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Proper English and Postcolonial Power in Americanah and Wizard of the Crow

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ABSTRACT

This paper offers a comparative, linguistics-centered reading of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah* (2013) and Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* (2006). It argues that English operates as both an embodied discipline and a world-literary infrastructure. Using Alastair Pennycook's theory of global Englishes as movement beyond imperial/pluralist binaries, the analysis traces how "proper English" functions as a technology of legitimacy in workplaces and intimate self-fashioning. It also draws on Aamir Mufti's account of English as a "vanishing mediator" and world literature as a "border regime" to read Ngugi's satire of propaganda, renaming, and *The Ruler's* speech-loss after the Global Bank's refusal as dramatizations of linguistic governance at the scale of the state and transnational capital. By juxtaposing microlevel speech performances with macrolevel institutions, the paper shows that English both enables mobility and extracts compliance. The study contributes a model linking sociolinguistic practice to world-literary mediation. In *Americanah*, accent and "professionalism" regulate belonging, while in *Wizard of the Crow* the manipulation of meaning, silence, and development discourse expose how sovereignty depends on linguistic performance. Together, the novels theorize postcolonial modernity through language.

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1. Introduction

Contemporary postcolonial literature benefits greatly from the works of the two authors Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Occupying central positions within contemporary postcolonial literature, their respective works *Americanah* (2013) and *Wizard of the Crow* (2006) serve as foundational texts which emphasize the legacies of colonialism, the discourse of power in postcolonial and neocolonial states, and the complex negotiation of identity under the conditions of displacement and modernity. Both novels underscore language as an ideological and political force which shapes the lived experience of the characters. Such shared attention to language and postcolonial worldliness makes *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* productive texts to inform a comparative linguistic and postcolonial research paper. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (1977-) is a Nigerian novelist and public intellectual whose works encompass themes of gender, migration, power, and postcolonialism. *Americanah* is set between Nigeria and the United States. By integrating themes of migration and race with formal and linguistic aspects, Adichie renders language as a central site of postcolonial negotiation. Also, Ngugi wa Thiong'o (1938-2025) was a Kenyan novelist and literary critic who was raised under British colonial rule and he composed the struggle for liberation and also the post-independence state of his country into the format of many novels. *Wizard of the Crow* is set in the fictional African state of Aburiria while presenting an allegorical narrative with the purpose of exposing the absurdities of postcolonial authoritarianism and neocolonial dependency. Thus, *Wizard of the Crow* embodies the tensions between local linguistic practice and global English. The complementary roles of *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* are manifested through their portrayal of the postcolonial condition and how language affects it all. While Ngugi turns his attention to the linguistic performance of authority within the state, Adichie underscores the transnational circulation of accents and identities within a globalized Anglophone world. Thus, both novelists attest that language can never be neutral since it is a site for linguistic practice and historical power relations. Hence, this research introduces a comparative reading through a framework which accounts simultaneously for the language and the postcolonial notions of these novels.

1.1. Significance of the Study

The significance of this research is that it aims to treat language and specifically English as a problem of power and cultural legibility in *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow*. These are two major postcolonial novels which stage language differently: *Americanah* does so through self-representation in diasporic life and *Wizard of the Crow* through the public rhetoric of the postcolonial state. This paper intends to demonstrate that linguistic struggle is embedded in the lived world of migration, global capitalism, and governance. Theoretically, this research

integrates two approaches which align on the claim that language can never be neutral. Pennycook embodies the practice of language in order to help analyze accent acquisition and code-switching to study the grant or withholding of legitimacy. Simultaneously, Mufti magnifies the postcolonialist aspects by situating language within the history of world literature and the minority question. He claims that global circulation of a language such as English renders it an apparatus through which texts can be compared and valued since it is the dominant medium. In a nutshell, this research attempts to show that the two novels, read through Pennycook and Mufti, demonstrate how English as a global language simultaneously enables mobility and hierarchies of intelligibility which structure world literary values.

1.2. Research Questions

The paper at hand attempts to explore the novels through a methodological framework with the purpose of finding answers to these questions:

How do *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* represent English and private and/or social practice, and what forms of social legitimacy or exclusion follow these practices?

What institutions or structures enforce these linguistic practices in each novel?

How do the novels stage English as a medium of global circulation that simultaneously enables mobility and reproduces hierarchies of cultural value?

1.3. Literature Review

Much scholarship exists on both novels *Americanah* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and *Wizard of the Crow* by Ngugi wa Thiong'o. Based on the subject of this paper, the researcher has conducted a review of the previous explorations of language and postcolonialism of the two mentioned novels. Accordingly, they repeatedly treat language as a postcolonial border practice which renders speakers of different accents and dialects into hierarchies of legitimacy.

Okolie in "Adichie's *Americanah*, Transnational Border and the Prospects for Identity Reformation" (2022) employs border-studies approach by framing *Americanah* as a "border narrative" that foregrounds "the relationship between space and subjectivity," where racism operates as an everyday bordering structure rather than a mere attitude. Ifemelu's speech style therefore becomes a technology of passage: Okolie notes that she adopts "slang" and mimics an American accent, showing how pronunciation can function as an embodied credential in the migrant encounter. Sutrisno et al. in "Intercultural Linguistic Borders, Stereotypes and Representations in *Americanah* by Chimamanda Adichie Ngozie Adichie: A Socio-Linguistics Perspective" (2023) argue that stereotypes attach to dialect and accent and that shapes mobility and belonging. They also signal that these "linguistic borders" are enforced not only through informal prejudice but through expectations of correctness that attach language to place and belonging, which in turn makes "standard" speech a gatekeeping norm instead of a neutral tool.

Subsequently, Taylor in “Language, Race, and Identity in Adichie’s *Americanah* and Bulawayo’s *We Need New Names*” (2019) reads accent as a racializing technology: a receptionist’s slowed, exaggerated speech to Ifemelu at Princeton presumes immigrant incompetence and helps explain her decision to train herself into an American accent, so that “proper” English is experienced as nationalized and racialized. Importantly, Taylor argues that migration narratives, instead of a purely celebratory cosmopolitanism, can be read through a “hermeneutical Afropolitanism” attentive to language, race, and cultural hybridity. He also insists that in *Americanah* language is not simply communication but an “epistemology,” a way of knowing, and he points to Adichie’s multilingual strategy such as Ifemelu and Obinze trading proverbs in Igbo and then translating them into English as a formal sign of identity forked by the colonial legacy of English. Ultimately, Dias and Pinto’s critical discourse analysis in “Racism and Identity: A Critical Discourse Analysis of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” (2019) complements these accounts by linking phonology and language ideology to assimilation pressures. In their reading, Aunty Uju’s practice of the American pronunciation of “schedule,” alongside her refusal to speak Igbo, exemplifies how migrants manage stigma through pronunciation and language choice.

At the same time, several studies emphasize that *Americanah*’s postcolonial linguistics is now inseparable from digital genres. Aor in “Internet-Mediated Language and Style in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” (2022) defines internet-mediated communication as networked interaction across platforms such as “emails, chat rooms, instant messaging, blogs and texting,” and argues that Adichie “makes ample use” of these forms (blog posts, emails, and text messages) bringing online pragmatics and orthography into the novel. Salami (2025) in “Racialization, Emotion, and the Material Life of Migration in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie’s *Americanah*” reframes Adichie’s *Americanah* via “affective infrastructure,” arguing that migration and racialization are produced through everyday systems that channel emotions such as hope, estrangement, and endurance. The article also treats the novel’s blogs, letters, and delays as narrative infrastructure exposing the contingent, racialized mechanics of global Black mobility. Obi and Okoro in “The Role of Internet Communication in Shaping Language in *Americanah*” (2025) likewise stress, in Computer-Mediated Communication terms, that Adichie’s alternation between “synchronous” (telephone/IM) and “asynchronous” (email/blog/text) modes shows ICT-shaped language as a constitutive resource for contemporary fictional realism, especially because it foregrounds how spoken and written words now travel through the same platforms and social networks. Ike and Obiorah then in “Literature and Social Entrepreneurship in a Digital Age: A Study of Chimamanda Adichie’s *Americanah*” (2025) connect this digital stylistics to political economy by arguing that

Ifemelu's blogging functions as social entrepreneurship: the blog challenges dominant racial discourse, builds community, and generates income, illustrating how platform and audience co-produce an oppositional voice. Finally, Gola's globalization reading in "Striving in the Globalized World: A Study of Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Americanah*" (2025) pushes the same point further, treating email and blogging as infrastructures of transnational life: Ifemelu's "Raceteenth" becomes a source of information about race and racism and exemplifies how the internet can "control" literary construction.

In *Wizard of the Crow*, scholarship keeps a parallel claim about language and power at the scale of the state where propaganda, allegory, and performance become the medium through which a neocolonial regime manufactures authority. Spencer in "Performance and Power I: Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*" (2021) places the novel in the African "dictator novel" tradition and emphasizes that dictatorship is sustained through "performance," polyphony, and parody, so that power is staged as a contest of voices and rituals. The article "Tragic Situations of the Subaltern in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow*" (2024) by Madu and Ujowundu gives this performance a Marxist linguistic emphasis. They describe the "House of Babel" as a "house of mental confusion" where the administration distorts information into "falsehoods," while citizens circulate rumors as a survival epistemology. Following, Sitot and Feleke in "Interpreting the Socio-Cultural Symbols in Ngugi Wa Thiong'o's *Wizard of the Crow* and Ben Okri's *StarBook*" (2024) develop a semiotic account of how Ngugi turns language pathology into political diagnosis. They attest that the Ruler's "malady of words" produces a "restricted voice," and metaphors such as "white-ache" and "red-ache" externalize the classed and racialized harms of "corruption and neocolonialism," while the novel's fables and emblematic objects are read as methods for recovering suppressed history. Ultimately, Haruna-Banke in "Evolution of Local, National or Regional Literature into World Literature: *Things Fall Apart*, *So Long a Letter* and *Wizard of the Crow* in Perspective" (2025) connects these internal language politics to world-literature circulation by emphasizing medium and translation (*Wizard of the Crow* was written in Gikuyu and translated by Ngugi into English) and notes that the English translation has "captivated" international critics, raising questions about colonial languages as gateways to global literary authority.

Ecocritical approaches further track how state development rhetoric masks ecological harm. Firstly, Pacho in "Marching to Heaven or Marching to Hell, Foreign Projects in Africa in Relation to the Environmental Crisis: A Case Study of *Wizard of the Crow*" (2024) interprets "Marching to Heaven" as a project framed as foreign direct investment and progress but intertwined with environmental crisis. On the other hand, Keat and Adugna in "The Discourse of Ecological Proximity in *The Famished Road* and *Wizard of the Crow*: A Postcolonial

Ecocritical Analysis” (2024) propose “ecological proximity” to describe the novel’s attention to ecological diversity, interspecies interaction, and boundary blurring, including Kamiti taking “the form of a bird” as a figure for distributed agency.

Taken together, these readings support a comparative approach that moves across sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, translation studies, and media studies. Despite such strong scholarship, a well-developed comparative account that explores how English operates both as an everyday medium of belonging and exclusion and also as a global mechanism of literary legitimacy is missing. This paper aims to fill in this academic gap and offers a framework for reading *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* with the purpose of linking microlevel language policing to macrolevel structures that govern cultural value.

2. Theoretical Framework

The present theoretical framework commits to treating English as a historically produced set of practices that eventually institutionalizes it through world-literary systems. These systems do not separate colonial histories of knowledge and diversity from universality. With the aid of Pennycook’s applied linguistics and theories of globalized English, and also with Mufti’s critique of world literature which provides a genealogy for institutional conditions under which English has gained legitimacy, one can establish a comparative framework for reading *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow*.

2.1. Pennycook’s Applied Linguistics as a Method for Reading Language, Power, and Inequality

Pennycook’s Critical Applied Linguistics can be considered as an orientation that keeps interrogating the ethical and political implications of linguistic knowledge. In his own opinion, critical applied linguistics is a “broad critical approach to language-related questions” which are close to critical theory but should not be confused as a “set of alternative methods.” Instead, they should be deemed an approach to doing applied linguistics marked by a “constant questioning of the normative assumptions of applied linguistics” (2001, 7, 10).

He argues for a version that treats applied linguistics as a “practice that is always concerned with relating micro relations between language and power to macro relations of social and political power” (2001, 10). For this research, this orientation legitimizes literature as a site where language ideologies and power relations are contested and reproduced since the two novels continuously foreground language as a practical problem of belonging and hierarchy.

Moreover, Pennycook underscores translation as a political operation and notes that the politics of translation falls under the politics of text and applied linguistics. He cites Venuti (1997) where he argues that “the tendencies of translations to domesticate foreign cultures, ... the dominance of translation from English into other languages rather than in the other

direction, and the need to unsettle local cultural hegemonies through the challenges of translation” taken together mean that there is an urgent need for a translation approach which is based on an ethics of difference. (Pennycook 2001, 14).

Pennycook additionally elaborates on the concept of postcolonial performativity. Borrowing the “performativity” from Judith Butler, he maintains that according to her, gender is not a noun, something we do or have, but rather “gender proves to be performative that is constituting the identity it is purported to be. In this sense, gender is always a doing, though not a doing by a subject who might be said to preexist the deed” (1990, 25). One can attribute the properties of gender performativity to language performance in a postcolonial context in the way that follows: “the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being” (33; Pennycook 2001, 156).

2.2. Politics of Locality in terms of Language

Pennycook’s theory is not merely “language in context,” but rather redefining what constitutes a language. He maintains that language practice is constituted through locality. Pennycook defines locality as “a way of thinking where the local is not so much a context in which language changes but rather a constituent part of language practice” (2010, 9). Hence, any account of language must treat it as a social activity rather than a preexisting linguistic system. If one assumes language to be an autonomous system, the social practices that embody it will be overlooked. He elucidates the concept of “use” by mentioning that “to look at language as a practice is to view language structure as deriving from repeated activity” (2010, 9).

Regarding language practices, according to Pennycook, “practices prefigure activity”: they ought to be seen as the “organizing principle”. Thus, language is rendered a social practice due to being able to “capture the level of activity between the individual and the social”. (2010, 29) He quotes Bourdieu to solidify his claims,

The way forward here for Bourdieu was to think in terms of practice – how people do things – and then to develop ways of thinking about how such practices became sedimented and regulated. His notion of habitus, therefore, became a bridge between large social forces and the doing of the everyday: “Through the habitus, the structure which has produced it governs practice, not by the processes of mechanical determinism, but through the mediation of the orientations and limits it assigns to the habitus’s operations of invention.” (1977, 95; qtd. in Pennycook 2010, 27)

Turning toward postcolonialism, Pennycook cites Mühlhäusler’s definition of language in which he purports that the notion of a language “is a recent culture-specific notion associated with the rise of European nation states and the Enlightenment. [It] makes little sense in most

traditional societies” (358; qtd. in Pennycook 2010, 5). Therefore, Pennycook asserts that Eurocentrism in regards to linguistics must be abolished and one should look for “ways in which language practices are local, are linked to local perspectives, insights and worldviews” since European perspectivalism is the hidden template for global description of language (Pennycook 2010, 5).

Once we adopt the practice framework, we can witness that language structure is emergent and the speakers are the negotiating agents who create language forms for particular purposes (2010, 138). Another concurring theorist is Canagarajah who suggests that even when it comes to “competence,” it is not merely about the mastery of a grammar or sociolinguistic system but about the strategic capacity to use diverse semiotic items across integrated media and modalities. Lastly, “the notion of bounded languages becomes very dubious, since languages are always mixed, hybrid and drawing on multiple resources” (Clemente and Higgins 2008, 9).

2.3. The Flow of Global Englishes

Pennycook draws a distinction between his own idea of globalization and what is commonly believed due to its shortcomings. His point of departure is that global Englishes cannot be described by either an assumption of globalization as a homogenizing domination or a pluralist celebration of Englishes (2007, 18). Consequently, theorizing English via movement which can be exemplified by “cross-overs, mixes, borrowings and appropriations” prevents a postcolonial linguistic analysis from defaulting to an imperial/pluralist binary (2007, 18).

He then proposes his “transgressive theory” which takes applied linguistics from being a fixed discipline into a domain of interdisciplinary work in order to incorporate a broad and political view of knowledge (2007, 38). He defines it as “the need to have both political and epistemological tools to transgress the boundaries of conventional thought and politics” (2007, 40). “Transgression” aids in avoiding the sustained models of thinking and providing the critical thought with new ones. Academia ought to question the imperialist and anglo-centrist conditions under which the global Englishes considered language autonomous, isolated entities (2007, 33).

Returning to his adoption of the notion of performativity from Butler, Pennycook elucidates on identity and agency. He warns us that “If we view performativity along the lines of false compliances, parodies and pretences, as identity performances that can be invented, revised and discarded when no longer useful,” there will be a danger of viewing performativity as “the casual pulling-on and taking-off of identity” (2007, 75). Therefore, caution is needed as to not view linguistic performativity as mere acting; language and identity are interrelated but they are not acts which we choose freely (2007, 76). In a nutshell, romanticizing postcolonial linguistic performativity as having full autonomy is wrong. “We need to understand the

interrelationships among metadiscursive regimes, language inventions, colonial history, language effects, alternative ways of understanding language, and strategies of disinvention and reconstitution” (Makoni and Pennycook 2005, 138).

2.4. World Literature and English as a System of Assimilation

Moving on to Mufti, in his book *Forget English!*, he claims that “world literature” cannot be independent from the historical rise of English as an apparatus that renders linguistic worlds legible while simultaneously forcefully reorganizing them (2016, 13-17). As a result, this research will not reduce the problem of postcolonial linguistics to global Englishes as a neutral matter; instead, English must be treated as a historically produced cultural system that authorizes literature on a global scale and translates linguistic heterogeneity into forms which are compatible with the markets of world-literary circulation (2016, 52).

English is now a “vanishing mediator” since it gains power precisely by vanishing as an object of critique “as it assumes various mediating and officiating functions” (2016, 16). This imperialist language is deemed transparent or self-evident as it naturalizes social hierarchies, global mobility, or cosmopolitan access. Therefore, this is a postcolonial linguistics treatment because language is now involved in world-making; colonial histories are now condensed with “neutral” communicative competence. Subsequently, Mufti links this to a historical amnesia where neoliberal conditions have enabled English to “erase the scene of politics and power that marks its emergence” (2016, 16). He offers philology as a remedy due to its insistence on learning the “historical understanding of the creation of meaning in language” (2016, 218).

Mufti further maintains that “a genealogy of world literature leads to Orientalism” which contemporary literature fails to recognize. Orientalism is historically intertwined with colonial power and even nowadays in its transformed appearances is continuing to structure world literature (2016, 19). Secondly, Mufti states that from the beginning “world literature has functioned ... as a border regime, a system for the regulation of movement, rather than as a set of literary relations beyond or without borders. ... [It is] a regime of enforced mobility and therefore of immobility” (2016, 9).

Another key point of his is diversity and how it should be oriented. Aligning with Pennycook’s concept of focusing on dominion and disparity and not merely on “difference,” He insists that religious, national, civilizational, or even continental diversity as a concept is a colonial and Orientalist approach since it emerges from the Eurocentric teachings of literature and language. Now world literature must be indoctrinated anew,

What we have to teach when we teach world literature is precisely the history (and the contemporary workings) of these relations of force and powers of assimilation and the ways in which writers and texts respond to such pressures from a variety of locations in the world. The

universalism that is inherent in the task of rethinking the concept of world literature thus has to be confronted with linguistic heterogeneity and the concept itself uncoupled from the effects of standardization and homogenization both within and across languages and cultures that come masked as diversity. (2016, 250)

2.5. The Global Diffusion of Minority

Mufti elaborates on the notion of minority as a cultural and literary site. He explains that it is “inscribed within the larger problematic of the relationship of self to the world” (2007, 12). According to another critic, Azad, minority also denotes, “... a weaker group that, in terms both of number and ability, does not find itself able to live alongside a larger and powerful group and feel confident in its own ability to defend itself” (2007, 292). Therefore, minority is a produced relation.

Nonetheless, not only should we understand minority as “a set of formal relationships within literature as a whole,” but also, we ought to remind ourselves that it constitutes “an exemplary site for the writing of the problematic of national culture and representative Selfhood” (2007, 12). The minority experience has a dilemma: “how to remain distinct and at the same time enter into the fullness of political experience as citizens” (2007, 68). Mufti overviews the formation of national identity in Europe and concludes that their identity and culture is built around language which in turn is imagined as the native authenticity while foreign provenance is treated as threatening (2007, 70-71). This is a site for national anxiety when it comes to concepts such as legitimacy and difference.

Read alongside, Pennycook and Mufti allow this research to analyze *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* as sites where embodied linguistic performances are at the same time local negotiations and worldly adjudications. They both theorize English at the two scales of microsocial performance and world-literary mediation. Pennycook provides us with the approach of English as performance rather than competence with the purpose of foregrounding language as a social act while Mufti supplies the structural horizon.

3. Discussion

3.1. “Proper English”

Americanah follows Ifemelu and Obinze through their relationship which is interrupted by migration, political instability, and class aspiration. As Ifemelu moves from Nigeria to the United States, she confronts race as a lived social structure. She learns how American norms of speech, appearance, and professionalism affect whether someone belongs to the States. Sutrisno et al. note how linguistic hierarchy becomes evaluative: “foreign could be worshipped, and native could be demonized” (2023, 421). Also, Taylor makes the mechanism explicit: “language and the capacity to speak English ‘properly’ becomes racialized” (75).

Ifemelu witnesses the pressure around braids and “unprofessional” standards (Adichie 2013, 123) and also sees the labor of accent performance and what it denotes socially (2013, 177). At the same time, Obinze’s life trajectory underscores how “correct” English and cosmopolitan identity operate as symbols of status and exclusion (2013, 455). Ultimately, the characters return to Nigeria where “*Americanah*” becomes a local label for returnees and their altered linguistic and social practices. Upon her comeback, Ifemelu is greeted in this manner, “You are looking at things with American eyes. But the problem is that you are not even a real *Americanah*. At least if you had an American accent we would tolerate your complaining!” (2013, 373).

Wizard of the Crow is a satirical political novel which is set in Aburiria. The state is run by a dictator and he sustains the regime through spectacle, propaganda, and coercion while every day people circulate alternative information via rumor networks such as the “Dictator’s Mouthpiece” or “Bush Telegraph” (Ngugi 2007, 895). Ngugi masterfully correlates postcolonial authoritarianism to linguistics and global economic governance, and dramatizes how external institutions can destabilize sovereignty. For instance, this is evident when the “Global Bank” decision leaves the ruler “los[ing] the power of speech” (2007, 640). Across the episodes of this epic work, Ngugi showcases how naming, language loss, and enforced “proper” forms of speech are about domination and resistance which is a reminder of Pennycook’s “rigid regulatory framework” (2007, 76):

“So what did the white slavers do to their black slaves? Took away their original names to make them over into what they wanted them to be. Are you with me?”

“Yes, Mr. *Wizard of the Crow*.”

“So to become white you must first give up your name. And, unlike those Africans who were forced to do so, you must give yours up willingly. Become a willing slave.” (2007, 240)

As it was demonstrated in the previous sections, *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* treat language as a historically constructed social technology that organizes class, race, mobility, and state power. A comparative study across both texts shows that English functions as both the practical medium of institutions and world literature and also as an intimate discipline of the body when it comes to accent, lexical choice, naming, etc. Mufti argues that “English comes to occupy a central place as a vanishing mediator of other languages and cultures” (2016, 16). He also warns that “privileging of English can only mean privileging the last remaining forms of European colonialism” (2016, 17).

This capability becomes underpinned when we take in mind Pennycook’s statement that language is inseparable from power and we must constantly stay alert to how language operates within the context of everyday life. Both novels repeatedly dramatize Pennycook and Mufti’s

frameworks by putting them to practice: characters discover givens about proper English, what professionalism and foreignness mean, and how development is not just a linguistic fact but an economic, racial, and social arrangement.

3.2. A Critique of Binary Models

The novels' narrative logic is easy to grasp: each plot advances by tracking how characters must recalibrate their speech and even further, are calibrated by others. This calibration takes place as they move between Lagos and the United States in *Americanah* or between Aburiria and the geopolitical fantasy of the "Global Bank" in *Wizard of the Crow*. Okolie attests that "transnational border crossing is both physical and temporal" (2015, 13). A monolithic reading of English as an imperial instrument or as a pluralistic set of varieties must not be celebrated in a contemporary linguistic reading (Pennycook 2007, 18). Instead, this binary should be replaced with a new emphasis on crossovers, mixes, borrowings, and appropriations (2007, 18). As a result, English transforms into a moving resource which continuously "entextualizes" itself in new sites and gets attached to new linguistic and social evaluations.

Since global Englishes are not separate from the struggles over who can use which language in what circumstances and for what purpose, one can match this formula with the two novels. *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* both pay attention to social and linguistic constraints. They do not merely depict multilingual realities: they represent the political economy of language choice which in turn designates who has the right to speak, who has to be punished for "wrong" speech, who is heard, who needs to translate themselves, and who is coerced into silence. Language is not a system but consists of a set of repeated practices (2010, 135). Therefore, we must read "Igbo" or even "English" as outcomes of repeated social practices, whether it would be workplace interviews, phone calls, propaganda, rumors, or forms of addressing people. Any given space provides the speaker with the choice to mobilize different strategies for multilingual interaction (2010, 82).

As a result, one can witness such mobilized strategies in the novels: the characters code-switch when angry, they "perform" a professional self, they refuse to address people in a certain manner, or they adopt the linguistic habits of the dominant group. The novels render language a fertile ground for diagnosing where globalization abstractions such as nation, race, and modernity are materialized even in the smallest details and acts of speech. "English" provides the characters with a type of access which has its own shortcomings: even though it serves as a passport, it is also a surveillance mechanism that puts individuals into categories of educated, respectable, foreign, assimilated, etc.

3.3. Language, Professionalism, and the Disciplining of the Immigrant Body in *Americanah*

Adichie in *Americanah* portrays the immigrant's discovery that linguistic legitimacy is a form of embodied compliance. After her work interview, Ifemelu and Auntie Uju discuss how having ethnic braids affects professionalism:

"I have to take my braids out for my interviews and relax my hair. Kemi told me that I shouldn't wear braids to the interview. If you have braids, they will think you are unprofessional."

"So there are no doctors with braided hair in America?" Ifemelu asked.

"I have told you what they told me. You are in a country that is not your own. You do what you have to do if you want to succeed" (Adichie 2013, 123).

Ifemelu realizes that workplaces in America define professionalism by racialized aesthetic norms that masquerade as neutral standards. Auntie Uju's response where she says that this is not their country sharpens the political reality; more than mere assimilation, it demonstrates how the immigrant body is governed by the host country's standards and success is contingent on linguistic and aesthetic conformity.

Moreover, "professionalism" here implies a register; a mode of speaking and presenting that is aligned with whiteness and institutional power. Ifemelu's effort in adopting and the dropping an American accent renders the relation obvious:

She had perfected, from careful watching of friends and newscasters, the blurring of the t, the creamy roll of the r, the sentences starting with "so," and the sliding response of "oh really," but the accent creaked with consciousness, it was an act of will. It took an effort, the twisting of lip, the curling of tongue. If she were in a panic, or terrified, or jerked awake during a fire, she would not remember how to produce those American sounds. And so she resolved to stop. (2013, 176)

Her adopted accent is conscious labor and feels like coercion to her as Ifemelu knows that her value depends on how her environment assesses her linguistic performance. The evaluation also happens within the diaspora: Igbo functions as an affective register when Ifemelu hears Auntie Uju speaking to Dike in Igbo only when she is angry and "Ifemelu worried that it would become for him the language of strife" (2013, 174). Dias and Pinto observe that "one essential part of who they were, the maximus of their cultural expression, would become a trigger to [Dike]" (2019, 242). Mother tongue can carry certain emotions which exceed the disciplined performance of American English.

Further complicating the politics of speech, Adichie mentions that Nigeria has its own linguistic hierarchy and coercive address regimes. Ifemelu's father was fired from his job since he would not call his boss "Mummy" (2013, 51). Power imposes a "minor" linguistic requirement that functions as a test for subordination. To refuse the symbolic authority of the

higher class is to be punished with economic precarity. Hence, linguistic coercion is not unique to one social system and it operates through different local norms.

Ifemelu herself in her blog links language and identity to race as a social structure. Blogging has been recognized as a form of entrepreneurial agency, which allows individuals to generate income while addressing social issues” (Ike and Obiorah 2025, 2). “In contrast to the racial sphere (such as the segregated residential places and the hierarchical relationships), the blogosphere exposes equal existence” (Okolie 2022, 11). She writes: “But race is not biology; race is sociology. Race is not genotype; race is phenotype. Race matters because of racism. And racism is absurd because it’s about how you look” (2022, 332). She adds that being black is “decided for you” (2022, 332) which is offering a commentary on how linguistic categories such as speaking good English or sounding American are imposed on foreigners. Elsewhere in her blog she writes about her lived experience: “In America, racism exists but racists are all gone. Racists belong to the past. ... the manifestation of racism has changed but the language has not. So if you haven’t lynched somebody then you can’t be called a racist” (Okolie 309-310). This refers to the speech regime in which the language of a certain class is legitimized whereas others are delegitimized unless supported by extraordinary evidence.

Moreover, the novel discusses a transnational class marker which is called being a “correct Englishman” (455). It is not solely about nationality but also about a type of cultivated speech which carries a recognized package of linguistic capital. Even if the character is Nigerian, “Englishman” becomes an honorific for a global elite identity. Thus, English both as a language and as an identity functions as a symbolic capital across borders.

3.4. Linguistic Whitening, Global Finance, and the Production of Silence and Rumor in *Wizard of the Crow*

Ngugi’s *Wizard of the Crow* deepens the already mentioned dynamics through satire and allegory. We are presented with a postcolonial state whose authoritarian power is indivisible from propaganda, rumor, and speech manipulation. Notwithstanding, the text also elucidates how global institutions, such as the “Global Bank,” govern the nation through conditions and discourses of development. Language turns into a medium in which sovereignty is both performed and withdrawn.

Colonial desire for supremacy transforms bodies and identities. As a slave first loses his name then his language, the postcolonial power establishes a sequential model of domination: a new name given by the master is the first site of dispossession, and then, language loss follows (Ngugi 2007, 240). In Aburiria becoming “white” is not just about the color of the skin but to become “modern”. In a scene, a couple visit *Wizard of the Crow* and they ask for “pure English skin” (Ngugi 2007, 245). They want the luxuries that accompany belonging to the elite class,

“lords, aristocrats, blue bloods,” “The colonial type, like the ones who used to lord over us here in Aburiria” (Ngugi 2007, 246). Power is a theater of titles which are in essence instruments that reorganize perception and consolidate authority.

Language is not always about actual words, but also silence. Ngugi establishes the politics of silence, especially gendered silence. “Women? They must be silent, but, like silent streams, you can never tell their depth” (2007, 333). As an effect, silence is now a semiotic strategy: not speaking is not the same as not knowing. Silence can operate as opacity, patience, or refusal. This is due to the fact that multiple strategies are mobilized within multilingual interactions and silence becomes meaningful under authoritarian conditions (Pennycook 2010, 82).

Apart from the power exercised by The Ruler of Aburiria, global power is explicitly acknowledged. When the Global Bank denies a loan to The Ruler, his relationship to speech collapses:

The Ruler rose to make a speech, completely unaware that the letter in his hand was now shaking. They sat glued to their seats, anticipating his every word. But when the Ruler opened his mouth, no word came out. The Ruler stood there, trying pointlessly to speak. What? The Ruler, lost for words? Terror struck them all: here was the Ruler, his mouth open, attempting to say something but producing only hot air and bronchial wheezing. The true horror was only a few seconds away.

Suddenly his cheeks and stomach began to expand. ... The Ruler gestured with his hands that he wanted pen and paper, but he could not even hold the pen properly, his fingers fattening by the second. (Ngugi 2007, 640)

This scene literalizes how external (in this case Global) financial institutions can strip a dictator of his dominance and sovereignty because his voice depends on the recognition by a global authority. The scene is also a parody of the idea that political power does not reside in the voice of the charismatic ruler; the power of speech is distributed by political economy, not by vocal chords.

In a similar vein, the narrator expands on the continuing history of colonial reign by compressing epochs into a single mutating figure:

Around the seventeenth century, Europe impregnated some in Africa with its evil. These pregnancies gave birth to the slave driver of the slave plantation, who mutated into the colonial driver of the colonial plantation, who years later mutated into the neocolonial pilots of the postcolonial plantation. Is he now mutating into a modern driver and pilot of a global plantation? (Ngugi 2007, 913)

Ngugi extends his metaphor to globalization in order to showcase that power becomes transnational logistics with local elites as pilots for global extraction.

Alternatively, in the finishing pages of the *Wizard of the Crow*, we see the production of rumors as a form of satire for counter discourse speech. It is grounded in reproductive futurity and collective agency but the main purpose is to politicize the rhetorical question:

“... today is pregnant with tomorrow.

“What kind of tomorrow was Aburiria pregnant with? Of unity or murderous divisions? Of cries or laughter? Our tomorrow is determined by what we do today. Our fate is in our hands.

“But I had forgotten that in Aburiria the nation and the Ruler are one. And that is why I have come here with my armed friends to tell you the truth about my role in the origins of the rumor that the Ruler is pregnant.” (Ngugi 2007, 913)

Here pregnancy is a rumor disguised as a sign of instability and possible change to come. Ngugi is mocking the state’s claims of development and planning. The future of the country is not narrated by the state alone, it is written via action and speech. After this rumor is heard by the people, they demand “when will he give birth”? (2007, 913) and now this voice is turning the dictatorship into a farce.

3.5. Vernacularization of the Standard Language

Vernaculars do not simply appear but are produced as national projects through institutions and carry political identity. Therefore, when we see Igbo appearing only when a character is angry (Adichie 174) or Aburirian subjects being forced to change their names and languages (Ngugi 2007, 240), the vernacular is at stake. These are not considered personal choices separate from history: they are situated within broader projects which assign value and legitimacy to certain languages while relegating others to “backwardness.” “Locals are nearly invariably linked with backwardness, while the foreign has become the epitome of success” (Sutrisno et al. 2023, 435).

Mufti has elaborated on the historical journey of how these linguistic hierarchies emerged. He mentions that “vernacularization is linked to the rise of national cultures and requires the invention by elites of essentially new forms of spoken and written language as the language of the people-nation” (2007, 148). Additionally, postcolonial modernity and imperialism share a contradictory process as it celebrates equivalence instead of equality (2007, 3). Evident in Ngugi’s work, the Global Bank enforces equivalence such as economic metrics, development vocabulary, and load conditions but never equality. The Ruler can be judged and denied equivalence but he is not empowered as an equal subject. As we saw in the previous section, the loss of speech is an allegorical version of Mufti’s political economy where global equivalence produces local humiliation (Ngugi 2007, 640).

Hence, both *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* tell of the paradox of English which Mufti addressed: English is both the enabling infrastructure for global circulation and the historical vehicle of imperial knowledge (Mufti 2016, 16).

4. Conclusion

Americanah and *Wizard of the Crow* underscore two complementary faces of English in postcolonial linguistic studies: firstly, English is the institutional language of almost every social and racial discourse in *Americanah*. In *Wizard of the Crow*, English is the language in which the nation's legitimacy is performed internationally. Mufti's notion of English as a "mediator" validates this infrastructural role (2016, 16). English officiates, grants access, and legitimizes. Pennycook also notes English's connection to economic advantage and globalization (5). The removal of braids (Adichie 2013, 123) or The Ruler seeking loans (Ngugi 2007, 640) reveals this even further. Secondly, English is also an intimate coercion applied to the body: the accent is forced out (Adichie 2013, 177) and there is a demand to sound correct, or the logic that a subject first loses his name the his language (Ngugi 2007, 240). These are not simple representations of language difference but techniques of subject formation. The reason coercion in this case is intimate is due to the fact that it operates via shame, respectability, aspiration, and the fear of rejection by society. The novels illustrate a field of practices in which domination and agency are continuously negotiated. Read as linguistic texts, *Americanah* and *Wizard of the Crow* become theoretical interventions into how modern power operates, not mere stories on migration or dictatorship. Through their dramatization, they claim that language has never been neutral and shall always remain political to its core. Hence, rather than considering it as an abstract system, it must be explored as a situated practice. The comparative conclusion is that both novels depict globalization as a struggle over who gets to speak with authority, and under what conditions. English regulates: it offers access but extracts compliance. By staging these contradictions at the level of accent, naming, silence, and institutional discourse, Adichie and Ngugi produce a critical attention to micro relations between language and power. The novels are, therefore, not only objects of linguistic critique but are critiques of how language, especially English, organizes postcolonial life in the era of global mobility and global finance.

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