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# Language Use in Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary"

**Anne Langat**
*University of Kabianga (School of Education, Arts & Social Sciences.*

**Corresponding Authors***
Anne Langat

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**Abstract:** Language is an important tool in our society and in human life in particular. It plays an essential function not only in communication but also in restoring and maintaining harmony in interpersonal relationships. The style in which language is used portrays a lot about the language users and the audience as well. In Ngugi Wa Thiongo's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary", there is a distinctive usage of language that expresses his resistance to the oppression meted out to them by the colonizer and reinforces the theme of cultural identity as well. This paper will examine the specific instances of language use, such as Idioms, proverbs, code mixing, and switching, that were used to bring out the themes in his book. The researcher was interested in highlighting the different styles of language usage and further establishing the reasons why the author used them. The research was primarily limited to Ngugi wa Thiongo's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary.* The scope of the research was within the realm of Prison Narration. The research was Library based qualitative study involving close and in-depth analysis of the selected text in order to bring out Ngugi's language choices.

***Keywords:*** idioms, proverbs, code - switching, code-mixing

## Introduction

### Background of the Study

Prison Narratives stretch back to the narrations of released slaves in America who found themselves back in slavery again through the laws of Jim Crow and convict leasing. The laws intended to restrict the new freedom of liberated African Americans by enforcing restrictions on their mobility and by forcing them into an employment economy founded on low income and debt. Regimes that detained the authors have long been forgotten, but the written records can never be erased from history.

One of the prison narratives is Ngugi Wa Thiongo's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary" (1981). The work follows his arrest without trial in 1977. It is a chain of reflections on its deeper implications, from its plausible motivations to its implications in the present stage of Kenyan History and culture. Ngugi wa Thiong'o, Kenya's foremost novelist, advocated for the workers and peasants who struggled against the vast inequity of wealth between the bourgeoisie and proletariat. This is chronicled in his book during his detention in Kenya. Consequently, to reinforce his main objectives, Ngugi's prison diary showcases deliberate language choices by

blending Gikuyu, Kiswahili, and English to convey resistance to colonial legacy and to assert cultural identity.

**Objectives of the Study**

This study was guided by two objectives:

1. To investigate language choices in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary".
2. To establish the reasons for the language choices in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary".

**Significance of the Study**

The findings of this research will contribute to the understanding of the language choices in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary" and the reasons why he uses them. On a wider sphere too, the findings will benefit any researcher who is interested in the study of language tools, not only in the works of African writers but also with different languages and contexts.

**Literature Review**

Most prison writers draw their motivation from the urge to narrate their experiences and to provide an explanation for their incarceration. Prison Narratives have flourished over the years thanks to those who made pen and paper their daily meal behind the prison boundaries. Ironically, most of these personalities were jailed for disobeying the unjust laws, and their only way to express their dissatisfaction was to divert their attention to Prison narratives. In this category also are Stella Nyanzi's No Roses from My Mouth, Petina Gappah's The Book of Memory, John Kiriamiti's My Life in Crime, *and* Ngugi Wa Thiongo's Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary.

Stella Nyanzi's poems urge the readers to protest and speak about freedom, human dignity, and justice. In explaining her poem, she affirms the effectiveness displayed in her poems, irrespective of their cheapness. She further assures us that the poem shakes the nation as well as exposes the dictatorship. She believed in writing to secure herself in freedom. Nyanzi's work urges the readers through language to protest against injustices they encounter.

While in Birmingham prison in April 1963, Dr Luther King put up a spirited fight against segregation laws through essay writing. The Long letter drawn from Dr Luther's extensive knowledge of Philosophy and theology used language as a powerful tool to advance his fight.

While in detention, Ngugi Wa Thiongo wrote *'Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary'*.

The Diary is basically divided into three sections: the prison notes, letters from prison, and prison aftermaths. The prison notes comprising three fourths of the narrative. It's thus the most essential section. Section two is 'Letters from Prison', which was entirely written by Ngugi while in detention, and lastly the 'Prison Aftermaths', containing the documentation of Ngugi's attempt to regain his position as chairperson of the department of literature at the University of Nairobi.

In General, the book captures a real experience that Ngugi underwent in Prison. His experiences in difficult moments, together with those of other inmates, are aptly reflected while serving a sentence in Kamiti Maximum Prison. He was sentenced without trial in December 1977 and joined eighteen other political prisoners who were already in Cell 16.

The diary detailed the harsh conditions to which Ngugi was subjected while in prison. This is an indictment of the government of Kenya. He condemns Kenya for being controlled by "foreign



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capital" and "foreign economic interests," as he asserts that the real problem is the invasion of Western culture and dominations on the African people. From the early 1970's, Ngugi was at the forefront of the struggle to salvage traditional Kenyan culture from the snares of Western culture.

He argues that the present Kenyan political leaders are today's neo-colonialists who just replace their colonial masters and become their tool boys. He noted that even though some of Kenya's leaders were among the Mau Mau uprising of the 1950'S, many have since independence vowed to protect the power and status of neo-colonialists by collaborating with the Western economic interest. Ngugi wonders how fast these leaders have changed. To him, it is so ironic that the former detainees are now detainers and the former freedom fighters are now denying others their freedom.

Ngugi made it known that he is on the side of the workers and the poor peasants who are struggling against the vast inequities of wealth between the haves and the have-nots. *Detained A writers prison Diary* also captures a historical summary of colonial and post-colonial Kenya from an underclass perspective. Ngugi applauded the poor peasants and workers for their continued traditional resistance.

It is worth noting that in his diary, Ngugi Wa Thiongo offers a compelling case study of language choices. He deliberately used language to navigate oppression, assert cultural identity, and resist colonial legacy.

The specific instances of language use that were studied in this paper included: Idioms, proverbs, code mixing, and switching

1) **Idioms**
   These are expressions that are used in a language and whose meanings are figurative.
   **Characteristics of Idioms**
   (i) **Non-Literal Meaning –** The phrases don't bear direct meanings but rather, figurative.
   Example: Cost an arm and a leg (very expensive)
   (ii) **Cultural Context –** They represent a common cultural experience or history.
   **Example:** An Idiom from the Agikuyu Community
   (iii) **Fixed Structure –** They have fixed words and order
   **Example:** Bite the bullet (to face a difficult situation). This cannot be changed to "Bite the gun."
2) **Proverbs**
   These are short, wise sayings that convey general truths or pieces of advice.
   **Characteristics of Proverbs**
   i) **Concise –** They are short, brief
   **ii) Metaphorical language –** Not literally applicable
   **iii) Cultural Context –** Vary across cultures, languages
3) **Code switching**
   According to Wardhaugh (2006:101), code switching is a condition where a speaker decides to switch from one code to another or to mix codes. This may happen within very short utterances or even longer ones. A speaker who is using code switching may use it in a bilingual setup (two languages) or more (multilingual) in their utterance.

**Categories of Code Switching**

There are two major types of code switches, depending on the position they occupy.

a) **Intra-sentential switching**


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This refers to switching from one language to another within the same sentence or clause. It can occur at the sentence initial position, in the middle, or at the end. It usually happens without pauses or hesitation, thereby requiring competence and fluency of the languages involved, since the rules of syntax of the languages switched have to be adhered to.

**b) Inter-sentential switching**

This happens when switching from one language to the other is done between sentences. In other words, one sentence is produced entirely in one language, and the subsequent one is produced in a different language.

Code switching is strictly used in the context of a communicative competent or skilled bilingual/multilingual and not like with the unskilled speakers who use it due to a lack of knowledge in a particular code.

4) **Code mixing**

Wardhaugh (1992; as cited in Janhom; 2011) defines code mixing as a change in code by a speaker in the same utterance. He goes on to explain that there is no specific rule for mixing the first and second codes since they are context-specific.

Code mixing is mostly used in informal situation and one of the common reasons given by speakers is that they mix codes because they lack sufficient vocabulary to say things in the core language, or there are words completely in the language to explain what the speaker means. Yiamkhumnuan (2010) supports this view that speakers mix codes when they cannot think of words in the original language or when they think that mixing is suitable for the topic at hand.

In this paper, the researcher investigated language choices in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary" (Idioms, proverbs, code switching, and code mixing) and also established the reasons for the language choices.

## Methodology

The research was a library-based qualitative study that involved a close and in-depth analysis of Ngugi wa Thiong'o's *Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary.* The book was selected through purposive sampling. Primary data was collected through reading the book by Ngugi Wa Thiongo, and secondary data through reading other Prison narratives.

## Findings And Discussion

### Research Question 1:

### To investigate language choices in Ngugi Wa Thiongo's "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary".

| | CODE | EXAMPLE | EXPLANATION |
|---|---|---|---|
| 1. | **Idioms** | - **A finger cannot kill a louse**<br>- **Eat the fruit and forget the tree**<br>- **Kumuona mutu** (To see one as an enemy)<br>- **Gukua na ng'ele** (To die with nails) | Power dynamics<br>Criticism of the colonialism erasure of history, cultural roots<br>To be conscious of the environment (enemy)<br>To die with secrets |

| | | | |
|---|---|---|---|
| **2.** | **Proverbs** | - **The sun does not hide its face**<br>- **When the music changes, the dance changes**<br>- **Muti ndurumaga nja (**A tree doesn't fall outside)<br>- **Witu ni witu** (Our home is our home) | Need for truth and transparency<br>Highlights adaptability, responding to circumstances<br>Need for family and community unity<br>Sense of togetherness, belonging |
| **3.** | **Code-switching** | - **Huyu ni mpumbavu (**This one is a fool)<br>- **Hakuna matata ya bure** (There's no trouble for free)<br>- **Tafadhali, afande** (Please, sir)<br>- **Gikuyu kiene** (Gikuyu land)<br>- **Tuuri murunda** (We are in the wilderness)<br>- **Mati ni maana** (Truth is truth)<br>- **Githaka kinene** (Big bush) | The whole clause appears in a different code; Kiswahili. This is a switch since the matrix language is English<br>The whole clause appears in a different code, Gikuyu. This is a switch since the matrix language is English |
| **3.** | **Code-Mixing** | - **The officer asked, "Unataka nini?"** (What do you want)<br>- **I replied "Niko hapa"** (I'm here)<br>- **They laughed, "Hahaha, mkazi wapi?"** (Hahaha, where do you live?)<br>- **She said "Umeona, giko ni giko"** (You see, there's this and that")<br>- **The teacher alituambia "Muthuri mwema"** (The teacher told us "Good morning")<br>- **He told me "Wewe uri trouble"** (He told me "You are in Trouble") | The words **Unataka nini, Niko hapa, Mkazi wapi** (Kiswahili) have been embedded into the English sentences, resulting in code mixing<br>The words **Umeona, Alituambia, Wewe** (Kiswahili), and the words **giko ni giko, Muthuri mwema, Uri (Agikuyu)** have been embedded into the English sentences, resulting in code mixing |

**Research Question 2:**

**To establish the reasons why the author uses the language devices in his book.**

Writers choose language styles for different reasons. Holmes (1992) in her research stated that speakers resort to code switching and mixing for a reason. The linguistic landscape of Ngugi Wa Thiong's diary is marked by a deliberate blend of English, Gikuyu, and Kiswahili. This reflects on the complexities of postcolonial identity. His language choices serve as a pointer to subtle resistance, undermining the dominant narrative of the enemy (oppressors). By code switching and mixing, he creates a sense of cultural solidarity while also excluding the oppressors from their plans, consequently, highlighting the tension between the colonial and the indigenous languages. In Summary, the reasons for using idioms, proverbs, code switching, and mixing were the following:

1) Reinforcing the themes of resistance and resilience
2) Highlighting the power dynamics between the detainees and the authority



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3) Asserting cultural identity and heritage
4) Conveying timeless wisdom and connecting with readers through shared experiences
5) Adding flavour, authenticity, depth to language
6) Reflecting on multilingual reality: English, Gikuyu, and Kiswahili

**Conclusions**

The findings show that Ngugi Wa Thiongo employed a wide array of language tools in his book "Detained: A Writer's Prison Diary". He uses idioms and proverbs, code-switching and code-mixing techniques in different sections of his book to communicate with his audience and express human feelings.

From the data collected, it is evident that the author picked the words carefully for intended reasons. The three most outstanding reasons are: to include a wide range of his audience through his lived experience, and in the process, he identifies with the contemporary issues, for example, power imbalances, and finally, using them in the core language to assert cultural identity.

In conclusion, Ngugi's blending of Kiswahili, English, and Gikuyu is a pointer to Kenya's multilingual state and the audience's diverse linguistic identities. His use of English alongside the indigenous languages showcases the interplay between global and local influences in Kenyan texts. He fits into the broader African and worldwide popular trends that have embraced multilingualism.

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