

The usage of African languages in three selected contemporary German novels set in Africa

Doret Jordaan²

Department of German, University of Zululand
djordaa1@pan.uzulu.ac.za

This paper will focus on the use of indigenous African languages as well as the acquisition of language as a motif in selected contemporary German novels set in Africa. The aim of this paper is to show where the portrayal of indigenous languages fits into the quest for high sale figures as the German contemporary novel set in Africa aims to provide the greatest amount of entertainment to the largest number of readers (cf. Nusser 2000:13; Jordaan 2008:31). The word 'contemporary' refers to approximately the last ten years and 'German' to novels written in the German language, i.e. novels from Switzerland (for example) are also included. The nature, quantity and function of utterances from three selected contemporary German novels will be presented, in order to show how the use of African languages in these novels can create, perpetuate and resolve suspense in the plot.

Keywords: African languages, German novels, *Ein Land das Himmel heißt*, *Die weiße Jägerin*, *Afrika mon Amour*, Africa

Introduction and theoretical overview

Africa, as a setting for and motif in fiction, non-fiction, biography, autobiography and film sells well in German-speaking countries. This fact as well as possible reasons for it is explored by various studies. My Masters thesis, for example, explored the similarities between various German novels set in Africa, mainly the repetition and popularity of the white woman as a main character. This study is titled *Zur Darstellung der weißen Frau als Hauptfigur in ausgewählten Unterhaltungsromane der Gegenwart mit Afrikabezug*. (Regarding the depiction of the white woman as a main character in selected contemporary popular German novels set in Africa). The nature of the 'Unterhaltungsroman', the problem of classifying literature, and specifically Nusser's theoretical approach to the working of the Unterhaltungsroman and the Trivialroman, formed a significant part of the theoretical framework of the thesis. This paper seeks not to repeat the findings of the thesis, but to explore a feature of these novels not pursued in the thesis, namely their usage of African languages (Jordaan 2008). Dirk Götttsche refers to these novels as part of an 'Africa-Boom' in contemporary literature written in the German language, a definition that he quotes from a lexicon (Götttsche 2003:162). Ingrid Laurien also comments on the popularity of these novels portraying Africa as a 'continent of feminine longing', providing a space where figures, especially white women, can fulfil their dreams. And the more extreme these stories, especially autobiographical encounters, the better they sell. She suggests that the portrayal of Africa is less about Africa and more about experiences of Africa (Laurien 2004:31-44). Furthermore, authors such as Ruth Mayer argue that it is not even Africa, but rather a series of Artificial Africas that are portrayed in these novels, in order to entertain (for example: Mayer 2002:1). In addition to the literature, a quick glance through bookshops in Germany or a search in book-selling Internet sites reveals a considerable number of novels boasting a colourful sunset on the cover and promising intrigue, suspense, drama and adventure in Africa.

Most of these novels find themselves to a greater or lesser extent confined to what is classified as 'Unterhaltungsliteratur' (entertainment literature or popular literature). Restricting though such a term may be, regarding these novels as popular fiction and analysing them as such brings one closer to the reason these novels are popular and why many of them become so-called bestsellers.

Peter Nusser, among many others, has done some extensive theoretical work on analysing the Unterhaltungsliteratur and Trivialliteratur. The working of an Unterhaltungsroman can be summed up as saying that the reader needs to be moved from his or her comfort zone into a state of unrest and to have that state of comfort restored again at the end in order to create and resolve tension (Nusser 1991:120-123). In the contemporary Unterhaltungsliteratur set in Africa the emphasis is on not only creating and resolving tension but also on maintaining the tension by repeating the cycle (Nusser 1991:120; Jordaan 2008:15-17, 98-99).

The page-turning tension in novels such as the three used for the purposes of this paper is created by various agents, many of which are repetitive (Jordaan 2008:92-99). The aim of this paper is to discuss African languages in such novels, not only those utterances used in order to create setting and local flavour in the novels, but also those used to entertain as many readers as possible by supporting the necessary suspense. An utterance in Swahili such as

2. Doret Jordaan is a Lecturer in the Department of German at the University of Zululand, South Africa. This article is based on her masters work at the University of Stellenbosch.

Na kwa moyo wangu napenda ninyi wote kurudi wazima. Kwaheri Askaris ... !
(Ackermann 2006 [2005]:89)

is not intended to be understood by the reader at first glance. This sentence comes from the novel *Die Weiße Jägerin* (Ackermann 2006 [2005]). It is explained in the preceding paragraph in the novel as being a motivational address to the Askaris (by means of an interpreter) leaving to fight for Germany, along with a wish that they return home safely. Not all such phrases are treated in this manner. Some utterances are translated straight away, and others are left for the context to explain them. This is especially true of greetings and interjections. The usage is carefully done, whether sparsely as in *Afrika, mon Amour* or abundantly as in *Die Weiße Jägerin*.

A glance over the African languages in German novels set in Africa reveal that the languages used in these novels are mostly Swahili, Zulu and Maa. To make matters more complex, languages such as French, Arabic, Greek, English and Afrikaans also enter the picture. With the latter group of languages it is often hard to tell which is being used by the characters, because in most cases only German is used to narrate the events. On the contrary, every instance where an indigenous African language is used is clearly indicated, by phrases such as 'und das in korrektestem Zulu' (Gercke 2006 [2002]: 218), 'and in the most correct Zulu, at that'. (All such translations from German into English are my own.)

More important for the purpose of this paper than the issue of which African languages are used, however, is the issue of how to present the different instances when an African language is used directly or indirectly in order to show that additional reasons apart from creating an authentic scene are at play. As mentioned above, tension or suspense form an integral part of these novels. The usage of African languages maintains and resolves tension in line with my understanding of Nusser's model as explained earlier in this paper.

The novels

I shall now take a look at the usage of African languages in the three novels selected for this study, first by briefly introducing the novels. These brief summaries are inadequate for grasping the plots of the novels, because a staggering number of events take place in each novel. The aim of these summaries is rather to help the reader to differentiate between the three novels used in this paper.

Ein Land, das Himmel heißt ('A Land that is Called Heaven') by the female author, Stefanie Gercke (2002), is set in late-Apartheid and post-Apartheid South Africa (Kwazulu-Natal), featuring the young Jill Court. She is of German, British and Afrikaans descent and the novel tells of the many catastrophes she survives in an ongoing battle to save her family farm and keep it in the hands of her family.

Die weiße Jägerin ('The White Huntress') by the male author Rolf Ackermann is a fictionalised biography, telling the story of the famous German huntress, Margarete von Trappe. Set in Prussia and German East Africa, Margarete's journey to Africa with her husband, the hardships that she suffers, her struggle to survive and protect her farm and her children and her passionate love for the Greek, Anthimos, are depicted against a historical backdrop. A lot of attention is given to the historical details of the German occupation of German East Africa as well as Germany's defence of the colony against Britain during the First World War.

Chris Schnalke (a male author as well) wrote *Afrika, mon Amour* ('Africa, My Love'), the subject of a three-part television series in Germany. This novel, published in 2007, is also marketed as a 'Buch zum Film' (book to the film). Also set during the German colonial expansion and the First World War, this novel also features mainly Prussia and German East Africa. It tells the story of Katharina von Strahlberger's struggle for survival in a colony at war after the infidelity of her husband, the death of her sons, the loss of her possessions and the threatening of her own life.

However similar many of the motifs, scenes and language in these novels may be, they are still very different novels in many ways, including historical setting, style and even thickness of the actual book. Their differences do not, however, detract from the fact that even very dissimilar uses of different African languages in these novels on closer scrutiny show up great similarities.

The African languages in the novels

In order to examine the usage of African languages in these novels, one needs to establish which African languages are being used, how often these languages are used, how they are used and which characters use these languages.

In *Ein Land, das Himmel heißt*, Zulu is the African language used. In *Die weiße Jägerin* both Maa and Swahili feature quite prominently. And in *Afrika, mon Amour* Swahili features, albeit much less than in the other two novels. Having read several other novels of this genre, I can say that these three languages are certainly among those most frequently used in this kind of novel, along with some Namibian languages.

For how often these languages are used, one needs to look at the form in which they are presented to the reader. In this study a distinction is made between the usage of indigenous African languages by speakers of the language and that of non-speakers of the language. Another distinction is made between the direct representation of the language and translated or explained uses of utterances without using the original language first. Certain words such as greetings and interjections are frequently retained in the original language without direct translations.

As mentioned earlier, it is clearly indicated in most cases where African languages are being used in the novel, as opposed to the usage of other languages. These indications often take the form of comments by the narrator on the quality of non-speakers' usage. As a result of these indications, it is possible to count the number of utterances in African languages as well as the utterances in African languages that are presented in translation only. For the purposes of this paper, I have done an approximate count of the number of pages in the three novels where African languages are used by characters. In many instances the same page contains utterances by characters, both speakers and non-speakers of African languages. Some of these utterances are depicted only in German and others in both the original language and German. Such a page will fall into all four categories, and be counted four times. Instances in which the narrator uses a word or phrase from an African language are excluded from this count, but included in the findings of the paper.

I shall now proceed to look at *Ein Land, das Himmel heißt*. On about 141 of the 642 pages, conversations in Zulu or utterances in Zulu by white characters are given in German; on approximately 123 pages such conversations or utterances by Zulu speakers in Zulu are given in German. Zulu words, printed in Zulu and used by white characters can be found on roughly 23 pages and Zulu words used by Zulu speakers and given in Zulu, on about 40 pages (Gercke 2006).

In *Die weiße Jägerin*, several languages play an important part in the novel. The narration features numerous words from Maa and Swahili. As far as utterances by characters are concerned, the approximately 403 pages of the narration include an approximate 41 pages where non-speakers of African languages use Swahili and 28 pages where utterances by non-speakers of African languages are depicted in German only. About 47 pages depict African-language utterances, by speakers of the languages, in German, whereas approximately 54 pages show utterances in African languages by Africans (Ackermann 2006).

Much less extensive use of African languages is made in *Afrika, mon Amour*. The 306 pages of the narration include more or less 7 pages in which Europeans use Swahili and about 9 pages in which Africans use Swahili. On roughly 8 pages accounts are given in German only of utterances in Swahili by Europeans and 7 pages contain translated accounts in German of Swahili utterances by Africans (Schnalcke 2007).

This roughly sums up the answer to the first two questions mentioned at the beginning of this section. Three functions of African languages that feature in all three of these novels will be identified in the next section, after which more detailed attention will be paid to specific instances where these languages are used and which characters use them.

Three functions

First of all, the usage of African languages in these novels aids the creation of tension or suspense, especially by setting the character apart from other characters. Secondly, it helps to maintain and increase the tension, by revealing aspects of the characters as they develop, or upsetting situations even further. Thirdly, it helps to resolve tension in the novels and restore a sense of harmony for the reader, especially by depicting a sense of safety and belonging (Nusser 1991:121). The object of the following discussion of the three functions is not to generalise, but to direct attention to the potential of the depiction of such utterances to increase the entertainment value of the novel.

Creating tension

In all three novels a language-induced element of surprise occurs early in the plot. This happens each time an utterance in an African language is depicted not in Africa but in Europe, transporting Africa to Europe unexpectedly. In *Die weiße Jägerin*, Margarete learns Swahili before she departs for German East-Africa with her husband Ulrich. The few Swahili words that she has already learnt are described as bubbling from her mouth when she surprises her new language teacher by greeting her in Swahili at their first meeting (Ackermann 2006 [2005]: 101). In the home of the Von Strahlbergers in *Afrika, mon Amour*, Richard von Strahlberger surprises his German guests from German East Africa by greeting them in what they describe as good Swahili (Schnalcke 2007: 19). In both these instances, an African language enters a European home on European soil, literally entering the comfort zone of the reader. Further, the use of an African language by a character in Europe immediately sets the character apart from his or her surroundings and alerts the reader to his or her special qualities. A character that is different from the other characters can act as an immediate catalyst for some action, as the next example will also show.

The incident which could possibly be regarded as the most surprising, in which an African language is suddenly heard in Germany, is the meeting of the protagonist of *Ein Land, das Himmel heißt*, Jill Court, with her future husband Martin. Jill

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and her friend Angelika, gossiping in Zulu at the Oktoberfest in Munich and expecting not to be understood, suddenly hear a male voice behind them:

'Umnuntu wesifase unolimi oluhlanbayo njengolwenyoka!'

.... Die Damen haben eine beißende Zunge wie eine Schlange, hat er gesagt ... (Gercke 2006 [2002]:218)

This is the voice of Martin, saying, according to the German translation, that the ladies have a biting tongue like a snake. The uniqueness of his use of Zulu in a German Beer Tent is increased by the fact that he does not only use a language that is seemingly out of place, but also idiomatic language, only to be understood by those who are very fluent in the language. This sets him even further apart from the other men in the tent and, along with his good looks, draws Jill's attention to him in a very dramatic way. A relationship starts when Jill falls in love with Martin in Germany – a Martin speaking Zulu at a German festival. A dramatic encounter between two future lovers initiates the series of tension-filled encounters between these two characters, and language plays a vital role in creating the element of surprise.

Maintaining tension

Once the tension is created, it needs to be retained in order to keep the pages turning as fast as possible (Jordaan 2008: 31). Existing sources of tension are upset or continued and the following examples will illustrate how the use of African languages can cause such an upset or continuation.

Instances of misunderstanding due to language can result in tension. Sometimes such a misunderstanding upsets a factor that created tension, in order to maintain tension. Margarete Trappe's aptitude for learning Swahili is of no use to her when she realises that there are more African languages to keep in mind:

'Memsahib, diese Massai sprechen kein Kisuaheli ... aber wenn sie reden, dann ist es in ihrer Sprache, dem Maa.' (Ackermann 2006 [2005]:196)

Margarete is told that the Massai do not speak Swahili, but their own language, i.e. Maa, that is, when they speak at all. Margarete is stumped because she did not foresee this development. As soon as the reader is lulled into a comfortable state, believing that the protagonist has the strange African language under control, a jolt is given in the form of another African language and once again there is tension. One characteristic that has set the character apart from other characters has now been upset by a new development. It is left to the reader to read further to discover whether Margarete manages to regain one of her exceptional qualities by learning Maa, thus further developing her role within the narrative.

As the characters develop, certain aspects of their personalities are changed and foregrounded. In all three novels names are given to characters in indigenous African languages, conveying aspects of their personalities. Especially in the cases of Margarete von Trappe and Katharina von Strahlberger, the new names that are given to them in Africa mark the changes they undergo as a result of living on the African continent. Margarete is called 'Jeyo' (mother) and 'Kibereti Kali' (flaming match), depicting two contrasting qualities of this main character: her status among the Massai as a respected woman and, in contrast, her flaming temper that is regarded with fear as well as humour. (Ackermann 2006 [2005]: 125, 259). Furthermore, the giving of the name 'Jeyo' perpetuates the mystery created right at the beginning of the novel, where it is predicted that a creature with dark, silky hair and glass eyes (sunglasses) will change the future of the tribe's next prophet forever. The moment members of the tribe encounter Margarete for the first time and recognise her as the creature in the prophesy, she is given the name. The reader and the characters are still unaware of exactly how she will influence the tribe, and thus the tension increases (Ackermann 2006 [2005]:11, 124-125).

Similarly, the nickname of Katharina von Strahlberger 'Mama Mganga' (Mother Doctor) represents her painful journey, starting out as a young girl forced to drop out of medical school by her family until she is finally dramatically transformed into a rescuer of people facing great hardship (Schnalcke 2007:172). The nicknames help maintain suspense, showing that the characters are seldom static and their behaviour is not predictable.

Using the example of Martin and Jill again, the tension takes a new turn as the cracks in their relationship begin to show. They encounter a few Zulu men on a night out and, instead of ordering them out of their way as Martin does, Jill greets them in Zulu and wishes them a good evening. As the men walk away, they cheerfully cry 'Amandla'. Martin is very upset by this:

'Hast du gehört, was die eben gebrüllt haben? Amandla, Gewalt!' ... 'Es kann auch einfach mit 'Kraft' oder 'Stärke' übersetzt werden', sagte sie versonnen. (Gercke 2006 [2002]:113, 114)

Suddenly Martin's fluency in Zulu does not impress Jill so much. Martin understands the meaning of the word 'Amandla' as 'violence', whereas Jill argues that it can simply mean 'power' as well as 'strength'. This difference of opinion in relation to one word summarises the difference that is starting to show in their characters, forcing them apart. In this way the tension in their relationship builds up. Once again, an African language indicates to the reader, in an indirect way, that something is changing.

Resolving tension

The previous two sections show how the usage of Zulu in *Ein Land, das Himmel heißt* aids the unsettling of the reader by creating surprises and building up tension. But this section shows how the use of Zulu in the novel also creates some tranquil moments, giving the reader a chance to breathe before the next catastrophe occurs:

'Ingane yame ... mein Baby ... musa ukukhala ... weine nicht. Du bist nicht allein', sagte die Zulu, 'lass mich herein.' (Gercke 2006 [2002]:565)

The comforting voice of the Zulu woman, Nelly Dlamini, reaches out to Jill in a moment of desperation when it seems that most of her loved ones have died throughout the course of the plot. Nelly, with whom Jill has many a quarrel in the novel, practically raised Jill as her nanny and tells 'her baby' not to cry, but to let her (Nelly) in, because she (Jill) should not feel alone. The feeling of safety created by these words echoes the various instances in the novel in which the sound of Zulu words or songs is associated with Africa as the 'Heimat' of the characters (for example, Gercke 2006 [2002]:301.)

Once again, the giving of names in African languages to European characters provides an example of how the characters acquire a sense of belonging through language. This sense of safety or belonging creates calming moments in the narrative. Having shown that the giving of nicknames maintains the tension in the novel by revealing aspects of characters' personalities, the use of these names by other characters in the novel also plays a part in the creation of calmer moments in the novel. Following the dramatic surprise of encountering each other in the wilderness, Katharina and her old friend Dr Franz Lukas experience a moment of calm during the narrative when he uses her name 'Mama Mganga' (Schnalcke 2007: 215). Later in the novel, Katharine herself uses the name to try and persuade a man from killing her and her lover with a spear. The mere mention of her name, identifying her as a helper of his people, is enough to make him turn around and flee. This releases the characters from a tense moment of near-death, to the relief of the protagonists as well as the reader (Schnalcke 2007:312).

Africa, or Africa as a setting (Mayer 2002:1) is depicted as a home to non-speakers of African languages. In the case of Jill it is a home, and in the case of Margarete and Katharina it becomes a home. The comfort of belonging eases the tension in the narration at intervals in order to allow spaces where renewed tension can build up. This sense of belonging is created to a large extent by the use of African languages and the characters' mastering of these languages. The African languages follow the trajectory of suspense in the novels mentioned before. At the beginning of the novel the introduction of African languages contributes to the tension, and the same languages, even the same utterances, help to resolve tension. The reader is carried along by the use of these languages to a point where the initial estranging effect of the languages is replaced by a sense of almost understanding these languages, as the reader accustoms himself or herself to the repeated utterances.

Conclusion

In literature set in countries or situations where languages other than the language that the work is written in are spoken, it is not uncommon to find utterances represented in other languages, whether directly or in translation. This paper presents the use of African languages in three selected novels, in order to show that such utterances can serve various narrative purposes. These functions are well illustrated by the use of African languages in contemporary German novels set in Africa. By transporting Africa to another continent, upholding the structures of the popular novel genre and creating emotion, the use of African languages contributes to the entertainment value and, therefore, sales figures of these novels – not as languages understood by the reader, but as tools of writers who understand their readers.

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