# Border Languages: The Semiotics of Language on the Move in Refugee Poetry

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## Abstract

In an era defined by migration crises and the displacement of millions, sustaining linguistic identity and belonging across borders has become both an existential and educational concern. This study examines how African refugee poetry transforms experiences of exile into semiotic acts of meaning-making and solidarity. Focusing on 'Gbenga Adeoba's Leaving Agadez and Rain Choral alongside Bhion Achimba's Winter with Ovid, the study explores how poetic language negotiates trauma, mobility, and belonging within transnational contexts. Grounded primarily in Semiotic Theory (Kristeva; Kress & van Leeuwen) and Postcolonial Sociolinguistics (Blommaert; Canagarajah), the study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology involving close textual reading and discourse-semiotic analysis. The analysis identifies three dominant patterns: silence and song as languages of survival; borders as dialogic spaces of encounter; and exile as a process of linguistic reconstruction. These patterns demonstrate how poetic discourse functions as a symbolic response to displacement and marginalization. The findings reveal that refugee poetry extends beyond testimony to become a form of border literacy through which displaced subjects negotiate identity, memory, and belonging. By theorizing "border language" as a semiotic resource emerging from mobility and displacement, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on migration, language, and literacy. It further demonstrates how poetic language fosters intercultural understanding and reimagines belonging across geographical and linguistic boundaries.

**Keywords:** Migration, Border Language, Refugee Poetry, Semiotics, Postcolonial Sociolinguistics

## Introduction

The twenty-first century has been marked by increasing patterns of forced migration, transnational mobility, and linguistic displacement. According to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR, 2024), over 114 million people worldwide are currently displaced, with language emerging as both a *bridge* and a *barrier* in their efforts to reconstruct belonging. Language, in refugee contexts, is never neutral; it functions as a terrain of negotiation, survival, and solidarity. As Blommaert (2010) observes, mobility exposes speakers to unequal linguistic markets where access to meaning becomes a measure of social power. Similarly, Canagarajah (2013) emphasizes that migrants constantly "shuttle" between languages, discourses, and communities, performing identity through communicative adaptation.

This study, titled "Border Languages: The Semiotics of Language on the Move in Refugee Poetry," examines how African refugee and migration-themed poetry operates as a semiotic and pedagogical site of solidarity. Drawing on Gbenga Adeoba's *"Leaving Agadez"* and *"Rain Choral,"* alongside Bhion Achimba's *"Winter with Ovid,"* the paper explores how poetic language transforms trauma into creativity, isolation into empathy, and silence into care. These texts embody what Kristeva (1980) terms the *semiotic chora*, a pre-linguistic space where emotion and rhythm generate meaning and what Kress and Van Leeuwen (2006) describe as *multimodal discourse*, the interaction of linguistic, visual, and auditory modes to produce complex semiotic meaning.

## Research Problem

Although migration and refugee studies have flourished in recent decades, African experiences of displacement are often approached

through humanitarian, political, or economic frameworks, leaving their linguistic and aesthetic dimensions underexplored (Mbembe, 2019; Nwakanma, 2021). The limited focus on language as both a symbol and a survival tool in African refugee poetry creates a critical gap. This study addresses that gap by investigating how contemporary Nigerian poets, particularly Adeoba and Achimba, deploy language semiotically to narrate exile, loss, and renewal turning poetry into a medium of solidarity and self-reclamation.

**Research Questions**

1. How does refugee poetry represent language as both a site of trauma and a process of reconstruction?
2. In what ways do semiotic devices such as silence, imagery, rhythm, and metaphor, communicate displacement, mobility, and care?
3. How can refugee poetry function pedagogically to foster empathy, inclusion, and intercultural understanding in multilingual classrooms?

**Significance of the Study**

This study theorizes border language as a semiotic practice through which displaced individuals reconstruct meaning and belonging across linguistic and cultural boundaries. Rather than viewing exile solely as loss, the paper demonstrates how refugee poetry transforms displacement into a creative process of linguistic and symbolic renewal.

By integrating Semiotic Theory and Postcolonial Sociolinguistics, the study contributes to emerging scholarship on migration, language, and African literary expression. It also responds directly to the conference theme by illustrating how poetic language creates spaces of dialogue, understanding, and human connection across borders.

## Literature Review

The intersection of language, migration, and poetry has gained increased scholarly attention in recent years, as researchers seek to understand how displaced voices use artistic forms to negotiate identity, belonging, and trauma. Scholars such as Blommaert (2010) and Canagarajah (2013) have examined the ways in which language functions as a mobile and translingual resource, moving across borders and adapting to new communicative environments. Their studies highlight how linguistic repertoires become dynamic tools for survival and solidarity in transnational contexts. However, much of this work focuses on European or Middle Eastern migration, leaving African refugee poetics underexplored in linguistic theory and semiotic analysis.

In literary studies, refugee poetry has often been analyzed as testimony or resistance literature (Mokhtar, 2021; Okonkwo, 2019), emphasizing its emotional and political dimensions rather than its semiotic and pedagogical functions. Adeoba's *Exodus* (2019) and Achimba's *Winter with Ovid* (2018) belong to a new generation of Nigerian exile poetry that merges documentary realism with lyrical semiotics to represent displacement. Yet, few scholars have examined how such poems transform language itself into a medium of cross-cultural pedagogy and empathy, a critical gap that this study seeks to address.

The theoretical frameworks of Semiotic Theory and Postcolonial sociolinguistics offer unique insights into this phenomenon. Kristeva's (1986) semiotics of the *chora* emphasizes the pre-verbal and affective dimensions of language, which align with the rhythmic, sonic, and symbolic features of refugee poetry. Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) work on *multimodal discourse* further expands this

by showing how meaning operates through visual, auditory, and textual modes, an approach particularly relevant to poetic analysis. These frameworks reveal how the displaced poet uses signs and symbols to construct belonging beyond syntax or grammar.

Meanwhile, Postcolonial sociolinguistics, as advanced by Blommaert (2010) and Canagarajah (2013), foregrounds the mobility of language and the politics of voice in globalized spaces. Their work emphasizes that language is not a fixed code but a living practice shaped by movement, power, and context. In African migration poetry, this theory helps explain how poets reassemble linguistic fragments: English, indigenous idioms, global metaphors into *border languages* that challenge colonial hierarchies of meaning.

Thus, this study fills a crucial gap by bridging semiotic and sociolinguistic approaches to analyze African refugee poetry as both a symbolic system and a pedagogical practice. It repositions refugee poetry not merely as art but as a decolonial literacy tool that teaches empathy, inclusion, and global care: directly aligning with the conference theme *"From Silos to Solidarity"* and the subtheme *"Mobility, Migration, and Inclusion."*

## Conceptual Framework

### Border Language

The term *border language* is introduced here to describe linguistic and symbolic practices that emerge from displacement and exile. It refers to forms of expression that cross linguistic, cultural, and emotional boundaries, creating new grammars of solidarity (Mbembe, 2017). Border language captures how refugees, exiles, and migrants reconstruct meaning in between languages through fragments, silences, and hybrid expressions (Blommaert, 2010). In the selected

poems, border language manifests in the blending of myth and geography (Achimba, 2018) and in the lyrical reconstruction of memory and grief (Adeoba, 2019)

**Semiotics**

Semiotics, the study of signs and meaning-making is central to interpreting refugee poetry. Julia Kristeva's (1986) theory of the *semiotic chora* emphasizes the pre-linguistic, affective impulses that underpin language, suggesting that poetry reactivates this emotional dimension of signification. Similarly, Kress and van Leeuwen (2001) argue that meaning is produced through multimodal systems: images, sounds, gestures, and symbols which intersect in poetic texts. Through these lenses, the poems' imagery of broken walls, deserts, detention centers, and songs are not merely descriptions but *signs* that encode migration trauma and resilience.

**Language on the Move**

The concept of *language on the move* derives from Blommaert's (2010) view of linguistic mobility, which sees language as a repertoire that travels, adapts, and transforms across social and geopolitical borders. For displaced poets, language becomes both a survival mechanism and a map of memory. Canagarajah (2013) extends this by describing *translingual practice*, how multilingual individuals negotiate meaning through flexibility and hybridity rather than strict linguistic boundaries. In the context of refugee poetry, this perspective highlights how English, African idioms, and global references coexist to create layered voices of belonging and exile.

**Mobility and Inclusion**

Mobility and inclusion are both thematic and analytical pillars in this research. Refugee poetry dramatizes mobility as physical and

linguistic movement across borders, tongues, and identities while also calling for inclusion and human solidarity (Appadurai, 1996). By representing the refugee body as a site of both trauma and renewal, poets like Adeoba and Achimba articulate new forms of belonging that resist exclusionary nationalisms. Thus, their works model *linguistic inclusion*- the capacity of language to hold multiple histories and identities within shared expression.

**Theoretical Synthesis**

This study employs two complementary theoretical frameworks: Semiotic Theory and Postcolonial Sociolinguistics.

Semiotic Theory provides the tools for examining how signs, symbols, imagery, rhythm, and silence generate meaning within refugee poetry. Kristeva's concept of the semiotic chora highlights the affective dimensions of poetic language, while Kress and van Leeuwen's social semiotics explain how meaning is produced through symbolic resources embedded in discourse.

Postcolonial Sociolinguistics provides insight into how language operates within contexts of migration, mobility, and unequal power relations. Blommaert's concept of linguistic mobility and Canagarajah's notion of translingual practice explain how displaced subjects negotiate identity across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Together, these frameworks enable an examination of refugee poetry as both a symbolic and sociolinguistic practice through which experiences of exile are represented, interpreted, and transformed.

## 5. Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive research design. The primary data consist of selected poems from ‘Gbenga Adeoba's Exodus (2019), specifically Leaving Agadez and Rain Choral, and

Bhion Achimba's Winter with Ovid (2018). These texts were purposively selected because they engage explicitly with themes of migration, exile, displacement, and identity formation.

The analysis proceeded in three stages.

First, a close textual reading was conducted to identify significant images, metaphors, symbols, and recurring motifs associated with displacement and belonging.

Second, these textual features were examined through Semiotic Theory to determine how signs and symbolic resources construct meanings related to exile, memory, and identity.

Third, the findings were interpreted through a Postcolonial Sociolinguistic lens to explain how linguistic choices reflect mobility, translingual practices, and negotiations of belonging within global migration contexts.

> The combination of these analytical procedures provides a systematic framework for understanding how refugee poetry constructs meaning and represents experiences of displacement.

**Analysis and Discussion**

This study adopts a qualitative interpretive methodology, combining close textual reading with semiotic and postcolonial discourse analysis. The purpose is to interpret how poetic language in Nigerian refugee and exile poetry functions as a site of meaning-making, identity negotiation, and solidarity. Through this lens, the selected poems by *'Gbenga Adeoba* and *Bhion Achimba* are not merely literary artefacts but semiotic landscapes where displacement, trauma, and belonging are continuously reimagined through linguistic and symbolic choices.

The interpretive approach here foregrounds the *symbolic work of language*, how poets encode emotion, mobility, and memory into aesthetic signs that speak across borders. As Kristeva (1986) argues, every text is "a mosaic of quotations," and meaning emerges in the interplay between the individual voice and collective memory (p. 37). In refugee poetry, this mosaic becomes a metaphor for migration itself -a crossing of linguistic, cultural, and affective boundaries.

**a. 'Gbenga Adeoba and the Semiotics of Mobility**

In *Leaving Agadez*, Adeoba crafts a poetic geography of forced movement and survival. The line, *"The road breaks into our names before we learn to spell survival,"* encapsulates how identity and language fracture under displacement. Through **close reading**, we observe that the poem uses *onomastic semiotics* which is the breaking of names as a metaphor for the rupture of selfhood caused by exile. This aligns with Kress and van Leeuwen's (2001) conception of semiotic resources as "socially shaped and culturally given means for representation" (p. 21). Adeoba's words are not mere descriptions; they *signify* loss, resistance, and adaptation.

Interpreted through **Postcolonial Discourse Analysis**, the poem critiques the geopolitical hierarchies that produce African displacement. Adeoba's multilingual diction echoes of Arabic, Hausa, and English functions as a translingual negotiation of selfhood, resonating with Canagarajah's (2013) notion of *translingual practice*, where multilingual speakers "shuttle between codes, recognizing fluidity as the norm" (p. 5). This linguistic shuttling becomes a **semiotic act of agency**, reclaiming ownership of expression in spaces of global inequality.

In *Rain Choral*, Adeoba's water imagery operates as a **semiotic symbol** of renewal. The "rain" becomes a metaphor for healing collective trauma, resonating with Blommaert's (2010)

*sociolinguistics of mobility*, which argues that language, like people, moves and acquires new meanings across contexts. The poem's structure mimics rainfall -short, cascading lines that perform the rhythm of migration. Interpreted through the qualitative lens, the poem demonstrates how linguistic form and cultural symbolism merge to produce empathy and collective resilience.

**Bhion Achimba and the Semiotics of Care**

Bhion Achimba's *Winter with Ovid* presents exile as a site of **epistemic estrangement** and creative regeneration. The poet's invocation of Ovid, the exiled Roman poet, signals a transhistorical dialogue about suffering and artistry. The line, *"I too write in a winter that will not end,"* positions Achimba as both student and inheritor of a global tradition of exile writing. Through **semiotic interpretation**, "winter" becomes more than a season, it signifies silence, alienation, and endurance, embodying the coldness of foreign landscapes and bureaucratic exclusion.

Kristeva's (1991) *Strangers to Ourselves* provides a theoretical frame for understanding this emotional geography. Kristeva posits that exile produces a *semiotic rupture*, a reconfiguration of self through language. Achimba's winter imagery, when read interpretively, performs this rupture while also healing it: the poet transforms isolation into solidarity through shared symbols of displacement.

From a **Postcolonial linguistic** perspective, Achimba's interweaving of English with Igbo rhythm and cultural imagery exemplifies *border language* -a translingual, semiotic practice through which marginalized voices reclaim representation. Adegoju (2019) observes that such hybrid poetics constitute "a decolonial rewriting of the migrant self" (p. 114). Achimba's allusions to both African and

classical traditions embody what this study calls *semiotic inclusion* - a linguistic act that opens dialogue between global and local histories of exile.

**c. Border Language as a Pedagogical and Ethical Practice**

Through interpretive analysis, both poets illustrate how *border language*, a blend of multilingual, symbolic, and emotional resources serves as a **pedagogical model** for intercultural empathy. Kramsch (2009) argues that language learning must involve "symbolic competence," the ability to interpret and negotiate meanings across cultural systems (p. 198). Adeoba and Achimba's refugee poetics cultivate such competence by demonstrating how meaning survives and transforms under linguistic and cultural displacement.

The semiotic approach also reveals poetry's **ethical dimension**: these works teach care and coexistence through form, not just content. The aesthetic arrangement of lines, the rhythm of breath, and the interplay of multiple tongues enact what Canagarajah (2020) calls *translingual pedagogy*, an embrace of hybridity and difference as sources of communicative richness. In this sense, refugee poetry becomes an informal classroom of human solidarity, where aesthetic experience fosters moral imagination.

By situating the analysis within a **qualitative interpretive paradigm**, the study demonstrates that poetic language is not only expressive but performative that is, it *does* the work of care, resistance, and inclusion. Through semiotic and postcolonial readings, we see that Adeoba and Achimba's works turn exile into a grammar of belonging. The "border" in *border languages* thus shifts from being a line of separation to a **symbolic meeting point**, where language performs healing and shared humanity.

This study set out to explore how poetic language in Nigerian refugee and exile poetry functions as a semiotic and pedagogical act of solidarity using a qualitative interpretive approach grounded in Semiotic theory (Kristeva; Kress & van Leeuwen) and Postcolonial sociolinguistics (Blommaert; Canagarajah). The analysis of 'Gbenga Adeoba's *Leaving Agadez* and *Rain Choral*, and Bhion Achimba's *Winter with Ovid* demonstrates that African refugee poetry transcends documentation of suffering; it reimagines displacement as a creative and communal act of meaning-making, transforming the border into a site of connection, empathy, and linguistic care.

The findings reveal that these poets employ **border language**, a translingual, symbolic mode of expression to reconstruct fragmented identities and reclaim linguistic agency. In doing so, they convert trauma into artistic communication that builds bridges across cultures. Adeoba's water and movement imagery encode resilience and renewal, while Achimba's winter and mythological metaphors signify alienation turned into introspection and solidarity. Both poets, through their semiotic innovations, demonstrate how language on the move becomes a *medium of healing* and *a pedagogy of inclusion*.

From a Postcolonial linguistic standpoint, these poetic strategies challenge dominant Eurocentric narratives of migration and literacy. They validate African linguistic and aesthetic experiences as legitimate sources of theory and knowledge (Canagarajah, 2013; Blommaert, 2010). By foregrounding multilingualism and emotion as epistemic resources, refugee poetry expands the boundaries of what counts as literacy, aligning with the conference's call to *break silos* and *rethink languages and literacies through collaboration and care.*

**Theoretical and Pedagogical Implications**

This paper contributes to scholarly conversations on **language, migration, and education** by demonstrating that semiotic and postcolonial frameworks can illuminate the ethical and pedagogical power of creative expression. Poetry, in this context, becomes a *pedagogical tool* that teaches intercultural empathy and symbolic competence (Kramsch, 2009). It calls on educators to integrate refugee poetry into language and literacy classrooms as a means of fostering inclusion, global awareness, and care-centered learning.

Furthermore, the study shows that border language as a concept can reframe language education itself. Rather than viewing multilingualism as a challenge, border language reveals it as a **resource for solidarity**, a way of rethinking how linguistic and cultural differences can nurture empathy and collaborative learning (Canagarajah, 2020). Such pedagogical reframing supports the conference theme's vision of *rethinking literacy beyond silos*, encouraging educational spaces where art and activism meet.

**Recommendations**

1. **Incorporate Refugee Poetry in Language Education:** Educators and curriculum designers should integrate African refugee poetry into multilingual literacy programs to foster empathy, global awareness, and care-oriented pedagogy.
2. **Adopt Semiotic and Translingual Approaches in Classroom Practice:**
   Language educators should embrace semiotic and translingual frameworks that value multimodality, creativity, and emotional intelligence as vital components of literacy learning.
3. **Encourage Collaborative and Decolonial Scholarship:** Researchers should continue to decolonize migration linguistics

by centering African voices and epistemologies, engaging in collaborations that connect art, language, and social justice.

4. **Promote Interdisciplinary Solidarity:** Institutions should encourage dialogue between linguistics, education, and the arts to address global issues of displacement and inclusion through collective inquiry and care-driven initiatives.

**Conclusion**

This study has demonstrated that refugee poetry functions as an important site of semiotic and sociolinguistic meaning-making. Through the analysis of selected poems by ‘Gbenga Adeoba and Bhion Achimba, the paper has shown how poetic language represents displacement not simply as loss but as a process of identity reconstruction and symbolic renewal.

The findings reveal that silence, imagery, rhythm, and metaphor serve as significant semiotic resources through which experiences of exile are articulated and transformed. Furthermore, the concept of border language provides a useful framework for understanding how displaced individuals negotiate belonging across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

By integrating Semiotic Theory and Postcolonial Sociolinguistics, the study contributes to contemporary discussions on migration, language, and literacy. It highlights the capacity of poetic language to generate new forms of understanding, dialogue, and human connection in contexts of displacement.

Ultimately, refugee poetry reminds us that language remains a powerful resource for preserving identity, negotiating belonging, and reimagining community across borders.

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