

English in Africa

A Sample of Cameroonian Pidgin

Di fos tok fo di gud nuus fo Jesus Christ God yi Pikin. I bi sem as i di tok fo di buk fo Isaiah, The first talk of the good news of Jesus Christ God 's Son. He be seem as he the talk of the book of Isaiah,

God yi nchinda, 'Lukam, mi a di sen man nchinda fo bifo yoa fes weh yi go fix yoa rud fan'. God 's prophet, 'Look there, I am the send man prophet to before your face which 's go fix your road ahead'.

Di vos fo som man di kraik fo bush: 'Fix di ples weh Papa God di go, mek yi rud tret'. The voice of some man the cry in bush: 'Fix the place which Papa God the go, make 's road straight'.

(The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. As it is written in the book of Isaiah the prophet, 'Behold, I send my messenger before thy face, which shall prepare thy way before thee.' The voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make his paths straight'.)

Attitudes towards English in Africa

Alexander Crummell, "The Language in Liberia" (Sierra Leone, 1862)

The spirit of the English language is the spirit of Independence, both personal and national; the spirit of free speech and a free press, and personal liberty; the spirit of reform and development; the spirit of enterprise; the spirit of law, of moral character, and spiritual beneficence.

G.E. Perren and Michael F. Holloway, *Language and Communication in the Commonwealth* (Commonwealth Africa, 1965)

English has always lain beyond the reproach of tribalism, and is widely accepted as a politically and culturally neutral language, now largely disassociated from former political dependence on Britain. Even more than in Asia, English provides a window on the world and a widespread common language which can aid African unity and development. But in this context English must be seen as an African language—albeit an acquired one—and must be ready to serve as the vehicle for distinctively African cultural values.

Ali A. Mazrui, "The English Language and the Origins of African Nationalism" (Uganda, 1967)

The English language as a partial embodiment of Anglo-Saxon habits of thought must therefore carry with it seeds of intellectual acculturation for the Africans who learn it. That is why learning English was, to a non-Westerner, a process of Westernization. And to the extent that an English-speaking African was thus partly "Westernized" he was indeed partly detribalized.

Emeka Okeke-Ezigbo, "The Role of the Nigerian Writer in a Cathaginian Society" (Nigeria, 1982)

The adoption of Nigerian Pidgin for national literature will arrest our writer's flight to English, a difficult foreign language which even a writer of [John] Munonye's standing "doesn't know enough," let alone his much less privileged countrymen. Not only is Pidgin a much simpler language, syntactically, but it is also a practical, viable, flexible language distilled in the alembic of our native sensibility and human experience. This lusty language, which transcends our geographical and political boundaries, grows daily before our very eyes. It is our natural, unifying weapon against the divisive forces of English. In West Africa, English splits; Pidgin unites.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind: The Politics of Language in African Culture* (Kenya, 1986)

We African writers are bound by our calling to do for our languages what Spenser, Milton and Shakespeare did for English; what Pushkin and Tolstoy did for Russian; indeed what all writers in world history have done for their languages by meeting the challenge of creating a literature in them, which process later opens the languages for philosophy, science, technology and all the other areas of human creative endeavours.

Ayi Kweh Armah, "Our Language Problem" (1985)

Once adopted, that African language will be taught as a compulsory language in all African schools, alongside the current official languages it will eventually replace. No African will be denied access to foreign languages, but all educated Africans will be competent in that one African language, so that by the time the continent is wholly literate, Africans conversing with one another will no longer need interpreters.

Léopold Sédar Senghor, "The Essence of Language: English and French" (1975)

One last remark on the English language: it has, since the eighteenth century, been one of the favourite instruments of the New Negro, who has used it to express his identity, his *Négritude*, his consciousness of the African heritage. An instrument which, with its plasticity, its rhythm and its melody, corresponds to the profound, volcanic affectivity of the Black peoples.

Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creation Day* (1975, written in 1964)

The price of a world language must be prepared to pay is submission to many different kinds of use. The African writer should aim to use English in a way that brings out his message best without altering the language to the extent that its value as a medium of international exchange will be lost. He should aim at fashioning out an English which is at once universal and able to carry his peculiar experience.. I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings...Where am I to find the time to learn the half-a-dozen or so Nigerian languages each of which can sustain a literature? I am afraid it cannot be done. These languages will just have to develop as tributaries to feed the one central language enjoying nation-wide currency. Today, for good or ill, that language is English. Tomorrow it may be something else, although I very much doubt it.

Chinua Achebe *Things Fall Apart* (1959)

Having spoken plainly so far, Okoye said the next half a dozen sentences in proverbs. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten. Okoye was a great talker and he spoke for a long time, skirting round the subject and then hitting it finally. In short, he was asking Unoka to return the two hundred cowries he had borrowed from him more than two years before. As soon as Unoka understood what his friend was driving at, he burst out laughing. He laughed loud and long and his voice rang out clear as the *ogene* [a kind of gong], and tears stood in his eyes. His visitor was amazed, and sat speechless. At the end, Unoka was able to given an answer between fresh outbursts of mirth.