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Chantal Zabus

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Mending the Schizo-Text: Pidgin in the Nigerian Novel

Abstract

Post-colonial West African writers writing in English may have been too scripturally schizophrenic, too busy with the dichotomy mother tongue/ other tongue, to account fully for the presence of auxiliary contact languages in their writing. Yet it is in that space in-between, in the contact language itself, that writers like Kafka and Louis Wolfson² have nestled to redefine writing in the mother tongue. I will here examine how Pidgin has insinuated itself into the very texture of Nigerian writing, at first under the decorative guise of an unobtrusive, 'auxiliary' language confined to dialogues and, subsequently, as the potential vehicle for multilingual and cross-cultural hybridized poetics.

Socr. to the youth, hand on knee: 'Look, tell him to cut to the point: love is the highest god of all, without whom men would not know what men may be... and at his next law-giving he should insert a pension for philosophers like me.'

CHANTAL ZABUS

Mending the Schizo-Text: Pidgin in the Nigerian Novel¹

Post-colonial West African writers writing in English may have been too scripturally schizophrenic, too busy with the dichotomy mother tongue/other tongue, to account fully for the presence of auxiliary contact languages in their writing. Yet it is in that space in-between, in the contact language itself, that writers like Kafka and Louis Wolfson² have nestled to redefine writing in the mother tongue. I will here examine how Pidgin has insinuated itself into the very texture of Nigerian writing, at first under the decorative guise of an unobtrusive, 'auxiliary' language confined to dialogues and, subsequently, as the potential vehicle for multi-lingual and cross-cultural hybridized poetics.

I will focus on Nigerian Pidgin English (NPE or EnPi), originally a trade language born out of the contact between English and various other African languages. Its complex origins, which are a major source of disputation among monogenetic and polygenetic theoreticians,³ are only relevant in so far as they explain why Pidgin English in contemporary Nigeria is at present both a first stage in acquiring English and a non-official *lingua franca* which has currency along the West Coast. Its increased creolization and its growing status as a first language (especially in Bendel and Rivers States) find their corollary in the post-colonial Nigerian novel of English expression precariously poised at a historical interface between the neo-colonial upsurge of English or 'english'⁴ and the rehabilitation of indigenous African languages.

The writer's attempt at representing Pidgin as it is spoken in the streets and then at forging a 'pidginized' artistic medium has to be understood against the vast spectrum of post-colonial English language experimentation in the Nigerian novel. These experiments have engendered, at best,

skilful schizo-texts in which the African language is latent and the European language manifest, in which there is an almost Manichean opposition or power relation between the mother tongue and the other tongue. Gabriel Okara's experiment with lexico-semantic and morpho-syntactic relexification in *The Voice* (1964) is thus far the most eloquent experiment, but also one that is bound to lead to an artistic impasse. Pidgin is notably absent from the novel for, as Okara told us in a recent interview, 'it is a primarily oral medium' and 'not too many people would be able to read it'.⁵

In other schizo-texts onto which an 'ethno-text' has been grafted,⁶ the mother tongue has often been fossilized in adages. Achebe's 'palm-oil' proverbialization is a case in point; the gnomic discourse acts as a narrative lubricant helping in the expert transplant of the Igbo ethno-text and makes the Igbo language look like a dusty dinosaur whose last gasps histrionically foreshadow the death of a species.⁷

Given the post-colonial stalemate between mother tongue and other tongue, it would appear that the Pidgin medium mends the schizo-text by dissolving the infernal 'binarity' between target and source language. The literary use of Pidgin would thus transform this mutual cannibalism into a bilateral creolization or *métissage* of two or several registers, the necessary prelude to cross-cultural syncreticity.

It is not possible here to outline the literary history of EnPi, but let it be said that after a false start as an embellishment and slot-filler in plays and novels alike, it functioned for a while as baby talk and bush talk to become later the medium of urban prestige and integration (and therefore of disidentification with Tradition), the mode of inter- and intra-ethnic communication and eventually a mother tongue. Its protean capacity for adaptation makes it 'the language ever more suited to the times', a phrase Achebe used in *A Man of the People*, a novel that contributed to further establishing the infamous, albeit cathartic, 'levity of Pidgin'.⁸ I will focus on three writers who correspond to various stages in the literary history of Pidgin – Joyce Cary, Cyprian Ekwensi and Ken Saro-Wiwa – who helped move Pidgin from the *staccato* language of low-life or low-income characters in third-person narratives to the wrought-up medium of first-person narratives.

Despite allegations against Joyce Cary as a colonialist or, as Obiechina labelled him, a 'crocodile writer', this Irish Saurian nevertheless made the earliest use of Pidgin in *Mister Johnson* (1939) while confining its use to dialogues and, curiously enough, to soliloquies and afterthoughts.

Mister Johnson is a young half-literate third-class filing clerk on probation at Fada Station in the Hausa-speaking part of Bauchi and Gongola in Northern Nigeria in the 1930s. He is perceived by the local population as 'a stranger ... from the South'⁹ whose ethnic group Cary did not care to identify. As a coastal Nigerian, he speaks Pidgin with Ajali, 'a light-coloured Southerner' (p. 18). Yet he can effortlessly switch to 'good Eng-

lish' (SE) when addressing the British District Officer, 'but in the clipped accent of one using a foreign tongue' (p. 25), or when addressing the local authority, i.e. the Waziri 'for a greater effect' (p. 39). But he pitifully falls back on 'Cook's English' (p. 77) when caught clumsily trying to steal from the safe. In this particular instance, Pidgin accompanies a fall from grace.

Echeruo remarks that the first sentence Johnson addresses to Bamu, the village *belle* – 'What pretty girl you are' (p. 13) is 'too idiomatic to be in character'.¹⁰ He unhesitatingly attributes to Johnson the misuse of the adverb in the next sentence – 'Oh you are too pretty', which should read 'very' or 'so'. In fact, the lapse from English to Pidgin corresponds to Johnson's code-switching from Hausa, which is here recorded in SE according to a tacitly accepted practice among African writers which prescribes the use of the dominant or 'elaborated' code to render the dominated or 'restricted' code.¹¹ Johnson has been in Fada for six months and speaks, or rather patters, Hausa with the local people, who know neither English nor Pidgin. It is indeed very likely that the compliment that Johnson calls out to his mavourneen who 'no talk English too good' (p. 106) is in Hausa, whereas the second sentence is an afterthought that he is addressing to himself in Pidgin, for throughout the book, Pidgin is the histrionic language of Johnson's soliloquies. The bilingual strategy of code-switching thus explains what Echeruo has construed as an inconsistency in Cary's artistry. In that respect, Johnson adumbrates later characters in Nigerian writing who speak Pidgin not in default of but in addition to speaking English. This makes Cary a precursor in rendering not only Pidgin but the attendant strategy of code-switching as well as language stratification in West Africa.

Although Cary may have exaggerated the English substratum of Pidgin as a concession to his metropolitan audience, he is likely to have recorded the Pidgin he himself had to rely on as an Assistant District Officer, for Cary reportedly failed his Hausa language examination in 1917 and could hardly speak the language.¹² The 'babu-type of English' Obiechina accuses Cary of having carved out for the circumstance¹³ is in fact a Pidgin imported from Southern (Coastal) Nigeria in the 1930s, which was later to merge with Pidgin Hausa or Barikanci. As such, it exhibits few characteristics of modern NPE. A statement like 'I give you plenty money' (p. 39), to mean 'I will give you plenty of money', may well have been recorded as it was spoken, as a deviation from SE. It is indeed closer in structure to the Ibibio-informed Pidgin that Antera Duke, an Efik slave-trader, used in his diary at the end of the eighteenth-century¹⁴ than to its later and more modern counterpart: 'À gò gív yù m̀nì bo[r]ku', *bo[r]ku* being favoured over *plénti*, which is in Ènpi a verb expressing plurality.

What this pseudo-Pidgin does share with its modern counterpart, however, is the symptomatic tinge of 'levity'. It is indeed used in the humorous soliloquies and springy songs modulated by Johnson, the 'fool chile' who revels away the time with drums and smuggled gin. This levity

inevitably conjures up the legions of mattoids created by colonial writers and the many portrayals of 'natives' with their innately 'cheerful' disposition. Such inherited levity inevitably adds its mite to Cary's allegedly reductive statements about Africans. That is why Cary's rendering of Pidgin has been seen as part and parcel of a colonialist strategy aimed at establishing a captious equation between the 'baby talk' of Mister Johnson and his putatively infantile mind.¹⁵ In fact, this seemingly hypocritical treatment of NPE pertains to a more complex discourse, which takes into account Cary's Irishness and his own ambiguous relationship to the English language which, in turn, may explain his crafty concern with mastery over every idiom. Cary has meticulously phoneticized a character's idiolect, whether it is Johnson's Hausa-informed lingo or the truculent old coaster Sergeant Gollup's jovial colloquial English. Presented as a botched aspect of second-language acquisition, Pidgin has to be examined *in situ*, in the state of hybridization it had reached in Nigeria in the 1930s. Cary's phonetic treatment of Pidgin can only in bad faith be subsumed to his supposed elaboration on the African-as-emotional-child formula. It is thus fair to assume that Cary did not use Pidgin to connote linguistic incompetence as an index to racial inferiority but to represent linguistic stratification and to point to its potential role as the interlingua of coastal West Africans.

Cyprian Ekwensi has expanded on 'the levity of Pidgin', or what Onitsha Market Literature established as unbecoming jocularity, to comment and reflect on the fraudulent frivolity of Lagos urbanites. More to his credit, however, Ekwensi is the first West African novelist to have produced a full-fledged 'Pidgin personality', the glamorous prostitute and kind-hearted sugar-mummy, Jagua Nana.

Her first rebuke to her lover, Freddie, is in a pseudo-Pidgin fleshed out by some of its deep grammatical features as in 'You better pass many who done go and come. You be clever boy, and your brain open'.¹⁶ The use of the present perfect 'done', the comparative 'pass', and the third-person personal pronoun 'dem' are some of those deep features. But in what follows – 'You young, too. You know what you doin'. You serious with your work. Yes! Government kin give you scholarship' – the use of 'know' instead of 'sabi' and 'kin' (can) instead of the more common 'fit', as well as the generally English syntax, show that Ekwensi retained only the superficial elements of Pidgin, its 'feel' but not its deep structure. Had Jagua Nana told her own story in the first person, she would have retained the deep structure of Pidgin along with Igbo and Yoruba interferences. In third-person narratives, however, it will often be difficult to determine whether this erosion of Pidgin is attributable to the author's ignorance of the language, as is the case with Ulasi's *Many Thing You No Understand*, to his effort at making Pidgin palatable for metropolitan English consumption, to the character's alienation from his speech community, or to the gradual assimilation of Pidgin to a substandard variety of English in

metropolitan centres such as Lagos. One thing is sure: Pidgin, as the main language of the protagonist, fills the interstices in the mother tongue/other tongue cleavage; the mother tongue is here part of these 'embarrassing reminders of clan or customs' (p. 5).

Ekwensi has thus established Pidgin as the curious prestige language of this *demi-monde* of urbanized loafers and prostitutes who have paced their lives to the city bustle and to the beats of African *high life*. Yet, Jagua is also competently trilingual. Though Mister Johnson is more literate than Jagua, her proficiency in Pidgin, Igbo and Yoruba makes Cary's protagonist look like a deficient polyglot and a foetal 'Pidgin personality'. Of these languages – Pidgin, Igbo and Yoruba – Pidgin is the only register of communication to have a truly interethnic function in both the text and the context, which here refract one another, as it were.

We can catch a glimpse of the future role of Pidgin as the *lingua franca* of coastal West Africans faced with the extralinguistic deculturation-acculturation process when we consider Jagua's rival, Nancy Oll, whose parents originally came from Sierra Leone. She consistently communicates with her Igbo husband in Pidgin, even after she has completed her studies in England. One can surmise that their children will probably speak Pidgin at home and that, if Jagua had children, their native tongue would be Pidgin as well. This is the case now in Nigeria, since first-language users of NP, 'mainly children of urban mixed families' have been attested 'particularly in the delta cities of Warri, Sapele and Port Harcourt in Bendel and Rivers States respectively'.¹⁷ The creolization of Pidgins inchoated in fiction not only reflects but anticipates the sociolinguistic reality, fiction being here not mimetic but essentially proleptic.

Pidgin has decidedly evolved from a trade language to a public *patois*, a *sermo vulgaris* of a kind. As such, it continues to be associated with a half-literate subculture and with either low-life or low-income characters which stand comparison to the *illiterati* or *idiotae* in Western European medieval culture, those *indocti* or *rustici*, country bumpkins who communicated in vulgar Latin. The developed Pidgin personalities in the Nigerian novel are thus for the most part *idiotae* who have little or no formal education and have not mastered the dominant idiom, SE. In other words, most Pidgin locutors in novels speak Pidgin *because* they do not speak SE: prostitutes, city-slickers, gangsters, stalwarts, passenger touts, petty-traders, *bole-kaja* thugs and other nefarious outlaws. Other popular fiction pieces such as Joseph Mangut's *Have Mercy* (1982) confirm the stylistic function of Pidgin as a social indicator of one's status in life and as a barometer for measuring exposure to literacy. So does Achebe's latest novel, *Anthills of the Savannah*.¹⁸ Close examination of recent fiction confirms that the linguistic behaviour of the Pidgin locutor continues to be looked down on, stigmatized in comparison with Standard (Nigerian) English, the linguistic standard set by the glottopolitical situation and, more precisely, by the education system, which has always acted as a yardstick for formal

social acceptability and prestige. Although we may note, among some Nigerian novelists, a growing refinement of concern in revising the earlier use of NPE, the latter remains an 'auxiliary' language into which a character slides, slips, lapses, as in a fall from a higher register.

It is against such a schizoid background that Saro-Wiwa's novel *Sozaboy* (1985)¹⁹ came into being. It is thus far the most conscious and sustained linguistic experiment with non-standard speech in the West African first-person narrative to emerge from the tiny corpus of writing in Pidgin. *Sozaboy* is a naive recruit thrust into the atrocities of the Biafran War with, as his only weapon, a capacity for elation that comes close to Mister Johnson's. He speaks a lawless lingo which is meant to be the discordant voice of post-Civil War Nigerian society. It is made up of three registers – his mother tongue, Kana; 'broken English', that is, the unsystematic use of strings of English words; and Standard Nigerian English – themselves amalgamated in a Pidgin-based idiolect on the verge of creolization, which Saro-Wiwa has called 'rotten English'. As an 'artefactual dialect', its making can be traced linguistically, as in progressive drafts, down to its constitutive elements.²⁰ As a construct, it conveys a new seriousness that could potentially oust the earlier 'levity of Pidgin', which has now taken on a neo-comic guise in entertainment programmes on the radio and television, and in newspaper columns and cartoons.

Saro-Wiwa provides a glossary clarifying non-standard use of English at the end of the book's twenty-one 'Lombers', i.e. chapter numbers, called thus after the speech habits of the Ogoni or Khana people of the Niger Delta. Pidgin words and phrases are used, such as 'this girl na waya-oh' (this girl is something else); 'na je-je' (it's stylish); 'abi the girl no dey shame?' (is the girl not shy?); 'water don pass gari' (matters have come to a head). The Chief Commander General's regimented language is rendered in a glut of phoneticized mispronunciations of SE such as 'Tan papa dere' (Stand properly there); 'Hopen udad mas' (Open order march); 'terprita' (interpreter). Some words and designations are presumably of Kana origin, such as 'wuruwuru' (chicanery; cheating); 'ugbalugba' (problem); 'tombo' (palm-wine) and 'Sarogua', the 'ancestral spirit, guardian of Dukana', itself a coinage 'meaning "a market in Khana" based on the pattern of the existent Gokana ('village in Khana')'.²¹

At times Saro-Wiwa, like Ekwensi, conveys only the 'feel' of Pidgin by retaining some of its signal features like the reduplication of the adjective for emphasis and the non-inverted question. This method, however, makes NPE look like an impoverished variant of the standard norm, which *Sozaboy* fails to understand and refers to as 'big big grammar' or 'fine fine English' (p. 77). At other times, Saro-Wiwa delves into the deep structure of Pidgin, causing the unwary, non-Pidgin reader to infer – perhaps wrongly – the meaning of such phrases as 'simple defence' (civil defence); 'some time' (perhaps); 'whether-whether' (no matter what); 'as some thing used to be' (maybe); 'does not get mouth' (has no rights); 'man' (penis);

and 'country' (ethnic group). NPE has been stripped of its African element and the mother tongue thus repudiated; the discursive mode of English has been minorized. The chinks between mother tongue and other tongue can now be freely filled with this post-Civil War linguistic stew. We do not know, however, whether this 'rotten' medium will rot away and die or whether it will, in the author's words, 'throb vibrantly enough and communicate effectively' (p. i).

The new generation of writers like Osofisan, Iyayi, Oyekunle, Ezenwa-Ohaeto and Fatunde, as well as other well-meaning rhetors writing politics from the grassroots, have been said to further contribute to the dismantlement of Pidgin by subjecting it to some sort of 'plastic surgery' and thereby creating other schizo-texts. New contradictions indeed emerge from coining a pseudo-Pidgin. A linguist from Ibadan has taken both formal and popular dramatists and journalists in the mass media to task by highlighting these contradictions. She contends that it is not EnPi proper but

some kind of free-for-all linguistic mixed-grill or cocktail ... that displays evidence of an ever increasing exploitation of the peculiarities of speech that have come to be associated with Zedubaya, the hero of *Masquerade* [and whose structure essentially derives from] doing violence to the structure of both English and EnPi [with the result that] quite often it has the air of bad English donning a top coat to NP structure.²²

Allegations against this linguistic 'free-for-all' stew indicate that EnPi is in urgent need of standardization, especially since EnPi has outgrown its stereotyped functions as a trade language for the uneducated and the flighty medium of slapstick comedies. It has indeed become a viable *lingua franca* and, in its quasi-creolized form, is now used for broadcasting news and television dramas such as *Samanja*. Originally transmitted in Hausa on the Kaduna station, *Samanja* was changed to 'a variety of Pidgin' once it was elevated to network status.²³ As with any strong currency, we are from now on bound to watch the upward moves of this peculiar 'inter-language'²⁴ as it fluctuates between two systems of patronage.

As Agheyisi contends, standardization entails codification, a single accepted convention for written NPE and the choice of a variety that enjoys wide recognition. Such regularization would then encourage the acquisition of literacy in it. The most promising route seems to be through literature, she argues, provided the writers consider themselves as 'language gatekeepers'. Yet, of these writers, like the poets featured in the 'Poetiri' corner of the weekly *Lagos Life*, only a few are really proficient in NPE.

By helping name the metonymic gap between target and source language, Pidgin has become part of the post-colonial Creole continuum and is thus paradigmatic of cross-cultural writing. Just as the Creole continuum theory is relegating English to the periphery and taking the pidgins and creoles as its core,²⁵ Pidgin writing is relegating English to a

substrate in the text and context. We may thus be witnessing a transfer of legitimacy from the writer's filial bond to the mother tongue to his affiliation to a communally owned creole. As an interlanguage, this *tertium quid* may be cast out as a linguistic still-born by future generations of writers, or it may be championed as the hallmark of literary languages in contact, that which mends it all.

NOTES

1. A modified version of this paper was read at the 1990 EACLALS Conference held on 2-6 April in Lecce, Italy.
2. See Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Kafka: Toward a Minor Literature*, transl. Dana Polan (1975; Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986). See also Louis Wolfson, *Le Schizo et les langues* (Paris: Gallimard, 1970).
3. Polygenetic theories of origin for pidgins hold that each pidgin is genetically related to the corresponding standard language, from which it diverged under the influence of a similar sociolinguistic situation. The monogenetic theory posits a general pidgin(-creole) as a common ancestor which has developed distinct and mutually unintelligible varieties. See Dell Hymes, ed., *Pidginization and Creolization of Languages* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971).
4. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back* (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 8. They distinguish 'between the "standard" British English inherited from the empire and the English which the language has become in post-colonial countries ... between what is proposed as a standard code, English (the language of the erstwhile imperial centre), and the linguistic code, English, which has been transformed and subverted into several distinctive varieties throughout the world'. Instead of 'Nigerian English', however, I will use 'Standard Nigerian English', which, in its hegemony, is close to Standard English or SE.
5. Chantal Zabus, 'Interview with Gabriel Okara', forthcoming in *Matatu* (1991).
6. The word 'ethno-text' was coined by Alioune Tine in 'Pour une théorie de la littérature africaine écrite', *Présence africaine*, *New bilingual series*, No. 133-134, 1st & 2nd quarterlies (1985), p. 106.
7. See Chantal Zabus, 'The Logos-Eaters: The Igbo Ethno-Text', in *Semper Aliquid Novi: Littérature Comparée et Littératures d'Afrique*, eds. Janos Riesz & Alain Ricard (Tübingen: Gunter Narr Verlag, 1990), pp. 305-314.
8. Chinua Achebe, *A Man of the People* (London: Heinemann, 1964), p. 167 & p. 99, respectively.
9. Joyce Cary, *Mister Johnson* (1939; London: Penguin & Michael Joseph, 1985), p. 32.
10. M. Echeruo, 'Introduction' to *Mister Johnson* (1939; London: Longman, 1975), p. xxxi.
11. Basil Bernstein's theory of 'elaborated' and 'restricted' codes is to be found in *Language in Education: A Source Book* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1972). This dialectics of codes provides the basis for H.E. Newsum (Ikechukwu Okafor)'s Marxist-Leninist-influenced study, *Class, Language and Education: Class Struggle and Sociolinguistics in an African Situation* (Trenton, New Jersey: Africa World Press, 1990).
12. See Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics* (Amherst: The University of Massachusetts Press, 1983), p. 20.
13. E.N. Obiechina, 'Language' in *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), p. 188.

14. See Efik *Traders of Old Calabar: Containing the Diary of Antera Duke*, ed. Daryll Forde (London: Dawsons of Pall Mall, 1968).
15. See E.N. Obiechina, 'Language', in *Culture, Tradition and Society in the West African Novel*, op.cit., p. 188; and Abdul JanMohamed, *Manichean Aesthetics*, op.cit., p. 40.
16. Cyprian Ekwensi, *Jagua Nana* (London: Heinemann, 1961), p. 8.
17. Rebecca N. Agheyisi, 'The Standardization of Nigerian Pidgin English', *English World-Wide*, 9, 2, 1988, p. 229. Danielle Bonneau sees in *Jagua Nana* and Nancy Oll 'l'amorce d'un processus de créolisation' in 'Le Pidgin English comme moyen d'expression littéraire chez les romanciers du Nigéria', *Annales de l'Université d'Abidjan*, 5D (1972), p. 19.
18. See Jürgen Martini, 'Experiments with the English language in Contemporary Nigerian Literature: Pidgin and Rotten English', a paper read at the 1989 EACLALS Conference in Canterbury, England, MS, p. 3.
19. Ken Saro-Wiwa, *Sozaboy: A Novel Written in Rotten English* (Port Harcourt: Saros International Publishers, 1985).
20. See Christian Mair, 'The New Englishes as a Basis for Stylistic Innovation in the New English Literatures: Ken Saro-Wiwa's *Sozaboy: A Novel in Rotten English*', a paper read at the 1990 EACLALS Conference in Lecce, Italy.
21. Willfried F. Feuser, 'The Voice from Dukana: Ken Saro-Wiwa', *Matatu*, 1 (2) (1987), p. 54.
22. See A.P. Omamor, 'Towards Extricating Nigerian Pidgin (NP) from a Straightjacket', a paper presented at the XIVth Annual Conference on African Linguistics, University of Wisconsin, Madison 1983; and 'New Wines in Old Bottles?', MS 1989. Quoted by Jürgen Martini, 'Experiments with the English Language in Contemporary Nigerian Literature: Pidgin and Rotten English', op.cit.
23. See Ken Saro-Wiwa, 'A Television Drama in Nigeria: A Personal Experience', a paper read at the African Literature Association Conference in Pittsburgh, U.S.A., April 1988, MS, p. 6.
24. The term is from Larry Selinker, 'Interlanguage' in *International Review of Applied Linguistics*, 10 (2) (May 1972).
25. See Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths & Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back*, op.cit., pp. 44-51.