

The Song of Languages that Walk Straighter, Taller, and Firmer

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Introduction

Ngugi wa Thiong'o once said that if languages could speak, the language between them would be called Translation. Similarly, I would like to suggest that if languages could sing they would sing a song that consists of two transitions or segues. The first transition would be about mother tongue languages, and the second transition would focus on language as a generic system; while the *leitmotif* would be the importance of language in general. The song would begin with the kind of gut-wrenching drumming found in the original 1975 version of *Ipi Ntombi*, ending with the soothing sound of Abdullah Ibrahim's *Water from an Ancient Well*.

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"I remember walking differently on that day, straighter, taller, firmer¹". So said Nelson Mandela on occasion of the great village ceremony that was held to welcome him and his fellow circumcision school graduates.

As a rite of passage from boyhood to manhood, circumcision was a critical milestone in the life of the young Nelson Mandela. Nothing captures Mandela's mood better than his memory of "walking differently ... straighter, taller, firmer". Hence my decision to title this short intervention: The Song of Languages that Walk Straighter, Taller and Firmer.

The Power of Mother-Tongue Language

And yet the moment that was inscribed in Mandela's memory from that occasion was neither the "two heifers and four sheep" he received as gifts nor his "different, straighter, taller and firmer walk" as such. Rather, his big take-away from the occasion, a haunting memory that stayed with him for the rest of his life, was the speech delivered in moving isiXhosa by the keynote speaker of that day – one Chief Meligqili, the son of Dalindyebo.

Reading Mandela's moving summary of the speech of Chief Meligqili, one obtains a clear picture of a heartfelt speech that was not merely delivered but performed with dexterity and sublimity of a Shakespearean orator.

There sit our sons, ... young, healthy and handsome, the flower of the Xhosa tribe, the pride of our nation. We have just circumcised them in a ritual that promises them manhood, but I am here to tell you that it is an empty, illusory promise, a promise that can never be fulfilled. For we Xhosas, and all black South Africans, are a conquered people. We are slaves in our own country. We are tenants on our own soil. We have no strength, no power, no control over our own destiny in the land of our birth. They will go to cities where they will live in shacks and drink cheap alcohol, all because we have no land to give them where they could prosper and multiply. They will cough their lungs out deep in the bowels of the white man's mines, destroying their health, never seeing the sun, so that the white man can live a life of unequalled prosperity.

Among these young men are chiefs who will never rule because we have no power to govern ourselves; soldiers who will never fight for we have no weapons to fight with; scholars who will never teach because we have no place for them to study. The abilities, the intelligence, the promise of these young men will be squandered in their attempt to eke out a living doing the simplest, most mindless chores for the white man. These gifts today are naught, for we cannot give them the greatest gift of all, which is freedom and independence².

Departing from the usual sweet-talking and praise-singing speeches often delivered at such occasions, Chief Meligqili elected to call the sacred tradition of circumcision “an empty, illusory promise”. At that time Mandela thought: “this upstart chief was ruining my day, spoiling the proud feeling with wrong-headed remarks”. But several years later Mandela realised that “... without exactly understanding why, his words soon began to work on me. He had sown a seed, and though I let that seed lie dormant for a long season, it eventually began to grow. Later I realized that the ignorant man that day was not the chief but myself”³.

So if you ever wondered why and how Mandela learnt to walk straighter, taller and firmer, the secret is in the power of the most important message he received as a teenager, a message delivered to him vernacular orature. In this case, the medium was as important as the message; as important as the messenger.

Although Mandela has said that he cannot “pinpoint a moment when I became politicized⁴”, I reckon that the moment of the Chief Meligqili speech was probably the closest Mandela came to a Damascus moment. Few people were more aware of the power of indigenous languages than Mandela – perhaps alongside the likes of Ali Mazrui and Ngugi wa Thiong’o. Though difficult to find the original citation, Mandela is reported to have once said: “If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart”.

In other words, Mandela is suggesting that there is a difference between the languages we understand and mother-tongue languages. Each set has its value and its limits. The languages we understand may go so far as our heads, but it is the mother-tongue languages that touch us deeply. Indeed, some would argue that our ability to appropriate and to function in the colonial languages is reliant on the hospitality of our mother tongue languages deeply embedded in our psyches.

To revert to the Mandela metaphor of a different kind of walk, only mother-tongue languages which walk straighter, taller and firmer will produce citizens who walk straighter, taller and firmer. As long as mother-tongue languages shamefully squat around confined private spaces away from the public square, they will not produce citizens who walk straighter, taller and firmer.

Language in General

On Thursday 7th of December 1993, Chloe Anthony Wofford Morrison (née Chloe Anthony Wofford), better known as Toni Morrison, delivered her acceptance speech for the Nobel Prize in literature. But, in typical Morrisonian style, she built her lecture around a story – which she told thus:

Once upon a time there was an old woman. Blind. Wise. Her reputation for wisdom is without peer and without question. Among her people she is both the law and its transgression. The honour she is paid and the awe in which she is held reach beyond her neighbourhood to places far away; to the city where the intelligence of rural prophets is the source of much amusement. One day the woman is visited by some young people who seem to be bent on disproving her clairvoyance and showing her up for the fraud they believe she is. Their plan is simple: they enter her house and ask the one question the answer to which rides solely on her difference from them, a difference they regard as a profound disability: her blindness.

They stand before her, and one of them says, “old woman, I hold in my hand a bird. Tell me whether it is living or dead.” She does not answer, and the question is repeated. “Is the bird I am holding living or dead?” Still, she doesn’t answer.

She is blind and cannot see her visitors, let alone what is in their hands. She does not know their colour, gender or homeland. She only knows their motive. The old woman’s silence is so long, the young people have trouble holding their laughter. Finally, she speaks, and her voice is soft but stern. “I don’t know”, she says. “I don’t know whether the bird you are holding is dead or alive, but what I do know is that it is in your hands. It is in your hands⁵.”

In Toni Morrison’s creative hands, the meaning of the story is interpreted in a variety of scintillating directions. Essentially, Morrison chooses “to read the bird as language and the (old) woman as a practiced writer⁶”.

The old woman is anxious “about how the language she dreams in, given to her at birth, is handled, [and] put into service...”⁷.

For Morrison and the old woman in the tale, language is ‘a system’ and ‘a living thing’ as well as an ‘agency’ which is not only the ultimate “measure of our lives⁸” but has the “mid-wifery properties⁹” that nourish creativity and origination. But Morrison is also aware of the dark side – abusive language and abused language. So she speaks the numbing “language glamorized to thrill the dissatisfied¹⁰”; the language “of surveillance disguised as research¹¹”; the language that ‘maims’ and ‘kills’ the language that “drinks blood, laps vulnerabilities, tucks its fascist boots under crinolines of respectability and patriotism as it moves relentlessly toward the bottom line and the bottomed-out mind¹²”. And she speaks of erased, dead and dying language¹³.

But here is the rub. For Morrison, “a dead language is not only one no longer spoken or written, it is unyielding language, content to admire its own paralysis¹⁴” - language which leaves ‘corpses’ of stunted intellects, retarded consciences and diminished aesthetic sensibilities in its wake.

Referencing the biblical story of the tower of Babel – a story later to be appropriated by Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui in their 1998 book, *The Power of Babel*¹⁵ Morrison suggests that the heavens which the ‘people of Babel’ were seeking to reach, can in fact be accessed here and now, if only we take “the time to understand other languages, other views, [and] other narratives¹⁶”. She therefore advocates for multi rather than monolingualism.

And yet, multilingualism is only possible between languages that are equals – equal in stature, before the law, equal in terms of the dignity with which their speakers are treated and equal in terms of worth – spiritual and material.

Between Nelson Mandela's Chief Meligqili and Toni Morrison's Wise Old Woman

Morrison does not allow the story of the blind, old and wise woman to be a one-sided contest versus naïve and capricious youngsters. Before ending her lecture, she complicates the story.

What if the youngsters were bluffing and they had no bird in their hands? What if their 'trick' was their way of speaking of that which they wished they had? What if the youngsters were in fact crying out for someone to light up a torch and show them the way?

In my postscript to the first English Xitsonga Dictionary¹⁷, I comment on Toni Morrison Nobel Literature Award acceptance speech thus:

Whether the bird in the hands of the youngsters was alive or dead, whether they had a bird or no bird in their hands, what matters is that they brought themselves into the presence of the blind, old and wise woman. This in itself, was a chance occasion not to be squandered and not to be reduced to a verbal boxing match. She could have taken time to know each one of them, spoken to them at length and told them how she managed to 'see' with clarity, even though she was blind. Maybe when the youths demanded to be told whether the bird in their hands was dead or living, what they were really expressing was the terror and the horror of going through life, without mentorship, and without language with which to articulate and navigate their experiences, feelings, hopes and fears... .

Not to be outdone, Chief Meligqili, son of Dalindyebo, ended his devastating circumcision graduation speech on a rather ominous note. He cracks a dry and morose joke at which no one laughs:

... I have a suspicion that Qamata may in fact be dozing. If this is the case, the sooner I die the better, because then I can meet him and shake him awake and tell him that the children of Ngubengcuka, the flower of the Xhosa nation, are dying¹⁸.

Indeed, without a living language in their hands, "the children of Ngubengcuka, the flower of the Xhosa nation, are dying", in more ways than one.

Will you join Chief Meligqili, son of Dalindyebo, in his effort to help the children?

Won't you help me sing
This song of freedom
Redemption song
The song of languages that walk straighter, taller and firmer
How long shall they kill our languages?
While we stand aside and look.

¹ Mandela, Nelson. Long Walk To Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela (pp. 29-31). (Function). Kindle Edition

² Mandela, Nelson. Long Walk To Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela (p. 30). (Function). Kindle Edition.

³ Mandela, Nelson. Long Walk To Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela (p. 31). (Function). Kindle Edition

⁴ Mandela, Nelson. Long Walk To Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela (p. 95). (Function). Kindle Edition.

⁵ Toni Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993.

<https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/literature/1993/morrison/lecture/>

Accessed 6 January 2025.

⁶ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993.

⁷ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993.

⁸ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993

⁹ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993

¹⁰ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993

¹¹ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993

¹² Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993

¹³ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993.

¹⁴ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993.

¹⁵ Ali A. Mazrui and Alamin M. Mazrui. *The Power of Babel. Language and Governance in the African Experience*, Chichago: University, 1998.

¹⁶ Morrison, Nobel Lecture, 7 December 1993.

¹⁷ *Xilamulelamhangu*, MM Marhanele and Vonani Bila 2025.

¹⁸ Mandela, Nelson. *Long Walk To Freedom: The Autobiography of Nelson Mandela* (p. 30). (Function). Kindle Edition.