

Interviewing African Writers

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ABSTRACT

The published interview with working writers, both in journals and in anthologies, is an example of what can be termed both *metatext* and *paratext*. Though frequently cited in academic research, the literary interview nevertheless remains largely uninvestigated for its aims, content, strategies and critical exploitation, and in the emergent field of Western scholarship in African literatures and given the problems of cultural dissemination in Africa itself, it is apparent that the production and role of literary interviews, while important in practice, are particularly open to question.

Within the context of African literature in particular, the aim of this paper is to open up discussion in both literary and sociolinguistic terms of (i) the interviewer's intention and the interviewee's response; (ii) strategies involved in transcribing, editing and publication, including discussion of the relative status of the oral interview in printed form and the interviewer's and/or interviewee's 'right' to alter the original interview; and (iii) the academic and general use, and abuse, of published and unpublished interviews.

1.

Faced with an edited of an interview which he granted me at the Stockholm African Writers Conference in 1986 (Lo Liyong 1989), Taban lo Liyong, the East African writer, scholar and critic, was both amused and bewildered. At first he had been sure the transcript must be incomplete. Surely, he had thought to himself, it contained only "vignette sentences (or parts thereof)." He illustrated his initial puzzlement by recounting the tale of a man of his own 'tribe,' the Kuku, who looks for the very first time into a mirror:

"He saw unkempt hair, mouldy-green teeth, crow's feet, contorted features—in short all the things which did not correspond with his own image of himself."

Taban added, however, that he, personally, was

"now convinced that my oral delivery was a wonderful cross between classic Tutuola, Gabriel Okara and Gertrude Stein with bits of William Carlos Williams and e.e.cummings thrown in for good measure[,] everything contributing to the disjunctive symmetry of the whole picture."

Taban had been a very willing interviewee: he had recounted the history of some of the literary movements in East Africa following independence in the 1960s, and he

had expressed with some force his humanistic dismay at the ideological rigidity of another conference delegate from a more recently independent African state. He had also insisted on the importance of writers like himself granting interviews because "somewhere or other we are on record . . . and history is kept in the history books and the archives" (Lo Liyong 1987).

Editing the transcript had been relatively unproblematic; there were some intrusive redundancies to cut out, but probably no more than in most of the other interviews we had conducted at the Stockholm conference. Taban, however, like the Kuku 'tribesman' in his tale of the mirror, was now tempted to say: "Take this lying thing of yours away before I crush it to pieces." Taban (and his fellow tribesman) was not alone in his reaction: two of the other writers interviewed for the same collection, Jack Mapanje and Lauretta Ngcobo, felt that the transcripts failed to convey their message and subsequently took up the editorial offer for them to re-edit their own interviews—in effect to re-write them—which Mapanje, in particular, did to a major extent. The only conclusion to be drawn was that, in one way or another, Public Image (the image perceived in the interview by the writer of himself) had evidently been dislocated from Self-Image (the writer's conception of self). Taban, however, unlike Mapanje and Ngcobo, decided to take no corrective measures: "Whatever was conceived in good spirit must remain as it is, and served to the guests as the cook had planned. I do not relish setting the record straight; I do not like remarking, like Prufrock: that's not it at all; that's not what I meant at all. . . . So I am afraid your interview will have to remain unrevised, by me" (Lo Liyong 1991).

To a certain degree, of course, the African element in this dislocation is arbitrary. On a basic level, the interview can be interrogated in general literary terms: what is the critical function of the literary interview? Is an interview merely a way of accumulating extra biographical data 'straight from the horse's mouth'? Can this access to living writers add an edge to other approaches used in the criticism of writing by dead or otherwise unapproachable writers? Can the interviewed writer be co-opted to work effectively as a fellow critic in a collaborative approach to his or her own writing? Or is the interview merely an aid to enhancing the exposure of writers in the literary marketplace? It certainly might be claimed that, although widely published in journals and anthologies, and frequently cited in critical research, the literary interview appears to be largely uninvestigated in terms of its aims, content, strategies and reception, in short, of how it should be made and read. It appears virtually impossible to find any discussion of the textual status of the literary interview—whether, for instance it can be regarded not only as a *metatext* but also, perhaps, in some circumstances as a potential *paratext*, that is, a kind of half-way house functioning both as a critical text and as a semi-autonomous literary text produced in collaboration with the interviewer.

There seems, instead, to exist a rather surprising take-it-for-granted, common-sense attitude to the published literary interview—even more surprising in the study of writing from other cultures, especially African, where the fallacies of a Eurocentric critical perspective have otherwise long since been exposed to great effect by critics such as Mineke Schipper (1989). We feel that we, as enlightened Western critics, faced with enlightened African writers, are implicitly 'on the same side' ideologically in the act of communication and, therefore, that our proven skills as Western critics of the African literary text will also serve us equally well in the production and/or critical reading of the literary interview. In this light, therefore, the theme of this paper will be the challenge posed to the interviewer and the critical reader from another cultural tradition by the kind of dislocation of public image and self-image perceived by Taban lo Liyong.

2.

In an important sense, as John Haffenden, as the editor of a collection of interviews with British writers, *Novelists in Interview*, has pointed out, "Good authorship is at once good criticism" (Haffenden 1985: xvi): the literary interview should, in the context of 'good' writing (Haffenden omits any clear definition of this sometimes controversial adjective), be redundant, since the literary work will reveal its own metalanguage. In the context of the Western mainstream of literature Haffenden's Introduction is valuable in that it provides a limited analytical investigation of the literary interview:

"the aims [of the interview] . . . are perhaps not wholly distinct from the aims of literary biography, except for the obvious fact that an interviewer cannot reach beyond what an author is prepared to present of his or her life and work." (Haffenden 1985: vii)

In this, Haffenden appears to suggest that the interviewer enters into an interview with preparation or foreknowledge of the interviewee's text and context, and without the opportunity or ability to construct a fluid, flexible interview in pursuit of elusive data. Thus, to suggest that the interviewer cannot, both during and after the interview, "reach beyond what an author is prepared to present" autobiographically and professionally, is, I think, misleading, as the remainder of this paper will attempt to illustrate. Haffenden's contribution, however, is that, against the trend of much recent critical theory which seeks to efface the author him/herself, he sets out a defence of what he sees as the admittedly partial value of auto/biographical information: "any understanding of the creative process . . . is useful to the act of criticism," especially in the form of the "ideas and visions which inform [writers'] . . . works" (Haffenden 1985: viii):

“Minimizing the importance of an author's 'original meaning' . . . to insist upon the purposiveness and thus the autonomy of the resultant work is to disallow the author's intelligence and deliberation with regard to 'progressive intention,' the author's developing awareness of communicable intent.” (Haffenden 1985: xv)

He comes out in support of Alastair Fowler's definition of 'progressive intention' (quoting Fowler): "Intention means different things at different stages of composition," adding his support to Fowler's perception that "'Intention' must be seen to have numerous aspects and phases: practical, generic, semantic, unconscious" (Haffenden 1985: xiii).

It is noteworthy that in the context of another humanistic field, that of the social sciences, exhaustive use is made of the formal interview in its research—Charles L. Briggs quotes a source which suggests that "90 percent of all social science investigations use interview data" (Briggs 1986: 1). Aaron V. Cicourel has also pointed out that "there is by now a *huge* literature on the problems of obtaining information from informants, respondents, and subjects" (Cicourel 1986: ix; my emphasis). In contrast to the sociological interview, with the notable exception of Haffenden's introduction, I have yet to see any methodological or critical reference to the literary interview beyond the generalized introductions to the many anthologies available. Why does literary research appear to treat the ubiquitous interview in what is arguably, at worst, a cavalier and ethnocentric, and, at best, an unsystematic and "methodologically naive" (Briggs 1986: 5) critical manner?

A rather different type of literary interview, such as one I conducted in 1989 with the colonialist South African popular novelist Wilbur Smith (Smith 1996), may help to illustrate the point—or, rather, its obverse—especially with regard to the roles enacted by the interviewer and the interviewee in the course of the interview.

One of the many critical problems facing anyone attempting to research the international, mass-market popular novel is the sheer elusiveness of the writer, which is linked with the desire of the popular novel to distract attention from and efface its "social determinations" (Maughan Brown 1990). It is, after all, primarily a commercial commodity, and few popular novelists—purveyors of adventure and romance—are willing to reveal the secrets of their merchandise.¹ Despite this, their authorial intentions are generally clear, suggesting an alternative kind of redundancy as far as the interview is concerned: their aim is to sell, to entertain, and

¹ Many write under one or more assumed names, not so much to protect true identity as to project a more marketable image, especially where writers have proven themselves capable of successfully producing fiction in more than one popular subgenre—perhaps both thrillers and 'romantic' tales—which, without a pen-name, would result in profit-endangering confusion in the separate readerships' simplistic conceptualizations of the writer's identity. It is, then, by no means for reasons of 'feministic' independence that Wilbur Smith's wife published her first romantic thriller, *Children of Darkness* (1992), under her maiden name, Danielle Thomas.

to bring sets of ideologically-predetermined images into literary play which are based principally on formulaic stereotypes and which can generally be isolated with critical ease. In interview, therefore, it is predictable that some popular novelists will start up a game of hide-and-seek with the interviewer in an attempt to simulate the writerly persona already projected in the fiction, to preserve the romantic illusion, and to evade critical analysis.

Smith did all of this. We sparred. The drift of my questioning was an attempt to elicit an acknowledgement from him that some of his recent fiction on Zimbabwe and South Africa has been inspired by a desire to propagate a conscious and definable late-colonialist line: Smith acknowledges in interview that he writes in the colonialist tradition of H. Rider Haggard, John Buchan, and Stuart Cloete (Smith 1996: 84). Understandably, Smith's responses were loaded with personal and general evasiveness. At different times he insisted on both his Englishness *and* his Africanness.² He insisted on his informed intimacy with southern African affairs—which, he implied, were impenetrable to uninitiated outsiders, whom he castigated at once as "liars or idiots" and also as "well-intentioned but totally misguided"—at the same time as insisting on his having abandoned the confines of South Africa to become a "citizen of the world."³ And he insisted simultaneously on the detachment from history of the 'good story-teller'—which he undoubtedly is—but also on the discursive historicity of his writing: "History's an untidy old bag and you have to sort it out in fiction" (reviewers and critics frequently point out the deleterious narrative and ideological effects of Smith's 'sorting-out' of history; cf. Maughan Brown 1990).

The hour-long discussion served, if nothing else, at least one critical task: to illustrate the tactics of diffuse self-contradiction in the construction of an authorial smoke-screen: not self- but ideological effacement,⁴ since Smith, a past master of the popular illusion, like a conjuror would brook no chance impingement on his

² "We're [his wife and himself] almost from the same nest, both from British parents, both born in Broken Hill in what was then Northern Rhodesia. . . . I'm just straight English: Brighton and Surrey family. . . . Africa without its wildlife wouldn't be Africa to me; I might as well go *home* and live in Brighton! . . . I feel at home in Africa as I don't feel in any other part of the world. . . . The funeral . . . was one of the most moving experiences that you could possibly, as an *African*, be in there with them" (Smith 1996: 73; my emphases).

³ "It all changes day by day, . . . and anybody who says he knows exactly what's happening in Africa is either a liar or an idiot. . . . When you're a writer . . . you can move around . . . and as your reputation grows you are invited into more interesting and unusual situations, which the average person wouldn't get access to. . . . We've moved out and become citizens of the world" (Smith 1996: 74).

⁴ Referring to detectable contradictions in popular romances, Jean Radford (1986: 15) has suggested that these give rise to "certain incoherencies and tensions which . . . can be seen as symptoms of what the text is unable to repress or reconcile within the story." Can the interview be read in the same way?

elaborately coded public image as a creator of unreflecting, unreflexive 'African' adventure fiction.

3.

The questions of intention and strategy need to be posed especially in relation to interviews with African writers, where the logocentric Western critic is faced with complex dilemmas like that pointed out by Adeola James (1990) in the Introduction to her widely-cited anthology of interviews with African women writers:

"The African writer's language, as the vehicle of her imagination, is shaped by her culture and at times by the fact that her mother tongue is not English. The language is often, therefore, coloured by the oral tradition, replete with proverbial sayings, information passed down from the elders, colloquial reportage, and sometimes the rambling that characterizes our style of greeting and passing on of information." (James 1990: 1)

It is by no means self-apparent how interviewers from other cultural environments — including other gender and ethnic environments—can process significant features of this nature during the recording of the interview itself, nor in its transcription and publication, and critical exploitation.

As Charles L. Briggs has indicated in the context of the social sciences, the "interview encapsulates our own native theories of communication and of reality"; in his own field he sees an 'imposition' of interview techniques on subjects (Briggs 1986: 4) whose communicative norms and metacommunicative strategies may differ enormously from those of the interviewer (Briggs 1986: 2), with the result that "the farther we move away from home, culturally and linguistically, the greater the problem" (Briggs 1986: 3). In essence Briggs is suggesting that the interview mode itself is, in Mineke Schipper's terms, yet another aspect of critical Eurocentrism since, "by leaving the interview situation itself out of the analysis [cf. the absence of analysis of the literary interview mode], we have cleverly circumvented the need to examine our own role in the research process" (Briggs 1986: 4). Briggs' tentative but rigorously-argued solution centres on the need, at every stage of the interview process (from the planning stage through to critical exploitation), to apply appropriate linguistic tools gleaned from the findings of sociolinguistics and discourse analysis (Briggs 1986: 5).

Though the scale and structure and application of the sociological interview may differ considerably, Briggs' suggestions would appear to be largely valid in both the performance and the exploitation of the (African) literary interview. Briggs identifies five major areas of concern:

(i) The interviewee's perspective requires explicit definition *prior to* the interview (and also its consumption). What Briggs needed to learn from his respondents, he found from experience, was "to respect [their social status] . . . as

well as to discover which questions were relevant to them and the basic cultural assumptions that underlie the answers" (Briggs 1986: 10).

(ii) The interviewer (and the critic) should analyse the structure of the interview: "perhaps the most basic maxim to be followed is that the interview must be analysed as a whole before any of its component utterances are interpreted" (Briggs 1986: 104). He mentions the need to be aware of the random ambient components of the interview as well as the communicative structure of the interview itself.

(iii) Given awareness of the total structuration of the interview, only then can the critic move on to the principal use of the interview, "discerning the broader significance of the responses" (Briggs 1986: 105).

(iv) "Speech . . . provides an ongoing interpretation of its own significance": taking his cue from developments in ethno poetics (especially the work of the American ethnographer, Dell H. Hymes), Briggs suggests that an awareness of linguistic style, "including its visual . . . , prosodic . . . , and verbal dimensions," will aid in the interpretation of "individual statements" (Briggs 1986: 106):

"looking for metacommunicative elements enables the researcher to base his or her interpretation on what the speaker is saying not only about 'the world out there' but also about the researcher's own words." (Briggs 1986: 107)

(v) Another important factor is especially evident in Adeola James's interview with Ama Ata Aidoo, as one of the reviews of James's anthology of interviews points out:

"Adeola James is a strong interviewer and there is sometimes the sense that she is hoping for a particular, useful answer to her strategic questions, something that Ama Ata Aidoo, *with her ear for the rules of a discourse*, picks up: "I don't know if these are the answers you expected from me" (Rooney 1991: 13-14)."

Briggs considers this factor under the heading of 'contextualization.' He takes up the suggestion from other linguists that "participants are constantly exchanging implicit messages as to how they perceive the speech event and how they want their utterances to be interpreted," that, in fact, the communicative context is not predetermined or stable, but "*created by the participants in the course of the interaction. . . .* [as they] monitor each other's words and actions" (Briggs 1986: 108; original emphasis).

4.

Clearly, there are many difficulties and impracticalities involved in Briggs' analytical model, and I have not lost sight of the fact that the nature of the interviews he discusses is in many ways different from the literary interview made with African (and other) writers. The most prevalent literary interviews are printed

in the conventional form of the question and answer, where it is taken for granted that interviewers have edited out intrusive 'illiteracies' from transcripts. Most provide some contextualization; minimally: "Eckhard Breiting interviewed Percy Mtwa in Hamburg on July 23, 1987" (Mtwa 1988: 160); extensively: in the same journal containing the Mtwa interview, Geoffrey V. Davis provides a full-page literary biography to precede an interview with Alan Paton (Paton 1988: 203). Other interviewers indicate that the published interview is a 'selection' from a longer transcript (Lessing 1986), or they provide more or less extensive clarificatory footnotes (Mungoshi 1990).

Relatively few academically-oriented literary interviews deviate from this apparently neutral, interpretation-free presentation. Taban lo Liyong's interview appeared in an anthology where the editors (Raoul Granqvist and the present writer) attempted—in quite massive contradiction to Briggs's model—to foreground the writers' 'voices' by largely eliminating their own questions (and identities) and editing the transcripts into thematic chunks—contrast Adeola James' personalization of the interviewer as 'Adeola' and of the subject also by first name. A more radical textual editing occurs, exceptionally, in Nichols (1984), where extensive interviews with a large number of writers have been dissected for their thematic content; the product, I would suggest, is largely unreadable.

Nevertheless, features of Charles Briggs's analysis can be identified in the presentation of one type of published interview: the interview conducted with a public celebrity, details of whose private and public identity form an integral part of what is expected of the article by the magazine or newspaper reader. The first of two literary examples is one which is both popular and conservative in format and focus, and typical of articles appearing in the ephemeral press which are based primarily on interviews with popular, contemporary writers. "Who the hell does Wilbur Smith think he is?" begins one adulatory piece, which goes on to define the writer's appearance, manner, mood, diet (Smith 1990a). Another interview with Smith (Smith 1990b), while employing the same kind of familiar contextualizing devices, manages to signal a more critical approach (in the otherwise conservative British *Sunday Express Magazine*) by placing Smith's and his wife's responses in a novelettish frame which can only be read ironically:

"Darling," he said as he sat down, "you didn't give me a kiss." His wife, Danielle (Dee)—a sophisticating influence . . . from whom he has been inseparable since he met her after a night out with the lads more than 25 years ago—puckered her lips." (Smith 1990b: 70)⁵

⁵ I find this interview particularly impressive in that it elicits from Smith what I failed to: an explicit admission that he conceals his political stance on South Africa beneath the surface of his novels since "it doesn't sell many books, and the risk can only harm you in the long run."

The potential of this kind of thorough contextualization may be seen in an interview which, while not conducted with a writer, is both thoroughly literary and at the same time analytical in its presentation. In one of the early issues of the South African journal *Staffrider*, Miriam Tlali published a highly edited version of an interview (Bra Luke 1982: 2-3) she had made with "Bra Luke of Sophiatown." She provides a photograph taken at the time of the interview, and describes Bra Luke's manner and origins and physical environment, telling us that

"he speaks impeccable English with the eloquence of a scholar and quotes whole passages from writings of great English masters. It is no wonder that those who know him have nicknamed him 'Die Philosopher.'"

She includes linking references to pauses, head shakes, and shared laughter, and when Bra Luke moves on from English to Afrikaans and Xhosa, she quotes him verbatim, providing only a selective minimum of translation into English:

"He shakes his head when he thinks of what it is like to be black in this country. He-e-e, jy kon kry 'n klein Laaitiekie van 'n nyoertjie of 'n Engelsman roep jou 'boy'. Or hulle underpay jou because they say: (He switches over to Sotho.) 'O senya chelete; e etsang ka eona?' 'Why waste money on him; what's *he* going to do with the money? I gave him a pair of trousers it's enough. His backside is not outside!' "(Bra Luke 1982: 2)

The impression is one of true communication with a living being. Taban lo Liyong—and Charles Briggs—would have been gratified.

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