



**Chantal Zabus. *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*. Amsterdam, Atlanta, Ga, Éditions Rodopi, B.V. 1991, 224 pp.**

Maïr Verthuy

Volume 4, numéro 2, 2e semestre 1991

Traduire la théorie

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/037099ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/037099ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Association canadienne de traductologie

ISSN

0835-8443 (imprimé)

1708-2188 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Verthuy, M. (1991). Compte rendu de [Chantal Zabus. *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*. Amsterdam, Atlanta, Ga, Éditions Rodopi, B.V. 1991, 224 pp.] *TTR*, 4(2), 207–210.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/037099ar>

## **La traduction, la terminologie et la rédaction en chronique (6)**

**Mair Verthuy, Clara Foz, Pierre L'Hérault,  
Claire le Brun, Jean Delisle**

**Chantal ZABUS. *The African Palimpsest: Indigenization of Language in the West African Europhone Novel*. Amsterdam, Atlanta, Ga, Éditions Rodopi, B.V. 1991, 224 pp.**

As Professor Albert Gérard points out in his warm and generous preface, the aim of its author, Chantal Zabus, is to offer «a comprehensive, systematic analysis of the ways in which the international languages of [West] African literature are become africanized under our eyes...» (Zabus, p. v). Indeed, working on the no doubt legitimate assumption that most African texts reveal, beneath the European writing, traces of various source languages, an assumption translated into the striking metaphor of the palimpsest, Dr Zabus examines the different methods used by a number of post-colonial West African authors to «indigenize» the European tongue, to bend it to the African reality it must express.

These writers are, in other words, engaged in various forms of translation: from one language to another but also from a largely oral tradition to a written one, from a colonized experience to a language born out of colonizing history. The author herself seems unconvinced, as her often value-laden vocabulary indicates, that it is either possible or desirable to «translate» African experience into a European language (although, in her conclusion, unwittingly perhaps, she tempers this somewhat essentialist attitude toward language, an attitude in itself surprising under the pen of

someone who actually quotes Stalin as a respectable source of linguistic information).

After some consideration of indigenization as a form of decolonization once-removed, and as an attempt to bridge the gap between two cultures, the author devotes considerable attention to glottopolitics and diglossia in West Africa. She rightly points out the differences between the linguistic experiences of countries under French domination, where the policies of centralism and assimilation eliminated to all intents and purposes any consideration of African languages as written forms of expression, and those under British domination, where African languages, albeit in Roman script, were not only tolerated but used as a teaching vehicle in the early years of schooling. Both French and English remained, however, the language of administration, of government, of post-primary education; in both cases African languages were reduced either to official «non-existence» or to official inferiority, although English, with its looser structure was more permeable to pidginization than the more rigid French.

The bulk of the book is devoted to an account and analysis of the various modes of indigenization used: pidginization, relexification, cushioning and contextualization, etc. Pidginization takes place when people who do not speak each other's languages need to communicate. Like baby-talk in its early stages, as Yiddish, however, in relation to German, it can develop into a language in itself. Zabus traces attempts to make pidgin into a literary language, particularly in Nigeria where N[igerian] P[idgin] has in some urban regions become a vehicular language. In spite of its great promise, however, the current absence of a stable written form renders its usefulness somewhat limited. Relexification, the second most important strategy, here defined as «the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon» (Zabus, p. 102), unlike pidgin, is grounded in a specific ethnic and linguistic identity, and involves a form of translation from a source language into a target language, without any form of original text. Unlike mere translation, however, this process allows the source language to surface as morpho-syntactic variations. Offered as a solution to the creative writer's problem and a way of enriching the target language, it can result, as Zabus points out, in further disqualifying the literary use of African languages.

Cushioning (aligning the word from the source language with the equivalent in the target language) and contextualizing (providing sufficient explanation for cushioning to be superfluous) also come under fire as likely

to reduce African languages to a mere vestige, an initial text, erased by the new European version.

Zabus nevertheless concludes her study on a somewhat more positive, occasionally voluntarist, note. Pidgin, she hopes, will develop into an Atlantic Krayol, and become available as a written vehicular language. Zabus also refers to the Africanization of the different school systems, with the consequent likelihood that French and English will become peripheral, while retaining some importance as a mode of communication between different linguistic groups.

In this context, she is particularly optimistic on the topic of auto-translation in which the author writes first in his/her mother or native tongue and proceeds only afterwards to translate his or her own text into French or English. Not only are the latter languages thus perceived as «othered» exolects, but the use of African languages contributes to the development of national literatures close to the experience of the people. The palimpsest gives way to two separate texts which «interface.» This is translation in its most orthodox sense.

Dr Zabus's book is useful reading for those who are preoccupied either by questions related to translation or by the evolution of African literatures; it is not, however, without a number of flaws, some more serious than others.

In her discussions of French, she reveals an apparent lack of familiarity with the literary efforts made for over a hundred years, not only to fracture the apparently rigid structures of the language but also to translate into literary form, for example, speech patterns alien to classroom French. If she had read Barbusse, say, and Céline, she might have modified many of her remarks. The unfortunate association between «fractured» French and African or other «native» writing is what made so many Parisian critics, for instance, assume — wrongly — in the 1970s that Jeanne Hyvrard, Caucasian and Parisian, is a Black West Indian writer. Similarly, one sometimes wonders whether Zabus always differentiates between the actual transliteration of popular speech and the need for a creative writer to rework his or her material and present it to the reader in stylized form.

In discussing the difficulties posed by pidgin, the author might usefully have given some attention to the difficulty of developing satisfactory written forms of such «new» languages when the eye of the putative

reading public is already trained, however imperfectly, to read the parent language (in this case, English or French).

The major flaw seems to me, however, to lie in the ambiguity of Dr Zabus's approach. She may well be right to disapprove, on political grounds, of the use of what she calls Europhone languages to describe African experience, particularly as that continued use can only confirm the already weakened position of the local tongues. That, however, is a political stance. To disapprove of writers who use European languages or suggest that the latter can NOT express African experience seems to me wrong for a number of reasons, not the least of which is that no language is immutable, as the history of French and English shows. Dr Zabus herself approves of «auto-translation» because it restores its lost voice to the source language. That strategy leads me to assume that the African author finds the translated version an acceptable expression of his or her reality and so in turn leads me to believe that, no matter how «undesirable» it may be to write directly into English or French, both these languages can indeed serve as adequate literary tools.

One final complaint. The manuscript should have been reread by a good English-speaking editor. What does «wrought up» mean? Is «prequel» really being proposed here as an antonym to sequel?

Mair Verthuy  
Concordia University

**Jacqueline HAMESSE et Marta FATTORI, dir. *Rencontres de cultures dans la philosophie médiévale. Traductions et traducteurs de l'antiquité tardive au XIV<sup>e</sup> siècle, Actes du colloque international de Cassino (15-17 juin 1989), Louvain-la-Neuve/Cassino, 1990, 402 p.***

Cet ouvrage de 402 pages, à la fois volume 11 des *Publications de l'Institut d'Études Médiévales* de l'Université catholique de Louvain et volume 1 de la collection *Rencontres de philosophie médiévale* patronnée par la Société internationale pour l'Étude de la Philosophie médiévale (S.I.É.P.M.), contient la quasi-totalité des communications présentées — en français, anglais, italien, allemand et espagnol — lors d'un colloque tenu en juin 1989 à l'Università degli Studi di Cassino sous l'égide de la S.I.É.P.M. Les