

11 February, 1997

Dr David Eka,
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Dear Dr Eka,

I am pleased to inform you that your essay, "Aspects of Language in Ken Saro-Wiwa's Sozabey: A Novel in Rotten English" is one of the essays on the literature and politics of Ken Saro-Wiwa accepted for publication by Africa World Press, New Jersey, USA.

Africa World Press is doing this in collaboration with ASE: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Nigerian Life and Literature based at the University of Calabar, Nigeria.

This arrangement specifies that you will receive two off-prints of your essay by September 30, 1998 and two hardbound copies of the book, Ken Saro-Wiwa: Literature, Politics and Dissent in which your essay appears.

Accept my heartfelt congratulation.

Sincerely,


Onookome Okome

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Aspects of Language Use in Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*: A Novel in Rotten English

David Eka

Sozaboy is apparently an uncommon example of a novel written in a subvariety of English that is beyond the limits of regular acceptability and intelligibility — local, national or international. The author has demonstrated a unique ability: consider his management of what, at first, sounds like utterances from a demented mind. Then imagine his control of general communicative lawlessness and commotion and his eventual arrival at what can pass for an innovative communicative patterning. Reflect on the part he plays consistently mangling the language and then channelling the pieces into an irresistible variegation. Or, let us consider the author's suggestively unusual acquaintance with low level communication in English and the frivolous behavior exhibited by the characters he recreates. There are not many authors who confronted with this kind of task, could have done better than Ken Saro-Wiwa has done in this novel!

Being a Nigerian, and more importantly, being one highly connected with communication matters, Ken Saro-Wiwa was, without doubt, aware of the vast possibilities within the English language. He knew also about the process of nativization of nonnative varieties of English and that the English language (like any other natural language in contact) adjusts itself to the milieu of the environment (of the users) within which it finds itself. Perhaps, the author's aim was not just to experiment with nonstandard English usage but also to get to the bottom of it. It would appear he did so and got to the abyss ... leaving in its wake unclassified usages; structures without modifiers; bold and unusual swopping of

grammatical elements; unique verbal groups and phono-graphological intrusions, among others. This article deals with the above matters collectively and individually as appropriate.

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The first intriguing issue about language use in *Sozaboy* is probably the use of the "word" *Lomber*. From the viewpoint of English phonotactics², "lomers" is a potential word. I recall vividly that I came by this "word" for the first time during my reading of *Sozaboy*. No dictionary could help; the glossary did. Then I asked myself: why did the author resort to this? The answer possibly is: the characters he recreated used it, perhaps as a way of demonstrating that they had "mastered" the English language and so could show off with it in a "big way", using the liquid lateral /l/ instead of the familiar and "common" alveolar nasal /r/. Then, one more point would remain: from my experience with learners of the English language in Nigeria, the central vowel /ʌ/ is problematic and so the nearest equivalent to it, the back vowel /ɒ/ is often used as a replacement since the majority of Nigerian languages do not have the sound and all of them have /ɒ/. So I could account for the use of /"O"/ realizable as /ɒ/. However, this "word" "Lomber" must remain an important addition to the vast experiments which are possible with English.

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The first utterance in the novel is clearly an adverbial clause of concession introduced by the word *although*. Yet it is written as though it is a lot more important than a clause: from the punctuation and the arrangement of words, it is highly suggestive of a sentence which has the status of a paragraph:

"Although, everybody in Dukana was happy at first (p.1)"³. In formal writing, and even in spoken prose or published conversation, one would have expected a main (independent or major) clause to follow, to complement the idea expressed. But that has not been the case!

Then the next paragraph begins:

All the nine villages
were dancing and we
were eating plenty
maize with pear and
knacking tory under the moon. (p.1)

At this point, the reader begins to wonder whether the language of this novel is the normal one — English — that he knows. He probably

wonders first, whether the word *we* refers to membership of the nine villages; why there is no grammatical word of between *plenty* and *maize*: and whether this *maize* is a special one that has *pear* to go with it! He also probably wonders what shape the moon now has as people can dance eat, tell stories under it! These two initial utterances demonstrate instances of unclassified usages. But there are many others. Witness the following:

- (i) He was crying *with water from his eye* (p.2)
- (ii) Then he told Okonkwo *to not to worry* (p.2)
- (iii) My master say it is *very bad at all* (p.2)
- (iv) So we must *to believe you* (p.7)
- (v) I must *to do* (p.8)
- (vi) I am *prouding plenty* (p.12)
- (vii) *Policeman's stick's blow* (p.46)
- (viii) ... if two people are *loving themselves* they will be talking *small small things*.
- (ix) ... when *the come comes to become* ... (p.62)
- (x) ... which time will they *learn us* how to shoot the gun? (p.73)
- (xi) You are *ghost* (p.131).
- (xii) ... if *that Sozaman have pregnanted my young darling* (p.138).
- (xiii) ... that is *the exactly thing that happened* (p.140)
- (xiv) ... did we not think that *he have already dead?* (p.152)
- (xv) *Pastor Barika is the in-charger of the church and he is very wicked man* (p.173).
- (xvi) After he have dig for some time and *made hole in the ground* they put the bundle inside in the ground *and covered the hole that they have dig with soil* (p.173).
- (xvii) Somebody must kill any person who *have dead before he can die*. (p.181).
- (xviii) I was just thinking how the war have ... *uselessed many people* ... (p.181).

I invite the reader to believe that I originally intended to list only ten of the numerous unclassified expressions in this novel but I could not end at ten, for each time I wanted to stop, there was another one more appalling. To put the matter very mildly, there is none of the 181 pages of this edition that does not have at least five shocking (unclassified) expressions! Even though this sequential listing is enough to explain one aspect of language use in this novel, we shall still do a brief (un?) necessary discussion.

We can reclassify this listing into five main groups:

- (a) Those which introduce unnecessary words e.g. *to not to worry*; *must to do*;
- (b) Those which show unacceptable agreement between subject and verb e.g. *he have already dead*;
- (c) Those which have introduced strange words e.g. *prouding plenty*; *in-charger*; *pregnanted*; *uselessed*;
- (d) Those which will for a long time continue to defy explication e.g. *when the come comes to become*; *it is very bad at all*;
- (e) Others e.g. *policeman's stick's blow*; *the exactly thing*.

In the first group we see that the word *to* is regularly introduced to obstruct the meaning which the verbal group would otherwise have signalled. This is so because "not to worry", for instance, is meaningful; "to not to worry" is something else. In the same way, "must go" "must believe" "must be careful" are examples of English utterances; but "must to go", "must to believe", "must to be careful" are not.

In the second group, the characters have demonstrated that they have not managed to observe the commonest rules of concord: singular nouns or pronouns and singular verbs; plural nouns or pronouns and plural verbs. However, it is interesting that the apparent violation has tended to be onesided: singular nouns or pronouns with plural verbs:

He have never done this (P98).

Sozaboy have already dead (p.130)

I will see everyone who have fit able to return (p.171).⁴

In the third group we encounter what we have described here as a bold swopping of grammatical classes e.g. from adjectives *proud* and *useless* to verbals *prouding*, and *uselessed*. But we shall return to this shortly.

We also encounter uncommon coinages e.g. *in-charger*, *pregnanted*, *surprisation* (pp. 51; 103) *Surprised* (pp. 172; 174).

We have already indicated that those in group four have defied explication. However in group five the tortuous comparison is worthy of note: instead of what is often heard: "The blow from the policeman's baton", the character has talked about "policeman's stick's blow". This may be compared to another oddity: where the possessive marker is not indicated at all:

"The Soza captain body (P108)

"The Soza captain tent (P109).

4

Reduplication is a feature of Nigerian, indeed African languages. It is not a known feature of English, particularly the educated variety. When,

Therefore, we observe that there are numerous instances of reduplication in *Sozaboy*, we can say that the English used in this novel has a strong basis in the mother tongue of the characters who use it.⁵ Because of the numerical strength and diversity of this phenomenon we have divided it into two parts: simple reduplication and complex reduplication. Reduplication that has two items is referred to (in this article), as *simple reduplication*. One that has more than two items is classified as *complex reduplication*. This separation is not only for convenience of analysis and discussion, it is also intended to prove that reduplication is not used and applied here in the usual sense in language description. It is used as of feature of language use in *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English!*

At the beginning of the novel, we have simple reduplication (pp.1-6) thus:

... yams were growing *well well*.

They were all chopping bribe from the *small small* people.

big big grammar.

long long, words.

Before before, the grammar was not plenty ...

the sun will shine *proper proper* ...

In other *Lombers*, there are also many instances of simple reduplication. Witness the following:

The thing pained me *bad bad*... (p.11).

Army is for *tall tall* men (p.26).

Because I am now Soza *true true*.

Nothing was worrying him *at all at all* (p.163).

As can be seen from the above, some instances of reduplication occur at the beginning and some occur at the end of each utterance shown above. At the end of each utterance, they tend to function as adverbial---

"growing *well well*;

... shining *proper proper*;

... now Soza *true true*.

At the beginning and immediately before nouns or nominals reduplications tend to function as adjectivals ---

Big *big big* grammar;

Long *long long* words;

Tall *tall tall* men;

Small *small small* people.

In other environments, each tends to constitute an adverbial group.

Before *before*, the grammar...

In general, some simple reduplication serve to emphasize the issue hinted at by the word that is reduplicated. For instance in:

Growing well well
tall tall men

The characters uttering the words may be understood to mean:

... growing very well;
... very tall men

In that situation, the first item in a simple reduplication serves a function very similar to that of the intensifier/emphasizer in educated English.⁶

However, there are other situations in which reduplications are not productive at all. For example, in:

Before before;
True true;
Bad bad;
At all at all.

One of the words (or set of words) is simply wasted as it would have been adequate to have, for instance:

Before now, the grammar . . . ;
... I am now Soza truly
It pained me seriously;
Nothing worried him.

Instead of:

Before before, the grammar...
... I am now soza true true
It pained me bad bad.
Nothing was worrying him at all at all.

But there is something consoling, perhaps surprising: the same character that, at the beginning, said:

My master say it is very bad at all (p.2)

is also the one who now, (towards the end), says

"But he is not worrying about anything at all (p.163).

With regard to complex reduplication, we have the following illustrations:

... some of them were just shaking
their head small small, small small (p.158)

The man just begin to move the landrover
small small, small small (p.159).

In begin cry small small, small small (p.160).

They were all walking, walking, walking
very very slow because you can see that
They are tired and have no power again (p.170).

that can be noticed readily is that each complex reduplication has a comma separating the first pair from the last one (where there are four items as in:

"... small small, small small"

Alternatively, there is a comma separating each item where there is an additional dimension of complexity as in:

"They were all walking, walking,
walking very very slow . . .

This could be compared to the simple reduplication, which were, in all cases, entirely contiguous.⁷

Another point: in addition to suggesting some kind of emphasis or intensification, the complex reduplications have, in some cases, tended to be onomatopoeic. For instance the cluster /s m /, which begins each item in the pairs, suggests extreme inaudibility arising from tiredness or a near --- total exhaustion in the camp. They had to shake their heads "small small, small small" to show that they were not yet dead! The same can be said of Sozaboy who after being tied to a landrover and being dragged along rough roads became exhausted. So, the exhaustion, the pains and the muffled voice could be seen in onomatopoeic terms:

"Crying small small, small small."

In the case of the landrover, however, the complex reduplication is apparently more suggestive of progression (the vehicle beginning slowly and going fast eventually), than Onomatopoeia.

5

We have used the term phono-graphological intrusions in this article to refer to the use of lexical items in a manner that suggests the user's inadequate acquaintance with the pronunciation of such items. As the term suggests, the items (words) are written following the character's pronunciation — usually unacceptable pronunciation — and not the usual spelling of the words. They are also said to be *intrusions* because they feature suddenly among other well formed words — words spelt following the usual conventions.

Examples of such intrusions include:

- (i) sarzent (p. 2)
- (ii) gratulate (p. 2)
- (iii) porson (pp. 7, 61, 135 etc)
- (iv) whasmatter (p. 7)
- (v) odah odah (p. 8)
- (vi) awright (p. 7, 8)
- (vii) praps (pp. 25, 43)
- (viii) terprita (p.41)
- (ix) ammo (p.123)
- (x) Soza(s) (pp.27, 102, etc).⁸

We shall briefly explain each entry, beginning from the top.

(i) The entry *sarzent* (sergeant) apparently stems from two main problems: the attempt to write the first syllable *ser* --- to reflect the usual pronunciation /sa:/ and the inability to realize the voiced palato --- alveolar affricate /dʒ/ hence a replacement of this by both /z/ and the clear vowel /e/: /sa:dʒənt as against [sa:zent-].

(ii) *Gratulate* (congratulate) has a simpler explanation: the character uttering this is likely to be one who has heard the appropriate pronunciation of this word very often and has noted that the first syllable *con-* in the full word *congratulation* is generally made unclear, being one that realizes an unclear vowel / ə/ as in /kən/. Shortening the word therefore to "gratulate" implies rendering the first syllable so unclearly that it practically fails to exist!

(iii) The form *porson* (person) is a very close imitation of the pronunciation of the word *person*. As shown here, the first syllable constitutes the problem: instead of the central vowel /ɜ:/ in that first syllable, the speaker apparently chooses the back rounded vowel /ɔ:/. resulting in /pɔ:sn/ as against the general acceptable realization /pɜ:sn/.

(iv) The next item *whasmatter* is clearly a contraction of four words into one --- what is the matter --- generally *what's the matter*. There is also a suggestion here of what could pass for an unsatisfactory rendering of the cluster /ts/ in *what's*, quite apart from the total elision of the specific modifier *the*. It is a good example of simplification in nonstandard English speech.

(v) *Odah Odah* (order) is indicative of two problems --- the first with the realization of *or* --- and the second with ---*er*: /:ɔ/ and / ə/ is replaced with [o] and / ə/ is replaced with /a:/. In this way, the two syllables are irreconcilable from the standpoint of accentuation.

(vi) The next entry *awright* is a contraction from two words: *all* and *right*. With the contraction, the liquid lateral /l/ is eluded, giving prominence to the back rounded vowel /ɔ:/.

(vii) The utterance *praps* is an example that is suggestive of an attempt to elide the schwa / / and to give prominence to the linking /r/ in the writing system. It is actually a very faithful imitation of the educated pronunciation of the word *perhaps* when it occurs in the company of other word. This utterance therefore is all right as an attempt to imitate the pronunciation on p. 25. But on p.43, where the entry receives full prominence, *praps* features in a wrong context; in that situation the usual pronunciation (from the speech of educated speakers) is /pə'hæps/ not [præps].

(viii) The entry *terprita* (interpreter) appears to stem from the lack of prominence which is usually known to mark the realization of the first syllable in the word *interpreter*. However, the last vowel in the word suggests a lower variety --- indeed a very low variety --- of /a/ generally shown as [ä] in place of the educated pronunciation which regularly features /æ/. Put differently, the entry *terprita* suggests two phonographological problems --- an initial elision and a vowel alteration, the latter in particular being a marker of nonstandard pronunciation.

(ix) The item *ammo* (a short rendering for the word *ammunition*) represents also an attempt at simplification. The difficult part of the word is where we normally notice the glide /mju:/: so, to avoid that environment, the speakers substitute the letter o which also has the sound suggested by it [o]. From the way it features in the novel the word is used by the characters to refer to bullets, not general military wares. So, we can say the word suggests double simplification: pronunciation and reference.

(x) The item *Soza(s)* refers to soldier(s). The phonological problem here is the replacement of the voiced palato-alveolar sound /dʒ/ by the voiced alveolar fricative /z/, medially. From the general level of mediocre expressions in the novel, it is almost certain that the /s/ in *sol-* is also replaced, this time by [o], thus leaving the word [soza: (s)] as against the educated pronunciation generally heard: /sə'dʒə(z)/.

The above are only a few of the phono-graphological representations in the novel --- representations which give very helpful insights into the pronunciation problems of the characters portrayed. These representations also serve to complement the syntactic and general construction problems which constitute a major feature of *Sozaboy*.

6

Verbs are among the most interesting aspects of language use in *Sozaboy*. We can isolate at least four features. First, there is an attested inclination towards the use of many verbs in a single utterance. Put differently, the

great majority of sentences in this novel are of various levels of complexity. Here are a few examples:

- (i) And if we see him, we should fight him and if he is too strong, we should return to tell the soza captain (P. 105)
- (ii) Like everything I want to do I must do it well well (p.33)
- (iii) Then she will tell me that I am very fine man with plenty of hair for my chest and I am smiling very well all the time (p.20)
- (iv) So Terr Kole told me that because he likes me, he will tell me to return to Dukana as I am good young man and can know my way and road to Dukana.

In the first illustration, we can isolate two main clauses and two subordinate clauses. The main clauses are:

- (i) We should fight him;
- (ii) We should return to tell the soza captain.

The subordinate clauses are:

- (i) (AND) if we see him,
- (ii) (and) if he is too strong.

Notice the implication here, that having four clauses presupposes that there must be four verbal groups too, implying that the sentence is a compound complex one. Also, notice that each subordinate clause begins with a dummy conjunction — one that has little or no function, except perhaps to add to the verbosity of the expression! The second illustration is a complex sentence, having one main clause and one subordinate clause.

The main clause is:

I must do it well well.

The subordinate clause is

Like everything I want to do.

The third illustration is an example of a compound complex sentence, having two main clauses and one subordinate clause. The main clauses are

- (i) (that) I am very fine man with plenty of hair for my chest:
- (ii) (and) I am smiling very well all the time.

The subordinate clause is:

Then she will tell me.

The fourth illustration is the most complex, having three main clauses and two subordinate clauses. So, from the viewpoint of sentence structure, we can refer to this as an example of a multiple sentence.

The main clauses are:

- (i) (That) he will tell me...;
- (ii) (as) I am good young man;
- (iii) (and I) can know my way and road to Dukana.

The subordinate clauses are:

- (i) so Terr Kole told me;
- (ii) because he likes me.

Since the great majority of sentences in this novel are of the complex type, we can agree with the views in Kachru (1982) and Labov (1973) that speakers of nonstandard English have usually tended to be verbose and to have an inclination towards complex sentences. From the above analysis into clauses, and from the structure of the verbal groups below, we will agree also with the latter (Labov) that in spite of the verbosity in the utterances and complexity of sentences, there is an appreciable system and logic in nonstandard English. After all, nonstandard, even rotten expressions in English also serve certain communication purposes!

A second feature worthy of note is that there is an attested tendency to convert nouns or adjectives to verbs. The following are striking examples:

- (i) Prouding (from the adjective proud).
The following are attested.
 - (a) Zoza and his *prouding* stupidity (p.38).
 - (b) Myself I was *prouding* plenty (p.65)
 - (c) And I was *prouding* plenty too (p.71)
 - (d) And I was *prouding* of myself... (p.125).
- (ii) Confuse (d) (from the adjective confused).
Notice the following:
 - (a) Chief Birabee is *confusing* before this man... (p.39)
 - (b) And I *come confuse* proper (p.38)

(c) If not to say I am very old man in Pitakwa self I should *have* confused completely (p.52).

(d) I begin to confuse (p.34)

(iii) Shaming (from the noun shame).

Here are a few illustrations:

(a) ...because to talk true I was *shaming bad bad* (p.62).

(b) I was beginning *to shame*, (p.14).

(c) I must not show that I *shame pass woman* (p.14).

(iv) To glad (from the adjective glad).

Here is an instance:

Even, when I think that I will see Agnes again I begin *to glad* more than (p.35).

(v) Pregnanting from (pregnant). Here is an example:

If that Sozaman have *pregnanted* my young darling (p.138).

As everyone knows, classes of grammatical elements in English cannot be determined until they (the elements) are actually used in sentences. Thus, we can have the word *back*, for instance as a noun, a verb, an adjective or an adverb. What we have shown above is clearly different from this, however. Indeed the use of words like *prouding* and *to glad* and *pregnanting* shows that the characters involved are virtually illiterate ones as far as English is concerned.

A third feature of verbs in *Sozaboy* is the occurrence of either outright verbless constructions or those without main verbs. The following are a few of them.

In the afternoon (p.44).

In the night (p. 44).

Even in dream (p.44).

God in Heaven (p.33).

Me too (p.1).

You stupid people of Dukana (p.39).

Plenty blood and plenty shout (p.167).

God, no more ammo (p. 167).

Now, my son, and you, my daughter (p.67).

No trouble at all (.125).

Making plenty of noise in the house (p.15)

For work or anything at all (p. 38).

It should be remembered that verbless constructions can be quite elegant, stylistically, but when they occur in doubtful contexts as many of the above do, they tend to serve the negative function of obstructing communication.

Finally, notwithstanding the problems indicated here, the structure of the verbal group in *Sozaboy* is hardly altogether different from the structure of verbal groups in any educated variety of English. For instance, we can single out simple verbal groups (those with only one entry) each serving as head(h).

Example of this include:

(a) She *paid* the money (h) (p.68)

(b) The Soza captain body *was in* the bottom of the boat (h) (p.108).

We can also isolate complex verbal groups — those (each) with an auxiliary and a main verb. Here “x” represents the auxiliary while “h” represents the head or the main verb. Examples:

(a) ... they *have followed* the sozas ... (xh) (pp.140-141).

(b) They *were laughing* ... (xh) (p.46).

Again, we have seen instances of compound verbal groups — groups with two or more heads functioning contiguously or conjunctival. Examples:

(a) ... in their house *eating and drinking and sleeping and fucking* ... (h + h + h + h) — conjunctive compound verbal group (p.140).

(b) I just ... *stand (still), chop, piss, shit* (h h h h) — contiguous compound verbal group (p.114).

There are also instances of compound complex verbal groups — those with a *minimum* of an auxiliary and two heads. Examples:

(a) The sozas *were walking, prouding, asking* for the chief (xh h h) — contiguous compound complex verbal group (p.38).

(b) I *will (just) run and run and run and run and run* (xh + h + h + h + h) — conjunctive compound complex verbal group (p.181).

(c) “... this Chief Birabee *will be shouting and prouding and bullying on him*”. (x h + h + h) — conjunctive compound complex verbal group (p.39).

7.

We have shown in this article that language use in *Sozaboy* belongs to a peculiar class — one that appears to have drawn beneficial influences from, the non-standard variety of Nigerian English, English-based pidgin

and the mother tongue of the characters involved. In particular we have drawn attention to expressions which defy classification, those which introduce unusual dimensions such as reduplication, and those which demonstrate pronunciation not acceptable to the native speaker or the nonnative speaker properly educated in the language. Also, we have shown that in spite of the apparent disharmony in the operations, underlying structural patterns (such as the structure of the verbal group), share consoling similarities with the educated and even the sophisticated varieties. What remains to add is that studies on this novel are only just starting: a novel with a specific character which says:

"I am prouiding plenty"
 "So I kept quiet with several people
 shouting little shouts inside my head from
 the policeman's stick's blow"

and on other occasions asserts:

"Oh, I was very happy and very proud"
 After that, I said goodbye to them and went away"

certainly deserves many rounds of investigation.

Notes

1. Readers interested in finding out more about nonstandard Nigerian English and indeed the other varieties (sophisticated, educated, basic etc.) can consult any of the following sources: Brosnahan (1958); Banjo (1971); Jibril (1979); Adesanoye (1980); Eka (1987).
2. Phonotactics as used here deals with the combinatorial possibilities and restrictions in English. For instance, *was* is an actual English word; "wood" is a potential English word because the rules of sound combination do not stop the word from existing; but "wpoob" is an impossible one, for English does not have the initial consonant combination "wp-".
3. All page references are to 1986 (reprinted) edition of Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy*.
4. In the general context of the novel, this cannot be seen in the same light as "everyone are wanted outside", for instance.
5. We should not be understood to be saying that reduplication occurs only in the English used in *Sozaboy*. Indeed, I have heard it on many occasions among people who are barely educated in English. I have actually heard expressions like
 "The car moved softly softly"
 "We should know that one day one day we all must die".
 "The centre forward player came closer closer".
6. More information on intensifiers/emphasizers may be read in Eka (1994: 131-139).

7. We have used the word "entirely" to draw attention to the fact that even with the commas in complex reduplication, the patterning is still technically contiguous.

8. For Further information on phono-graphological problems see. Folarin

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