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Werewere Liking as Translator and Translated

The texts of Cameroonian playwright and novelist, Werewere Liking, are known for the linguistic creativity and overall difficulty resulting from Liking’s self-translation from her native Bassa language. As Liking’s works may also be considered translations of African oralities, those who translate these same texts into English encounter additional challenges. This study analyzes how the self-translator and translator alike deal with various linguistic and cultural realities presented by African languages upon translating them into French and then into English. Four of Liking’s texts will serve as models.

One rarely speaks of the African Francophone writer’s “ownership” of the French language. Most critics have claimed that the opposite is true — that French as a language of the colonizer is one that the African writer has been forced to accept. As Kwaku Gyasi claims,

the early African writers started to write in the languages of the colonizers without considering all the implications involved in the use of such languages. In the zeal to destroy the stereotypical images of Africa and to project their African world view, these writers may have considered the colonial languages as mere tools or means to achieve their objectives. (“Writing” 75)

This progression of the language “owning” the writer is thought to begin at a relatively young age, as children acquire French and refine their expression through schooling in the French system, either in the home country — most likely a former colony of France — or else in
France proper. One writer who clearly challenges all of these assumptions, however, is Cameroonian novelist and playwright, Werewere Liking, whose works in French resemble no Western forms of fiction and whose language and registers are highly distinctive. Self-taught in French as an adult, Liking had been immersed during her youth exclusively in the language, rituals, traditions, and teachings of her native Bassa culture of Southwestern Cameroon. It must be said that this schooling was largely from a feminine perspective, either transmitted to her by her grandmother or as the result of Liking’s own membership in female secret societies. Although relatively well known for three decades, Liking’s work in theater, oral performance, and the novel is notoriously difficult, with Franco-Bassa neologisms being just one aspect of its complexity. Liking’s travels and research have also inspired her to infuse into her texts and performance art cultural and linguistic elements from Mali as well as from Côte d’Ivoire, the country where she has resided since 1977. Thus, Liking’s works, whether translated into French by her or into English by others, can be considered what Gyasi calls a “cultural production” for which he sees translation as a crucial dimension (“The African Writer” 144). Gyasi further claims:

[...] if it is true that there was a time when the Europeans imposed their language on their colonized subjects, it is now clear that the imposed language is being enriched by local vernacular lexical traditions. According to each individual writer, the European language in Africa is given different hues and shades. (“Ahmadou” 150)

Although many of Liking’s writings in French have been translated into English, the linguistic challenges presented by her works appear to have limited her readership. As Africanist John Conteh-Morgan explains in his book, Theatre and Drama in Francophone Africa, “The lack of [Liking’s] wide appeal can be attributed to her work’s extensive use of an esoteric and highly ritualized language: of dream, trance, and spirit-possession techniques [...]” (212). However, the linguistic complexity of Liking’s work is not considered by everyone to be a detriment. In a more positive light, fellow Cameroonian writer and scholar Juliana Makuchi Nfah-Abbenyi hails Liking’s approach to writing as a “new African literary esthetic” (95). Indeed, with her intricate style of language, Liking’s goal is to prove that merely knowing French is insufficient if one hopes to truly understand