

Of Translational Spaces and Multilingual Cities: Reading the Sounds of Lagos in Sefi Atta's *Swallows* and *Everything Good Will Come**

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<Abstract> Over the last few years, there has been an increasing number of Nigerian authors who in their writing have centered on portraying the different sounds and accents of one of Nigeria's most diverse and vibrant cities, Lagos. This article aims to analyze the way in which Sefi Atta, a leading voice in what has come to be known as "the third generation of Nigerian writers," describes in her novels *Swallow* (2005) and *Everything Good Will Come* (2010) the manner in which some of Nigeria's vernacular languages, such as Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba, as well as Nigerian English and Nigerian Pidgin, permeate this incredibly plural and multilingual city where varying ethnic, linguistic, and religious groups have been made to live together in the same translational space as a result of the colonial era.

As Achille Mbembe (2010) has underlined, one of the main bequests of colonialism has been the unequal development of the different countries and regions of Africa. This situation has led to an uneven distribution of people within multiple spaces. In this way, cities such as Lagos, Dakar, Accra, or Abidjan have actually become major metropolitan centers where interaction and negotiations among diverse peoples are commonplace and transcultural forms of different elements such as modes of dress, music, or language are constantly emerging. Without a doubt, translation is a main feature of coexistence in Lagos given its multilingual environment and the way in which various ethnic and linguistic communities share everyday life.

"Language is part of the audible surface of the city."
(Cronin and Simon 2014, 120)

IN TRANSLATION: READING THE SOUNDS OF THE CITY

Over the last few years, there has been an increasing number of Nigerian authors who in their writing have centered on portraying the different sounds and accents of one of Nigeria's most diverse and vibrant cities, Lagos. In this

* This article is part of the research project entitled "Violencia simbólica y traducción: retos en la representación de identidades fragmentadas en la sociedad global" [Symbolic Violence and Translation: Challenges in the Representation of Fragmented Identities within the Global Society] (FFI2015-66516-P; MINECO/FEDER, UE), financed by the Spanish Ministry of Economy and Competitiveness.

regard, as Toni Kan Onwordi has underlined in a brief description included on the cover of Sefi Atta's second novel *Swallow*, "no contemporary Nigerian writer is better than Sefi Atta at evoking the smells, sounds and the sheer madness of this sprawling cosmopolitan city of Lagos." Along with Chris Abani, Helon Habila, Maik Nwosu, Jude Dibia, and Akin Adesokan, and other members of what has come to be known as "the third generation of Nigerian writers," in her narrative Sefi Atta ably describes the way in which diverse peoples negotiate everyday life on the city's populated streets.

Although there are many ways in which one may try to understand the workings of urban reality, analyzing "the practice of everyday life" (see De Certeau 1984) in a postcolonial city such as Lagos through language and translation can offer new and interesting perspectives in various fields of study. Indeed, Atta's novels *Everything Good Will Come* (2005) and *Swallow* (2010) provide the reader with a valuable linguistic experience of Lagos through the inclusion in her texts of the multilingual transactions that permeate the city.

As Simon interestingly points out in her book *Cities in Translation*,

Much of the abundant literature in recent decades has emphasized the visual aspects of urban life. And yet the audible surface of languages, each city's signature blend of dialects and accents, is an equally crucial element of urban reality [. . .] "hearing" introduces the observer into layers of social, economic and cultural complexity. (Simon 2012, 1)

Thus, reading in Atta's fiction the sounds and diverse range of accents that characterize the city brings the reader closer to the complexity of its linguistic reality, in which translation appears as an indispensable tool which has gradually allowed for the emergence of what McLaughlin has termed "new urban language varieties":

The burgeoning growth of Africa's cities that began during the latter part of the colonial period and continues with increasing momentum into the twenty-first century has given rise to a multiplicity of innovative and often transformative cultural practices that are associated primarily with urban life, not least of which is the emergence of new urban language varieties. (McLaughlin 2009, 1)

Lagos is, without a doubt, a multilingual and multiethnic city that can actually be defined as "a translation space [where] the focus is not on multiplicity but on interaction" (Simon 2012, 7). Therefore, given its multilingual environment and the way in which various ethnic and linguistic communities have come to share its everyday life, translation can clearly be considered one of the main features of activity in Lagos. In this way, beyond dichotomist understandings, translation becomes an indispensable medium through which a common coexistence may, although not always successfully, be negotiated:

Multilingual contexts put pressure on the traditional vocabulary of transfer and its concepts of source and destination. Communities which have had a longstanding relationship inhabit the same landscape and follow similar rhythms of daily life. Facing one another across the space of the city, they are not “foreign” and so translation can no longer be configured only as a link between a familiar and a foreign culture, between a local original and a distant destination, between one monolingual community and another. [...] The Other remains within constant earshot. The shared understandings of this coexistence change the meaning of translation from a gesture of benevolence to a process through which a common civility is negotiated. (Simon 2012, 7)

LAGOS: A MULTILINGUAL AND MULTIETHNIC MEGACITY

In his book *Sortir de la grande nuit* (2010), Achille Mbembe recently underlined the fact that one of the main bequests of colonialism has been the unequal development of the different countries and regions of Africa. In fact, “[n]o major coastal cities existed in Western Africa before the colonial period. However, as a result of the mostly maritime-based logistics of colonialism, countries in the sub-region began an urbanization path strongly associated with the coast” (United Nations Human Settlements Programme [UN-Habitat] 2014, 99). This situation has gradually led to an uneven distribution of people within multiple spaces, hence cities like Lagos, Dakar, Accra, and Abidjan have actually become major metropolitan centers where interaction and negotiations are commonplace and transcultural forms of different elements such as modes of dress, music, or language are constantly emerging. It becomes apparent, therefore, that in many African cities such as Lagos

attaining even the minimum often requires complex styles of staying attuned to the shifting intersections of gestures, excitements, languages, anxieties, determinations and comportments enacted across markets, streets and other venues. The city is a field of affect where specific dispositions and attainments are contingent upon the ways actors’ bodies, histories and capacities are mobilized and enacted. (Simone 2007, 237)

As Ato Quayson explains in regard to Oxford St., in the Ghanaian capital of Accra the streets in many African cities may be seen as archives, rather than just geographical locations, where it is possible to find “a rich and intricate relationship between tradition and modernity, religion and secularity as well as local and transnational circuits of images and ideas” (Quayson 2010, 72).

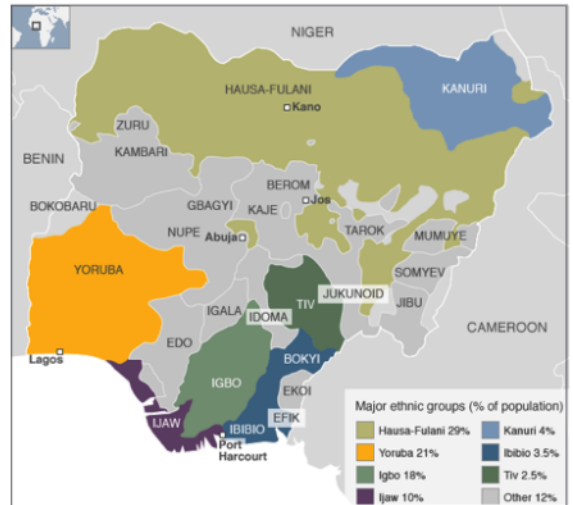
Lagos is a burgeoning city, the largest in Nigeria (Falola and Genova 2009, 202), and, according to the figures published by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) in its 2014 report *The State of African Cities 2014. Re-imagining Sustainable Urban Transitions*, it “has recently joined the ranks of the world’s megacities” (2014, 17). Lagos has undoubtedly been shaped by its history, not only as one of the most important ports

in West Africa from the eighteenth century onwards, but also as the federal capital of Nigeria (1914–1991). In this respect, although Abuja has been the federal capital of the country since 1991, Lagos, whose population is expected to rise to over eighteen million by 2025 (United Nations Human Settlements Programme, 23–25), is now the center of one of the largest urban areas in Western Africa and continues to be a main hub in the southwestern region of Nigeria for the circulation of peoples as well as goods. Growing urbanization and rural–urban migration are responsible for the cultural heterogeneity of this major Western African city, which was at one point described “as an ancient city inhabited by the Awori and Ijebu people, both subgroups of the Yoruba” (Falola and Genova 2009, 202). Nevertheless, as a result of Nigeria’s national history, Lagos is currently populated by varying and distinct ethnic groups. Although there is still a Yoruba majority, it can be said that “Nigeria’s myriad ethnic and religious identities are found throughout the city’s neighborhoods, usually managing to coexist, though periodically sparking tensions” (Lewis 2009, 115).

The artificial boundaries which were drawn when Nigeria was created by British administrators in 1914,¹ have given rise to an incredibly heterogeneous space both in ethnical and linguistic terms. As can be seen in the map below, there is an extremely wide range of ethnic groups which, as a consequence of colonialism, have come to inhabit the same nation; this has often provoked ethnic and religious tensions, the Biafran War (1967–1970) being a case in point:

The Nigeria of today [...] is a relatively new creation, dating back to the early 20th century. Boundaries prior to that time included numerous chieftaincies and empires that expanded and contracted geographically without regard to modern Nigeria’s boundaries. For the early peoples of Nigeria, only geographic boundaries, such as the Sahara Desert or Atlantic Ocean, might have kept them in place. Western European powers competing for territory and political control in Africa during the late-19th century determined Nigeria’s boundaries to suit their needs. Much of Nigeria’s western, eastern, and northern borders are the results of rivalry and compromise by European powers. As a result, ethnic groups and former kingdoms straddle boundaries. [...] Modern-day Nigeria is a conglomeration of hundreds of ethnic groups, spanning across different geographical zones. [...] To identify a single Nigerian culture is difficult. (Falola and Genova 2009, xxx-xxxi)

¹ The name ‘Nigeria’ is credited to the colonial editor of the *Times of London*, Flora Shaw, who later married the new entity’s governor, Lord Frederick Lugard. The name stuck. But the new name was not accompanied by any sense of national unity. [...] The British yoking together of so many different peoples into a huge state [...] shaped the future of about a fifth of Africa’s sub-Saharan population” (Campbell 2013, 2).



From a demographic point of view, within Nigeria the Hausa-Fulani, the Igbo, and the Yoruba can be considered to be the largest of the ethnic groups. According to Iyoha (2010, 169), around 29% of the population is Hausa-Fulani who live mainly in the northern regions in cities such as Kano, Sokoto, and Kaduna. The Yoruba, more or less 21%, are based primarily in the southwest of the country, in cities such as Ife-Ife, Lagos, and Ibadan. On the other hand, the Igbo, approximately 18% of the population, inhabit the areas situated in the southeast of Nigeria, for example in Port Harcourt, Owerri, and Enugu. These aforementioned groups can, however, be said to live all around the country. Other, numerically smaller ethnic groups include the Tiv, the Nupe, the Igala, and the Jukun in the Middle Belt region and the Ijaw, the Itsekiri, the Urhobo, the Ogoni, and the Ibibio in the Niger Delta. They have long been demanding greater political and economic representation within the national space, as Saro-Wiwa has pointed out on many occasions in regard to the Ogoni people:

Colonialism is not a matter only of British, French, or European dominance over Africans. In African society, there is and has always been colonial oppression. In my case, the Ogoni had never been conquered by their Igbo neighbors. But the fact of British colonialism brought both peoples together under a single administration for the first time. And when the British colonialists left, the numerically inferior Ogoni were consigned to the rule of the more numerous Igbos, who always won elections in the Region since ethnic loyalties and cultural habits were and continue to be strong throughout Nigeria. (Saro-Wiwa 1992, 155)

Not only is Nigeria diverse in terms of its ethnicity, but it also boasts an enormous variety of languages and dialects—more than four hundred according to Garuba (2001, 11) and more than five hundred according to the

Ethnologue database (Simons and Fennig 2017). As Adekunle (1997) and Adeg-bija (2000, 2004) highlight, multilingualism is a common feature of many West African regions, and Nigeria can be said to be the country where the largest number of different languages is spoken. Together with English, which is used as an official language and is employed in diverse forms, Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba have become the three major national languages.² Moreover, a wide range of languages and dialects spoken by the different Nigerian ethnic groups is to be found:

Apart from the indigenous languages, which are the mother tongues of Nigerians, there also exist non-indigenous languages. They include English, which has become a second language; Nigerian Pidgin (the language in Nigeria with probably the largest number of speakers), which derives from the contact between English and the indigenous languages; Classical Arabic, which is learnt by Muslims; and other foreign languages such as French, German, and Russian, which are taken as academic subjects at the secondary and tertiary levels of education. (Igboanus 2002, 13–14)

Faced with this highly complex web of languages, many Nigerians have resorted to both English and Nigerian Pidgin (NP)³ as a way of favoring communication with each other:

Originally mainly restricted to trade, Pidgin has spread to become the language of market places, sports, the army and police force, taxi drivers, playgrounds, university campuses, and generally of interethnic discourse in lower-class and informal contexts. In recent decades it has therefore been utilized for mass communication—in advertising, political campaigning, government propaganda, announcements, and mass media, e.g. news broadcasts on the radio [. . .] It is labeled “the most widely spoken language in Nigeria” [. . .] Though the language still carries a strong stigma in the eyes of many educated Nigerians, many others have come to use it in informal conversations, also in banks, offices, and businesses, utilizing its ethnographic role as a code of friendliness and proximity. (Schneider 2007, 205–206)

Nonetheless, it is interesting to take into consideration that whilst NP and the vernacular languages are normally used in informal and familiar conversations, administrative and educational matters are mainly dealt with in English: “For a great many speakers from different groups, English is [...] valued as a language of prestige, a sign of education, and a mark of modernity”

² “The dominance of English in the Nigerian Constitution continued until 1979, when the Constitution that emerged under a military regime specifically provided for the use of the three major languages (Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba) in addition to English for proceedings in the National Assembly: ‘The business of the National Assembly shall be conducted in English, and in Hausa, Ibo, and Yoruba when adequate arrangements have been made therefore (Section 51)’” (Bamgbose 1996, 358).

³ It is important to bear in mind that, as Igboanus points out, “Nigerian English” (NE) and “Nigerian Pidgin” (NP) are considered to be different languages: “Nigerian Pidgin is different from Nigerian English (the variety of English used in Nigeria). However, the line between them is sometimes difficult to draw, particularly at the lexical level” (Igboanus 2008, 78).

(Simpson 2008,194). According to different critics (Bamgbose 1971; Bamgbose 1996, 366; Igboanus 2002; Gut 2004, 813), only a small percentage of the Nigerian population may understand or speak English, but, despite the fact that in recent years there have been repeated attempts to increase the importance of the vernacular languages, it continues to be used on a regular basis, especially by the local elites:

As ex-colonial people, Nigerians hold English in great awe. They so overrate English that literacy in English is considered the only mark of being an educated person. For example, for them science and technology are not within the reach of any person who cannot master the English language. Not surprisingly, therefore, the language, unlike any of the Nigerian mother tongues, is regarded as being politically neutral for adoption by the people. [...] Consequently, political expediency makes the English language the ready language for adoption for national literacy today. (Afolayan 2001, 83)

Just as in other African countries, the increasing use of new technologies such as the Internet and cable TV among specific sectors of Nigerian society has resulted in a growing interest on the part of the younger generation in learning the English language. This situation has been skillfully described by the widely acclaimed Nigerian writer Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie who, on many occasions, has stated that English is no longer considered by some as a “foreign” language, but rather as a Nigerian language adapted to the Nigerian cultural context:

I'd like to say something about English [...] which is simply that English is mine. Sometimes we talk about English in Africa as if Africans have no agency, as if there is not a distinct form of English spoken in Anglophone African countries. I was educated in it; I spoke it at the same time as I spoke Igbo. My English-speaking is rooted in a Nigerian experience and not in a British or American or Australian one. I have taken ownership of English. (Adichie, quoted in Uzoamaka 2008, 2)

The general trend encountered in multilingual communities consists in usage gradually determining the role each language has in particular domains, and Nigeria is no exception. Although English remains the most important language in education and matters pertaining to government and administration, the vernacular languages—such as Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo as well as NP—are used primarily in informal contexts. Taking these matters into consideration, it is important to underline the “diglossic,” or rather “poliglossic,” relations that, as Zabus (2007) and Bandia (2008) point out, have been established between the different languages that are employed in many of the countries in West Africa, including Nigeria:⁴

⁴ It is interesting to mention here that, according to Warren-Rothlin, in Nigeria digraphia is also a social reality which can result in social divisions (Warren-Rothlin 2012, 6–7). There also exist multiple orthographies and writing scripts within the country (ibid. 7).

For our purposes, the sociolinguistic concept of diglossia needs to be expanded to include not only Ferguson's genetically linked "high" and "low" varieties (to which he erroneously attributed scripturality and orality, respectively) but unrelated languages as well. Indeed, in a country like Ghana, Ewe is not a dialect of English and has a written literature of its own but, functionally, Ewe is to English what a dominated or subordinate language is to a dominant or superordinate language. [...] Also, the West African auxiliary languages resulting from languages in contact such as pidgins have a diglossic relation to the dominant European language that is similar to the more conventional relation between a prestige or power language and its regional dialect. Conversely, a statistically dominant language like Wolof in Senegal can be considered as being hegemonic like French and would thus be in diglossia with a minor language like Ndüt. (Zabus 2007, 14)

In the case of the Nigerian linguistic landscape, English has gradually come to be accepted as the dominant language in some domains while specific forms of some of the vernacular languages such as Hausa, Igbo, and Yoruba have been gaining ground in others. In many instances, however, these vernacular languages are in a diglossic situation in relation to the English language. Likewise, although it is now defined as "the most widely spoken language in Nigeria," NP appears to be in a diglossic situation with respect to English. It is also important to bear in mind that the three major vernacular languages can be categorized as hegemonic *vis-à-vis* those considered as minor. Thus, faced with the linguistic variation characteristic of a territory like Nigeria, it may be said that, in Zabus's own words, "[w]e can therefore advance the notions of 'triglossia' or even 'polyglossia,' and 'intertwined diglossias'" (Zabus 2007, 14).

The Nigerian cultural and linguistic situation that we have been describing, although very succinctly, is reflected in the city of Lagos where, as illustrated by the different examples that follow, diverse languages, and therefore translation, are used on a daily basis, not only in the ever-changing "discourse ecologies" (Quayson 2010) that exist on its streets, but also in the conversational exchanges that take place in its crowded markets, "motor parks," taxis or buses. In this regard, in their work both Adedun and Shodipe have underlined the fact that, although most people in Lagos use Yoruba and Nigerian Pidgin in their daily interactions, Hausa, Igbo, and other vernacular languages together with English are also a common feature in this cosmopolitan African city:

The nature of Lagos, which accommodates various ethnic, and religious groups, accounts for the present state of its language repertoire. [...] Without any doubt, Lagos is a potpourri of different peoples and tribes and these have had a noticeable impact on the linguistic repertoire, language choice, and language shift in the area. (Adedun and Shodipe 2011, 131)

One of the main characteristics of Atta's work, as mentioned previously, is the accuracy with which she manages to portray the city of Lagos and the wide range of sounds that fill its streets and buildings. Both in her first novel, *Everything Good Will Come* (EG in the citations, below), and in her second novel, *Swallow* (SW in the citations, below), in addition to other works, Atta describes different parts of the city along with its diverse languages and accents:

Our continent was a tower of Babel, Africans speaking colonial languages: French, English, Portuguese, and their own indigenous languages. Most house help in Lagos came from outside Lagos; from the provinces and from neighboring African countries. If we didn't share a language, we communicated in Pidgin English. (EG, 212)

Sheri's younger siblings greeted me as I walked across the cement square.
"Hello, Sister Enitan."
"Long time no see."
"Barka de Sallah, Sister Enitan." (EG, 247)

Street hawkers sat behind wooden stalls in a small market . . . They were Fulani people from the North. The men wore white skull caps and the women wrapped chiffon scarves around their heads. [. . .] They talked loud in their language, and together they sounded like mourners ululating. (EG, 198)

Baba came to collect his monthly salary [. . .]
"Compliments of the season," I said. "How are you?"
I spoke to him in Yoruba, addressing him by the formal you, because he was an elder. He responded with the same formality because I was his employer. Yoruba is a language that doesn't recognize gender—he the same as she, him the same as her—but respect is always important. (EG, 312).

In her fiction, Atta includes many instances in which translation appears as an indispensable tool and a necessary medium through which everyday life may be negotiated in Lagos, a place where diverse peoples and languages have come to share a common space. For instance, when Enitan, the main character in *Everything Good Will Come*, is sent to Royal College in Lagos and encounters girls from varying ethnic and linguistic backgrounds, cultural and linguistic translation becomes indispensable on a day-to-day basis:

I met Moslem girls [. . .] Catholic girls [. . .] Anglican girls, Methodist girls. One girl, Sangita, was Hindu [. . .] I learned also about women in my country, from Zaria, Katsina, Kaduna who decorated their skin with henna dye and lived in *purdah* [. . .] Uncle Alex had always said our country was not meant to be one. The British had drawn a circle on the map of West Africa and called it a country. Now I understood what he meant. The girls I met at Royal College [in Lagos] were so different. I could tell a girl's ethnicity even before she opened her mouth. Hausa girls had softer hair because of their Arab heritage. Yoruba girls like me usually had heart-shaped faces and many Igbo girls were fair-skinned; we called them Igbo Yellow. We spoke English, but our native tongues were as different as French and Chinese. So, we mispronounced names and spoke English with different accents. Some Hausa girls could not "fronounce" the

letter P. Some Yoruba girls might call these girls "Ausas," and eggs might be "heggs." Then there was that business with the middle-belters who mixed up their L's and R's. (EG, 44–45)

Moreover, when Enitan meets one of her neighbors, a Muslim girl named Sheri, they are each faced with both cultural and linguistic translation. Since they come from different ethnic communities and religious backgrounds, Enitan, who is Yoruba, and Sheri, a "half-caste" with Hausa roots, need to understand one another's cultural and linguistic circumstances before they can become friends:

[Sheri] was funny, and she was also rude, but that was probably because she had no home training.

She yelled from our gates. "I'll call you aburo, little sister, from now on. And I'll beat you at ten-ten, wait and see." (EG, 16)

The woman in the photograph by [Sheri's] bedside table was her grandmother. "Alhaja," Sheri said. "She's beautiful!" [...]

There were many Alhajas in Lagos. This one wasn't the first woman to go on hajj to Mecca, but for women like her, who were powerful within their families and communities, the title became their name. [...] She pressed the picture to her chest and told me of her life in downtown Lagos. She lived in a house opposite her Alhaja's fabric store. She went to a school where children didn't care to speak English. After school, she helped Alhaja in her store and knew how to measure cloth. I listened, mindful that my life didn't extend beyond Ikoyi Park. What would it be like to know downtown as Sheri did, haggle with customers, buy fried yams and roasted plantains from street hawkers, curse Area Boys and taxi cabs who drove too close to the curb. [...] Sheri was a Moslem and she didn't know much about Christianity. [...] I asked why Moslems didn't eat pork. "It's a filthy beast," she said, scratching her hair. I told her about my own life. (EG, 33–34)

As Enitan mentions in several parts of the novel, although Hausa resonates in the streets and markets of Lagos, without translation into other languages it is not always understood by the Yoruba majority or by people from other ethnic communities. That is why, in many cases, people from diverse ethnic and linguistic backgrounds who live in the city translate their vernacular languages into Pidgin English or English:

Our gate man unlocked the gates. His prayer beads hung from his wrist. I realized I must have disturbed his prayer. Soon it would be the Moslem fasting period, Ramadan. "*Sanu, madam*," he said.

"*Sanu, mallam*," I replied in the only Hausa I knew. (EG, 201)

In my first year of marriage, there was a hawkler who sat by the vigilante gates of our state. She was one of those Fulani people from the north. We never said a word to each other: I could understand her language no more than she could mine. (EG, 243)

This situation is also underlined by another Nigerian writer, Buchi Emecheta, in her well-known novel *The Joys of Motherhood*:

The early market sellers were making their way to the stalls in single file. [Nnu Ego]

in her haste almost knocked the poor man down [. . .] There followed a loud curse, and an unintelligible outpouring from the mouth of the beggar in his native Hausa language, which few people in Lagos understood. (Emecheta 1994, 9)

In the colorful markets of Lagos and other African cities, peoples from varied ethnic and linguistic environments constantly mingle and interact. Markets, as Simone puts it, are “the site for incessant performance, for feigned connections and insider deals, for dissimulation of all kinds, for launching impressions and information, rumors and advice” (Simone 2008, 81). Hence, given the *mélange* of languages and cultures, “[t]he resulting confusion about what is really going on breeds its own makeshift interpreters, who pretend to have real skills of discernment and can steer customers to the best price, quality, or hidden deal” (Simone 2008, 81).

In the extract below, taken from *Everything Good Will Come*, Enitan, who was brought up in Ikoyi, one of Lagos’s affluent neighborhoods,⁵ highlights the fact that class differences are extremely important in the city and can greatly influence the way in which people talk to one another:

Pierre, my present house boy, began to wash the vegetables [. . .]
I needed Pierre to place the okras on the chopping board.
“/c/,” I said pointing. “Over there, please.”
Pierre raised a brow. “/Là bas, madame?”
“My friend,” I said. “You know exactly what I mean.”
It was my fault for attempting to speak French to him. [. . .]
“I beg, put am for there,” I said [in Nigerian Pidgin]. [. . .]
The general help we called house boys or house girls. [. . .] They helped with daily chores in exchange for food, lodgings, and a stipend. Most were of working age, barely educated. [. . .] (EG, 212)

In this particular situation, because Pierre, the house boy, comes from the neighboring Republic of Benin, Enitan tries to translate her orders into French. Nevertheless, in the end, she resorts to a translation into Pidgin English, which, as stated earlier in the article, is the language normally used as the medium of communication among peoples who belong to different ethnic and linguistic groups in Lagos.

On other occasions, however, depending on the educational level of the speakers and the specific context in which interaction takes place, when

⁵ According to Fourchard (2012a, 68), this comes as a direct result of the colonial era, when the city of Lagos was divided into a residential area reserved for Europeans (Ikoyi) and a commercial area in which Europeans lived, worked, traded, and interacted with Africans (Lagos Island). In this regard, Lagos, like other contemporary African cities, may be described as what Triulzi (2002, 81) refers to as “the ‘site of memory’ of colonisation, with its divisions (the colonial city was conceived and grew opposite to and separate from the native town), its visible remains (buildings, town plans, statues) and its obligatory ‘synthesis’ of tradition and modernity.”

people whose ethnicities differ speak with one another, they translate their vernacular languages into English, instead of Pidgin English:

We [Rose and Tolani] always spoke in English because she couldn't speak Yoruba and I couldn't understand her own language, Ijaw. (SW, 8)

Enitan and Tolani, the main protagonists of *Everything Good* and *Swallow* respectively, recount their stories in English yet, as Atta herself has pointed out (quoted in Rodríguez Murphy 2012, 107–108), it actually consists of a transcultural form of English (Rodríguez Murphy 2015b, 72), which is inscribed with Nigerian vernacular languages and expressions as well as with Nigerian cultural markers: “[Nigerian readers] tell me they enjoy seeing those kinds of Englishes in my work. They come up to me and say: ‘Oh, you really *do* know Nigeria, you really *do* know Lagos very well.’ They enjoy it” (Atta quoted in Rodríguez Murphy 2012, 108). In her work, Atta manages to reflect the different varieties of English used in Lagos. These varieties have come to be defined as NE, and now form part of the wide range of “World Englishes” (see Kachru 1992 and Kachru, Kachru, and Nelson 2006) or “New Englishes” (see Crystal 2003), in reference to local adaptations of the English language which suit specific cultural contexts. This can be seen in the following examples:

Yellow

Sheri's afro was so fluffy, it moved as she talked [. . .] She had a spray of rashes and was so fair-skinned. People her color got called “Yellow Pawpaw” or “Yellow Banana” in school. (EG, 18)

Peter Mukoro tapped my arm. “I was calling that lady, that yellow lady in the kitchen, but she ignored me. Tell her we need more rice. Please.” (EG, 125–126)

I'd heard men say that women like Sheri didn't age well: they wrinkled early like white women. It was the end of a narration that began when they first called her yellow banana, and not more sensible, I thought. (EG, 206)

In diverse passages of Atta's novels, we may observe that the word “yellow” has come to acquire a specific meaning in NE: “a NE way of describing a fellow Black who is fairly light-skinned” (Igboanusu 2002, 303).

Area boys

“You won't believe. We were having a peaceful protest, calling on the government to reconsider our demands, when we noticed a group in the crowd who did not belong to our union. [. . .] They were shouting insults and acting rowdy [. . .]”

The people she was talking about had to be area boys. They waited for any protest so they could misbehave. (SW, 133)

In this extract taken from *Swallow*, Atta uses the term “area boy,” a phrase now commonly heard in urban settings, which, in NE, makes reference to a job-

less young man who participates in criminal acts and is often involved in criminal activities. Such a term is one of many linguistic reflections of what, according to some critics (Fourchard 2012b, Lewis 2009), is now happening in the streets of the city where, for several decades, criminal activity has been on the increase.

High-life music

As he spoke, I fell asleep dreaming of him, an eleven-year-old boy with khaki shorts holding a rifle made of sticks, dancing to high-life music with his mother and learning how to drink palm-wine from his father's calabash. (EG, 116-117)

“High-life music,” sometimes referred to just as “highlife,” is a very well-known musical genre in the Western regions of Africa,⁶ “a brand of music style combining jazz and West African elements, popular in Nigeria and other West African countries. In BE, ‘high life’ denotes a style of life that involves spending a lot of money on entertainment, good food, expensive clothes, etc.” (Igboanusi 2002, 138). As Igboanusi remarks, it is important to take into consideration that there is a difference between the way the term is used in British English and the meaning it has come to acquire in Nigerian English.

Not only “Highlife,” but also other types of transcultural Nigerian music such as apala or juju music are often mentioned in Atta's novels. Along with language, another element that permeates daily life in Lagos and many Nigerian cities is music that, as in other countries on the African continent, has been adapted and translated to suit diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds:

Through the fence we heard Akanni's juju music. Sheri stuck her bottom out and began to wriggle. She dived lower and wormed up. (EG, 15)

The street was narrow and juju music blared from a battered cassette player perched on a wooden stool. Street hawkers sat around selling boxes of sugar, bathing sponges, tinned sardines, chewing sticks, cigarettes, and Bazooka Joe gum. (EG, 89)

Lagos. The street on which we lived was named after a military governor. Our neighborhood smelled of burned beans and rotten egusi leaves. Juju and apala music, disco and reggae music jumped from the windows, and fluorescent blue cylinders lit up the entire place past midnight. (SW, 21)

In her writing, Atta includes both NE and NP, and also the vernacular languages with which she was brought up, Yoruba and Hausa. This helps situate the reader in Lagos's translational spaces, where the sounds of different accents and languages share a common linguistic environment:

⁶ Although “highlife music” is a popular genre in West Africa, it is necessary to emphasize that each region has managed to maintain its own specificity: “Generally, as the music and its accompanying highlife dance spread across West Africa, each region maintained its ethnic specificity by composing songs in the local language, and some bands, especially the multinational ones, created compositions in English or pidgin English” (Ajayi-Soyinka 2008, 526).

He pronounced his visions between chants that sounded like the Yoruba words for butterfly, dung beetle, and turkey: *labalaba, yimiyimi, tolotolo*. (EG, 10)

Yoruba people believed in reincarnation. The Yoruba religion had a world for the living and another for spirits. There was a circle of life and other complex concepts regarding deity, royalty, and fate that I couldn't fully understand. For anyone to understand the Yoruba cosmos was a challenge without the wisdom and guidance of a *babalawo* [...] (SW, 88)

On the day of the Moslem festival, *Id-el-fitr*, I left home for the first time that month to break fast with the Bakares. [...] As I drove through their gates, I heard a ram bleating in the back yard of the Bakare's house. It had been tied to a mango tree for two weeks and would be slain for the Sallah feast. (EG, 245)

"How's your husband?" Mama Gani asked. Her gold tooth flashed.

"He's fine," I said [...]

"Still nothing about your father?"

"Still nothing," I said.

She clapped her hands. "*Insha Allah*, nothing will happen to him, after the kindness he's shown us." (EG, 245)

The multilingualism which is typical in Lagos makes communication based on translation and transculturation inevitable. The following dialogues from *Everything Good Will Come* and *Swallow* clearly illustrate this point:

We heard a cry from the road.

"Pupa! Yellow!"

A taxi driver was leaning out of his window. [...]

"Yes, you with the big *yansh*," he shouted.

Sheri spread her fingers at him. "Nothing good will come to you!" [...]

"And you, *Dudu*," the taxi driver said.

Startled, I looked up.

"Yes you with the black face. Where is your own *yansh* hiding?"

I glared at him. "Nothing good will come to you!"

He laughed with his tongue hanging out. "What, you're turning up your nose at me? You're not that pretty, either of you. Sharrap. Oh, sharrap both of you. You should feel happy that a man noticed you. If you're not careful, I'll sex you both."

Sheri and I turned our backs on him. (EG, 135-136)

There was a strong smell of simmering palm oil in the flat. Rose was in the kitchen.

[...] She laughed at my expression.

"My sister," she said. "You think say I no know how to cook or what?"

"I've just seen Mrs. Durojaiye," I said, shutting the door.

"I saw her too!"

"She says you visited her?"

She clucked. "The woman done craze [...]" (SW, 135)

On my way to the bus stop, I passed a group of women selling roasted corn under a breadfruit tree. [...] I heard two men discussing women. "Statuesque," one of them said. "The first one is black and skinny, the second is yellow and fat. I can't decide. I love them both. You think say I fit marry both of them?" (SW, 236)

At the bus stop, an army officer with his stomach protruding over his belt parted the crowd to board a bus. "Single-file line," he repeated and lifted his horsewhip to warn those who protested. [...]

"Those who give orders," I said in a voice loud enough for the others to hear. "Question them. You can't just obey without thinking."

[...]

"Oh, I hate people like this," [a] woman said. "What is wrong with her? Move your

skinny self, sister.”

[. . .]

“Sister [. . .]. Move before I move you to one side, oh!”

“*Abi* she’s deaf?”

“Maybe she done craze.”

“Sister, ‘dress oh!”

“Yes, address yourself to the corner and continue to *tanda* for dat side with your body like *bonga* fish.”

“*Tss*, keep shut. Don’t start another fight” (SW, 188–189)

Enitan’s and Tolani’s stories take place in a particular context which Atta succeeds in describing in great detail through a specific use of language that evokes, in the mind of the reader, the smells, images and languages which define the city of Lagos, where it is possible to come across interesting contrasts and a wide range of lifestyles as well as “cultural inscriptions [. . .] seen in mottos and slogans on lorries, cars, pushcarts and other mobile surfaces that may be encountered on the street” (Quayson 2010, 73):

Millions lived in Lagos [. . .] Most days it felt like a billion people walking down the labyrinth of petty and main streets: beggar men, secretaries, government contractors (thieves, some would say), Area Boys, street children [. . .] There was a constant din of cars, popping exhaust pipes, and engines, commuters scrambling for canary-yellow buses and private transport vans we called *kabukabu* and *danfo*. They bore bible epigraphs: Lion of Judah, God Saves [. . .] There were countless billboards: Pepsi, Benson and Hedges, Daewoo, Indomie Instant Noodles, Drive Carefully, Fight Child Abuse [. . .] a taxi driver making lurid remarks; people cursing themselves well and good; All right-Sirs, our urban praise singers or borderline beggars, who hailed any person for money. Chief! Professor! Excellency! [. . .] My favourite time was early morning, before people encroached, when the air was cool and all I could hear was the call from Central Mosque: *Allahu Akhbar, Allahu Akhbar*. (EG, 98–99)

In the different examples cited above, one can appreciate to what extent Atta accomplishes a very creative and engaging use of language in her novels. She skillfully manages to transmit the specific characteristics of the cultures that have come to constitute her identity;⁷ similarly she also succeeds in representing the diverse range of accents that define the city of Lagos as a translational space, where “[a]ccents, code-switching and translation are to be valued for the ways in which they draw attention to the complexities of difference, for the ways in which they interrupt the self-sufficiencies of ‘mono’ cultures” (Simon 2012, 1).

⁷ “I had an unusual upbringing [. . .] and was surrounded by people from other ethnic groups and religions. Many Nigerian writers I meet feel that they are Yoruba, Igbo or something else, but I actually feel Nigerian and it comes out in my writing. I write about people who don’t have any strong ethnic allegiance or people who are in mixed marriages. [. . .] What I have picked up is language from different parts of the world and it comes out in my writing. I have to be very careful when I am writing in the voices of people who have not had my experiences. My second novel, *Swallow*, is written in the voice of a Yoruba woman, for instance. I couldn’t use language I had picked up here or in England” (Atta as cited in Collins 2007, 7).

CONCLUSION

As several critics (Bandia 2008, Bandia as cited in Rodríguez Murphy 2015a, Gyasi 1999, Mehrez 1992, Inggs and Meintjes 2009) have rightly emphasized, the high rate of multilingualism or “polilingualism” (Bandia 2008, 136–137, Bandia as cited in Rodríguez Murphy 2015a, 149) which characterizes many of the African postcolonies,⁸ including Nigeria, is of great importance for translation studies in this day and age. Without a doubt, taking into account the ever-growing transculturation and transnationalization of cultures in our present-day global world, multilingualism can be considered an increasingly relevant feature both in literature and society:

As a corollary of colonization, the displacement and migration of peoples brought about changes that would challenge the notion of a national language and a homogeneous culture paving the way for understanding language and culture from the point of view of a transnational experience. According to Bhabha, hybridity, a main characteristic of the postcolonial condition, disrupts the relation between national language and culture, and points to a culture of difference, of displacement of signification, of translation. (Bandia 2008, 139).

In this regard, in many African cities new transcultural and hybrid forms of diverse elements are being created every day. Ranging from transcultural types of music (Osumare 2012), such as afrobeat or highlife music, to other transcultural phenomena, including the Azonto dance in Ghana (Jakana, 2012) and the Nollywood film industry, which is now a major influence in Lagos’s streets and markets (Haynes 2007, Fuentes-Luque 2017). In the specific case of language, and as we have seen in the examples quoted from Atta’s novels, the prominence of the multilingualism that permeates African cities in general, and the continuous emergence of new hybrid linguistic forms and new semantic associations, which are typical features of the discourse employed in situations involving interaction in urban areas, are, and will continue to be, compelling topics when analyzing issues related to translation and translatability in the twenty-first century.

⁸ Here “postcolony” (Mbembe 2010) refers to the postcolonial context which, according to Bandia, is part of the colonial space: “Colonial space is ‘the postcolony’ itself, but it is also that space where people with postcolonial experiences, people with postcolonial backgrounds, exist” (Bandia as cited in Rodríguez Murphy 2015a, 149). This “colonial space” should not be understood as a static entity, but rather as characterized by ongoing translation, translocation and transculturation.

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