Signifyin(g) Irony
Discursive and Political Subversion in Nadine Gordimer’s July’s People

Abstract

It is incontrovertible that the authority of a dominant nation, race or social class allows for the creation of systems of thought which, in a sense, shape the experience, beliefs, and identity of subjected communities, and reinforce their subjugation and coercion. These cognitive systems are reflected, endorsed, and validated by language and discourse. The dialectics of language and authority allows the discourse embodied by a dominant ideology to channel thought and confer upon it the status of scientific truth, thereby widening power asymmetry between the dominators and the dominated. This process of ideological and discursive (de)formation is incarnated in modern South Africa mainly in the apartheid system, an institutionalised form of racial discrimination which secures the hegemony of a racist white minority over the Black majority. However, just as apartheid logic is secured through language, liberation from oppression and servitude requires a parallel process of discursive subversion. This feature is explored by the South African writer Nadine Gordimer in her novel July’s People (1981). In this novel, Gordimer envisages South Africa as a dark and gloomy world where whites are defeated, dispossessed and ousted from their cities and homes after a Black insurrection against apartheid. Drawing on Linda Hutcheon’s exploration of ironic discourse and Henry Louis Gates, Jr.’s elaboration on the African rhetoric of “Signifyin(g),” this paper both unveils the linguistic foundations of political hegemony and underscores the way such repressive discursive constructions are signified on, subverted and undermined in South Africa under the revolution.
The Signifying Monkey - he who dwells at the margins of discourse, ever punning, ever troping, ever embodying the ambiguities of language - is our trope for repetition and revision, indeed, is our trope of chiasmus itself, repeating and simultaneously reversing in one deft, discursive act.

Henry Louis Gates, Jr. “Blackness of Blackness”

Power systems essentially function through language. The authority of a dominant nation, race or social class allows for the creation of systems of thought which, in a sense, shape the experience, beliefs, and identity of subjected communities and reinforce their domination and coercion. These cognitive systems are reflected, endorsed, and validated by language and discourse. The dialectics of language and authority allows the discourse embodied by a dominant ideology to channel thought and confer upon it the status of scientific truth, thereby widening power asymmetry between the dominators and the dominated. This process of ideological and discursive (de)formation is incarnated in modern South Africa mainly in the apartheid system, “a legal form of racial discrimination” that secures the “political and economic domination” of “the African masses” by a racist white minority (Cabral 12). However, just as economic and political hegemony under apartheid is secured through language, liberation from oppression and servitude is conducted at the discursive level.

This feature is mainly explored in Nadine Gordimer’s novel July’s People (1981), which charts the dynamics of language and political change in times of revolution. In this modern dystopia, Gordimer envisages South Africa as a dark and gloomy world where a Black insurrection occurs and where whites are defeated, dispossessed and ousted from their cities and homes. The family around whose circumstances the narrative revolves is the white family of Bam and Maureen Smales and their three children, who find themselves sheltered from riots and
burnings in their Black servant July’s village. The novel records the repercussions of the violent uprising on the Smaleses and their inability to adjust to the primitive life of their servant.

In approaching the novel’s subversion of apartheid inequalities, Gordimer’s critics have mulled over the significance and implications of the Black revolution in terms of domestic/social space. Rita Barnard, for instance, argues that revolution “involves, first and foremost, a defamiliarization—effected in Gordimer’s novel through a geographical displacement—that allows one to see the quotidian practice of class society as unnatural and unjust” (57). Revolution also consists, in Barnard’s view, in “a radical disruption of the everyday” and a “destruction of all established places” (57–58). It is thus merely “conceptualized as an architectural matter,” i.e. “the exchange of a seven-roomed suburban house with a swimming pool for a thatched hut with mud walls” (Barnard 57).

Michael Neill maps the spatial configuration of revolution onto time, since he defines the revolution depicted in the novel as “a morbid state” of living in the interregnum, a condition of “critically anxious waiting,” of longing for “the advent of the End” (72-73). Neill thus conceives of revolution as a disruption of chronology, an “immersion in a kind of no-time” (73), which results in the white characters’ being “stripped of coherent selfhood” (76). He even goes further to chart the rupture between the Smaleses and their servant at the level of language, arguing that this “progressive breakdown of relationships” is essentially experienced as a “linguistic catastrophe” (82). In fact, he insightfully links “the problem of language” with “the problematics of knowledge and identity,” thereby equally pointing out the failure of communication inside the Smales family due to the white characters’ inability to “recognise” their identities in their new condition (83). Neill concludes that radical “political change necessarily requires linguistic transformation,” which inevitably entails “an absolute metamorphosis of the [white] self” (85).
A similar argument has been advanced by Jennifer Gordon in her article, "Dreams of a Common Language: Nadine Gordimer’s July’s People," where she underlines the total failure of “language relationships” and its implications on the Smaleses (102). Gordon highlights the “[im]balance of (verbal) power” resulting from the metamorphosis of identities undergone by the white characters in the new setting (105). She also argues for the necessity of radical linguistic change, insinuating that communication in the South African context is “a very rare occurrence” which is always tainted with misunderstandings and limitations (108). However, if Gordon points out the obstacles literal translation places on communication in interregnal South Africa (107), then Neill highlights the “physical and temporal, psychic as well as linguistic” translations that operate at a deeper level than “mere word-play,” and that result from the white characters’ geographic translation. Neill’s view is that July’s People “lays bare the whole structure of assumptions embedded in the language by which its characters are made and out of which they have made their world” (85). This process of ‘baring’ hegemonic discursive processes operates, in Neill’s sense, through metaphorical, rather than literal, translation (85).

In spite of their divergences, both critics tend toward an exploration of the limits of language and the restrictions it imposes on knowledge and identity in interregnal South Africa. The present paper eschews this reductive framework in order to uncover the discursive foundations of political hegemony and underscore their subversion in times of insurrection. Through unveiling the dialectics of language and political change, this paper ultimately seeks to show that the discursive power of political hegemony is far from ubiquitous and that any form of domination is ultimately betrayed and reversed by its own foundations.

Throughout the narrative, Gordimer underlines apartheid’s racial underpinnings and socio-economic manifestations mainly through depicting the relationship between the Smaleses
and their Black servant. Moreover, she explores the dynamics of power relations involved in their contact and their translation at the communicative level. In the process, she provides the reader with the different linguistic varieties inherent in her multiethnic and multiracial society, while assigning to each class its own linguistic repository. Indeed, the narrative is infused with expressions pertaining to South African dialects such as Afrikaans and Zulu. Words like “bakkie,” “rondavel,” “veld,” “baas,” “donga,” “vlei,” “mealie” (JP 92), “induna” (112), and “Fanagalo” (127) serve as substitutes for words with a similar meaning used in Standard English. A “bakkie,” for instance, which is a van with an open back, is used to describe the vehicle owned by the Smales family, whereas “rondavel” designates the conical-roofed huts inhabited by July and his family. “Veld,” “donga,” and “vlei” are used to refer respectively to an open grass land used for farming, a low-lying ground, and a valley, while “baas” and “induna” are the equivalents of “boss” and “chief.” Finally, “mealie” is the Afrikaans word for maize and “Fanagalo” is the name of one of the Pidgin languages of South Africa which mixes aspects of English with some elements of Zulu and Afrikaans.

Significantly, this socio-linguistic concern sets the standards for the stratification that governs South African society as well as the power relations ensuing from it. The two social classes depicted in *July’s People* are the upper-middle class, represented by the Smaleses, and the lower-working class, epitomised by July. If the Smaleses adopt Standard English as a means of communication, then July makes use of a pidginised form of this language to communicate with them. The first instance of “Fanagalo” is recorded in the second chapter where Maureen and July discuss the latter’s attempt to appropriate the Smaleses’ “bakkie:”

> They know, they know what it is happening, the trouble in town. The white people are chased away from their houses and we take. Everybody is like that, isn’t it? [...] How they know I’m not
driving? Everybody is know I’m living fifteen years in town, I’m knowing plenty things. (JP 13)

The syntactic and grammatical inconsistency displayed by these utterances attests to the utilitarian and pragmatic nature of communication in the South African context and the antagonistic power relations inherent in the apartheid system. For July, the English language is simply a means for convincing Maureen to give him the vehicle and allow him to drive it in town, the “bakkie” being for him a symbol of authority of which his masters must be divested once they are in his ‘place’. In this passage, the hegemonic relationship between Maureen and July is underlined by the substandard English the latter uses and which symbolises his inferiority and servitude.

Quite interestingly, the linguistic division is reinforced by the racial schism between the white liberal family and their Black servant, a feature discernible in the following passage where Maureen recalls her family history and questions her father’s treatment of his Black servants:

The shift boss Jim spoke the bastard black lingua franca of the mines, whose vocabulary was limited to orders given by whites and responses made by blacks. An old story that she had been ashamed – when she had married her liberal young husband – of a father who had talked to his ‘boys’ in a dialect educated blacks who’d never been down a shaft in their lives regarded as an insult to their culture; now he, the husband, was to be submitted to her being ashamed of that shame. (45)

In this passage, the father’s authoritative position is not only underscored by his ownership of “the means of material production,” but it is also secured through his appropriation of his servants’ means of mental production and his ability to monitor their inner thoughts (Marx 64). Racially and historically over-determined, the Black mine workers are insulted by a restrictive variety of English, the “bastard lingua franca of the mines” (JP 45), whose aims are transactional rather than interactional and which reinforces their subjugation and humiliation. The father’s affirmation of his authority as a representative of the “ruling intellectual force” (Marx 64) is
substantiated by his use of this same variety, i.e. his servants’ Fanagalo, in interacting with them in the workplace. This reductive means of communication evinces the father’s “control” and “policing” of his servants’ enunciations (Foucault, *History* 18), thereby underlining the relative rank and economic status of each class and the utilitarian foundations of class relations under apartheid.

From a cursory reading, this discursive stratification evidences the fact that “the ruling ideas” of apartheid society “are nothing more than the *ideal* expression” of its “dominant material relationships” (emphasis added) (Marx 64). As such, rather than merely deploying the “ideas of dominance” instituted by apartheid, language allows “material relationships” to be “grasped as ideas” by the different shades of the social spectrum (Marx 64). At a deeper level of interpretation, however, Gordimer’s narrative reveals how the discursive forms involved in Blacks’ intellectual disciplining are appropriated, parodied, ironized, and ultimately subverted by the Black community in South Africa under the revolution. Indeed, just as it validates and widens the divide between Blacks and whites under apartheid, language marks the reversal of conventional hierarchies in times of insurrection.

This reversal is underlined through Gordimer’s incorporation of the trope of irony in the texture of the novel. The use of words and structures loaded with a dual significance clearly points out the ironic nature of revolutionary discourse, a feature perceptible in the confrontations between Maureen and July. One of these confrontations occurs when the two characters discuss the latter’s appropriation of the Smaleses’ “bakkie:”

You don’t like I must keep the keys. Isn’t it? I can see all the time, you don’t like that.-
She began to shake her head, arms crossed under her breasts, almost laughing; lying, protesting for time to explain-
-No, I can see. But I’m work for you. Me, I’m your boy; always I’m have the keys of your house. Every night I take that keys with
me in my room, when you go away on holiday, I’m lock up everything...it’s me I’ve got the key for all your things, isn’t it- [...] -July, you don’t ask me-
-Your boy who work for you. There in town you are trusting your boy for fifteen years. - His nostrils were stiff dark holes. The absurd ‘boy’ fell upon her in strokes neither appropriate nor to be dodged. Where had he picked up the weapon? [...] -No. No. You don’t like I must have these keys.-
-July you don’t ask me-you’re just telling me. Why don’t you let me speak? Why don’t you ask me?- He drew his head back to his steady neck, to look at her.
-What you going to say? Hay? What you can say? You tell everybody you trust your good boy. You are good madam, you got good boy. (JP 69-70)

In this conversation, duality appears in the rhetoric July deploys in order to justify his appropriation of the keys. From a cursory reading, the overuse of the word “boy” appeals to the emotions and presents July as an obedient, docile and faithful servant. The reiteration of his complaints “you don’t like I must keep the key” and “you don’t like I must have these keys” (69) likewise infuses the scene with a great deal of pathos. However, at a deeper level of understanding, July’s claims can be seen as instances of understatement whereby he manifests his inferiority only to assert his authority in the present situation. In fact, his apparent submission is implicitly and paradoxically accompanied with a strong affirmation of power and dominance. Even as he ingratiatingly asserts his servitude, July p/cunningly “encodes and names” his “sense of independence” through “Signifyin(g)” (Gates 66), a rhetorical game that consists in deploying “the language of trickery, that set of words or gestures which arrives at direction through indirection” (Abrahams 70). As such, his double-voiced utterances, “it’s me I’ve got the key for all your things” and “it’s me I’ve got the key,” not only symbolise his appropriation of the vehicle but also affirm, “through indirection,” his full control over the Smaleses’ life and possessions.
July’s rhetoric disarms Maureen and reveals her “a-symbolic” misreading of his “Signifyin(g)” utterances. As such, even his apparently “asignifying intensive utilization” (Deleuze 22) of the word “boy” is laden with irony and duplicity; far from constituting a mark of “poverty of his language” (Deleuze 23), this word becomes a double-edged weapon, “an extended Signifyin(g) sign of repetition and reversal” (Gates 66). In addition to reclaiming the social division between July and the Smaleses, such a segregationist word also represents a strong offence addressed towards Maureen, an accusation whereby she is considered a racist person who treats her servant as a slave. At this stage, July “enounce[s] his sense of difference by repetition with a signal difference” (Gates 66), since he replicates the same racist slur deployed in his own subjugation in a context where it acquires a curiously ambiguous significance. This notion is confirmed by Gordimer’s description of the effect of such an ‘absurd’ (JP 69) insult on Maureen’s nerves. In this respect, the equivocal meaning of the word ‘strokes’, which literally signifies both “caresses” and “blows,” is used to connote the dual effect of the word “boy.” Indeed, such a derogatory form of address can neither be appreciated by a white liberal who ostensibly never treats Blacks as inferior, nor artfully evaded as such an action would further incriminate Maureen with a racist attitude.

As the conversation progresses, July’s “Signifying” rhetoric gains momentum and overpowers Maureen’s attempts at defending her position:

- She speak nice always, she pay fine for me when I’m getting arrested, when I’m sick one time she call the doctor.- He gave a laugh like a cry.- You worry about your keys. When you go away I’m leave look after your dog, your cat, your car you leave in the garage. I mustn’t forget water your plants. Always you are telling me even last minute when I’m carry your suitcase, isn’t it? Look

1 Maureen’s passive and escapist reaction represents a morbid interregnal symptom of Roland Barthes’s “a-symbolia,” a condition in which she “cannot perceive or manipulate” the symbolic thrust of July’s “signifying” utterances (15).
after everything, July. And you bringing nice present when you come back. You looking everywhere, see if everything it’s still all right. Myself, I’m not say you’re not a good madam-but you don’t say you trust for me. - It was a command. – [...] -The master he think for me. But you, you don’t think about me, I’m big man, I know for myself what I must do. I’m not thinking all the time for your things, your dog, your cat. - -The master. Bam’s not your master. Why do you pretend? Nobody’s ever thought of you as anything but a grown man. [...] -You not going pay me, this month? - -Pay you! She glowed and lashed. He continued a kind of fastidious pretence of insensitivity to a coarse and boring assault. [...] -I’m the boy for your house, isn’t it? - He made a show of claiming a due. (70–71)

In defining ironic discourse, Linda Hutcheon argues that “irony is the trope of the redeployable and the refracted as well as simply of the double, but doubleness seems to provide fertile ground for its usage” (164). In the above-quoted conversation, the irony of July’s “[a]Signifyin(g)” utterances is two-fold. Not only does it “refract” and deflect his masters’ language, but it also displaces his substandard language from the realm of submission to that of domination, thus uncannily intensifying its double effect. His lamentations acquire the imposing character of directives and his use of the word “master” further incriminates Maureen with a racist attitude, thereby “redeploying” the restrictive economy of his enunciations in her humiliation. July’s ritual reaches its highest momentum as he asks for his pay, a command whereby he reasserts the material and transactional nature of their relationship.

The ambiguity and duality of July’s language and its destabilising impact on the characters’ respective identities are accounted for in a later passage where Maureen’s uneasiness with regard to July’s attitude is dramatised:

She had never been afraid of a man. Now comes fear, on top of everything else, the fleas, the menstruating in rags – and it comes from this one, from him, not physical, anyway, but in herself. How was she to have known, until she came here, that the special consideration she had shown for his dignity as a man, while he was
by definition a servant, would become his humiliation itself, the one thing there was to say between them that had any meaning.

Fifteen years
Your boy
You satisfy

She walked away and sat on a mud ruin, sending her gaze far from them – from him, from her – over the grey and green bush [...] where crossed date-lines eliminate time and there are no horizons.

(98-99)

In this extract, Gordimer highlights Maureen’s trauma and abjection. In Kristeva’s terms, abjection is “one of those violent, dark revolts of being [...] directed against a threat that seems to emanate from an exorbitant outside or inside” (1). Maureen’s “revolt of being” reaches its climax when she can no longer fathom her servant’s attitude or define his identity in her own terms. Moreover, her confusion is reinforced by July’s rebuff of her condescending sympathy and her “special consideration” for “his dignity.” July uncannily becomes the “threat” that “disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4). Maureen’s bewilderment illustrates how his presence disturbs her supremacist identity and crosses the sacred border between self and other that she has internalised through her colonial upbringing. In this respect, the repetition of the objective pronoun “him” in referring to July underscores Maureen’s alienation from him and her revulsion at his unfamiliar conduct. In fact, July becomes an abstraction for the white subject and a symbol of the unknown destiny that awaits her in her helpless situation.

The “sense of the abject” (Kristeva 6) that haunts the scene gives rise to the dialectic of master and slave between Maureen and July. In this context, the two characters seem to exchange their relative ranks through a power reversal that foregrounds the Hegelian “master-slave dialectic.” According to Hegel, the master is “a consciousness” (61) that defines itself in communal relation to the consciousness of the enslaved through a process of negotiation and interdependence. As such, the master “is not certain of existence-for-self as the truth; rather, his
truth is the inessential consciousness and the inessential action of the latter [i.e. the enslaved]” (Hegel 61). Through asserting his superiority in the new situation, July assumes the role of the master whose identity gets redefined in terms of dominance. In contrast, Maureen’s present uncertainty with regard to her superior “existence-for-self as the truth” further undermines her status and shatters her self-confidence. In Kristeva’s theory, July embodies the horror of an “abjection” that is “sinister, scheming, and shady: a terror that dissembles, a hatred that smiles” (Kristeva 4). The resonance of his “shady” utterances “Fifteen years/ Your boy/ You satisfy” in Maureen’s traumatised consciousness evidences his ability to dissemble his authority in the new situation, while underscoring her inferior status and her total reliance on him for protection and survival. In fact, the juxtaposition of the first two utterances with the chiastic turn of phrase “You satisfy” clearly evinces the “Signifyin(g)” thrust of July’s discourse while rhetorically highlighting the reversal of roles experienced by the characters. Such communicative acts between Maureen and July certainly assert the latter’s claims to dominance through appropriating the Smaleses’ possessions and simulating colonial discourse, thereby affirming the role of language in subverting the dominant order from within.

This feature can be further investigated through Bakhtin’s theory of language and heteroglossia. In Bakhtin’s theory of the novel, any language is made up of multiple languages internally stratified “into social dialects, characteristic group behaviour, professional jargons, languages of the authorities [...] languages that serve the socio-political purposes of the day, even of the hour” (262-263). Language is then a feature of social and historical diversity and of relations of power and domination in any given culture. Language is also viewed as a site of conflict dictated by antagonistic power relations. Such a notion is inextricably connected to Bakhtin’s view of the novel as a genre that best represents the social and “ideological voices”
and discourses of its era (263). Indeed, an “indispensable prerequisite” for the novel is, in Bakhtinian terms, this “internal stratification present in every language at any moment of its historical existence,” a feature he identifies as “heteroglossia” or the interweaving of different registers in the text of the novel (263). *July’s People* thus clearly embodies Bakhtin’s conception of the novel as a “diversity of social speech types” and “individual voices, artistically organized” (262). The interweaving of two varieties of English in the texture of the novel, with the official version to impart the Smaleses’ thoughts and attitudes as those of the ruling class and the substandard version to report July’s speech, upholds this notion.

However, Gordimer moves beyond the archetypal stratification of these discourses in order to note the forces that govern the relationship between them. Among the peculiarities of Bakhtinian theory is its identification of two contradictory tendencies governing the “dialogue” between the different discourses of the novel and their representatives. The first one is identified as the “centripetal” proclivity towards ideological unification (270). It is incarnated in the way language and culture work in the direction of the establishment of a unitary or monoglossic language that colludes with an officially recognised set of values. This totalising impulse is countered by a “centrifugal” force which aims at the decentralisation of language and manifests itself in the endless developing new forms that parody and criticise the pretentious ambition toward a unitary language (270). The tension between ‘centripetal’ and ‘centrifugal’ forces in the novel is best elicited in the above-quoted conversations between Maureen and July. At the surface level, July endorses the centripetal significance of the word ‘boy’ in an attempt to ingratiate the Smaleses and prove his loyalty and obedience. At a deeper level of understanding, however, he exploits the centrifugal significance of such a racial slur in their incrimination, thereby underscoring the reversal of powers inherent in the current situation. In the same vein,
July’s grumblings perfectly incarnate the obsequious centripetal tone of the “servant’s formula, attuned to catch the echo of the master’s concern” (JP 94). Nonetheless, in the context in which they are placed, they acquire a centrifugal thrust which allows them to subvert the master’s authority.

The same significance can be attributed to July’s use of the words “back” and “master.” For Maureen, the locative “back” (95), used by her servant to refer to her past in the city and her former position of authority, is understood as the parodying double of the phrase “back there”(57), which denotes her nostalgia for the happy memories of a distant past. July thus drains the word of its centripetal significance in order to infuse it with a centrifugal force that draws attention to Maureen’s current position of servitude. The same process is undertaken with the word “master,” which acquires a dual significance throughout the quasi-disputes between the two characters. Indeed, such a word both amalgamates and intensifies the conflict between the centripetal tinge which symbolises for July the conventional vertical relationship between the dominators and the dominated, and the dissident centrifugal inclination that uncovers the racist attitude inherent in such a word.

This particular intermingling of centripetal and centrifugal discourses is quite revealing with regard to the reversal of social relations in the novel. In fact, July is not only the rebel who espouses the centrifugal propensity in order to subvert a prevailing order, but also the one who sets the rules of the game by endorsing the centripetal force and suiting it to his own motives. Through the interplay between the two forces, July achieves full mastery over the situation. Furthermore, by his sheer adherence to centripetal discourse, his paronomastic rhetoric becomes harmful and offensive to Maureen, who, being disarmed and overpowered by his speech, experiences the poignancy of the reversal that undermines her supremacy.
The duality and duplicity characterising the interaction between July and Maureen conspicuously illustrate the workings of dialogised discourse within the texture of the novel. *July’s People* fulfils the functioning of Bakhtin’s notion of heteroglossia at the diegetic level, mainly through incorporating Gordimer’s subversive discourse “in another’s language,” and expressing “authorial intentions” in a “refracted way” (324); hence the novel’s translation of the author’s denunciation of apartheid aberrations. In this sense, heteroglossia becomes a prominent feature of the narrative in that it simultaneously “enters the novel in person,” i.e. in the guise of July’s persona, and “determines, as a dialogizing background, the special resonance of novelistic discourse” (Bakhtin 332).

Such resonance in fact lies in the core meaning of the word revolution. In the *Littré*, revolution implies the “return of a star to its point of departure,” a meaning inherent in the etymology of the word, i.e. the Latin expression *revolutionem*, which means “to return.”

Significantly, July’s ironic and parodic “return” to Standard English underlines his ability to disengage this discourse from the realm of the Smalese’s dying authority and “reterritorialise” (Deleuze and Guattari 20) it in his newly acquired realm of supremacy. Through “oppos[ing] the oppressed quality of language to its oppressive quality,” his pidginised utterances invert the dominant order from within (Deleuze 27). It is thus incontrovertible that Gordimer deploys July’s persona to fashion an oppositional system of belief with the ultimate objective of “detaching the power of truth from the forms of hegemony, social, economic, and cultural, within which it operates” (Foucault, “Truth” 253).

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2 “Retour d’un astre au point d’où il était parti.”
Yet, July’s crowning victory is embodied in his radical transgression of white dominance through totally rejecting the English language as a means of communication when Maureen accuses him of the gun theft:

—You—He spread his knees and put an open hand on each. Suddenly he began to talk at her in his own language, his face flickering powerfully. The heavy cadences surrounded her; the earth was fading [...]. She understood although she knew no word. Understood everything: what he had had to be, how she had covered up to herself for him, in order for him to be her idea of him. But for himself – to be intelligent, honest, dignified for her was nothing [...]. He spoke in English what belonged in English:

—Daniel he’s go with the ones like in town. He’s join. (152)

Apprehending his “strokes” through his “heavy cadences,” Maureen suddenly realises July’s extraordinary ability to slough off her agonising attempts to contain and pacify his rebellious and revengeful attitude. Gordimer’s substitution of the preposition “to” with the preposition “at” in the expression “talk at her” epitomises the total failure of communication between the two characters as well as the uselessness of any vehicular language in bridging the schism between them. “That by which you intend to confine or define me,” July seems to retort, “I shall return to you squarely in your face” (Gates 66). Significantly, July’s refusal to “belong” to the liberal Weltanschauung constructed and dictated by Maureen’s English tongue reveals his rebellion against being reduced to mere sameness: “[h]e spoke in English what belonged in English.” Through reasserting his alterity and refusing to recognise the discourse of the dominators, July effectively thwarts Maureen’s potential endeavour to homogenise/hegemonise his identity and re-site it within the bounds of servitude. Such an attitude confirms the reversal of apartheid racial hierarchy since July becomes the executioner who not only manipulates, but who also smothers and subjugates the white subject.
Gordimer’s revolutionary narrative incontrovertibly evaluates “the hierarchic and imperative system of language as a transmission of orders, an exercise of power or of resistance to this exercise” (Deleuze 23). This linguistic practice acquires a two-fold function in the novel since language is presented as a tool that unveils both the intricate workings of ideology and the reversal of power in South Africa under the revolution. The challenge posed by Gordimer’s novel is “to use the existing language, even if it is the voice of a dominant other – and yet to speak through it: to disrupt the codes and forms of the dominant language in order to reclaim speech for itself” (New x). In this respect, her Black character’s hold over his masters’ colonial discourse ultimately insinuates that language is not only the vehicle that “translates struggles or systems of domination,” but is also “the thing for which and by which there is struggle, discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault, “Discourse” 53). Gordimer’s narrative therefore suggests that discourse is the power that allows the Black community to move beyond silence and subjection and reconstitute its identity in an egalitarian and apartheid-free society.

On another plane, the novel investigates the extent to which the English language has been smeared with the guilt of apartheid oppression. Gordimer insinuates that one cannot afford “to be critically complacent” about this means of communication, “for there are many reasons why it cannot be considered an innocent language” (Ndebele 116). In this sense, July’s People could be construed as an attempt to reveal the dangers of approaching South Africa’s rich racial and ethnic diversities through a crooked mirror, as well as the role of an “official” discourse upheld by a racist minority under apartheid in maintaining this distorted vision. Gordimer’s envisioning of a Black revolution thus not only bares and denounces apartheid’s discursive aberrations, but also casts a futuristic glance at their possible social and political repercussions on the Black and white communities in South Africa.
Works Cited


