

African Research Review

AN INTERNATIONAL MULTI-DISCIPLINARY JOURNAL,
ETHIOPIA

AFRREV VOL. 11 (1), SERIAL NO. 45, JANUARY, 2017:192-204

ISSN 1994-9057 (Print)

ISSN 2070-0083 (Online)

DOI : <http://dx.doi.org/10.4314/afrrrev.v11i1.14>

A Distinctive Aspect of Translation: The Cultural

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Abstract

Simply put, translation can be said to be the re-expression of the meaning contained in a language **A** into another language **B**. Translation involves language and can equally involve culture. Culture is the way people from the same linguistic background live their lives. This includes their customs and traditions, moral values, habits; food, eating patterns, fashion and styles in clothing etc. Culture is expressed in language and so includes the practice and usage of language in a society, expressions, proverbs and metaphors. Language is a means of communication. It is human speech either written or spoken. Language like culture expresses norms, value systems, ideas, concepts and customs. It defines man's environment and his experiences in life. The totality of man's activity is expressed in language. Thus, both translation and culture are expressed through language either through verbal or non-verbal communication. Translation through language becomes an important tool in the dissemination of cultural knowledge. How do you translate the word "pancake" into the Igbo language knowing that the English "pancake" differs from the French "pancake"? How do you translate some Igbo words/proverbs or Yoruba words used by some Nigerian authors into English? This paper will focus on the distinctive aspect of culture in translation. It will also try to proffer solutions as to how to resolve problems emanating from cultural view points.

Key Words: translation, culture, communication, language, bilingual

Introduction

Every text to be translated contains some elements of culture. The problem of translating such cultural elements can be as a result of lack of corresponding lexical notions in another culture or as a result of cultural ignorance of the translator at the time in question. This cultural aspect of translation has been tackled by translatoologists who seek to resolve the problem in cultural transfer in translation. Translating culture means translating the cultural elements contained in a text. According to Lederer (1998, p. 163), the translation of culture should re-establish an appropriate proportion of the implicit and the explicit contained in the original text. She illustrated four methods of translating cultural realities. These are: adaptation, conversion, explanation and ethnocentrism. To these methods, we will refer subsequently.

Pelage (2001, p. 5) on his part, proposed solutions to the translation of cultural realities while referring to legal documents. He talked of transcoding, translating and adaptation. While we do not accept transcoding, which is word for word (except when it comes to numbers), and adaptation easily, we only accept translation here as it relates to the interpretative theory of translation. How then do we translate Igbo words used in novels or in plays into a foreign language?

Communication, Culture and Language

Communication is complex and is not purely a linguistic affaire. Hence Samovar and Porter (1991, p. 28) posited that “communication occurs whenever meaning is attributed to behaviour or the residue of behaviour”. Hall (2002, p. 16) claimed that “communication refers to the *generation of meaning*” (italics by the author). These definitions show the multidimensional nature of communication. Thus, communication can be intentional, conscious or unconscious. To illustrate: the opinion that spectators form of a politician who speaks to them through the television is not necessarily made of linguistic signs (Baylon & Mignot 1999) but is also made up of non-linguistic signs. All that makes up meaning is communication: dressings, height, age, sex, gestures, silence etc; are all means of communication because each conveys a message.

Communication and culture are linked hence “one’s cultural perceptions and experiences help determine how one sends and receives messages” (Samovar & Porter 1991, p. xii).

Intercultural communication can be seen as a communication where the speaker and the person being addressed belong to different backgrounds. Translation is an example of intercultural communication.

Culture is the way of life of a people. It is a binding force in any society. It is the way people do their things – their beliefs, custom, legend etc. Taylor (1871) cited by *The World Book Encyclopedia* (1976) views culture as “the complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, custom and all other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society”. Thus, Taylor considers culture as the sum total of human achievements and activities as a social group. Supporting this view is Tschum (1978) who posited that culture is:

The way of life of the members of a society. It includes how they dress, their marriage, customs and family life, their patterns of work, religious ceremonies and leisure pursuits. It covers also the goods they create, bows and arrows... dwelling places (p. 40).

In the same light, Newmark (1988, p. 94) also defined culture as “the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression”. Different national groups have different ways of visualising the world around them. They have varied customs that distinguish them from other national groups. Thus, each language group has its own culturally specific features. It is worthy of note that “no language can exist unless it is steeped in context of culture and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre, the structure of natural language” (Newmark 1988: *ibid.*) Culture can be expressed through language which is a means of communication. Language is thus closely related to culture and should be considered in the processes of translating a culture bound text.

Bellos (2011, p. 349) posited that “language is ethnicity. Ethnicity in this sense has nothing to do with lineage, heredity, race, blood group or DNA. It means: how a social group constitutes and identifies itself”. In other words, one can be identified by one’s language. Language is thus part of culture.

Language can be said to be human speech, either spoken or written. It is a means of communication. It differs from one community to another and from one country to the other. Language expresses the norms, value systems, ideas, concepts, customs and experiences of a people. It defines environment. It is the basis of man’s uniqueness and the essence of his culture. Language is common to all cultures. On the other hand, culture is expressed in language. Because culture and language are linked, language can only be understood in its cultural context.

Since language is an essential component of culture, the translator has to be bilingual and bicultural. This is because different languages perceive realities of life differently. Thus, language is the expression of the cultural beliefs of the society to which it belongs. The values and norms of a society are reflected in their culture. It is worthy of note that language and culture cannot be treated in isolation or out of context.

Translation: A Means of Cultural Transfer

To the uninitiated, to translate means a word for word rendition of the text to be translated. But for a translator, to translate means to understand the meaning contained in a text and re-express such meaning in another language. Though it is language that vehicles the meaning contained in a text, it is not the object of translation.

In the words of Darbelnet (1997, p. 7), translation is:

The operation which consists in transferring from one language to another all the elements of meaning of a passage, and only these elements ensuring that they retain in the target language (TL) their relative importance, as their tonality, and also taking into account the relative differences presented by cultures to which the source language (SL) and target language correspond respectively.

Viewed thus, translators should remain faithful to the source text by conveying the meaning it contains to the target audience.

Translation communicates through language and facilitates the spread of information and culture. It enhances knowledge. In the words of Mba (1996, p.1), translation is “a conscious semantic transfer of cultural items from one culture or its variety to another”. Thus, translation is seen as a tool for the perpetuation of culture since it makes available the cultural and artistic content of a group of people to another group. It promotes understanding and co-operation between peoples and nations. Translation cannot be isolated from culture because it unites cultures. Both language and translation are vehicles of culture.

House (2009, p. 1) on his part does not see translation as only a linguistic act, but also as a cultural one. He therefore defines translation thus: “Translation is not only a linguistic act, it is also a cultural one, an act of communication across culture. Translation always involves both languages and culture simply because the two cannot really be separated”. Thus, in translation studies, translation is no longer seen as a linguistic activity but is seen as a means of cultural transfer whereby the translator is seen as a mediator between two cultures.

We see translation as the re-expression of the meaning contained in one language (text A) into another language (Text B). Our view of translation is in line with the Interpretative Theory of translation. We thus deem it necessary to explain this theory.

The Interpretative Theory of Translation

The Interpretative theory (IT) of translation also known as the theory of meaning was developed by Danica Seleskovitch and Marianne Lederer and their counterparts at the École Supérieure des Interpretes et Traducteurs (ESIT), of the University of Sorbonne

3, Paris. This theory sees translation as being based on speech or on human communication in general. It lays emphasis on relaying on meaning in communication. IT is founded on the processes of interpretation, deverbalisation and reformulation or re-expression (Israël, 1990, p. 37). The meaning contained in the original text has to be understood and reformulated in the second language. The theory upholds equivalence in translation rather than one-to-one meaning. This aspect differentiates the IT from the linguistic theory of translation. Lederer (1994: 51) emphasises this difference when she said that the IT is based on the text, while the linguistic theory is based on linguistic elements such as words and syntactic forms. The principles of IT can be summarized as follows:

- a. Translation is an act of communication that permits the translator to send across a message to one speaking a different language.
- b. Translation is an act of communication that brings together two languages with different signs as a result of their being polysomic.
- c. Even though translation makes use of languages, it is not a purely linguistic activity but operates on the message contained in a text. The translator does not work on linguistic significance but on the meaning of the message. He involves his extra linguistic knowledge in his work.
- d. The meaning of signs is revealed in the context and by the four communication situations namely: the source, the function, the medium and the receiver.
- e. Three of these parameters change as the translator carries on his work.
- f. Equivalentents are not found at the language level but at the message level
- g. Equivalence is established when all the ideas contained in a text are well translated thereby delivering the message. In other words, the translation has to deliver the intended message of the author.

Methods of Translating Cultural Realities

We had earlier mentioned Lederer (1998) and Pelage (2000) in the introduction. Both exponents of the Interpretative Theory of translation suggested methods of translating cultural realities. These methods are here discussed.

1. Adaptation

Adaptation is the reformulation of the meaning of a cultural item in another language while relying on the context and translation. An example is that of differences that exist in legal structure which can pose a problem for the translator. In the sentence: She works in a law firm from 8 to 4. Law firm here is in the American context. In the Nigerian context, it will be “law chamber” which will be translated into Igbo as *Uloqoru*

ndi okaiwu (Office of lawyers). It can be seen that each rendition has been adapted to suit the culture of each language.

2. Borrowing

Stroberski (1987) opined that “the development of a language depends not only on its own inner laws, as in the case of an individual, a family and a nation, but on external influences, contacts, and on adopting foreign words as well” (p. 88). In other words, Stroberski feels that words that cannot be translated can be borrowed. In this view point he is supported by Edema (2008, p. 94) who stated that no language escapes borrowing. Borrowed words can undergo phonetic, morphologic and semantic transformations. In this case, the borrowed term is adapted to the rules of the borrowing language. To translate the word **pancake** into Igbo, the word is borrowed as it undergoes phonetic transformation thus: *pankeki*. Other borrowed words that have undergone transformations include fridge = *friji*, bomb = *bombu*, motor *moto* etc. Some translators have borrowed some cultural items and explained them at the footnote or at the end of the book as we will later see.

3. Conversion

In conversion, the translator tries to re-establish in the target culture the notion as in the source culture taking into account the target audience. Let us take the following sentence as an example: “I am tired of eating brown beans”. “Brown beans” are not common in the villages of Igbo community. The brown beans can be translated into *akidi* which is the local beans well known in the Igbo community. He works in Mac Donald’s. Mac Donald’s can be replaced with Mr. Biggs which is what exists in Nigeria.

4. Explanation

Here instead of using a footnote, the translator makes a direct explanation: “I saw her in Mac Donald’s” since there is no such eatery in the Igbo land, the sentence can be translated: *A hụrụ ya n’ụlọ oriri Mac Donald.* (I saw him in Mac Donald’s eatery). In the English version, the information about Mac Donald’s is implicit but in Igbo it is explicit for the target audience is made to know that Mac Donald’s is an eatery.

5. Ethnocentrism

In this, the translator substitutes things in the text with what they imply in her culture. For example, the substitution of Mac Donald’s with Mr. Biggs which exists in Nigeria. Carrefour which is a big supper market in France can be substituted with Shop Right which can be found in Nigeria. Camara Laye’s *L’Enfant noir* is translated *The African Child*. *Noir* is black. But in the context of the novel, the *noir* there refers to the African Child, hence the title.

Translating Cultural Elements Found in Five Books by Nigerian Authors

For the translation of these cultural elements, we considered five Nigerian authors:

- 1) Nkem Nwankwo's *My Mercedes is bigger than yours* that was translated into French.
- 2) Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*
- 3) Wole Soyinka's *The Lion and the Jewel*
- 4) Ola Rotimi's *The gods are not to blame*
- 5) Nwana Pita's *Omenụọ* (written in Igbo language)

How do we translate the cultural elements contained in these books?

We can resort to borrowing. Borrowing according to Vinay and Darbelnet (1958, p. 7) is a technique that consists in preserving in the target language the cultural elements contained in the source language but have no terminological equivalent in the target language. Such borrowing may or may not be followed by explanation. Where the translator has no right to modify the foreign culture, he resorts to borrowing. When the context explains the borrowed word, it will not be necessary to give another explanation. A good example is "the *Odan* tree" used by Wole Soyinka. The reader understands from context that the *Odan* is a type of tree.

When explanation is used, the borrowed term is explained in the form of foot note by the translator. For example, Nkem Nwankwo's *My Mercedes is bigger than yours* has been translated into French. The translator borrowed the Igbo words used but explained them in foot notes thus: The explanations are given in French but we have translated them into English.

Borrowings	Translated foot notes
Agbada	Flowing gown
Alusi	Idol/ god
Borku	Plenty
Dibia	Sorcerer
Gari	Cassava flour
Igbandu	Igbo ritual ceremony
Obi	The meeting house of a chief
Ofo	The rod of the chief
Oga	Sir/ Master
Ogwe	Round wooden bench
Ogwu	Magic
Ozo	A title
Ummunna	Kinsmen

In the case of *Ikenga* which was also borrowed, there was no foot note given because the context makes it clear that *Ikenga* is an Igbo god.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* was written in English but the writer used about 37 Igbo words and phrases which he explained at the end of the novel thus half the work has been done for the translator who now translates the explanations into the desired language. Below is a sample of some of the words and phrases.

Igbo words and phrases	Explanations
Agadi-nwanyi	Old woman
Chi	Personal god
Efulefu	Worthless man
Eneke-nti-oba	A kind of bird
Ilo	The village green, where assemblies for sports, discussions, etc. take place
Jigida	A string of waist beads
Kwenu	A shout of approval and greeting
Ochu	Murder or manslaughter
Osu	Outcast; having been dedicated to a god, the osu was taboo, and was not allowed to mix with the freeborn in any way
Umuada	A family gathering of daughters, for which the female kinsfolk return to their village of origin

Achebe equally used proverbs, but he gave a literal translation of the proverbs used in a way the reader would understand. We were able to identify such proverbs and we gave the meanings or equivalents of the proverbs:

1. The sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them (p. 6) = Early bird catches the worm
2. If a child washes his hands he could eat with kings and elders (p. 6). = A youth with a good behavior will always be welcome in the company of nobles.
3. When the moon is shining, the cripple becomes hungry for a walk (p. 7). = Remembering old cherished habits one can no longer practice
4. A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing (p. 15) = There is no smoke without fire

5. An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in proverb (p. 15) = Old people become glittery when their contemporaries die.
6. The lizard that jumped from high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did (p. 15-16). = If no one appreciates my effort, I know I have done my best.
7. Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching (p. 16). = One should learn to change tactics to suit any situation.
8. You can tell a ripe corn by its look (p. 16) = By their fruits we shall know them
9. Looking at a king's mouth one would think he never sucked his mother's breast (p. 19) = When one rises from poverty and misfortune to greatness, the fact that he was once poor is forgotten
10. When a man says yes, his *chi* says yes also (p. 20). = Will is way

In *The Lion and the Jewel*, Soyinka wrote the songs in Yoruba. Here we are not concerned with translating songs. He used the Yoruba name of a tree "the *Odan* tree" earlier mentioned. He used other words as *Kabiyesi* which is a title and *Baba* which is used by Yoruba children to address their fathers. *Gangan*, and *iya ilu* are also used. As there were no explanations to these words, we tried to find out the meanings. We thus made enquiries from a Yoruba speaking person. From our investigations, we learnt that both *gangan*, and *iya ilu* are talking drums but *iya ilu* is the biggest talking drum. The words were being borrowed and we have given explanation. We did not find any proverb.

Ola Rotimi in *The gods are not to blame* used some Yoruba words whose meanings could be deciphered from the context: "What herbs did you boil?" The answer to the question is "*Asufe eiyeye* leaves". The context thus makes the reader know that *asufe eiyeye* leaves are herbs and the same applies to *dogo-yaro* leaves which is used to cure malaria (p. 13).

The town crier's message (p. 17-18) is written in Yoruba and explained in English by the author. Here also the work of the translator has been made easier. We also did not find any proverb in *The gods are not to blame*.

Proverbs were found in the books written by the Igbo authors Achebe and Nwana. This is not surprising because proverb is an aspect of Igbo heritage woven into their language. Achebe (1958:15) emphasized this by describing proverb as the palm oil with which the Igbo eat words. Proverbs thus remain "a way of life in Igbo culture", Egudu (1979, p. 101). They are ready tools for thinking and communication. They are not used by everyone but mainly by elders and in particular men. It is not easily understood by

everyone that is why someone who uses proverbs in Igbo land is considered to be endowed with wisdom. To understand proverbs, one needs to avail himself in village gatherings or meetings where proverbs are used to express ideas. In the words of Nwadike (2009, p. 4), proverbs are “a form of speech pregnant with meaning”.

Omenukọ is written in Igbo, the proverbs contained in the book are also in Igbo. More than twelve out of the eighteen proverbs found therein are intrinsically bound to Igbo culture and so are unique to this culture. We made a literal translation of these proverbs and gave their meanings. These proverbs can have other meanings in different contexts. The meanings of the proverbs have been explained in the context of *Omenukọ*. Proverbs that are not deeply rooted in the Igbo culture have equivalents in English. We equally gave the literal translation and their equivalents. E = equivalent, M = meaning

Proverb	Literal Translation	Equivalent/Meaning
Awọ adighi agba ọsọ ehihie n'efu (p. 8)	A toad does not run in the daytime for nothing	E= There is no smoke without fire
Ndi oji ọsọ agbakwu ọgu amaghi na ọgu bụ ọnwụ (p. 8)	Those who run to war do not know that war means death	M = The inexperienced gets involved in a dangerous venture without knowing the consequences
Nziza zara ezi zara ụlọ (p. 15)	A broom that swept the compound and swept the house	E = An ill wind that blows no one good
Ọ bụrụ na ọgaranya kere ekpe ma ọ nwụkwaghi, ihere ọnwụ ga-eme ya (p. 17)	When a noble makes a plea, but does not die, he will be ashamed of death	E = Let your yes be yes and your no be no
Site ehihie chọwa nwa ewu ojii, n'ihie na mgbe chi jiri, ọchịchiri gbaakwa, anyi agaghi achotakwa ya (p. 18)	Look for the black goat before night fall because it will be difficult to find it at night	E = A stitch in time saves nine
Ụka akpara akpa eji isi ekwe ya (p. 20)	A matter discussed is concluded by nodding	M = A matter well concluded is as good as signed and sealed
Ọ bụ miri bụ ndụ azụ (p. 20)	Water keeps fish alive	M = We need God to live
Egbe bere ugo bere, nke si ibe ya ebele, nku kwapụ ya (p. 28)	Let the kite perch, let the eagle perch, the one that refuses the other to perch, let it lose its wings	E = Live and let's live
Onye si m nwuo, ya buru okuko ụzọ lakpuo ụra (p. 28)	He who wants me to die let him go to bed before the fowl	M = The one wishing me death should be the first one to die

Ụta gbatarara eleke nti ọba, ya rie ọgụ mkpuru akụ (p. 37)	The bow that is able to shoot <i>eleke</i> the bird would take up to twenty arrows	M = Nothing great is easily achieved
Onye a na-agbara ama ọ na anuri: onye a na-ebo ebubo o kwetala? (P. 43)	One who is happy over an allegation has the accused accepted being guilty?	M= Do not rejoice over an allegation until the accused is found guilty
Onye nwe ozu na-apa ya n'isi (p. 48)	The owner of a corpse carries the head	E = Do not shy away from your responsibility
Nwatakiri gbara akwa n'ọ nne ya ara, a ga-eme ya anaa? (p. 59)	A child that ties wrapper and sucks his mother's breast what will be done to him	M = Someone who is treacherous
Ihe a hughi ka aga-esi mee ya, ka a ga-esi mee ya ga-adi (p. 59)	When you think it is difficult to solve a problem, you will always find a way out	M= Every problem has a solution
Ọkọ kowa madu, madu ibe ya akọọ ya, ma ọkọwa anụ ọhia ọ ga chiwe ahụ ya n'osisi (p. 59)	If someone's back is scratching, he calls someone else to scratch him but if it is an animal, he goes to a tree to scratch his body	M = We should help one another
Nne aturu ga-epu mpi, ekwo di kwa ya aro (p. 61)	Mother sheep wants to grow a horn, I hope her neck is strong	M = He who wants to build a house should first count the cost
Onye no n'ulo ya eche madu ukwu adighi egbu ya (p. 64)	One who is waiting for someone in his house does not have waist pain	M = Patience is needed to achieve success
Onu madu bu onu mmuo (p. 64)	The mouth of man is the mouth of spirit	E = The voice of man is the voice of God
Kama m ga-eriju afọ dachie ụzọ aguo guwa m (p. 79)	Instead of being overfed and falling by the road side let me die of hunger	M = a) Better be upright than soil your hands. b) Say the truth no matter the consequences. c) Say the truth and shame the devil

Conclusion

If we consider translation as re-expressing the meaning contained in a text or message, translating cultural elements is one of such exercises and not only a linguistic exercise where a text is translated word for word. The methods exposed in this work can be of help when cultural elements are translated. The IT was of help in this regard since it sees translation as a re-expression of the meaning contained in a text. Culturally bound

elements can be expressed in another language by re-expressing their meanings in the receptor language as we did with the proverbs found in *Omenyko*. We have demonstrated that cultural elements can equally be translated using different methods. They could be adapted, borrowed, converted, explained and substituted with their equivalents in the receptor language. The translator has to have knowledge of the two cultures and two languages involved to be able to carry out this task. He has to have an extra linguistic knowledge to carry out his work effectively. Translation is a means of transferring a people's culture to the outside world so translating cultural elements from one language to the other enriches the receptor language. Thus culture, translation and language work together to produce effective communication in the society.

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