

# Linguistic Borderlands Exploring the Role of Language in Uwe Timm's *Morenga*

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## 1. Introduction

Colonialism is not merely a re-drawing of political and geographic borders; its demarcations are imposed across many planes—for example, cultural, linguistic, racial, and religious. During the German Colonial period, a national agenda sought to understand and ‘measure’ the world through exploration, (pseudo-)scientific research, and documentation. However, this measuring lacked objectivity; culturally and ideologically driven, it delineated spaces with no natural boundaries and employed the resulting products in its campaign. In Uwe Timm’s novel *Morenga* (1978), language is a plane onto which divisions are etched and simultaneously a tool used to facilitate further social and cultural divides.

In *Morenga*, Timm depicts the Nama rebellion in German Southwest Africa using fictional as well as historical figures and text types. The use of different text types like journal entries and official documents as well as different registers and language varieties in the novel calls attention to the narrative language. Consequently, the reader gains an awareness of the language that is employed, especially through the changing text types that punctuate the novel. The topic of language reemerges as a theme throughout the novel, focalized through the German perspective. The demarcation of language into varieties and registers is worthy of closer investigation, particularly in terms of the dichotomy of a language of the oppressed and oppressor. In the following, I explore the ways in which boundaries are imposed on and through language as part of the German colonizers’ attempts to understand and measure the world in Timm’s *Morenga*.

## 2. Language in the Colonial Period

Language, as it is evaluated and measured as part of a larger attempt to understand the world, lends itself well as a topic of investigation, partly due to its recurrent politicization. In the Colonial period, the national language discourse was entwined with the imperialistic ideologies of the German Empire. The ongoing discussion on the standard language ideology in Germany today can—at least partly—be traced back to this period. The various regions in the German Empire boasted different identities, histories, economies, and politics. However, they did have one thing in common: the German language. Language thus served as a unifying factor in a discordant nation. For this reason, language took on a central role in the national discourse and ideology. With language and culture at the very foundation of the new German Empire, the importance of having a literary canon and an esteemed standardized language was also propagated (Spitzmüller 6). With the foundation of the Second German Empire in 1871, the German language remained tightly bound with the national ideology, which is why it continued to play a significant role in imperialism and colonialism.

At the same time that the German nation began to define itself through its common tongue, language became the focus of outward-facing efforts to categorize other peoples and cultures. With the attempts to measure and understand the world at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, language and culture, and by extension the subjects of linguistics and anthropology, experienced greater attention. The so-called ‘colonial sciences’ were undertaken by missionaries and encompassed the description of language and grammar of the natives of the colonies as well as ethnographic research. Phonetics was also established as a scientific field at this time, which granted linguistics validity as a natural science (Pugach 93). The strong influence of the nationalistic ideologies and their ties to language and culture led to the practice of a corrupt and flawed science, which was in turn used to support and justify the imperialistic ideologies that guided them. As the German Empire was defining its political borders, these disciplines were used to define and impose cultural and linguistic boundaries. Ethnic groups were sorted into categories according to their language, which were associated or dissociated by their perceived degree of sophistication or primitiveness. In their attempts to measure, the colonizers organized the world into categories based on preconceived notions rather than seeking to minimize bias in their studies.

## 3. Discussion of Languages in the Novel

Language emerges as a theme in Timm’s novel with descriptions and evaluations of the Nama language, which was spoken by the native Nama people in German Southwest Africa. The treatment of Nama emphasizes its foreign-

ness compared to the German language, thereby distancing the two languages. In the novel, the narrative is primarily focalized through the perspective of the German soldiers. As a result, there is no direct speech in Nama, nor are there specific examples of the language in the entire novel. Nama is only described through statements from the perspective of German characters; these statements emphasize the exotic and foreign aspects of the Nama language, resulting in the 'othering' of Nama. This narrative choice (and its implications for the depictions of the Nama people and their language) highlights the inability to overcome bias in a partisan attempt to evaluate the unfamiliar.

Since Nama is only described by the colonizers, two opposing—but equally colonialistic—views of the Nama language emerge. To most of the German soldiers, this language is strange and incomprehensible. The click sounds, which do not exist in German or other Indo-European languages, are especially emphasized. By highlighting these sounds, the foreignness of the language is stressed, which further distances the language and its speakers from the Germans. Gorth, a missionary, describes these sounds in the following way: “Als wolle man ein Pferd antreiben oder wie ein altes Mütterchen sein Erstaunen über eine furchtbare Nachricht zum Ausdruck bringen, und manchmal tönte es so dumpf wie beim Entkorken einer Flasche” (Timm 126). Gorth's associations with these sounds conjure destructive and ominous images. The sound used to coax on a horse can be likened with a startling yell. The message to the mother evokes the image of an old woman horrified by the devastating news of a fallen son in a foreign war. Furthermore, the uncorking of a bottle elicits images of flagrant brandy and liquor consumption, which the missionary perceives as a truly evil act. In no way is this a neutral description of the language, but rather a biased evaluation, and even a condemnation of its speakers.

On the other hand, the protagonist, German veterinarian Gottschalk, takes the opposite view of the Nama language as he develops a fascination for Nama. For Gottschalk, the click sounds, for example, are something fascinating and beautiful. When he hears them for the first time from a German sergeant, he refers to Nama as a “melodic language” (“*in einer melodischen Sprache*”) and describes how the clicks change his perception of their producer: “dabei verwandelte sich diese schwerfällige mecklenburgische Zunge wieder zu einer Kunstreiterin, sprach mühelos und leicht über Hürden und Gatter mit kleinem Klicken und Klacken” (52). He refers to speaking Nama as a type of performance rather than as a functional act. When he then tries to learn the language himself, he relishes the act of producing these sounds: “Gottschalk ließ diese sonderbaren Laute genüßlich auf der Zunge zergehen” (58). They are described here like a fine food or drink of which Gottschalk is the connoisseur; he savors and takes pleasure in them. Like Gorth's negative description, Gottschalk's enthusiasm—and possible obsession—with

the language can also be considered colonialistic, since both views exoticize the language and its speakers. These divisions further distance, alienate, and erect borders between the two languages and their speakers.

Another example of the way that the Nama language was evaluated through the German perspective relates to its physical representation in the form of grammar books. In the Colonial period, German missionaries and linguists published grammar books on the African languages, but since the authors did not attempt to fully understand their object of study, false representations emerged and were circulated. In the grammar book that Gorth uses to learn Nama, the click sounds are replaced by consonants. Instead of acknowledging the foreign sounds as a distinct and valid acoustic construct, the grammar book's author simply reconstructs the phonetics from a German perspective, replacing the foreign sounds with familiar ones. Where the grammar book's author encounters something new and unfamiliar, he does not try to change his worldview to accommodate it, but instead approximates it with a preexisting category. In the same way that the Nama language is Germanized, the story itself is rendered and portrayed through the German perspective, an aspect which marginalizes the voice of the Nama in the novel.

The only grammar book Gottschalk could find on Nama was not available in Southwest Africa; he had to order it from the German Empire. Here, the language could potentially be seen as being rendered into a German product, a process that is reminiscent of other colonial products. For example, the native people were forced to harvest raw materials like natural rubber, which was exported to Europe and processed there. The finished manufactured products were then shipped back to the colonies and sold to the native people. Like these raw materials, the unwritten Nama language is exported from the colonies. It is processed in the German Empire by imposing a written standard on it using the Latin alphabet. It is then imported back to the colony, but it returns as a German product. Concurrently, some native people began writing their language using Western orthographic conventions. Much like colonial conquest, borders were overlaid onto the otherwise unwritten Nama language, defining and imposing a standard on it.

While the German Empire was defining the borders around geographical areas in Africa and the languages within them, it simultaneously erected and fortified the borders around its own language to protect it from foreign influence. The standard language ideology, that is, the view that there is such a thing as a 'pure language' and this language must be protected from corruption and external influence, constantly reemerges in political as well as cultural discourses, e.g., in language politics, education politics, and immigration politics. However, it is impossible to define what a 'pure language' is, since there is no natural language in the world that is free from external influence and the effects of language change. In order to promote this ideology of lingual purity, language societies (*Sprachgesellschaften*) were founded and

gained momentum and popularity along with the national discourse during the Colonial period. One of their objectives was to uphold the integrity of the German language by defending it against loan words and other foreign influence.

The standard language ideology is captured in a discussion between German soldiers Treptow and Kleinschmidt about the name of a new car that is suitable for warmer climates. Treptow calls this machine a “Tropenautomobil,” but Kleinschmidt offers the more ‘German’ name “Heiszonenselbstfahrzeug.” He supports his choice with the argument: “Die sprachliche Überfremdung des Deutschen sei inzwischen beängstigend fortgeschritten” (Timm 319). The fear of foreign infiltration is suggestive of a physical threat to national borders. Like geographic boundaries, the division must be maintained between familiar and foreign. There is a perceived need to protect and defend the German language, here a cultural good, from an attack. Yet, language does not exist in a vacuum and the idea of language purity is only a myth. As an example, Kleinschmidt’s more ‘German’ name for the vehicle contains the loanword *Zone* from Latin *zona*, demonstrating that even the more prestigious alternative is not free of foreign influence. When borders are drawn, a qualitative judgment is made separating the allies from the enemies. It is unclear exactly what the two soldiers are afraid of with the use of loan words, but they are ready to militarize against the perceived threat.

The language varieties spoken by non-Germans in *Morenga* are differentiated from the standard language and are qualified in subjective terms. The Frenchman, for example, is said to speak a “false German” (“*in einem [ . . . ] falschen Deutsch*”) (342). Gorth dreams of taking Lukas, a Nama boy, to the German Empire and demonstrating to potential donors that through Christianity and missionary work, that he is able to make a civilized man out of a savage (“*aus einem Wilde ein aufrechter Mensch gemacht worden kann*”) (125). In his imagination, he dresses Lukas up as a European and imagines him talking to the audience in perfect German (“*in einem fehlerfreien Deutsch*”) (125–126). The standard German language can therefore be seen as a symbol for culture and civilization, where one is not mutually exclusive of the other.

#### 4. Language and the Failed Learning Process

German and Nama are portrayed as two distinct and irreconcilable domains. For the characters in the novel who try to acquire one of these languages, only a partial or false acquisition of the language is achieved, which results in a new pidgin language. Even if one does learn the vocabulary, syntax, and pronunciation of the language, as Gottschalk does, intercultural understanding is not achieved. The process is always incomplete or failed.

When Gottschalk goes home with Katharina, a Nama woman he is romantically involved with, he notices that her father only knows a single ex-

pression in German, interpreted as a single word; he repeats it multiple times: “Gehtinordnung.” This phrase resonates with repression and submission. The father cannot express his thoughts and ideas in German and in this way, he has no voice at all. The Germans require his obedience, which is why his ‘new language’ is sufficient in the colony.

Gorth attempts to learn the Nama language, but he learns it from a grammar book written by a German who only believed to know the language (127). With the false input he receives, Gorth is unable to reconstruct the language accurately whereby a new pidgin language emerges, which only he and a student in Basel learning from the same book could speak.

In Gottschalk’s endeavors to understand the Nama language, he experiences a transformation in the course of the novel. He becomes increasingly critical of the German perspective and open-minded toward intercultural understanding. However, he does not completely accomplish bridging the two domains. “Da war, wenn man diese Menschen beobachtete, mit ihnen sprach, sie roch, doch eine Ferne, die ihm nicht überbrückbar schien” (419). Although he comes closer to it, there is still a wide gap between them, and in the end, he is unable to overcome it. He considers deserting and joining Morenga’s troops in opposition to the German colonizers, but something stands in the way. “Diese Menschen waren ihm nah und doch zugleich so unendlich fern. Hätte er bleiben wollen, er hätte anders denken und fühlen lernen müssen. Radikal umdenken. Mit den Sinnen denken” (420). In his inability to acquire a new way of thinking, he is unable to overcome his own personal and cultural borders. Jost Hermand also identifies this in the novel: “Er weiß, daß man nicht einfach aus der eigenen Kultur ins Fremde ‘desertieren’ kann, sondern angesichts einer Schwarzweiß-Situation, wie der des Hottentottenaufstands, doch ein Weißer bleibt und kein Schwarzer werden kann” (Hermand 59). Though Gottschalk tries to transcend the borders between the two cultures through language, he is unable to achieve it through language alone.

## 5. Language and Authority

Timm employs a combination of informal and formal text types, as well as fictional and informal documents. A fictional diary is juxtaposed with historical and pseudo-historical official documents. Each of these documents has a different register and style, which influences the credibility and authority of the document. The proclamations and reports demonstrate especially bureaucratic and dry language, which lends them a sense of uncontroversial truth. In this way, language is used functionally as a political tool, which can convey an ideology with more force. Not only the register but also the word choice demonstrates how certain words are very purposely used in order to create distinctions, for example, between groups of people. Repeatedly in the novel, loaded terms are used in the descriptions by the Germans, for example

there are many diminutive forms used, which depict the Nama people like children and inferiors. For example, they are described as “*Leutchen*” (Timm 301). Language is also used to emphasize savage-like characteristics, such as being called “brown vermin” (“*dem braunen Gesindel*”) (169). This use of language leads to the ‘othering’ of these people. These pregnant terms are used to strengthen racial biases and draw invisible lines around people seen as different from them.

Brunkhort, a professor from Greifswald, speaks with Gottschalk about a future capitalistic colonial policy that should be employed in German Southwest Africa: “Es wäre sogar zu erwägen, ob man nicht auf das Wort Kolonie, das ja etwas negativ belastet ist, ganz verzichtet. Schutzgebiet ist da schon wesentlich besser” (352). The word “colony” connotes war and force and probably does not sit well with those who oppose German colonialism. It was mostly businessmen with economic interests in the colonies who supported the continuation of colonialism rather than the general public. For this reason the term *Schutzgebiet* was used in connection with the German colonies. This term gave the impression that the colonizers were protecting them from danger and helping them to develop, which led to greater popular support for having colonies. This demonstrates the deliberate use of language to serve a political purpose.

In the chapter “Von der mildereren, menschlicheren und doch pädagogisch nachhaltigeren Wirkung des Tauendes,” different methods of corporal punishment are discussed in letters between the imperial district authorities and other officials in the colonies. These letters are written in a very matter-of-fact way, as if those affected were nothing more than animals. For example, in describing the effects of beating someone with a particular instrument, the subjects were reported to experience “Epidermisverluste” (153); this term sounds objective, medical, and distanced. While the purpose of this exchange is to find the most humane form of corporal punishment, *none* of the methods discussed are humane, and the discussion comes across as absurd. The disconnect between the tone and the narrative itself, that is, how things are written and what is written, lead to a dissonant narrative style, which makes the reader more aware and leads her to be critical of the text and the process of ‘othering’ within the narrative. As Durzak writes: “Der Leser muss sich zu diesem Prozess in Beziehung setzen und gewinnt erst allmählich eine eigene Beurteilungsperspektive” (41). By engaging in the argument, the reader is able to develop her own judgments on the content.

## 6. Conclusion

The portrayal and use of language in *Morenga* highlights the attempts to measure the world by drawing borders on and between languages, influenced by cultural and linguistic ideologies of the Colonial period. The repeated

failure to acquire the language and achieve intercultural understanding demonstrates both an unwillingness and inability to reconcile the differences and overcome the boundaries erected between the two languages and cultures. Timm further uses different registers, styles, and media to portray a sense of authority and objectiveness, which blurs the line between the fictional and the historical in the novel. It reflects how language is used functionally as a political tool, revealing subjective assessments and biases motivated by a racist agenda. Language is therefore both an object onto which partitions are imposed as well as the tool with which these borders are drawn. These imposed boundaries are like a *Vermessung der Welt*, but in the sense of a *false* measuring of the world. At the end of the novel, Gottschalk describes a “language of the clouds” (“*Sprache der Wolken*”), a dynamic language composed of new words and forms, unlike the rigid bureaucratic language he is used to. In the last pages, Gottschalk finds himself above the earth in a hot air balloon. While the world below and everything in it is divided and partitioned, he is able to escape to a space that is still free from delineations and borders.

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