

## What's in a name?

### Language attitudes and linguistic features in NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names*

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**Abstract** This paper takes a close look at the language used by Zimbabwe writer NoViolet Bulawayo in her first novel, *We need new names*. The novel charts the emotional, cultural, and linguistic growth of its teenage protagonist Darling in the move from Paradise, a shanty town somewhere in Zimbabwe to *Destroyedmichygen* (= 'Detroit Michigan') in the US. An underlying but central theme of the novel seems to be the tension between the global language English, and Darling's never-named vernacular; a tension which emerges both in the non standard forms of the extended monologue (which oscillates between controlling pronouns *I*, and *we*), the numerous reflections on language use made by the characters, the freshness and vibrancy of the imagery, and, not least, as the title suggests, in the novelist's never-ending quest for new ways of representing reality through language.

**Keywords** African writing in English. Language choice. Non-standard forms. English Lingua Franca.

Adjectives such as «vibrant» are commonly used by reviewers to describe a quality of language in recent writing from Africa, and, more generally, of writing in the new Englishes. «Vibrant language», or an equivalent expression, indicates a notion which is easily explained away as the product of culture clash, the struggle to find a voice, and ultimately the need to achieve (to quote Chinua Achebe's seminal definition in 1964) «a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit new African surroundings».

The first novel by Zimbabwe-born NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* (Chatto and Windus 2013), and shortlisted for the Booker Prize, is a case in point. Reviewing it in the *New York Times*, Uzodinma Iweala<sup>1</sup> refers to Bulawayo's language as «brilliant», «alive», «confident», «funny», «strong»; in *The Guardian*, Helon Habila<sup>2</sup> claims that «what stops the book collapsing under its own thematic weight is a certain linguistic verve».

This phenomenon is usually interpreted in terms of an interplay between the «surface» language of the novel (English) and a substratum language,

1 *New York Times*, 7 June 2013.

2 *The Guardian*, 20 June 2013.

presumably the author's mother tongue (Ndebele, in the case of Bulawayo), and which manifests itself in a variety of techniques and strategies such as code-switching, calque translations, literal translation of idioms, and non-standard grammar. Such features reflect a decision by the author not to over-accommodate stylistically to any standard version of the host language, since to do so would be to dilute the flow of cultural information. For recent discussions on the translation choices which bilingual African writers have to make see (among others) Yeibo (2011) and Agbozo et al. (2014).

The aim of this analysis of *We Need New Names*, however, is not to examine the extent to which Bulawayo remains in communion with her ancestral home and tongue (a task which is beyond the remit of this article and the capability of its author), but rather, the way in which the language choices she makes are interpretable to a global audience, whose number includes non-native, as well as native, speakers of English; in short, to investigate the idea that *We Need New Names*, a novel about displacement, is also, on multiple levels – and starting with the title – a novel about language, about the use of Lingua Franca English (to use the term preferred by Canagarajah, 2007) and, especially, about attitudes to English (and Englishes) in a globalised world.

The first half of the novel is set in and around a shanty town called Paradise somewhere in (never named) Zimbabwe, at a time of property seizures and human rights abuses, presumably around the turn of the millennium. 10-year-old Darling and a group of street kids, with their ragbag of names (Bastard, Chipo, Godknows, Sbho, Stina) roam through Paradise and into the neighbouring rich district of Budapest, where white people's gardens provide rich pickings in the shape of guava fruit, and Shanghai, where the Chinese construction workers have arrived, and where the children play games they call «Find Bin Laden» and «country game», imagining their futures elsewhere in the world and watching their own country fall apart:

To play country-game you need two rings: a big outer one, then inside it, a little one, where the caller stands. You divide the outer ring depending on how many people are playing and cut it up in nice pieces like this. Each person then picks a piece and writes the name of the country on there, which is why it's called country-game.

But first we have to fight over the names because everybody wants to be certain countries, like everybody wants to be the U.S.A. and Britain and Canada and Australia and Switzerland and France and Italy and Sweden and Germany and Russia and Greece and them. These are the country-countries. If you lose the fight, then you just have to settle for countries like Dubai and South Africa and Botswana and Tanzania and them. They are not country-countries, but at least life is better than

here. Nobody wants to be rags of countries like Congo, like Somalia, like Iraq, like Sudan, like Haiti, like Sri Lanka, and not even this one we live in – who wants to be a terrible place of hunger and things falling apart? (p. 48)

Darling's own future lies in the US; the second part of the novel charts her adolescent adventures in «Destroyedmichygan» (= Detroit, Michigan) with Nigerian born Marina and Afro-American Krystal, and home life with Aunt Fostalina, married to a Ghanaian (they can only communicate using English) and who works as a nurse in a geriatric hospital. So this is also a coming-of-age novel which records the progress of a survivor, a citizen of the world attentive to the shifting dynamics of (English) language use across a range of interactions, as she moves from non-native, to native, and to non-standard speakers, and in which invariably the monolingual native speaker emerges as being less well equipped, linguistically and strategically, than «citizens of the world» in a lingua franca context. When (presumably British) relief workers from a NGO turn up in Paradise to distribute food to adults and T-shirts and toy guns to Darling and her friends, the language has to be English:

One of the ladies tries to greet us in our language and stammers so badly so we laugh and laugh until she just says it in English. Sis Betty explains the greeting to us even though we understandit, even a tree knows that *Hello children* means «Hello children». (p 52)

Later, Darling and her friends are witness to a crowd of men «reclaiming» a farmhouse which belongs to a white family,<sup>3</sup> one of whom proffers a document to the farmer:

*What is this? What is this?* the white man says, jabbing at the paper with a finger. The anger in his voice is as if there's a lion inside him. He towers above everyone, head leaning forward as if he is about to do something. The woman is there beside him, wringing her hands.

Can't you read? You brung English to this country and now you want it explained to you, your own language, have you no shame? one of them says. (p. 117)

3 The «Fast Track Land Reform Program», which dispossessed many (mostly white) Zimbabwean farmers of their land and property, began in 2000.

After the family has been turned out, the children raid the fridge; and Bulawayo can't resist letting Darling notice a message, mis-spelt, effective, left behind near the toilet: «we see the words *Blak Power* written in brown feces on the large bathroom mirror». (p. 130)

Years later, in the US, Darling overhears Aunt Fostalina getting increasingly frustrated on the phone as she tries to make the American operator at the other end of the line understand the name of the push-up bra she is trying to order:

Angel, angel, angel, Aunt Fostalina says, raising her voice even louder.

There is silence, like maybe the girl is getting ready to pray.

Ah-nghe-l, Aunt Fostalina adds helpfully, dragging out the word like she is raking gravel. I silently mouth - *enjel. Enjel*. I hear the girl make a small sigh.

I'm sorry, I don't know what you mean, ma'am, she says finally. (p. 195)

Prompting Darling's formulation of the «native speaker problem»: <sup>4</sup>

... the problem with those who speak only English is this: they don't know how to listen; they are busy looking at you falling instead of paying attention to what you are saying. (p. 194)

And Fostalina's drastic reaction to the problem, which is to re-enact the conversation in front of a mirror:

I know that in front of that mirror, Aunt Fostalina will be articulate, that English will come alive on her tongue and she will spit it like it's burning her mouth, like it's poison, like it's the only language she has ever known. (p. 198)

Fostalina wants to meet native speakers on their own terms, but Darling, aged about fifteen, has by now worked out her own relationship with the language:

The problem with English is this: You usually can't open your mouth and it comes out just like that - first you have to think what you want to say. Then you have to find the words. Then you have to carefully ar-

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4 For Graddol (2006) the «native speaker problem» resides in the fact that native speakers may become an 'obstacle to the free development of global English', since they do not have the communicative resources of lingua franca users.

range those words in your head. Then you have to say the words quietly to yourself, to make sure you got them okay. And finally, the last step, which is to say the words out loud and have them. (p. 193)

«Getting the words okay» is something that Darling thinks about a lot. In the US she has a list of American words that she «keeps under the tongue like talismans, ready for use» such as *pain in the ass, for real, awesome, yikes*, etc. She is scornful of her American friend Krystal, who uses Afro-American slang (Ebonics) as a badge of identity and at the same time a smokescreen against comprehensibility:

Krystal thinks that since she taught us to wear makeup and has a weave, she is better than Marina and myself, but she can't even write a sentence correctly in English to show that she is indeed American. (p. 199)

In the extreme lingua franca context of a Chinese-run construction site, back in Shanghai near Paradise, language comes across as little more than noise:

Around the construction site the men speak in shouts. It's like listening to nonsense, to people praying in tongues; it's Chinese, it's our languages, it's English mixed with things, it's the machine noise. (p. 44)

While the Chinese on the site cannot compete with the streetwise English of Darling and co., the manager has no English at all:

the fat man starts ching-chonging to us like he thinks he is in his grandmother's backyard. He ching-chings ching-chongs and then he stops, the kind of stop that tells you he is expecting an answer (p. 45)

Another Chinese worker called in to interpret fares no better:

We build you big big mall. All nice shops inside, Gucci, Louis Vuitton, Versace and so on so on. [...]

Give us some zhing-zhongs. We got some before, Godknows says, getting straight to the point. [...]

You get one time is enough. Now you want made in China, you work, nothing free, the Chinese man says.

Well, you are in our country, that counts for something, Stina says.

You want us to come at night and defecate all over? or steal things Godknows says, and the Chinese man laughs the kind of laugh that tells you he didn't understand a word. (p. 47)

In *We Need New Names*, fortune favours the (linguistically) brave. The voice that Bulawayo chooses for her narrator is direct, ingenuous, and extraordinarily flexible. The vibrancy of the writing we referred to above lies in the vitality of this voice, and it emerges on different levels. Syntactic simplicity, code-switching and reduplication, linguistic creativity, and the apparently effortless string of images (and in particular the use of simile), all contribute to this, and to the message that if Darling is a survivor, then the key to her survival is to be found in the flow of the narrative, and the controlling grasp of reality of the narrative voice.

This voice oscillates between a singular and a plural first person. For most of the first part of the novel it is «we», with Darling speaking for the gang, as in the title *We Need New Names* (we shall return to this need for ‘new names’ later). «We are on our way to Budapest», reads the first sentence, giving the stamp of collective experience to Darling’s African childhood. In the second part of the novel it is mostly «I», as Darling gets to grips with life in the US, and discovering herself as an individual in the throes of adolescence in a strange new world, trying to make sense of the promised land. The two sections are held apart by a two page interlude in which a disembodied narrator records, in the third person, the breaking up of a community and the dispersal of «the children of the land»; an exodus of biblical resonance, a consequence of things «falling apart» (Bulawayo continually returns to the expression, as if wanting to underline a homage to Achebe; a stance which finds her in good company among contemporary African writers).<sup>5</sup> In this short interlude Bulawayo achieves a lyrical intensity in the repeated invitation to the reader to step back and look. It offers a wide angle overview, in contrast with the up-front detail of Darling’s narrative:

When things fall apart, the children of the land scurry and scatter like birds escaping a burning sky. [...] Look at them leaving in droves despite knowing they will be welcomed with restraint in those strange lands because they do not belong, knowing they will have to sit on one buttock because they must not sit comfortably lest they be asked to rise and leave, knowing they will speak in dampened whispers because they must not let their voices drown those of the owners of the land, knowing they will have to walk on their toes because they must not leave footprints on the new earth lest they be mistaken for those who want to claim the land as theirs. Look at them leaving in droves, arm in arm with loss and lost, look at them leaving in droves. (p. 146)

When Darling plucks Biblical images from her memories of sermons delivered by Prophet Revelations Bitchington Mborro, they testify to innocence

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5 Take for example the opening of *Purple Hibiscus* by Chimamanda Ngozi Adiche (2004).

but also suggest a willful imprecision, since 10-year-olds are not required to understand everything, as for example in the following succession of vague deictics, 'those people', 'that terrible place', 'that old man':

we know that it is a place we will soon be leaving, like in the Bible, when those people left that terrible place and that old man with a beard like Father Christmas hit the road with a stick and then there was a river behind them. (p. 72)

Even more disarmingly, her friend Sobha, on seeing the Queen's portrait on a coin, says «I thought crowns were made of thorns». (p. 125)

This kind of ingenuity is born of constant close encounters, with the adult world, and the need for Darling and friends to understand the forces which control it, the politics of power and the process of globalization; but it is an ingenuity which creates the premisses for understanding and survival. Linguistically it is reflected in a range of phenomena. Not knowing the words for things is one of the most frequent (my italics in the examples):

I can tell from the cord *thingies* at the side of her neck and the way that she smacks her big lips that whatever she is eating tastes really good. (p. 6)

After everybody comes the two men with the BBC caps. One is busy looking at everything through a *thing*, the other is busy taking pictures.' (p. 136)

We get to the railroad tracks when the lights are flashing and that bar *thingy* is descending. (p. 223)

Another is the repeated use of *kaka* as an all-purpose derogatory intensifier:

I don't care, I'm blazing out of this kaka country. (p. 13)

That is what I would want if I were dead. For my grave to look nice, not this kaka. (p. 132)

It was wrapped in kaka wrapping, and I giggled when I finally cut the string with a scissors. (p. 186)

One of the most noticeable features of Darling's English is the frequent use of reduplication, which is a well attested phenomenon in the new

Englishes, and in particular African Englishes,<sup>6</sup> one which also (for the international reader) sits well with a narrative flow generated by a ten year old. This too, has an intensifying function, where a more standard form of English would use *real* or *really*:

Now that the lorry is gone-gone, we do not scream anymore. (p. 57)

In my dream, which is not a dream-dream because it also the truth that happened, the bulldozers appear boiling. (p. 65)

Forgiveness is not a friend-friend because her family only just recently appeared in Paradise. (p. 77)

Then Father laughed, but it wasn't a laughing-laughing laugh. (p. 92)

Nothing? You mean nothing-nothing? (p. 206)

In the case of *married-married* it carries the seal of officialdom:

TK's father, who is like Aunt Fostalina's husband but not really her husband because I don't think they are married-married. (p. 148)

While with an emotionally charged concept like *home*, it is the affective dimension which is underlined:

I am home-home now. (p. 220)

Straightforward repetition is signaled by a comma ('the delicious, delicious smell of Lobels bread'), which slows the rhythm and has a more focusing function as a consequence. For repeated actions, Darling goes for a threefold repetition:

We only laugh and keep hitting. Hitting hitting hitting. (p. 141)

Godknows runs and picks up one of those bricks with holes in them and holds it like it's a camera and takes and takes and takes pictures. (p. 62)

Non-standard grammar is not common, but where it occurs, it too may have an intensifying function, such as in the creative use of comparative and superlative forms:

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6 For an early account of reduplication in African English see Bokamba 1982.



I have forgotten it because it was a complicated name, but I think it's far much better than some kinds I have seen. (p. 236)

The onliest time that it's almost interesting here is when Uncle Themba and Uncle Charley and Aunt Welcome and Aunt Chenai and others all come to visit Aunt Fostalina. (p. 160)

We chant and sing louder and loudest. (p. 143)

In this final example, «loudest» has an absolute, not a relative function (as it would have in standard English) – Darling and company are shouting at the tops of their voices at a funeral, as they re-enact the death of a young man killed in a riot.

The ubiquitous use of «like», as she seeks to make sense of the world around her adds to the conversational directness of Darling's narrative. At times this may signal a comparison which she is unable to follow through («the song bores me like I don't know what» p. 33), but mostly the images convey a freshness and a physicality which have been drawn from the day to day reality of life in Paradise:

Her eyes are large, the white part like it's been dipped in milk. (p. 87)

MotherLove shakes her head, and then her body heaves downward, like she is a sack falling. (p. 87)

His face looks shocked, like he has just seen the buttocks of a snake. (p. 32)

We so badly want to see the adults come back, it's like we will eat them when they do. (p. 69)

We crowd in MotherLove's shack like sand. (p. 71)

This artless fusion of imprecise language and focused simile keeps the narrative buoyant and pro-active; if «vibrancy» is a quality of Bulawayo's writing, then it is here that it is most evident. But 10-year-old Darling is also a visionary, who sees beyond borders, knowing that her future lies in America. Borders provide her with a recurring image (which playing the «country game» described in chapter three has probably reinforced), and people are foreign countries, such as her aunt and uncle who

are just living together, like neighbouring countries (p. 281)

or Darling herself, in the way that her mother's lover ignores her:

he never asks after me, like I'm just a country that is far away. (p. 64)

The American half of the novel – it is divided almost exactly into two parts – has been criticized for the triteness of its themes, and a corresponding lack of vibrancy in the writing.<sup>7</sup> Teenage angst, shopping malls, obesity and diet (not hers), and the snow are just some of the (predictable) themes which Darling, now in her early teens, tries to get to grips with in her new suburban existence with Aunt Fostalina, Aunt Fostalina's partner, whom Darling calls Uncle Kojo, and his son from a former relationship, TK, an overweight teenager whose favourite word is *motherfucker*. But, in the opinion of this writer, the thematic triteness, if it exists, reflects an unfulfilled promise which is a necessary part of the novel's aesthetic, and which is illuminated by the title, *We Need New Names*.

The title comes from one of the most harrowing episodes described in the novel: Darling, Sbho, and Forgiveness are trying to perform an abortion on ten year old Chipso, who has been made pregnant by her grandfather. Chipso is lying down under a tree, Darling has found some stones, Forgiveness a rusty coat-hanger, and Sbho, who seems the most self-assured of the improvised medical team, an old cup, half a belt, «and a purple round thingy I don't know what it is». But Sbho is not completely convinced. «In order to do this right», she says, «we need new names», and she goes on:

I am Doctor Bullet, she is beautiful, and you are Dr Roz, he is tall. (p. 82)

The names belong to characters from the American TV hospital soap *ER*, which Sbho saw once «on TV in Harare». They are approximations, mediated by imagination as well as phonological restrictions. (Forgiveness, who is wielding the potentially most lethal instrument, is «Dr Cutter»), just as the children's own names sound like inventions of the moment which have stuck. That names are important in this novel is apparent from the opening line:

We are on our way to Budapest: Bastard and Chipso and Godknows and Sbho and Stina and me. (p. 1)

Names and naming, are at the heart of this novel. Lists of names are frequent: the countries of the world (divided into 3 categories ranging from 'country-countries' to a rag-bag C category), nostalgic lists of foodstuffs and singers at an African dinner party at Aunt Fostalina's, the «speci-

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7 Review by Usodinma Iweala, see note 1.

alities» available on the porn channel *Redtube*, which Darling has discovered with her new friends Marina and Krystal. T-shirts are prized for their names or messages: *Arsenal, Google, Cornell, What would Jesus do?, Change*. Names carry power; to use the familiar Saussurian distinction, the *signifiant* can take the place of the *signifié*. When Chipso has her baby (the abortion attempt having been prevented at the last moment) she names it after Darling, now in America, as a sort of insurance policy – so that if something happens to the first Darling, there will be another one to take her place. While at about the same time, from a nursing home in America, Tshaka Zulu (a relative or friend of Fostalina’s) names his (numerous) grandchildren over the phone:

It’s how I get to touch them, Tshaka Zulu said to me one day when we were going over the names. You see, every time they are called by name and they answer, I am the invisible hand touching them and calling them my own, he said. (p. 236)

Not naming also has a function, or rather, multiple functions. Towards the end of the novel the plural narrator takes over again, to recount the collective experience of illegal immigrants in the US, who hide their real names when asked, for fear of being discovered and expelled from the promised land, or who call each other by the names of their countries, because the real names are too difficult,

names like myths, names like puzzles, names we had never heard before: ‘Virgilio, Balamugunthan, Faheem, Abdulrahman, Aziz, Baako, Dae-Hyun, Ousmane, Kimatsu.’ (p. 243)

It is tempting to see this loss of names as part of a process – that of sacrificing identity for intelligibility – which is fundamental in some accounts of English as a Lingua Franca (for a recent discussion of identity issues in ELF see, inter al., Seidlhofer 2011), and which is a feature of accommodation strategies common in lingua franca communication (i.e., adjusting one’s own use of the language to make it more accessible to the interlocutor). The narrator translates this idea of sacrifice into an image of «bruised voices»:

Because we were not in our country, we could not use our own languages. And when we spoke our voices came out bruised. (p. 240)

And yet, in *We Need New Names*, the narrator’s voice is anything but bruised. Beyond the artlessness, beyond the linguistic strategies and simplifications which we have already noted, it is in the freshness and the physicality of the imagery that Darling finds her voice in English. There are

no tired native-speaker idioms in the novel; the metaphors are plucked one by one from experience. When Aunt Fostalina invites her compatriots to dinner, the evening ends up with everyone dancing. Darling stands at the door watching, and the ensuing description could provide an example of what Achebe famously referred to as a «new English» which could «carry the weight» of African experience:

They dance strange. Limbs jerk and bodies contort. They lean forward like they are planting grain, sink to the floor, rise as whips and lash the air. They huddle like cattle in a kraal, then scatter like broken bones. They gather themselves, look up, and shield their faces from the sun and beckon the rain with their hands. When it doesn't come they shake their heads in disappointment and then get down sinking-sinking-sinking like ships drowning. Then they get up, clutch their stomachs and hearts like women in pain, raise their arms in prayer, crouch low as if they are burying themselves. They rise again abruptly, stand on their toes and stretch their hands like planes headed for faraway lands. (p. 162)

The string of verbs and the physicality, the suffering, and the close relationship with elemental forces which they convey, the non-standard forms («They dance strange»), the triple repetition («sinking-sinking-sinking»), the accessibility of the imagery: ships personified and hands stretched out like aeroplanes; all of this not only carries the nostalgic weight of experience shared by the small immigrant community gathered in Fostalina's lounge, but it is also (to use Achebe's own phrase in the same defining description quoted above) «in communion» with users of English everywhere.

Darling stands, watches, and listens too: because it is on evenings like this one, with the Michigan winter raging outside, that she is able to keep in touch with her own culture and her own language. It is significant that this language is never named: it is just «my language», «our language», or even «our real language» (p. 161), as if to name it would be to break a taboo, to infringe an ancestral intimacy. It is a paradox of the novel that knowledge of this language, and the idea of the function of the mother tongue, inspire her to some of her most lyrical imagery, since the mother tongue offers an escape route to another level of reality:

When we were alone we summoned the horses of our languages and mounted their backs and galloped past skyscrapers. (p. 240)

However, for most of the time it is the omnibus of English which she chooses, to stay on the ground, and to communicate with the world.

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