. Representing the early wave of postcolonial writing, Selvon's work documents the continuous tension between the imperial centre and its margins, constructing, through language, "difference, separation, and absence from the metropolitan norm" (Ashcroft et al., 2005, p. 43).

In the literary context of the 1950s, the language strategies employed in *The Lonely Londoners* are definitely seen as innovative, as Selvon himself was aware. "I think I can say

without a trace of modesty that I was the first Caribbean writer to explore and employ dialect in a full-length novel where it was used in both narrative and dialogue' (Selvon quoted in Nasta, 1988, p. 63). The need for experimentation emerged out of the inadequacy of Standard English to capture the consciousness of the migrant subject and retain the quality and rhythm of Caribbean speech. Selvon rather "opted for the naturalistic flow and immediacy imparted by the vernacular idioms, affect, and speech vernacular" (Warner-Lewis, 2001, p. 32) and created, through a conscious modification of the English language, a narrative voice that correlates with the voices of his Caribbean migrant characters. As a result, the narrative voice employed in *The Lonely Londoners* renders the events of the book through the consciousness of Moses, one of its central characters, and thus speaks in the same way as the members of the immigrant community. By utilizing this strategy, Selvon successfully transformed the narrator-observer into a narrator-participant.

To achieve the effect of *authentic* Caribbean speech in his novel, Selvon employs a series of linguistic modifications and deviations. These include, among others, the usage of Caribbean slang words, such as 'fellar', 'spade' (a black person), 'test' and 'rab'; elision of the verb 'to be' ("I tell all of them who coming, 'Why all you leaving the country to go to England?'" [Selvon, 2009, p. 31]); omission of possessives and the -s suffix in third person singular in present simple, or altered syntax, which enables him to capture the rhythm of the Caribbean speech as exemplified by the following quotation: "I don't know these people at all, yet they coming to me as if I is some liaison officer, and I catching my arse as it is, how I could help them out? And this sort of thing happening at a time when the English people starting to make rab about how too much West Indians coming to the country: this was a time, when any corner you turn, is ten to one you bound to bounce up a spade" (ibid., p. 23).

Paradoxically, Selvon's Caribbean dialect, which is employed in his writing in order to mediate an authentic Caribbean voice, is artificially constructed and fabricated. It does not match any particular dialect spoken in the Caribbean but is rather a combination of different dialects and appropriations of English. Selvon "draws expertly upon the whole linguistic spectrum available to the literate West Indian, ranging from English Standard English to West Indian Standard English to differing degrees of dialect, inventing new combinations and adding his own emphases. The language of *The Lonely Londoners* is not the language of the people meaning 'the folk' or the peasantry, but a careful fabrication, a modified dialect which contains and expresses the sensibility of a whole society" (Ramchand, 2009, p. 13). Selvon's fictional Creole is an attempt to recreate the polydialectic continuum used across the whole of the Caribbean while still retaining its comprehensibility for a non-Caribbean reader.

To a large extent, Selvon's linguistic choices might have been influenced by the intended addressees of his work. The majority of postcolonial novels are addressed to both local communities and a wider international audience and therefore utilize various strategies to generate a narrative that would be comprehensible to both groups of addressees. If this were the case, *The Lonely Londoners*, aimed at both a Caribbean and European readership, would fulfil a dual purpose. For the European reader, the novel would successfully embody an *authentic* articulation of the migrant experience and the collective consciousness of a specific group, while for the Caribbean recipient it would provide an opportunity for empowering self-expression. In this case, striving for absolute verisimilitude would be secondary, as both objectives would be fulfilled in a satisfying manner.

As Selvon explained: "[...] I modified the dialect, keeping the lilt and the rhythm, but somewhat transformed, bringing the lyrical passages closer to standard English [...] I wrote a modified dialect which could be understood by European readers, yet retain the flavour and essence of Trinidadian speech" (Selvon quoted in Fabre, 1988, p. 66). Interestingly, Selvon denies that his work would be intended primarily for a Caribbean audience. Instead, he admitted in an interview that he is more interested in sharing his stories with a larger audience: "[W]hat I try to do with my work is try to universalize it: [...] I never wrote for Caribbean people, I wrote to show Caribbean people to other parts of the world and to let people look and identify" (Selvon quoted in Clarke, p. 76). While the statement may seemingly exclude the Caribbean audience as addressees of his work, it is certainly not the case. Selvon's novel addresses the issue of immigration while focusing on a particular group of people, recounting their experience from their perspective, using a corresponding voice.

So although, according to his abovementioned statement, the concept of dual addressivity does not seem to apply to the novel, it still manages to speak to both communities – not only in terms of its thematic scope but also because of its narratological and linguistic execution. On one hand, by choosing to employ elements of the Caribbean dialect in the novel, Selvon aims at verisimilitude and articulation of an *authentic* communal voice (at least to a certain extent). His efforts to render the text understandable for an outside reader, on the other hand, clearly demonstrate his intention to communicate the experience of the migrant subject in such a way that "people outside the Caribbean would be able to identify with it" (Selvon quoted in Fabre, 1988, p. 67). This strategy then not only reflects the cultural realities of the region, but it also becomes a textual gesture of the reciprocal historical influences that shaped the identity of the Caribbean subject. Selvon neither refuses to acknowledge the colonial past, nor is he nostalgic for the precolonial period. Instead, the novel becomes an acknowledgement

of the present reality, "the locus where two traditions collide" (Sindoni, 2006, p. 152). It simply verbalizes the complexity of the Caribbean experience which was shaped by a plethora of cultural influences.

In terms of postcolonial criticism, however, the language employed in the novel can be understood as a representation of an alternative to Standard English and the culture it implies. In this respect, Selvon's intentional language modifications and inventions can be regarded as expressions of a linguistic resistance. According to Sindoni, his "reliance on Creole features suggests also his ideological attachment to the Caribbean culture" (2006, p. 128) and an opposition to Western cultural discourses. In fact, coming back to Ashcroft's assertion that the process of abrogation is a powerful expression of one's political stance (whether conscious or not), Selvon's choice of language can be considered as a challenge to the dominant cultural system installed in the Caribbean by the European colonizers. It is, then, within the linguistic framework that the cultural fusion takes place. "The levelling experience of colonialism has transformed the global scenario into definite patterns of unequal power relations, and the linguistic arena has come to represent the privileged site where resistance, contestation and change collide to give rise to new, often unpredictable, cultural configurations" (Sindoni, 2006, p. xi).

In other words, just as the Caribbean is a result of a fusion of various cultural elements and influences, brought about by the European settlers, so Selvon's text reflects this amalgamation both on a textual and linguistic level. As has already been suggested, Selvon recognizes the reciprocity of such a cultural influence rooted in the colonial past, which renders the rejection of the European heritage (both linguistic and literary) useless, and manifests its literary embodiment in the hybridized character of his writing. His novel thus provides a counter narrative precisely to the influence of Western discourses imposed on the region by European settlers while exploiting the subversive potential of the very results of this cultural impact. According to Sindoni, "Selvon's novels cast doubts on the basis of Western culture, which he manipulates and subverts by means of linguistic and literary contamination, which is envisaged as an epistemological and ideological reply to the European cultural plunder against the rest of the world" (2006, p. xii).

To conclude, the departure from Standard English "represents an empowering expression of collective identity that rejects the positioning of authority" (Bentley, 2001, p. 76) and hints at a process of transformation and regeneration. "The process of creating a collective narration or minority literature is, therefore, a process of political empowerment through the creation of representative and identity-forming narratives that simultaneously reject the cultural

centrality of Englishness and proclaim the validity of marginalized voices within the privileged site of the novel form" (ibid., p. 73). With his creative approach to language, realized in such an early phase of postcolonial literature (especially in the context of Caribbean literature), Selvon helped to pave the way for other innovators and experimenters who came after him. His innovative use of Caribbean dialect was instrumental in clearing it from negative connotations rooted in the early literary traditions and validating it as a powerful aesthetic medium.

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