



# Bleeding Stubs and the Evolution of African Writing: Navigating Standard English and Uncertain Linguistic Futures

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**Abstract**— Several African novels and short stories have been analysed linguistically. The authors of those analytical articles found that some of the stories employed the linguistic style set by the authors Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa. A major characteristic of this writing style is the use of African English or a blend with standard English. Language evolves regionally, so for this article, standard English refers to any English used by the VOA, BBC, British Royal Family, or even Brits in a pub, including UK and US slang relevant to the novel's setting. It excludes English spoken by learners. The researcher considers this definition broad and lenient. African English refers to varieties of the English language spoken and written across Africa, often influenced by local languages and cultures, resulting in unique expressions and idiomatic usage. It encompasses different forms, including Nigerian English, Kenyan English and South African English, reflecting the diverse linguistic landscape of the continent. African literary researchers often show a strong interest in novels written in African English because these works reflect the linguistic diversity, cultural identity, and lived experiences of African communities. Nevertheless, many African authors write in Standard English. The academic discussion reveals that the debate on language choice in African literature is ongoing. This paper provides an overview of the English styles used by African authors and highlights the uncertainty regarding the future of African literature due to a lack of credible sources on current trends. The paper then analyses the style of African works in standard English alongside African English. For the purposes of this article, the researcher chooses Donald Besong's *Bleeding Stubs*, which has not been analysed previously, to represent standard English works. The selection of *Bleeding Stubs* is based on its brevity, recent publication, and its setting in Cameroon—a country with limited representation in fiction. The paper concludes that the preferred language style for African authors remains fluid. Finally, it recommends fostering improved reading habits on the continent, encouraging greater engagement with the global reading community. This would lead to better career progression across various fields, foster the development of more internationally marketable writers, and empower them to use their income to support the growth of African languages, thereby reducing the reliance on English for expressing African pride.



**Keywords**— African literature, linguistic analysis, African English, unique style, literary resistance.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The term “African literature” lacks a concrete, universally accepted definition due to the diverse and evolving nature of the literary traditions across the African continent

(Gikandi, 2001). For the purposes of this paper, any story written or narrated by a person of African descent, partly or entirely set in Africa, and featuring some African characters is considered part of African literature.

African English and Standard English are defined in the abstract. Some African authors choose to write in African English or a blend of African English and Standard English. Examples of such authors include Wole Soyinka, Chinua Achebe, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, and Flora Nwapa. It is the researcher's observation that these names are well known, so specific works of only a couple of them are discussed here to make way for relatively less mainstream names. Many African authors have diverged from using African English to write in standard English. The authors referenced in the rest of this paragraph write in standard English.

This paragraph offers brief summaries of the contributions from a small selection of African authors who write in standard English, without delving into linguistic details. Linguistic considerations will be addressed later. For completeness, this paper includes authors who wrote in other languages and their works translated into standard English.

Mungo Beti, a Cameroonian author writing in French, explores themes of colonialism and corruption in his novel *Mission to Kalabani* (Beti, 1957). Beti faced government opposition due to his critical perspectives and has written many more books throughout his career.

Meja Mwangi's *Going Down River Road* is a novel that explores the challenges of urban life in Nairobi, Kenya, focusing on the struggles and experiences of its inhabitants (Mwangi, 1976). Mwangi, a Kenyan author, is known for his vivid portrayal of contemporary African life. He has written several other notable works, including *The Cockroach Dance* and *Bitter Fruit*, making him a significant figure in African literature.

Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's *Petals of Blood* (Ngũgĩ, 1977) is a novel that critiques post-colonial Kenya by intertwining the lives of its characters with themes of political corruption, class struggle, and the impact of colonial legacy.

Henry Lopes' novel, *The Laughing Cry* (Lopes, 1987), was translated from French to English by the French writer Hélène Cixous. Lopes, a Congolese, has authored several other works and writes primarily in French.

*Shadows of Your Black Memory* (Ndongo, 2007) by David Ndongo was translated from Spanish to English by Michael Ugarte. Ndongo, a writer from Equatorial Guinea, has authored several other novels primarily in Spanish, further exploring themes of identity and cultural heritage.

*Nairobi Heat* (Ngugi, 2009) is a novel by American-born author Mwangi wa Ngũgĩ, whose father is the renowned Kenyan writer Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o. Mwangi wa Ngũgĩ has written additional novels, continuing his exploration of themes in crime fiction and socio-political issues.

*Harmattan Rain* (Attah, 2013) is a novel by Ghanaian author Ayesha Haroun Attah. She has written additional novels.

The above authors are well known; their biographies can be found in various media and will not be included here for the sake of brevity. The paper includes a brief, tentative biography of the next author, Donald Besong, because the researcher enjoyed his short fiction and recognizes that he is not well known. The researcher compiled information from various internet sources, so the following short biography may be accurate.

Born and raised in Cameroon, Donald Besong wrote the short fiction *Bleeding Stubs* (Besong, 2024) to explore the themes of acceptance and assimilation of Western technology and supremacy in Africa. Besong is a mathematician and engineer who has authored several papers in his field, and *Bleeding Stubs* is his first and only literary work to date. He writes primarily in English.

This article uses *Bleeding Stubs* (Besong, 2024) for this study because of its brevity and recent publication. However, before we delve into the story, we present a background of studies examining the primary writing styles in other African stories.

A brief introduction to the linguistic styles of African authors.

Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, published in 1958, is often regarded as the cornerstone of modern African literature from an international perspective. It spearheaded African Literature's recognition and influence on the global stage. The novel is set in pre-colonial Nigeria and focuses on the life of Okonkwo, a respected leader and warrior of the Igbo community (Achebe, 1958). Okonkwo's fear of being perceived as weak drives him to success but also leads to his downfall.

Several years later, Nwapa's novel *Efuru* came with the eponymous female protagonist whose economic standing challenged that of her husband, which did not sit well with her patriarchal environment (Nwapa, 1966).

An author's style is the sum total of the features and language habits that distinguish them as a writer (Wales, 2011). This sum total may be the linguistic fingerprint of a particular text (Leech & Short, 2007, p.1). Figures of speech, such as simile, metaphor, personification, hyperbole and anaphora, are commonly used by every experienced writer. Marcella Melly Kosasih studied these aspects in Achebe's style (Kosasih, 2019). The literary devices treated in Kosasih's paper are present in Western novels and are, therefore, not unique to Achebe. Achebe's writing was largely influenced by European writers

(Killam, 1969, p.2). What makes Achebe's storytelling linguistically different from Western novels is:

- his rich portrayal of Igbo culture.
- transliteration of Igbo words.
- source-language bias in both the dialogue and the narrative (specifically in the syntax, vocabulary, and grammar).

Flora Nwapa depicts a similar linguistic approach. Many African authors and literary analysts argue that the works of Chinua Achebe and Flora Nwapa have provided substantial foundations for the modelling of African literature (Uwakwe & Amadi, 2021). Therefore, it makes sense that African storytellers would write in English—using the blueprint from the pioneers of modern African Literature.

Linguistic analysis abounds on various African works of fiction. Simon Gikandi explores how Achebe employs African English to reflect African cultural contexts and oral traditions (Gikandi, 1991). Oluwaseun Okuyade focuses on Achebe's strategic use of African English to convey the themes and cultural nuances in *Things Fall Apart* (Okuyade, 2009). M. Osakwe examines how Nwapa integrates oral traditions and linguistic elements of the Igbo culture into her novel (Osakwe, 1999). Many African authors have undergone similar scrutiny, which has revealed a diverse range of diction.

Africanness in African Literature.

In literature, Africanness refers to representing and expressing African cultural identity, traditions, values and experiences, often emphasising the African continent's unique social, historical and political contexts. Writing in African English has become a part and parcel of Africanness. It could be argued that the concept of Africanness is as elusive as the definition of African literature.

Ben-Fred Ohia asserts that African literary writers are committed to keeping African fiction as protest literature (Ohia, 2023). Protest literature can be seen in Achebe's novels. This type of narrative portrays characters from the oppressed community standing up against the oppressor, such as the government or the coloniser, with resistance manifesting in both the author's narrative and the characters' linguistic and cultural expressions. Many subsequent African writers have primarily written similar narratives to underpin their Africanness. As per the present article, another term for protest literature is victim literature.

African literary researchers take pleasure in analysing novels of communal victimhood. Many articles highlight the cruelty of colonisation in Africa and the upheavals it incited. Other articles examine colonisation's linguistic angle and Africa's resistance to the English language.

This protest mentality is seen in Achebe's antagonism toward European author Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness*. Achebe (1977) criticised Conrad for describing Africa and her people as dark and savage in that novel. Achebe wrote several accusatory articles on *Heart of Darkness*. Numerous African literary scholars have followed suit in viewing the novel in a negative light. *Heart of Darkness* is a vivid account that follows the journey of a 19th-century sailor who travels up the Congo River, uncovering the darkness and moral ambiguity of European colonialism in Africa. Achebe interpreted the "Darkness" in "Heart of Darkness" as a critique of Africa itself, influenced by Conrad's overly descriptive writing during an era when Europeans viewed Africa as primitive.

*Heart of Darkness* remains one of the researcher's favourite books. The author, Józef Teodor Konrad Korzeniowski, was Polish and wrote in English as a second language. Born in a Poland colonised by Russians, Austro-Hungarians, and Germans, Conrad's experiences parallel those of some African writers. The researcher believes that Conrad's novella was not racist, and any such readings were unintentional.

From a linguistic angle, Achebe (1975) laid the foundation for African victim literature and its complementary African English when he wrote: "I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings."

Writers and scholars who say Africans must write their novels in African languages have proposed an even more drastic strategy toward language resistance. They expressed their strong opinion at the Makerere Conference in 1962, where they opposed Achebe and others for using English for African literature. Two camps emerged from the conference. One was led by the late Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe, who advocated using African English. The other was led by the Kenyan literary critic and writer Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o, pressing for the use of African languages in novels and other literary works (Mutamda, 2017). The Makerere Conference demonstrates that African writers hold strong opinions about their colleagues' writing styles, which exposes certain genres to the risk of being policed or even subjected to counter-marketing.

This article analyses a story by a new African writer.

Besong's *Bleeding Stubs* is a short story with a neo-colonialist theme involving the CIA and terrorism. It is written by an African, set in Africa, features predominantly African characters, and includes a bet about the African Nations Cup. The researcher therefore categorises it as part of the African literature genre. Since the researcher has

selected Bleeding Stubs as a convenient short fiction for discussing standard English in African literature, it is important to provide the story's blurb for the benefit of the article's readers. Therefore, *Bleeding Stubs* The rest of this section presents the plot of *Bleeding Stubs*.

*Bleeding Stubs* (2024) is an action-packed short fiction by Donald O. Besong. In the story, Lasso Tambong is an exceptional recruit of Besong's fictional African Military Intelligence Bureau (AMIB). The young gendarme is obsessed with stoicism. His mind has been toying with climbing the jagged wall of a forbidden cliff without a mountaineer's tools. Then, one morning, his obsession suddenly shoots through the roof after a virtual meeting in which his CIA boss, Sean Geiger, recounts his endurance after a bomb attack in a remote Iraqi field. Lasso then makes a bet with his teacher, Colonel Mvodo. Mvodo will win if Lasso cannot resist the urge to claw up the lethal cliff. The young recruit is now caught in a dilemma that jeopardises his winnings, even suspecting that his obsession with the cliff stems from Mvodo's subliminal verbiage over the years. Agent Lasso sneaks to the bottom of the cliff to embark on the much-awaited climb that very night. And yes, he used only his bare hands! To him, this feat is an ideal test of his endurance.

But the odds are not on his side. The story ends with Lasso inhaling a snake's deadly venom and Besong's suspenseful sentence:

It was hard for him to part with  
consciousness.

We observe how brief the sentence is, yet it may carry various dark implications for the reader's mind. This is a grim scene in which the stubs of Lasso's fingers bleed after being scraped on the rough, thorny wall. Thus, Besong takes advantage of English's full potency to create dark suspense when Lasso loses consciousness.

The next section looks more in-depth at the story from a linguistic viewpoint: it provides a linguistic analysis of Bleeding Stubs as a sample from African stories written in Standard English, with occasional comparisons to works in African English.

## II. ANALYSIS

*Bleeding Stubs* (Besong, 2024) shares common linguistic aspects with other African authors who write in Standard English.

*Bleeding Stubs* uses target-language bias.

The author of *Bleeding Stubs* uses English, the target language, in its full capacity. As seen in the introduction, the typical African author is source-language biased. For

instance, the characters in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* use elevated diction to convey the structure of the Igbo speech (Achebe, 1958). This kind of diction is also found in the narrative. Consider the following proverb from chapter two of Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*:

When the moon is shining, the  
cripple becomes hungry for a  
walk.

It suggests that sometimes circumstances or events can inspire unexpected desires or actions in people. The syntax and choice of words are the same as those uttered in Igbo. This source-language bias is prevalent in Achebe's writing and the works of subsequent African fiction authors. *Bleeding Stubs*—like all the other stories in standard English mentioned in this article—is different in that it is written with a target-language bias.

While the overall structure of the English language is followed in novels by African authors (Chinua Achebe, Flora Nwapa, Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, to name a few), variations in syntax and grammar may reflect the influence of Nigerian languages. For instance, Adichie applies the omission of articles. In Nigerian English, articles (such as "a," "an," and "the") are sometimes omitted or used differently compared to standard English. For example, characters might say "Go to market" instead of "Go to the market."

However, *Bleeding Stubs* and the other African novels written in standard English diverge dramatically from the above. Let us examine the following excerpt from *Bleeding Stubs*:

Mvodo and Lasso talked shop  
down the stairs and all the way  
to the car park. They spoke in  
AMIB code: Kool-M for Geiger,  
Q-jungle for Iraq, etc.

"Kool-M could be summed up in  
one word: stoic," Lasso said.

"You can say that again. The top  
spy seems nowhere near  
retirement. I would have quit  
after the Q-jungle incident."

"I love his designer waistcoats  
and bow ties. Bloke is neat,  
Colonel. He'd make a good  
clothes horse for CICAM's  
fancy wax department."

Mvodo's hard mouth relaxed  
into a smile. "What's more, he's  
pushing seventy—double my



age, and I swear he is built for it.  
I wish I had his balls.”

In the above excerpt, the sentence structure in the characters' speeches and the narrative are in contemporary Western English. Since the author's mother tongue is African and the target language is English, this is known as target-language bias.

This is a lively conversation between Lasso and Mvodo as they leave a strategic meeting. They are talking about their CIA mentor. Notice expressions in the narrative, such as “talk shop,” which suggests a strong target-language bias. This target-language bias is also strong in the conversation. Instead of “The bloke is neat,” Lasso says, “Bloke is neat.” In banter, this brevity of omitting “the” at the beginning of a sentence where humour is intended is common in spoken English in Britain and the USA and is usually done sparingly. Notice that it happens only once in *Bleeding Stubs*.

Using “balls” as a synonym for “courage” is also trendy in contemporary English.

Target-language bias may help English learners from across the globe improve their English while learning about Africa. Readers—much more so secondary English speakers—may need clarification when reading African English, which Besong avoids. Therefore, like the works of other African writers of standard English mentioned in the introduction, the English in *Bleeding Stubs* is more internationally palatable. It may be argued that “international English” is a more descriptive term for these works, given their incorporation of British and American slang. However, for the purposes of this article, the researcher will continue using the term “standard English.”

*Bleeding Stubs* does not use calque.

Calque refers to converting words or text from one language into another while maintaining the source language's grammar or syntax. It is common in African English. African authors who write in Standard English typically avoid using calque and use it sparingly, only to distinguish a character's speech when it differs from that of the other characters. Likely motifs for Besong's avoidance of calque might be:

- To motivate African readers to learn how to express different situations in English.
- To reach a wider readership.
- To make his readers relax and enjoy the fun-packed story without having to cope with the writer's mother tongue.
- To utilise the richness that English has accumulated over centuries as a written language.

*Bleeding Stubs* does not use code-switching.

The frequent insertion of a secondary English speaker's native language, such as Igbo, into English is known as code-switching. Most African authors use code-switching. Adichie applied code-switching in *Purple Hibiscus* (Adichie, 2003). Throughout the novel, characters switch between English and Igbo while conversing. For instance, when Mama addresses Kambili and Jaja, she may say something like “*Ndo, my children, jisie ike*” (Igbo for “Sorry, my children, take heart”).

Code-switching is certainly artistic and stylistic, giving greater variety to the vocabulary, it might alienate certain readers. However, Achebe and Adichie have used it expertly, and their books are well-loved internationally.

Lopes, Besong, Ngūgī, Attah, and other writers of Standard English generally do not code-switch their characters. However, they may use code-switching for a character who is linguistically distinct from the others. For instance, in *Bleeding Stubs*, Besong uses standard English to express every narrative, thought and spoken word, avoiding code-switching. However, perhaps to imply that French and English are common languages in Cameroon, he uses the following French words once:

- Bonjour (a jogger greeting Agent Lasso).
- Interdit (on a signboard).

*Bleeding Stubs* uses italics for the narrator's thoughts.

An author has several choices for expressing the viewpoint character's essential thoughts. They may use italics without a tag or avoid italics and include tags (he/she thought). Besong prefers the former. According to the article “Inner Dialogue—Writing Character Thoughts” (2012), although this method might be too intrusive for the reader, it is universally understood. The researcher criticises using italics as thoughts because they are distracting and are rarely used in African literature. However, it is up to the reader's taste if they prefer italics.

Besong's characters do not code-switch, even in their inner thoughts.

This could have one or more of the following implications:

- The characters are so familiar with the coloniser's language that it has become their language of thought—indicating a colonial mentality. From the realists' viewpoint, we see a present-day African society where people of higher social status may be delighted with this mental colonisation.
- Besong may imply that the characters code-switch in their thoughts or even muse in Cameroonian languages, but he chose a standard English representation to make the story flow better. In

addition, this makes his writing more internationally marketable

- This may be his favourite strategy for dealing with multi-tribal people. The case is different when dealing with just one African language. For instance, the characters of *Things Fall Apart* are all from the Igbo tribe, making the author's application of code-switching to their thoughts possible.

### III. CONCLUSION

African authors may use African English to protect their cultural identity, for authenticity, and to show language resistance. However, writing in African languages would be the most effective way of preserving the African cultural identity and resisting the English language. It is well established that to write in African languages, one must first learn the Latin Alphabet, which is a relic of colonisation. This implies they should be already educated in a European language (English, relevant to this paper) before learning to write in an African language. Therefore, African literature is caught in a nuanced loop.

English is more accessible to write than Igbo or any other African language. Therefore, African writers twisting English to fit their tribal languages or their knowledge of English may be the only way to resist English and propagate the African culture. Achebe and Nwapa, along with their followers, write in that style to portray a strong tribal identity and to resist imperialism.

On the other hand, Ngugi, Atta, Soyinka, Besong, and others use Standard English to achieve brevity, reach a wider audience, make their writing more universally understood, and avoid language resistance—among other reasons.

Besong's jovial expression might suggest that he glorifies the coloniser's language. His humour appears to set aside antagonism, focusing instead on entertaining his readers while expressing his Cameroonian patriotism in a lighthearted manner. The researcher argues that Besong's exaggeratedly cheerful writing in the coloniser's language defies the ongoing struggle of Africans to reclaim their identity.

Improving reading habits and literacy across Africa might help clarify the future direction of African literature. Despite ongoing debates on language choice, better engagement with diverse literary styles could guide this evolution. Enhanced literacy may also address uncertainties about current trends in African writing.

### IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

Works by Ngũgĩ, David Ndongo, Attah, Mwangi, Besong and others who write in Standard English should receive the same recognition as those written in African English. Besong's *Bleeding Stubs* reads as authentic from the realist's viewpoint, depicting the interactions of today's educated people in Africa. If anyone craves a fun-packed African story in a setting that goes beyond tribal barriers, this story is a must-read.

Given the ongoing debate over language choice in African literature and the risk of African English being misjudged as bad English—potentially reinforcing stereotypes about Africans' abilities and limiting international opportunities—African English writers and speakers might consider using Standard English to reach a broader audience. Royalties from book sales could then fund studies in African tribal languages, ensuring their preservation and independent development.

African readers should engage with the global reading community to gain a clearer understanding of the direction of African literature. Additionally, Africans should embrace and promote the use of African languages as a more effective means of expressing and preserving their cultural identity.

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