
A READING OF AHMADOU KOUROUMA’S *QUAND ON REFUSE, ON DIT NON*: LINGUISTIC HYBRIDITY IN PERSPECTIVE

Kehinde Jecinta OLAYINKA-SALIU
Department of Primary Education,
School of Education, Federal College of Technical Education,
Akoka, Lagos State

Sikiru Adeyemi OGUNDOKUN, PhD
Department of Foreign Language Studies,
Faculty of Humanities, Ikire Campus,
Osun State University, Osogbo, Nigeria.

Abstract: *Linguistic hybridity has become a practice among literary writers to reflect originality in their artistic productions. In Ahmadou Kourouma’s *Quand on refuse, on dit non*, he uses the concept of linguistic hybridity to demonstrate the richness of linguistic elements in Africa. The interface between African indigenous languages and European languages; especially English and French come to play when examining linguistic hybridity in African literary texts. This study interrogates linguistic hybridity in Ahmadou Kourouma’s novel, *Quand on refuse, on dit non* with a view to establishing the linguistic strategies employed by the novelist. Content analysis is adopted as research methodology and the postcolonial theory is our theoretical framework. Findings reveal that language is a tool for showcasing cultural identity, resistance, and a means of negotiation. Linguistic hybridity in Kourouma’s selected novel is a relevant reminder of the enduring nature of African cultures during the colonial era. The study concludes that language has the potential to resist colonial oppression, and to offer a formidable postcolonial identity.*

Keywords: *hybridity, language, linguistics, oppression, identity, Kourouma*

**Contact details
of the
author(s):** sikiru.ogundokun@uniosun.edu.ng_
kennynngozi02@gmail.com

INTRODUCTION

The rich aspect of human expression has become the subject of discourse in literature with regard to the concept of linguistic hybridity. This phenomenon concerns the inter-connectivity among variables such as languages, cultures, and identities. It is because these elements provide a tenet in which the complexities of human experience can be examined, understood and appreciated. To elucidate this conviction, Ahmadou Kourouma's literary works stand out as a typical example to illustrate the efficacy of linguistic hybridity in African literature of the postcolonial period. Kourouma as an African creative writer is very popular when it comes to in-depth exploration of postcolonial themes and the African experiences in his literary writings (Gikandi, 2003). As a matter of fact, Kourouma's novel, *Quand on refuse, on dit non* is a masterpiece to interrogate the issue of linguistic hybridity in an African literary text. This article aims at demonstrating the significance of linguistic hybridity in Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non*. It also unmasks how the use of language by literary characters reveals their identities, and how the use of language can serve as an instrument for cultural negotiation.

Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity is employed in the study. The theory allows the combination of two or more cultures, languages, and identities to understand their similarities and differences. This practice often results in the creation of new linguistic identities. In this study, we express how linguistic and cultural hybridity in the novel demonstrate Bhabha's ideas, particularly the notion of a "third space" where postcolonial identities are negotiated, and challenged colonial barbarisms. The analysis explores how Kourouma uses language to reinforce colonial hegemony and construct a complex African identity by looking at textual quotations and theoretical references. Kourouma expresses linguistic hybridity by mixing French with African languages, particularly Malinké which is his mother's tongue and also uses linguistic hybridity to subvert the colonial language; in this case, French Language. As Bhabha noted, 'hybridity is a process of negotiation between cultures, languages, and identities' (Bhabha, 1994, p. 38).

Language contact occurs when speakers of different languages come into sustained contact, leading to linguistic borrowing, adaptation, and transformation (Thomason and Kaufman, 1988). In African literature, language contact is often represented through the coexistence of indigenous languages with colonial masters' tongues such as French, English, or Portuguese.

Code-switching is another linguistic element that comes to play when discussing hybridity in languages. It implies using of two or more languages within a text or during a conversation (Gumperz, 1982). In *Quand on refuse, on dit non* characters always mix indigenous languages with French. This practice shows linguistic hybridity and creates a new linguistic practice. Linguistic identity entails an individual's sense of belonging and conceptualization of self in relation to language (Norton, 2000). When examining African literature, linguistic identity is basically connected to matters relating to power, privilege, and cultural heritage.

Some scholars in postcolonial and African studies have discussed the concept of linguistic hybridity in literature. Ato Quayson (2007) sees linguistic hybridity as a means of resistance from colonial hegemony. Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o (1986) pushes for the decolonization of the minds of the Africans through the use of African indigenous languages in African literature. In other words, he urges creative writers to embrace the use of African indigenous languages in their writings as a means of reclaiming cultural identity and sovereignty.

Examining Hybridity in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non*

Some linguistic parameters which are used by Kourouma in *Quand on refuse, on dit non* are examined. They include the use of proverbs, interjection and coinage. These linguistic properties are employed by the novelist as tools for his linguistic hybridity agenda.

Proverbs as an Element of Hybridity in Ahmadou Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non*

a. "*Quand un homme refuse, il dit non*" an expression that is an African proverb is the title of Kourouma's novel. The title suggests resistance. It is a declaration of a fact. Instructing Africans to say NO by rejecting imported traditions, beliefs and practices that negate African belief patterns and practices. The capacity to say no when situations request it shows self awareness, self consciousness, self identity and self determination.

b. "*On ne regarde pas dans la bouche de celui qui est chargé de décortiquer l'arachide*" (p. 91). (You don't look into the mouth of the one who is in charge of shelling the peanut). This expression highlights the issue of corruption, where individuals are expected to benefit from their positions without oversight, reflecting the corrupt practices in the novel. Kourouma uses these proverbs to emphasize the importance of honesty and transparency in governance; criticize the corrupt practices prevalent in society, showcase the cultural heritage and linguistic diversity of West Africa.

c. "*Encore la démocratie est l'abaissement des passions, la tolérance de l'autre*" (p.38), (Democracy is the subjugation of passions, the tolerance of others). This adage points at the importance of tolerance and understanding in democratic societies. Ivoirianness is a narrow, racist, and xenophobic nationalism that arises in all countries of high immigration subject to unemployment (p. 107), criticizing the concept of Ivoirianness and its implications for identity and sense of belonging.

The complexities of identity, culture, and politics in many African countries are captured in these expressions and proverbs. Proverbs are words of wisdom which are often drawn from oral tradition. They demonstrate the importance of culture and history as basis for literary works not only in Africa but also across various cultures around the world. Like those used in Kourouma's literary compositions, proverbs are usually used to give useful advice, warn people about repercussion of certain behaviours or actions and to teach moral lessons on core values of life.

Besides, African proverbs and idiomatic expressions in literary texts demonstrate to a large extent the concept of linguistic hybridity. The practice allows African writers to capture their native world view and present same unpolluted. African belief, cultures and traditions are embellished, promoted and preserved in the use of proverbs. The use of proverbs in literary texts is indeed a mark of African identity. The proverbs provide the texts with local flavours through and African contents to explain its sociocultural context.

Use of Interjection

Ahmadou Kourouma uses a hybrid language to convey the raw realities of postcolonial Côte d'Ivoire and the 2002 civil war that continues practically till date. The phrase "blablabla" on page 13 of the Seuil edition of early Fall 2004 is a telling example of this linguistic hybridity. Although this term may seem like a method or a trap for pun, its usage by Kourouma and his major narrator Birahima shows a well blend African orality. "Blablabla" is an Ivorian popular French expression, and a critical sociopolitical phenomenon. This analysis uncovers a previously unknown word, the context in which it occurs, its function, and its consequences in the establishment of hybridism, by referring to literary criticism from year 2000.

In *Quand on refuse on dit non* (p. 13), the demobilized child soldier and main narrator, Birahima, uses oral language spontaneously and ironically all over the pages of the novel. The word "blablabla" appears many times where Birahima, with his specific tone, to trivialize speeches and explanations that he considers unnecessary, irrelevant or unreasonable. This slang, often used as an expression of everyday language to express hollow or mute discourse. The term "blablabla" functions as an interjection that interrupts the scholarly discourse, reducing it to the simple perception of noise, dates, and chatter, and which translates this in contrast to that of a child soldier uncomfortable with historical abstractions but with an attentive foot in the raw reality of the conflict.

Heterogeneity of the expression bla bla bla

Kourouma's use of the term "bla bla bla" demonstrates his conception of linguistic hybridity, which consists of frying a fragment of mixture of different sets drawn from the language register such as standard French, and Ivorian popular Malinké dialect to create a complete new language model or variation. According to Cécile Van den Avenne (2005), "linguistic hybridity in Kourouma is a strategy of re-appropriation of French, which integrates elements of African orality to challenge colonial norms" (Van den Avenne, 2005, p. 94). "Bla bla bla" corresponds to this in one way and another: The word "bla bla bla" manifests itself in spoken language, especially that of young people from working-class backgrounds. Kourouma allows Birahima's voice to capture what is essential about the child soldier: victim and critical observer of his world. The way the narrator, Birahima uses the expression gives it a weight of authenticity.

Demystification of Academic French and Recuperation for Linguistic Hybridity

Kourouma intentionally uses the expressio "blablabla," which is an ordinary, non-academic vocabulary, to eliminate the complexity of the perceived standard French and its imperialism, which is often synonymous with the colonial and/or post-colonial elite. This linguistic choice aligns with the use of other terms from Ivorian popular French such as "gnamokodé" or "fais-moi, fais" (Kourouma, 2004, p. 92), which enrich the text with local colour. This could be perceived as a deconstruction of the French language.

From sociopolitical perspective, the use of "blablabla" by the narrator is a way of reducing the tension caused by the conflict in an African country believed to be the home country of the novelist. Birahima's use of this newly created word by the author underscores the linguistic hybridity in African writing. The use of the colloquial expressions in question, "blablabla" allow Kourouma to convey the character's dismay in the face of the rhetorical manipulations of the elites. "Blablabla" has both a comic and an ironic appeals which blends tragedy and comedy to condemn the crimes of war. The word "blablabla" can make readers to laugh. For instance, in Ivory Coast, "blablabla" is not just a sign of orality, it is a symbol of cultural resistance, allowing Birahima to appropriately x-ray the historical and political narrative through his narration. The use of the word "blablabla" on p. 13 of *Quand on refuse on dit non* illustrates Ahmadou Kourouma's innovative approach to create linguistic hybridity. This term, as applied by Birahima underscores the sociopolitical satire in the novel. The novelist waters down the academicism of French to pave the way for a new popular French-Malinké culture. Thus, this hybridity is not a simple stylistic element, but a political act that gives voice to the marginalized African people. It denounces the absurdities of postcolonial conflicts. "Blablabla" is, therefore, a genre of Kourouma's linguistic style that reflects a linguistic strategy which consists of using literary stylistics for the purpose of resistance and cultural identity as well recreation. Additionally, Birahima reflects on his linguistic upbringing and the dominance of French as the language of authority and survival: « *Il y avait tant de langues dans nos villages, mais*



la langue des Blancs était celle qui faisait taire toutes les autres. Moi, j'ai appris à parler le français comme une arme, pour me défendre, pour survivre » (Kourouma, 2000, p.32). (In our villages, there are many languages. However, the European languages have dominated the indigenous languages. I learn French to serve as a weapon, to defend myself, and to survive). The narrator is of the opinion that placing more value on an European language at the expense of an African indigenous language is unacceptable and should be resisted by the Africans. Language is a serious components of culture and culture remains the mark of identity everywhere in the world.

From all indications, linguistic hybridity in Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non* reflects his characters' cultural identity, resistance to colonial oppression, and the negotiation for the dynamics of power. The characters reclaim indigenous languages as a means of asserting their cultural heritage. They (characters) challenge the dominant narratives of linguistic supremacy of French over African languages by injecting their African world view in their utterances. They engage in code-switching and linguistic adaptation. It is evident that the characters assert their identity and fundamental human right to freedom of speech to press home their linguistic and cultural autonomy.

Language as a Tool of Resistance and Subversion

In Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non*, language is adopted as a useful instrument for cultural resistance and subversion towards oppressive power structures in Africa. As a postcolonial text, the characters tactically use language to challenge colonial hierarchies with an attempt to assert African cultural autonomy. The use of African proverbs and folkloric expressions disrupt dominant European narratives on matters that concern Africa and its people. In the novel under review, the use of language is the major means by which Kourouma resists colonial domination. Birahima, who is the major narrator in the story, demonstrates this idea of cultural resistance. First, he refuses to key to the colonial linguistic norms and asserting his linguistic autonomy by expressing himself in the best way possible to his ability. He is fond of mixing African indigenous languages with French. This represents a conscious act of defiance against linguistic imperialism and cultural alienation. In fact, the use of linguistic subversion is to deflate the domination of colonial authority and to challenge the oppressive system. For example, the marabout uses enigmatic language and coded messages to communicate. This technique of communication helps the marabout to evade colonial surveillance. Hence, this subversive use of language enables Kourouma's characters to resist colonial control and assert their autonomy in a foreign dominated African environment.

The characters in Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non* make bold to challenge colonial hierarchies through their use of language. They present the African indigenous languages as symbols of cultural identity and resistance. Birahima's adoption of a self-style way of communication in which he mixes African indigenous languages with French can be interpreted as his rejection of cultural assimilation. Birahima has boldly affirms his African cultural heritage.

The tension between the African indigenous languages and the European languages in *Quand on refuse, on dit non* rekindles the impact of colonialism on African societies. European languages, like French and English are often associated with power, privilege, and access to employment opportunities having acquired Western education. However, these foreign languages also indicate symbols of cultural domination and alienation or separation for unlettered Africans. This scenario threatens the survival of the African indigenous languages and the preservation of African traditions,



cultural heritage and values. The readers are made to see the characters in the novel struggling with the complexities of linguistic identity. They are shattered by the situation to make a choice between the desire to be assimilated into the dominant colonial culture and the urge to preserve their own indigenous heritage. Readers are made to see this tension in Birahima, the major character as he struggles to reconcile his fluency in French with his attachment to his African indigenous roots. This confirms the conflict many Africans face in the postcolonial period as they negotiate their cultural identity with that of a foreign culture. However, Kourouma's characters in *Quand on refuse, on dit non*, in spite of the dominance of European language, they actively strive to reclaim and preserve their linguistic heritage. Hence, to the characters, linguistic hybridity is the major means of asserting their cultural identity and resisting colonial oppression.

One could, therefore, submit that Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non* underscores the complex negotiation of cultural identity in a postcolonial Africa, where the Africans battle the tension between their own indigenous languages and European languages.

CONCLUSION

The study establishes that the concept of linguistic hybridity exists in African literary texts. The African literary writers use the concept as an expression of decolonization. In other words, linguistic hybridity paves the way for resistance and subversion against colonial oppression. African world view is captured and presented in its natural form through the use of African proverbs, code-switching, code-mixing and neologism. It is sufficed to also say that linguistic hybridity permits cultural identity and the possibility to bring about cultural negotiation. Kourouma's *Quand on refuse, on dit non* is one good example of African literary works for the interrogation of the use of linguistic hybridity. Both the content (message) and the context (language) of this novel are instructive in debates that focus on African literature and postcolonial studies.

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