

# A Word: ‘Palaver’ and Its Transferal Residues

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## Abstract

The word ‘palaver’ is colloquially associated with useless verbiage and the nuisance of a tediously long, aimless and superfluous debate. At the same time, it insinuates an uncivilized culture of discourse beyond reason and it appears to be of vaguely exotic origin but still firmly set in the European lexicon. Yet behind this contemporary meaning there lies a long history of linguistic and cultural transfers which is encased in a context of different usages of language and their intersections.

By tracing the usage and semantics of ‘palaver’ in various encyclopaedias, glossaries and dictionaries of English, French, German, Portuguese and Spanish, the following article explores the rich history of this word. Moreover, it also regards the travelling semantics of the term ‘palaver’ as a process of cultural transfer that can be likened to the microcellular workings of a (retro)virus. Viral reproduction and evolution work through processes of transfer that enable the alteration of the host to adjust it to the replication and reproduction of the virus. In some cases, these processes also allow for the mutation or modification of the virus, making it suitable for transfer from one host to another.

The virus is thus offered here as a vital model for cultural transfer: It not only encompasses the necessary adoption and adaption of contents or objects of cultural transfer in different contexts. It contributes to a conceptual understanding of the transferal residue that the transferred content is endowed with by its diversifying contexts. This model thereby surpasses an understanding of cultural transfer as literal translation or transmission: it conceptualizes cultural transfer as an agent of evolutionary processes, allowing for mutational effects of transfer as endowment.

**Keywords:** *cultural transfer, palaver, virus, lexicography, etymology, transferal residues, rhetorics, semantics*

## Palaver - A Word Transferred

In David Caute’s 1959 novel *At Fever Pitch*, set on the eve of transition of an unnamed British colony into an independent and soon to be troubled African nation, language is a problem. ‘[B]oth pidgin and the vernacular’<sup>1</sup> are forbidden by the War Office. Since the colonial administration hasn’t taken care to teach their African subjects proper English, however, the military personnel instructing African battalions to safeguard the coming election against protesters of the opposition revert to either pidgin talk or the help of vernacular translators to get their instructions across to the soldiers. British-educated and National Socialism-inspired African politicians debate political strategies at length and with Shakespearean drama in mind. Yet they stumble over ideologies that fail to bridge sophisticated education and linguistic virtue on the one hand and powerful

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<sup>1</sup> David Caute, *At Fever Pitch* (London: André Deutsch Limited, 1959), 17. All subsequent quotations will be given between brackets within the text.

concepts of Africanness and indigenous prowess on the other. British officials and military personnel discuss the state of colonial affairs and the capabilities of Africans for self-rule and reminisce nostalgically about the old days of supremacy over the coloured races, while suffering from feverish bouts of stammering, drink-induced logorrhoea and diffuse venereal symptoms that make their loins clammy, wet or prickly. The protagonists, finally, get lost in their train of thought, an inner monologue, or even inner dialogue; and they find themselves caught in the endless speeches of others. Yet in this setting of mis-communication, ‘palaver’ is on everyone’s lips:

‘Now listen to what I say. Just listen. Humbug terrible in town. Palaver plenty. Too much palaver for police. Too much past all. Police officer he come to me and he say, be too much; you go use platoon or company. [...]’ (16)

Sulley Azabugu felt his master’s hand exploring his back and his eyelids drooped under the heat... Glyn’s hand slid swiftly up the slender neck....  
The African leapt up. ‘I get your tea now, sah.’  
He strode away towards the mess. Soon his Nana would come from the North. Then no more palaver with massah.... (40)

Boland was rubbing at his prickly heat. ‘Now what’s all this palaver?’ he demanded. (44)

The signifier ‘palaver’ is here simultaneously used as a Pidgin English word for ‘discussion’ or ‘talk’, the basic form of political protest among the population; as a veil for sexual insinuations and encounters between an African servant and his British master; and as a derogative for idle talk or gossip among the high-ranking military officers in Boland’s office. The latter usage is most commonly found in present-day dictionaries, where ‘palaver’ means ‘[u]nnecessary, profuse, or idle talk; chatter’<sup>2</sup>.

As Caute’s novel indicates and as I will show in the following, however, ‘palaver’ is much more than that. ‘Palaver’ has a long history of linguistic and cultural transfers, as can be deduced from varying dictionary and encyclopaedia entries over the centuries. The way it took to the road, from its first occurrence springing from an encounter somewhere on the West Coast of the African continent to a denigrating word for useless banter now colloquially used, ‘palaver’ might be indicative of how some processes of cultural transfer are formed.

What I intend to undertake here in order to follow, describe and discuss the cultural transfer of ‘palaver’, is first to look at the occurrence and usage of the word ‘palaver’ in dictionaries and encyclopaedias of European Languages used in the context of the exploration, trade and colonialization of Africa. As we will see, ‘palaver’ is a word firmly set in the context of African-European contact and cultivated by European usage. Therefore I first look at the occurrence and usage of the term in dictionaries and encyclopaedias. Of course, the history and design of dictionaries and encyclopaedias is multiform. Nevertheless, as Ute Frevert and colleagues have shown with their lexicographic analysis of *Gefühlswissen* (knowledge of feeling), the differences and the similarities of various ‘national’ dictionaries are indicative in themselves: these dictionaries are sources of information and orientation as well as tools of normative discourses and educational selections. Collectively, they represent the image of the accessible and communicable knowledge of a given period. Thus they reveal the

<sup>2</sup> *OED Online* (Oxford University Press, 2014), s. v. ‘palaver, n.’; accessed 24 September 2014, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/136258?rskey=iDqF88&result=1#eid>.

specific perceptions of a word and its meaning(s), the knowledge and ideas entailed therein as well as processes of transfer and adaption.<sup>3</sup> Secondly, I shall briefly summarize and discuss the processes of transfer identified in this collection and how they reveal what I would like to call – at this point tentatively – transferal residues: bits and pieces of the word's travelling history that stick to its changing meaning(s). And thirdly, I then show how these residues inspire a conceptualization of cultural transfer that reminds me of how a virus works.

The idea of language and/or speech as virus is not original. In his work *The Electronic Revolution* William S. Burroughs developed the concept of a virus being responsible for the evolution of speech organs in prehuman primates. He went so far as to hypothesize 'that the written word was literally a virus that made spoken word possible'<sup>4</sup>. Furthermore, the virus has been widely used as a metaphor in cultural studies as well as in technological sciences.<sup>5</sup> As such, the virus is itself subjected to cultural transfer(s) between different scientific cultures. By looking at the way the word 'palaver' was and still is culturally transferred, encasing different but genetically bound concepts throughout its journey, I, too, will work with the analogy. But my aim here is to use the virus rather not as metaphor but as a model for conceptualizations of processes of cultural transfer(s) that involve an evolution of the thing transferred.

## A Word's Travails

The 2002 *Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* places the origins of 'palaver' in the mid-18<sup>th</sup> century and explains further: 'The first sense recorded was "a talk between tribespeople and traders", the word comes from Portuguese *palavra* "word", from Latin *parabola* "comparison". The notion of "fuss; rigmarole" (e.g. *what a palaver!*) dates from the late 19<sup>th</sup> century'<sup>6</sup>. This entry already states three motifs of the word's etymology: First, the *usage* in commercial encounters like 'a talk between tribespeople and traders'; second, the *origin* in the Portuguese language with its ancient Latin foundation; and third, the *pejoration* in the word's adoption into colloquial usage. At the same time, the entry offers a timeline: apparently the word must have been invented or adapted in the 15<sup>th</sup> century when the Portuguese were still the strongest European trading power on the African continent<sup>7</sup>. It was transferred into the English language

<sup>3</sup> *Gefühlswissen. Eine lexikalische Spurensuche in der Moderne*, eds Ute Frevert et al. (Frankfurt and New York: Campus, 2011), 16–17.

<sup>4</sup> William S. Burroughs, *The Electronic Revolution* (ubuclassics, 2005), 5. To a certain degree, this idea has been put into practice in Benjamin Hales recent novel *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore*, in which the protagonist, a chimpanzee, recounts how his speech organs evolved through continued practice based on phoneme imitation and, finally, the knowledge of the written word. Benjamin Hale, *The Evolution of Bruno Littlemore* (New York: Twelve Books, 2012); see also Virginia Richter, 'Ape Meets Primatologist: Post-Darwinian Interspecies Romance', in *America's Darwin: Darwinian Theory and U.S. Literary Culture*, eds Tina Gianquitto and Lydia Fisher (Athens and London: The University of Georgia Press, 2014), 360–387.

<sup>5</sup> Ruth Mayer and Birgit Weingart, 'Viren Zirkulieren. Eine Einleitung', in *VIRUS! Mutationen einer Metapher*, eds Ruth Mayer and Birgit Weingart (Bielefeld: Transcript Verlag, 2004), 15ff.

<sup>6</sup> *Oxford Dictionary of Word Histories* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), s.v. 'palaver', 359.

<sup>7</sup> See Philip D. Curtin, *The Image of Africa. British Ideas and Action, 1780-1850* (London: Macmillan, 1965), 11f.; Basil Davidson, *Africa in History. Themes and Outlines* (London: Orion Books, 1992), 190ff.; Emma George Ross, 'The Portuguese in Africa, 1415-1600', in *Heilbrunn Timeline of Art History* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2000), [http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/agex/hd\\_agex.htm](http://www.metmuseum.org/toah/hd/agex/hd_agex.htm), accessed 24 September 2014.

some time around the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century and blossomed in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, coinciding with the wide-scale ‘deepest and darkest Africa’ explorations.<sup>8</sup> In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the English meaning changed significantly (probably after the Berlin Africa conference of 1884-1885 that divided the continent for European colonial rule) while, at the same time, the word gained colloquial usage.

In fact, English dictionaries from the time before the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century rarely mention the word<sup>9</sup>. This is rather surprising, seeing that the latest web edition of the OED lists numerous quotations of the word’s use in 18<sup>th</sup>-century travelogues and accounts, the earliest being from 1707.<sup>10</sup> The *Oxford English Dictionary Corrected Reissue* of 1933 offers a more extensive timeline than that given in somewhat reduced form in 2002. After establishing the etymology from Portuguese (‘*Palavra* word, speech, talk’) and Latin (‘*parabola* parable, [...] story, tale, word’), it states: ‘*Palavra* appears to have been used by Portuguese traders on the coast of Africa for a talk or colloquy with the natives’<sup>11</sup> and lists a quotation from 1735. Other quotations from 1735 to 1857 are given to support the definition as ‘A talk, parley, conference, discussion: chiefly applied to conferences, with much talk, between African or other uncivilized natives, and traders or travellers.’<sup>12</sup> It then adds something interesting to the timeline: ‘to have been there picked up by English sailors [...], and to have passed from nautical slang into colloquial use.’<sup>13</sup> This intermediary role of sailors is supported by the earliest mention in a Portuguese-English dictionary of 1701. *A Compleat Account of the Portugueze Language* was put together explicitly for ‘the more industrious Trader and Navigator’ as the subtitle states. It doesn’t list ‘palaver’, but next to the entries ‘*Palavra*: A word’, ‘*Palavrada*: A taunt, scoff or mock’ and ‘*Palavreiro*: One that is full of words. Or a prating fellow’ we find the word ‘*Palanfroria*’, given as a ‘[c]ircumlocution in discourse, or a moanders of words.’<sup>14</sup> This lexical gloss might be as much of a clue as there is to where ‘palaver’ originated from as a word. A Portuguese dictionary from 1824 doesn’t give ‘*palanfroria*’, but ‘*palavrorio*’, meaning ‘muita

<sup>8</sup> See Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism 1830-1914* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1988), 180f.

<sup>9</sup> Samuel Johnson’s *Dictionary of the English Language* from 1785 lists no entry for ‘palaver’, neither does Caleb Alexander’s *The Columbian Dictionary of the English Language*. See Samuel Johnson, *Dictionary of the English Language: In Which the Words Are Deduced from Their Originals, and Illustrated in Their Different Significations by Examples from the Best Writers*. (London: J.F. and C. Rivington, 1785); Caleb Alexander, *The Columbian Dictionary of the English Language: In Which Many New Words, Peculiar to the United States, and Many Words of General Use, Not Found in Any Other English Dictionary, Are Inserted*. (Boston: Thomas Isaiah & Ebenezer T. Andrews, 1800).

<sup>10</sup> See *OED Online*, s.v. ‘palaver’.

<sup>11</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary Corrected Reissue* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1961 1933), s.v. ‘palaver’, 390-1.

<sup>12</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary Corrected Reissue*, 390-1.

<sup>13</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary Corrected Reissue*, 390-1.

<sup>14</sup> Alexander Justice, *A Compleat Account of the Portugueze Language. Being a Copious Dictionary of English with Portugueze, and Portugueze with English. Together With an Easie and Unerring Method of Its Pronunciation, by a Distinguishing Accent, and a Compendium of All Necessary Rules of Construction and Orthography Digested into a Grammatical Form. To Which Is Subjoined by Way of Appendix Their Usual Manner of Correspondance by Writing, Being All Suitable, as Well to the Diversion and Curiosity of the More Industrious Trader and Navigator to Most of the Known Parts of the World* (London: R. Janeway, 1701).

palavra inutil e superflua'<sup>15</sup> (much unnecessary and superfluous speech). It doesn't mention anything specifically African about the lexeme, though.<sup>16</sup>

The first to have associated the word in a listing of its meaning and usage as something inherently African appear to be the French. In the *Encyclopédie* of Diderot and D'Alembert (1751-1789) we find 'Palabre', as a word of 'Commerce':

On appelle ainsi sur les côtes d'Afrique, particulièrement à Loango de Boirie, à Melindo & à Cabindo sur celles d'Angola, ce qu'on nomme *avanie* dans le levant, c'est-à-dire un présent qu'il faut faire aux petits rois & aux capitaines negres, sur le moindre sujet de plainte qu'ils ont réellement, ou qu'ils feignent d'avoir contre les Européens qui font le traite, sur-tout lorsqu'ils se croient les plus forts. Ces *palabresse* payent en marchandise, en eau-de-vie & autres choses semblables, suivant la qualité de l'offense, ou plutôt la volonté de ces Barbares. [emphasis in the original]<sup>17</sup>

As this entry insinuates, the French seem to have made a series of unfortunate experiences with trading partners on the African coasts. At the same time, they were able to relate the phenomenon they observed – the gifts given to figures of authority as a sign of goodwill and respect – to a custom already known from a cultural sphere closer to home, the Levant or Orient. This 'avanie' was seen at the time as an extortionary demand of presents or payment made by the Turks on Cretan merchants.<sup>18</sup> The perceived similarity taints the perception of the phenomenon – turning it into something alike and experienced as extortion and bribery rather than as a customary behaviour not unlike earlier European traditions of presents for one's host or prince. Nonetheless, the other trading partner might have picked up quickly on the European thirst for African goods and turned the custom into a tool: making the gift into a tax or retribution for ills suffered or wishes compiled. However this story might be told, the entry provides a compelling idea of trading encounters on the African coast and their perception by French authors.

A century later, the *Grand Larousse* shortened the passage about the French uneasiness with the custom into presents (now in the plural) that merchants had to offer the princes on the African coast in order to have good relations with them ('Présents que les commerçants offrent aux petit rois de la côte d'Afrique, pour se maintenir avec eux bonne intelligence.'<sup>19</sup>). But it added a second form of discourse: the word 'palabres'

<sup>15</sup> *Diccionario Da Lingua Portuguesa Composto Pelo Padre D. Rafael Bluteau, Reformado, E Accrescentado Por Antonio de Moraes Silva Natural Do Rio de Janeiro*, (1824 1755), s.v. 'Palavrorio', 149.

<sup>16</sup> This lack of mention nevertheless, in her discussion of vernaculars in the postcolonial African world Adejunmobi highlights the mediating role of the naval and casts Portuguese sailors as originators of the word, see Moradewun Adejunmobi, *Vernacular Palaver: Imaginations of the Local and Non-Native Languages in West Africa* (Multilingual Matters, 2004), vii.

<sup>17</sup> Denis Diderot and Jean-Baptiste le Rond d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers* (Paris, 1751-89 1966), s.v. 'Palabre', Vol. 11, 771. Transl. (MS): 'One calls so on the coasts of Africa, especially in Loango of Boirie, in Melindo & Cabindo on those of Angola, what one calls *avanie* in the Levant, that is a present to be given to small kings and to negro chiefs on the smallest cause of complaint that they really have or feign to have against the European traders, above all if they think themselves the stronger. This *palabresse* is paid in merchandise, in eau-de-vie & other like things, following the quality of the offense, or rather the wishes of these barbarians.'

<sup>18</sup> Diderot and d'Alembert, *Encyclopédie ou Dictionnaire Raisonné des Sciences, des Arts et des Métiers*, 1751, s.v. 'Avanie', vol. 1, 859.

<sup>19</sup> *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siècle, Par Pierre Larousse* (Paris, 1874), s.v. 'Palabres', vol. 12, 45.

now not only designated the conference in which these presents were offered ('Conférence dans laquelle on offre ces présents'<sup>20</sup>). It was also defined by the duration of the exchange, since the *Larousse* lists a colloquial use as long and pompous discussion ('Discours long et pompeux'<sup>21</sup>). In sum, a whole complex of meaning was now hidden behind the word 'palabres'. Thus a prototypical scene was formed: one of presents that have to be delivered within a tediously long and pompous conference with local princes and chiefs.

Roughly fifty years later, the French usage shifted again and significantly so: it now exoticized this complex toward something of unclear gender ('N. des deux genres'<sup>22</sup>) and indigenized it into an exchange between or with indigenous people (rather than only West Coast Africans). Yet the term retained the tediousness of the process ('Pourparlers entre indigènes, ou avec eux, dans les pays exotiques. Par extension, il se dit d'une Discussion longue et vaine.'<sup>23</sup>). Clearly, this reflects on certain practices and attitudes of French colonial rule which reached well into the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Likewise, the German dictionaries attest a semantic narrowing of the usage of 'Palaver'. Being late in the colonial game, 'palaver' didn't enter the German lexicon until very late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The 1894 *Brockhaus Konversations-Lexikon* knew 'Palaver' as a solemn negotiation with African natives ('feierliche Unterhandlung mit afrikanischen Eingeborenen'<sup>24</sup>). In 1909, *Meyers Konversationslexikon* specified 'Palaver' to be of Portuguese origin and a term for meetings of primarily West African tribes. It also likened 'palaver' to the East African word 'Schaury' which was widely used in contemporary German colonial literature.<sup>25</sup> Here, a palaver was 'originally' a political convention, where social rules, war tactics and lawsuits were discussed ('um unter Vorsitz der Häuptlinge gemeinsame Angelegenheiten, Kriegszüge, Rechtsangelegenheiten etc. zu besprechen'<sup>26</sup>). The *Meyer* then extends the application of 'palaver' for all interaction with natives everywhere ('ganz allgemein für alle Verhandlungen von Weißen mit Angehörigen von Naturvölkern'<sup>27</sup>) and adds something found nowhere else in lexical literature:

In vielen Teilen West- und Zentralafrikas (Kamerun, dem Kongo-Becken, bei den Niam-Niam etc.) aber auch auf Neuguinea, den Neu-Hebriden etc. bedient man sich eigentümlich kombinierter Schallsignale, die, auf laut klingenden Holztrommeln von Niederlassung zu Niederlassung wiederholt, eine ziemlich entwickelte Schalltelegraphie darstellen und die Stammesangehörigen unter gleichzeitiger Verständigung, um was es sich handelt, in großer Schnelligkeit zusammenrufen. S. Trommelsprache.<sup>28</sup>

<sup>20</sup> *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siècle, Par Pierre Larousse*, 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Grand Dictionnaire Universel du XIXe Siècle, Par Pierre Larousse*, 45.

<sup>22</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française* (Paris: Hachette, 1935), s.v. 'Palabre', 2279.

<sup>23</sup> *Dictionnaire de l'Académie Française*, 2279.

<sup>24</sup> *Brockhaus Konversations-Lexikon* (Leipzig, Berlin and Wien: F.A. Brockhaus, 1894), s.v. 'Palaver', vol. 12, 819.

<sup>25</sup> See for example Richard Kandt, *Caput Nili. Eine empfindsame Reise zu den Quellen des Nils* (Berlin: Reimer, 1905), 27ff.

<sup>26</sup> *Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexikon: Ein Nachschlagewerk Des Allgemeinen Wissens* (Leipzig u.a.: Bibliographisches Institut, 1909), s.v. 'Palaver', vol. 15, 325.

<sup>27</sup> *Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexikon*, 325.

<sup>28</sup> *Meyers Großes Konversations-Lexikon*, 325, Transl. (MS): 'In many parts of West and Central Africa (Cameroon, the Congo bassin, in case of the Niam-Niam etc.) but also in New Guinea, the New Hebrides etc. one uses peculiarly combined acoustic signals, which, repeated on loudly sounding wooden drums

'Palaver' found another 'African' term in this short addendum: the 'tom-tom' as designator for a drum as well as the sound and function of its use and, in its German equivalent 'Tamtam', useless uproar of little importance.<sup>29</sup> The 1933 *Brockhaus*, in line with contemporary race terminology, lists 'palaver' as a term for every negotiation between 'Whites' and Africans or other natives ('jede Verhandlung v. Weißen mit afrik. u.a. Eingeborenen'<sup>30</sup>) and introduces the unnecessary talk ('überflüssiges Gerede'<sup>31</sup>).

In the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century another shift occurred in the lexical descriptions. The *Brockhaus* of 1972 elaborated 'palaver', stemming here from 'Palavra' as Portuguese for parley or story, to have been originally used as a term in wide parts of Africa. Here it denoted never-ending negotiations between 'Whites' and natives, and among Africans. Furthermore, the *Brockhaus* also added the colloquial meaning of useless talk ('eine ursprünglich in weiten Teilen Afrikas verwendete Bezeichnung für nicht enden wollende Verhandlungen zwischen Weißen und Eingeborenen, ebenso von Afrikanern untereinander; heute auch in der dt. Umgangssprache für ein langes, oft auch sinnloses Gerede'<sup>32</sup>). The 1991 *Brockhaus* then tried indigenising 'palaver' by rooting the word in 'Africanness' without any substantial evidence:

(engl.) Über eine afrikanische Sprache in der Bedeutung 'religiöse oder gerichtliche Verhandlung' von portug. palavra 'Unterredung,' zu lat. Parabola 'Gleichnis' [...]. Im 18. Jh. von portug. Händlern verwendete Bezeichnung für Verhandlungen mit den einheim. Afrikanern; dann von den Afrikanern übernommen in der Bedeutung 'Versammlung', über das Englische in die dt. Umgangssprache (Langes Hinundhergerede) eingegangen.<sup>33</sup>

This paints a picture of a previously unseen multitude of transfers and adaptations and adds a movement not of linear direction but a back-and-forth between African and European agents of transfer. The *Duden* revised edition in 2000 stuck to this image, mentioning 'eine afrik. Eingeborenen-sprache'<sup>34</sup> (an African native language). Since then, the word 'palaver' has gained a new indigenous context in most dictionaries of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. The *OED* lists its different formal and colloquial uses in West Africa and different compounds that underline the commonness of usage (from palaver court to palaver sauce);<sup>35</sup> and the *Larousse* sees 'palaver' as non-pejorative word when used in

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from settlement to settlement, represent a rather elaborated acoustic telegraphy and call the tribes people together while simultaneously communicating what it is about. See drum language.'

<sup>29</sup> See *DWDS - Digitales Wörterbuch Der Deutschen Sprache*, s.v. 'Tamtam', <http://www.dwds.de/?qu=tamtam>, accessed 27 August 2014.

<sup>30</sup> *Der Große Brockhaus* (Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1933), s.v. 'Palaver', vol. 14, 77.

<sup>31</sup> *Der Große Brockhaus*, 77.

<sup>32</sup> *Brockhaus-Enzyklopädie* (Wiesbaden: Brockhaus, 1972), s.v. 'Palaver', vol. 14, 141.

<sup>33</sup> *Brockhaus-Enzyklopädie* (Mannheim: Brockhaus, 1991), s.v. 'Palaver', vol. 16, 448. Transl. (MS): '(Engl. by way of an African language in the sense of "religious or judicial parley" from Portuguese palavra "interlocution", to lat. Parabola "parable") [...]. Term employed by Portuguese traders in the 18th c. for negotiations with the native Africans; then adopted by the Africans in the sense of "assembly", entering the German colloquial language (long rigmarole) via English.

<sup>34</sup> *Duden, Das Große Fremdwörterbuch. Herkunft und Bedeutung der Fremdwörter* (Mannheim u.a.: Dudenverlag, 2000), s.v. 'Palaver', 976.

<sup>35</sup> *OED Online*, s.v. 'palaver'.

francophone Africa, designating a traditional tribunal, often under a big tree ('souvent à l'ombre d'un grand arbre')<sup>36</sup> that might be called 'palaver-tree'.

## Transfers and Residues: the Palaver about Palaver

Arranged together and read against each other, these dictionary and encyclopaedia entries not only establish a point of origin for the *usage* of the word. They also reveal changing perceptions of the *act or object* designated as such as well as stations of *contact* with the word and its *adoption* into other contexts followed by *adaptions* of its sense and usage.

'Palaver' is intricately connected to something perceived as customary in a distinct area. At some time in their endeavours on the African coast, Portuguese traders found a certain ceremonial or customary requirement of elaborate discourse essential to their trading enterprises and made use of a word possibly already present in their vocabulary, surely at least derivative of words used in everyday language.

The word, slightly modulated, spread at a certain rate among the European languages in contact with African coasts<sup>37</sup>, just as the custom or customs so termed might have spread, and changed. 50 years after the entry in a Portuguese-English dictionary for traders and navigators, the French conceived of palaver not so much as a form of communication, a ceremony of speech and discourse, but as the gifts that had to be offered to trading partners as signs of goodwill or retribution for misgivings. Apparently the custom had changed; or the French attributed the word to a different phenomenon they understood via a third cultural sphere – the Orient. The word 'palaver' now designated a nuisance of trading relations: a tool that facilitated the smooth commerce they required, but which was perceived as an impeding hurdle.

The adoption and adaption by sailors on the routes back and forth between European and African harbours then let the word slip into colloquial and even slang use. 'Palaver' was thus made palatable as a signifier for 'Talk intended to cajole, flatter, or wheedle'<sup>38</sup>, as the *OED Online* states. Examples of this popular usage are Charles Dibdin's rather popular sea-shanties in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. *Nature and Nancy* starts with the following lines: 'Let swabs with their vows, their palaver, and lies, / Sly flattery's silk sails still be trimming, / Swear their Polls be all angels dropp'd down from the skies, – / I your angels don't like, – I loves women. [...]'<sup>39</sup>.

In this way, the word was established for use 'back home'. But its pejoration, which still persists within colloquial usage, went beyond a mere aversion to flattering talk. It was nourished by establishing and maintaining colonial rule over African countries and a disdain for their population and their traditional or just customary ways of social and political discourse, conflict solution and trade negotiations. Applied to

<sup>36</sup> *Larousse*, s.v. 'Palabre', <http://www.larousse.fr/dictionnaires/francais/palabre/57304>, accessed 22 August 2014.

<sup>37</sup> Accordingly, 'palaver' or similar words can also be found in Danish, Swedish and Dutch dictionaries, but not in Norwegian and only very briefly in Spanish ones, where it is only listed as 'Consejo de ancianos en algunas paises de Africa' (council of elders in some African countries). See *Enciclopedia universal ilustrada europeo americana*, 1920, s.v. 'Palaver', vol. 16, 137.

<sup>38</sup> *OED Online*, s.v. 'palaver'.

<sup>39</sup> Charles Dibdin, *Songs, Naval and National, of the Late Charles Dibdin: With a Memoir and Addenda*, ed. Thomas Dibdin (London: I. Murray, 1841), 135.

virtually all fruitless negotiation or mere contact with indigenous or colonial subjects (see the German note on the New Hebrides in *Meyers Konversations-Lexikon*) around 1900, 'palaver' became evermore distant from its origins in the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Consequently, the term could be applied to virtually everything else. Max Frisch, for example, titled his 1989 manifesto for Swiss demilitarization *Ein Palaver*.<sup>40</sup>

Interestingly enough, the word then reversed its direction of influence and was (re-)appropriated into African languages and concepts of African culture in the African Renaissance of the 1960s and 1970s and called out again in the 1990s. *Palaver and Its Influence in Current and Constitutional Law* or *Socio-political Aspects of the Palaver in Some African Countries* are examples of the installment of 'palaver' as a term for a certain cultural phenomenon of practicing political and social discourse.<sup>41</sup> 'Palaver' is now in this context understood to be 'a general principle of law'<sup>42</sup>, a 'dispute settlement process'<sup>43</sup> with emphasis on understanding and conciliation through the practice of rhetoric.<sup>44</sup> It is also used metaphorically in a literary discourse, as can be found, for example, in writings of Wole Soyinka and Chenjerai Hove, or in journalism, such as in the title of the Ghanaian news-website *The New Palaver Online*.<sup>45</sup>

## Viral Pathways

I chose the verb 'spread' and the term 'timeline' earlier to describe the dissemination of 'palaver' with a theoretical purpose. The history encased in the etymology of 'palaver' is one composed of a succession of traces of linguistic transfers. As such it can also be read and traced as the story of a *viral infection*.

In a short passage in *A Thousand Plateaus*, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari contend that a structural logic adheres to what they call the rhizome by making use of the virus as an image for the sort of 'aparallel evolution'-process they envision. Turning away from the tree model of evolution as a forked but purposeful line of decent, they call into mind the diffusing qualities of an agent that can scramble DNA:

Under certain conditions, a virus can connect to germ cells and transmit itself as the cellular gene of a complex species; moreover, it can take flight, move into the cells of an entirely

<sup>40</sup> Max Frisch, *Schweiz Ohne Armee? Ein Palaver* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1992).

<sup>41</sup> Joseph Kasule, 'Palaver and Its Influence in Current and Constitutional Law' (Köln, 1972); Robert G. Armstrong, 'The Public Meeting as a Means of Participation in Political and Social Activities in Africa', in *Socio-Political Aspects of the Palaver in Some African Countries* (Paris: UNESCO, 1979), 11–26; Ann Kathrin Helfrich has elaborated on the phenomenon itself and its role in African societies, see Ann Kathrin Helfrich, *Afrikanische Renaissance und traditionelle Konfliktlösung: das Beispiel der Duala in Kamerun* (Münster: LIT Verlag, 2005), 70ff.

<sup>42</sup> Kasule, 6.

<sup>43</sup> Kasule, 7.

<sup>44</sup> Thomas Bearth, *Parasitäre Töne, Partikeln und Palaver – Was leistet die Erforschung der Sprachen Schwarzafrikas für die Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft?* (Zürich: Seminar für Allgemeine Sprachwissenschaft, 1989), 27.

<sup>45</sup> Wole Soyinka, Abbey Maine, and Kabtihar Tesfaye, *Palaver: Three Dramatic Discussion Starters* (New York: Friendship Press, 1971); Chenjerai Hove, *Palaver Finish. Essays* (Harare: Weaver Press, 2002); 'The New Palaver Online | Ghanaian News Online', <http://thenewpalaveronline.com/>, accessed 30 August 2014.

different species, but not without bringing with it ‘genetic information’ from the first host [...].<sup>46</sup>

The new focus of biology and virology on genetics in the 1970s was of special importance to postmodern philosophy, since the question of ‘identity’ was also discussed within the forum of the molecular. Accordingly, theorems from molecular biology populate quite a few of the French postmodernist philosophers’ writings.<sup>47</sup> But Deleuze and Guattari’s project of the rhizome stands out because it takes the virus, at least at first, literally rather than metaphorically. To do this, Deleuze and Guattari turn to biological information. In the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, new findings on the workings of viruses, especially the identification of and research on the retrovirus HIV, put the stable (genetic) identities of host and virus-parasite in question.<sup>48</sup> Up until this point, a virus had been understood, simply put, as an infectious pathogen composed of proteins and nucleic acid that wasn’t able to grow autonomously or procreate through binary fission, as the French microbiologist André Lwoff put it in 1957.<sup>49</sup> In order to live on, a virus has to use the metabolism of a cell which it first had to infect by entering it, invading it in fact. It is easy to see, then, why the virus was so well received as a favourite political metaphor within a logic of the epidemic that discusses computer programs and terrorism in the same rhetoric as disease.<sup>50</sup>

Retroviruses add to this rhetoric by an ingenious turn in the narrative, which at the same time makes them so very interesting for the discussion of the cultural transfer of ‘palaver’: ‘The retroviral replication cycle follows the general pattern of enveloped viral infections, but embedded in it are some highly uncommon features’<sup>51</sup>. As the virologist and geneticist Peter K. Vogt tells the story: ‘The retrovirus growth cycle includes as an essential step the copying of RNA into DNA by a virus-coded polymerase, reversing the flow of genetic information, hence the terms “retrovirus” and “reverse transcriptase”’<sup>52</sup>. This ‘reverse transcription’ means that viral DNA is transferred into the cell nucleus. Effectively, a copy of the retroviral genome is inserted into the cell’s chromosomal DNA: ‘Viral messages are translated on cellular ribosomes. The translation products [...] are assembled at the cell periphery into viral particles that are released from the cell

<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 10.

<sup>47</sup> Apart from Deleuze and Guattari for example Jean-François Lyotard, Jean Baudrillard, Michel Serres, Paul Virilio and Julia Kristeva. See Chapter 2, ‘Technoaffinitäten: Sexualität, Geschlecht und Wissenschaftsmetaphern im Poststrukturalismus’, in Susanne Lettow, *Biophilosophien. Wissenschaft, Technologie und Geschlecht im philosophischen Diskurs der Gegenwart* (Frankfurt am Main and New York: Campus, 2011), 101ff.

<sup>48</sup> See Bettina Bock von Wülfingen, ‘Virus, Der’, in *Zoologicon*, eds Christian Kassung, Jasmin Mersmann and Olaf B. Rader (München: Fink, 2012), 419.

<sup>49</sup> See Ton Van Helvoort, ‘Viren, Wissenschaft und Geschichte’, in *VIRUS! Mutationen Einer Metapher*, eds Ruth Mayer and Birgit Weingart (Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2004), 73.

<sup>50</sup> As Ruth Mayer and Birgit Weingart point out in reference to Linda Singer: At least since the discovery of AIDS we live in an Age of Epidemic whose logic reaches far beyond biological infection into the collective imaginary. Mayer and Weingart, ‘Viren Zirkulieren’, 8; Linda Singer, *Erotic Welfare. Sexual Theory and Politics in the Age of Epidemic*, eds Judith Butler and Maureen MacGrogan (New York: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>51</sup> Peter K. Vogt, ‘Historical Introduction to the General Properties of Retroviruses’, in *Retroviruses*, eds John M. Coffin, Stephen H. Huges and Harold E. Varmus (Cold Spring Harbor: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 1997), <http://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/books/NBK19382/>, accessed 24 September 2014.

<sup>52</sup> Vogt.

budding of plasma membrane.’<sup>53</sup> Not only is the viral DNA permanently inscribed into the cell’s chromosomal DNA, due to the diploidity of retroviral particles the virus can also carry ‘foreign’ DNA: if a virus enters a cell that has already been infected with another genetically distinct but related retrovirus, the next reproduction cycle enables the viruses’ DNA to be recombined (which for example makes it possible for the swine flu to jump to human hosts). This also facilitates the incorporation of ‘the cellular gene into the retroviral genome, so that it is now transported by the virus from cell to cell’<sup>54</sup>. The product of this process (called transduction process in virology) ‘has acquired the host [DNA] sequence at the cost of one or more viral genes’<sup>55</sup>. In addition, retroviruses with cellular genetic material in their genome tend to accelerate growth in infected cells, tumourising rapidly in fact.

Let us turn again to ‘palaver’. By no means do I intend to pathologize the cultural transfer of this term, as one is easily prone to do when using a virus model.<sup>56</sup> Instead I would like to recognize what tremendous mutation effects this sort of reproduction process enables, and how the description and imagining of viral processes is already linked to cultural semantics: note the vocabulary used to describe parts of the viral reproduction cycle, the ‘copying’, ‘code’, ‘information’, ‘transcription’ and its biologized derivative ‘transcriptase’, the ‘message’ and ‘translation’, finally the ‘inscription’. The virus makes use of processes that can themselves be translated into a certain language: that of the transfer agent, or the medium.

And the (retro-)virus as medium of transport and transfer is not one to surrender easily or efface itself.<sup>57</sup> It doesn’t transmit a message (sense, significance) faithfully, it replicates but also translates by trans- and inscribing to its liking. It is, as Sybille Krämer points out, dependent not only on a host but also on a milieu that enables and supports the infection by ensuring the right conditions.<sup>58</sup> And at the same time, the virus casually takes up something of the host as if some material of its surrounding would just adhere to it, remaining after and of the process: residue. The residue is here not to be confused with the residual. In a viral context the residual is also present, of course, a retainer of the very viruses I discuss here within the seemingly recovered body, archiving it in a way for future use or rather a recurring surge of the primary infection. But the residue is not archival in the way Derrida describes it as topological and normative, or as Foucault would formulate it, as an accumulative, all pervasive conditioning system.<sup>59</sup> The residue is coincidental and volatile.

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<sup>53</sup> Vogt.

<sup>54</sup> Vogt.

<sup>55</sup> Vogt.

<sup>56</sup> Examples of this abound in the analogy-based usage of the virus in informatics, in the metaphor of spread and infection applied in the rhetoric of ‘counter-terrorism’ or even in fashion trends, as shown by Richard Dawkins, when he argued for ideas as *Viruses of the Mind*. See Richard Dawkins, ‘Viruses of the Mind’, in *Dennett and His Critics: Demystifying Mind*, ed. Bo Dahlborn (Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell, 1993), 13-27.

<sup>57</sup> This enables Sybille Krämer to incorporate the virus into her media theory which proceeds from the assumption that a medium is neither autonomous nor an invisible transmitter. She is interested in the virus as ‘Übertragung als Ansteckung’ and ‘Übertragung als Umschrift’. Sybille Krämer, *Medium, Bote, Übertragung. Kleine Metaphysik der Medialität* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2008), 9ff; 140ff.

<sup>58</sup> Krämer, 142.

<sup>59</sup> The cultural transfer indeed disputes the idea of the archive in the sense described by Derrida: ‘In an archive, there should not be an absolute dissociation, any heterogeneity or secret which could separate [...], or partition, in an absolute manner.’ Jacques Derrida, ‘Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression’,

The residue varies the genetic code that the virus is intend on replicating via a host cell by adding coded information formerly not entailed in the viral program. This is exactly why Burroughs found the virus a tempting model in language philosophy: Bringing together concepts of ‘genetic code’ and ‘coded information’, Burroughs saw language’s persuasive possibilities as a programming effect, a virus in equilibrium with its host and therefore eternally reproducible. Burroughs didn’t know retroviruses yet, but this image might be what Vogt, catchily summing up the permanence of retroviral infection, called: ‘A retrovirus is forever.’<sup>60</sup>

The travel or transfer paths the signifier ‘palaver’ has walked on *en route* to its different significations are not smooth and straight tubes which an encapsulated word could travel through as if it were transposed within a pneumatic delivery system, hygienically changing content whenever it suited an agent to do so. Rather, like viral pathways, they produce residue that adheres to the term ‘palaver’ on its journey.

Let us look again at the spread and mutation of the term ‘palaver’ representing a linguistic cultural transfer, and imagine it as something virally transmitted. As is valid for many deeply effective viruses, there is a point of origin that is rather elusive, because it can be described less as a definite moment of genesis, and more as the first occurrence of symptoms. These can be retrospectively located to a certain area of first infections, namely the West coast of the African continent. There, the usage of the term lingers for a while within a habitat or milieu – that of commercial interaction established between Portuguese merchants and African villages or single traders. Via a Portuguese-English occupational dictionary, a highly specified host, the infection can broaden to another language via translation. The term ‘palaver/palanforia/palabre’ (virus) has a significance (virus genome) which is now carrying the residue of its first usage (host): A circumlocution in discourse, or a moanders of words, as the *Compleat Account* states. The dictionary, ‘being all suitable, as well to the Diversion and Curiosity of the more industrious Trader and Navigator’, is a host cell already under influence of something else, maybe a spirit of globalized commerce, and soon the virus jumps into the slang of sailors as well as into other European languages. The sailors add to the viral genome the flavour of their pastimes. Palaver can now be understood as flattery in an erotic and persuasive context. Another host, the French usage of the word, already infected by an onset of Orientalism, provides the setting for a further recombination. Now the virus ‘palaver’ signifies an object *and* a form of discourse both understood to be unnecessary or even unjustly demanded. It soon adapts to a new milieu developing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century: the intellectual set provided by rising nationalism and imperialist ideas in Europe. It is harder to identify a host here rather than the milieu, but maybe the usage in travel and trading accounts as well as later on in administrative language is both symptom and agent, as a sneeze or cough might be. Just like those utterances of the viral, these texts are effective systems of distribution, so that the term/virus ‘palaver’ seems to be on everyone’s lips. Now, the virus has different strains, one bearing residues of the administrative language that treats palaver as a proper term for dealings with the native elders; one catching those of an overbearing imperialist and/or racist mindset and therefore using the term derogatorily; one that shows inscriptions of the everyday use and wear and therefore treats the word unchecked as simple jargon. The virus is most active having the power of three strains, here in the

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*Diacritics* 25.2 (Summer 1995): 10; Michael Ruoff, ‘Archiv’, in *Foucault-Lexikon. Entwicklung - Kernbegriffe - Zusammenhänge* (Paderborn: Wilhelm Fink Verlag, 2007), 71f.

<sup>60</sup> Vogt.

mid-20<sup>th</sup> century. This is what David Cauter's novel *At Fever Pitch* illustrates with its different usages of 'palaver'. There *is* so much palaver going round that people fall ill and misbehave in unexpected ways.

This last strain, the pejorative for a vaguely 'native' and therefore uneducated, irrational surplus of discourse, was most successful, until a very interesting mutation occurred: Pan-Africanism and postcolonial independence provided a milieu in which the virus could jump onto yet another host: concepts of indigenism or memories of tradition and discourse. There it could recombine its genome again, taking with it residues of customariness and rightfulness, even a sense of belonging, using the term to signify a culturally specific, but not too specific phenomenon charged with high expectations and embracing all forms of traditional African judiciary or political discourse. And here Burroughs's virology is once again conceptually helpful: with its residue of political and judiciary discourse, this last mutation, encasing a belief in the salutary powers of speech and communication, could be read as a symbiosis between virus and host, a stasis in the infection process. For now, 'palaver' has a stable significance – until it meets with another milieu.

## Implications for/of Evolutionary Change

The cultural transfer that is thematized in Cauter's *At Fever Pitch* by one of the protagonists is everywhere, and it is having unexpected consequences, because it is a sticky affair: 'Surely, [...] if you have the technical knowledge then you are doomed to assimilate much of the culture as well, whether you like it or not. [...] It is deceptive to imagine that you can assimilate only the techniques whilst rejecting the culture' (157). Every transfer results in residues; a transfer from one culture to another more than anything, and this is – from an evolutionary point of view – a productive force. Viral genome mutations are suspected to be responsible for a vast array of evolutionary changes. As Vogt points out, 'a significant percentage of the mammalian genome appears to be the product of reverse transcription'<sup>61</sup>. To use the virus as a model for cultural transfer need not add a pathological sense to the agent transferred. 'Virus' has been such a popular metaphor for so long that it has been thoroughly identified first with pathologies of disease, then with pathologies of terrorism. Ingeniously enough though, the very traits that make viruses in their microcellular workings so alarmingly dangerous enable them to be tools for something completely different, and positive, as can be seen in the research into retroviruses as gene delivery devices undertaken within the past 20 years.<sup>62</sup>

The virus serves as model for cultural transfer that is understood neither as completely autonomous nor as simply a tool determined by outside agents. Based on the diversity and heterogeneity of culture as a concept *and* a phenomenon, rather than as linear transmissions of form and/or content, an annexation of ideas or items, cultural transfer has to be understood as a mechanism of production:<sup>63</sup> a production *not*

<sup>61</sup> Vogt.

<sup>62</sup> See 'Preface', in *Retroviruses*, eds John M. Coffin, Stephen H. Hughes, and Harold E. Varmus (Cold Spring Harbor: Cold Spring Harbor Laboratory Press, 1997).

<sup>63</sup> Accompanying concepts of hybridity and/or third space, I acknowledge readily, already grasp this feature in what they add to the understanding of processes of transfer as dynamic and multiple – while nevertheless still being too densely involved with questions of identity. See Helga Mittelbauer, "'Acting

comprehensively envisaged, full of side products and evolutionary mutations. The narrative of evolution is rich in determinative language, telling a story of selection. But really, as can be shown on the very microbiological level that I take as my model of cultural transfer, the underlying processes are by no means teleological. On the contrary, evolution *might* be reinscribed with the narrative of a successful story of rational development, but effectively it is quite arbitrary.

As a virus changes in a retroviral reproduction cycle and, therefore, may be the agent of another entity's unwilling transformation as well as its own transfer and mutation processes, 'palaver' changed its significance and meaning throughout its spreading and infection on a global plane. But 'palaver' changed its host entities as well, as infections do. Most indicative of this transformative quality is the breadth of the entries: Where there was once a line or barely a paragraph fixing the term in one or two appliances, there is now page after page to sum up the various strains, in effect and in example. And just like the signifier 'evolution', the longer 'palaver' works as an agent of transfer and the more residue it accumulates, the more complex it becomes.

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## Un cuvânt: 'Palavragiu' și transferul său rezidual

Cuvântul „palavragiu” este colocvial și se referă la verbiaj și la neplăcerea cauzată de lungimea dezbaterii lipsită de scop și superfluă. În același timp, insinuează lipsa de cultură a discursului dincolo de rațiune. Așadar, apare ca termen ușor exotic, însă este atestat de lexiconul european. Însă, dincolo de sensul său contemporan, se află o lungă istorie de transferuri lingvistice și culturale care sunt situate în contextul diverselor utilizări ale limbii și ale intersecțiilor acestora. Prin depistarea folosirii termenului „palavragiu” și a descoperirii sensurilor acestuia cu ajutorul unor enciclopedii și dicționare variate în limbile engleză, franceză, germană, portugheză și spaniolă, articolul explorează istoria bogată a acestui cuvânt. Mai mult, urmărește traseul semantic al acestui termen ca proces de transfer cultural care poate fi asemănat proceselor microcelulare ale unui (retro)virus. Reproducerea virală și evoluția operează în procesele de transfer care permit alterarea gazdei pentru a o regla pe aceasta la mutația sau modificarea virusului, făcându-l pe acesta potrivit pentru transferul din corpul unei gazde în alt corp. Virusul este astfel oferit ca model vital al transferului cultural. Acesta nu doar conține adopția necesară și adaptarea conținuturilor și obiectelor transferului cultural în diverse contexte. El contribuie la înțelegerea conceptuală a rezidului transferal cu care conținutul transferat este înzestrat prin diversificarea contextelor. Acest model depășește astfel înțelesul transferului cultural ca traducere literală și transmisie și conceptualizează transferul cultural ca agent al unor procese evoluționare care permit efecte mutaționale ale transferului ca dotare.