

## Absence of Local Flavour: Presentation of Igbo Proverbs in English and French

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### Abstract

Cultural elements like language, marriage, food, religion, proverbs, idioms, dressing and others are often richly represented in literary works. African literature on its part has evolved over time with some of the most renowned works written in European languages. However, they may to a large extent be considered as translated texts. This is because the language structure presented in the works usually takes the linguistic form of the authors' mother tongue in spite of the fact that they are presented in a foreign language. The thought pattern of the authors of such works is usually rooted in their African origin. This study is concerned with the presentation of the African culture in the French and English languages. It critically examines an aspect of culture: proverbs. Ten proverbs selected from the English and French versions of Achebe's *Arrow of God*, are analyzed by comparing them with their original Igbo versions. The result shows that these proverbs of Igbo origin lose some of their meaning in the process of re-expression in either English or French because the imagery used represents the different realities of these cultures.

**Keywords:** culture, proverbs, literary translation.

## 1. Introduction

Translation is the art of rendering a text in a given language into another language. It is not merely an interlinguistic process. It is more complex than replacing a source language text with a target language text. Translation involves cultural and educational nuances that can shape the attitudes of those reading the translated text. Thus the translator should be endowed with the capacity to enhance the understanding of the indigenous cultures that generated the thought pattern of the author of the departure text, at the same time mediating ideas across cultural and national boundaries.

In translating literary texts, the translator takes note of the culture of the source and target audience. Cultural symbols may have conflicting representations in different societies. A good example is the Igbo symbol *aturu* which in English means 'lamb'. Whereas the English culture considers the 'lamb' to be a symbol of gentility and obedience the Igbo culture links it to stupidity. This illustration strongly supports the Interpretative Theory of translation which presupposes that the act of translation does not depend solely on words in isolation but rather, the meaning they bear. It therefore presupposes that words have meanings in context and any attempt to interpret them out of their situational contexts may only lead to counter sense or nonsense.

The translator is therefore a bilingual mediating agent between monolingual communication participants in two different language communities (Bennaka 2006:6). Translations are never produced in a sociocultural, economic or political vacuum. They can also not be isolated from the situational contexts in which the texts are embedded. Therefore translators not only have to be intermediaries between different language systems, but also

intercultural mediators (Korzeniowska 2001:1). Accordingly, they have to be both 'bilingual and bicultural.

Generally speaking, African literature produced in European languages is already a form of translation, because the authors thought pattern would obviously be in his mother tongue while he/she uses the foreign language(s) to produce the literary piece. This may be seen in Chimamanda Adichie's *Americanah*, where expressions such as *door knocking* represent a direct translation of the Igbo expression, *iku aka*, used in place of *introduction* or *engagement*. This actually denotes the first stage of the marriage process among the Igbo. The translator of an African literary work would obviously be working with a somewhat translated text. Such a translator would be required to have an in-depth knowledge of the history and culture of the society in which the work is based else errors are bound to occur.

This study is based on the translatability of the Igbo culture with respect to proverbs. Ten Igbo proverbs selected from Chinua Achebe's *Arrow of God* are critically examined. Though the proverbs are written in English, they often take the Igbo linguistic pattern. This system of writing or translation may be referred to as writing Igbo in English. The study also compares the original Igbo versions of the selected proverbs with what is presented not only in English but also in the French translation in *La flèche de Dieu*. The aim of this examination is to evaluate the meaning borne by these proverbs in their French translation from the English. This is to ensure that the meaning is not different from the original.

Every literary work has a purpose for which it was created. One could therefore say that *Arrow of God*, like most of Achebe's works has as its aim the promotion and advancement of African society and civilization. The translated version should also reflect this

purpose and the the meaning of the translated version should not differ from that of the source document. If translation is the transfer of a message, then the translator must recreate the target text in a form that is understood by the target audience. If the translator succeeds in producing a functional text in conformity with the author's intention, then the source text will be congruent with the target text as defined in the skopos theory (Nord 1991:33).

## 2. Proverbs and their Translation

A proverb represents a wise saying commonly understood by people in a given culture. It is a short sentence bordering on issues usually known or experienced by the people. Proverbs may be defined as popular short sayings involving advice or warning (Oxford 1995:3). In his very first novel, *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe defines proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten (6). They may be called feathery ornaments with which a speech is decorated (Amadiume 1995:3). The comparison between proverbs and oil shows that proverbs enliven speeches. Oil is used to eat yam to make it more appetizing and in the same manner, proverbs add color to speech and emphasize important points. Proverbs may also be used by people of the same ethnic group in the midst of foreigners as a means of disguising their meaning.

Proverbs are rooted deeply into culture, that is the totality of human behavior and its products embodied in thoughts, speech or actions acquired through training, education and social experience (Webster 2000). Culture may also be considered as the moral or intellectual behavior of a community. A good example is Achebe's explanation that proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten. This explanation may not be easy to comprehend by someone from another culture.

Proverbs and by extension literary works, are generally associated with the aesthetic component carried by such texts. This

means that they not only represent aspects of beauty and style of the author but also carry lexical and specific grammatical charges that enrich such works. Therefore, the translation of proverbs requires, besides the usual language capacity, specific cultural and artistic skills by the translator, since the translator is not only required to move from one linguistic code to another but to represent adequately the communal wisdom inherent in proverbs. Since proverbs are an embodiment of community wisdom expressed in a few words, the translator should be equipped with exceptional sensitivity as to their origin, connotations and situational or contextual reality. This involves recreating the voice, the rhythm and contextual relevance of proverbs, and the local flavour or color in the target language. It is the ability of the translator to bridge the emotional and psychological divide involved in this task that will constitute his strength. He/she will not only be sharing in the creativity of the author, but will in addition, transport the knowledge of the collective wisdom of a given linguistic community into another. In bringing together literature, proverbs, and translation serious consideration should be given to the place they occupy in the lives of both the departure and target audiences. Effective rendering of the message of African literary works should also be mindful of oral literature as a source.

Generally speaking, every literary work has its specific function. They are also created for particular reasons, either to fight injustice, speak against a social vice, enlighten the public on a particular issue or present/praise a particular culture. One could therefore say that *Arrow of God* was targeted at presenting and praising African culture and civilization particularly to non-Africans. As this presentation is done in such a manner that the translated version is

comprehensible to the target audience, word for word rendering may lead to loss of local flavour.

### 3. Literary Translation and Loss

In understanding the need for local flavour or color in literary translation and especially the translation of proverbs, one should be reminded of the fact that more than one concept is involved. One is faced with literature as a subject as well as translation as a human activity. Because both are complex in nature, it behooves the translator to address the issues surrounding literary appreciation and the complex demands of translation beforehand. Serious consideration is given to the cultural specificities of the departure language in order to determine their significance and acceptability in the target language. The success of any literary translation can only be measured in terms of how much intercultural communication is realized.

In translating proverbs in *Arrow of God*, the cultural evocation of the message has to be clearly replicated in such a way that its impact on the departure audience or cultural space of the author is equally conveyed to the target audience. Often the textual and evocative reality of proverbs are not easily represented in the target language(s), resulting in loss of local color. The reason for this, as explained by Sapir (1956) cited by Bassnett (2002:69), is that 'no two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality'. By reality, he meant that each human community has had its specific linguistic and cultural evolution. This certainly highlights the aspect of loss, and in other situations, gain in literary translation. In considering the two, emphasis is laid on how the core of social and cultural implications

of proverbs are captured in translated texts. This means that a thorough componential analysis of the cultural and functional reality of proverbs is required to establish the link between what they represent in their given culture and how they are linguistically transferred to the target language(s). In a situation where a reader of a translated text does not have a strong background cultural knowledge of the import of translated proverbs, reconstruction of meaning is in the form of compensation, making up for the inevitable loss of the local color involved in the rendering in a foreign language.

Generally speaking the translation of proverbs is bound to encounter certain constraints. This is because of the specificities of proverbs derived from the charge contained in their underlying cultural significance. This must have led Toury (1995) cited by Kenny (2001:50) to specify that proverbs fall under the category of messages that evoke:

The translation of general values or ideas shared by a community – as to what is right and wrong; adequate and inadequate – into performance instructions appropriate for and applicable to particular situations, specifying what is prescribed and forbidden as well as permitted in certain behavioral dimension.

Therefore the burden of loss in the translation of proverbs may not be directly related to the problems posed by the creativity of the author or specific source text features. Rather it stems from the nature of proverbs themselves. One can therefore seek to know if the translator will ever succeed in recreating the exact cultural image and atmosphere in the target language. If yes, would such an image be able to recreate the same effect as was the case in the

departure text? This certainly was the case of the translation of most of the proverbs in *Arrow of God* into English and French. The contextual situation of the *Arrow of God* proverbs in oral literature entails the European languages lacking this context are unable to recreate the local flavour of the proverbs. There is the added factor of the cosmology of the Igbo people from which these proverbs may be dissociated.

#### 4. Some selected African (Igbo) proverbs and their translations into English and French

Igbo	English	French
1) Anaghi eji ngwo ohuu etinye n'udu mmanyi ochie.	A new wife is not brought into an old homestead.	Une nouvelle femme ne doit pas entrer dans une ferme inachevée:
2) Ekwe m aka gafe ikpere aka, oghola ihe ozo.	When a hand shake passes the elbow, then it is turning into another thong.	Lorsqu'on serre la main et que la secousse se ressent au-delà du coude, c'est que cette poignée de main est devenue autre chose.
3) Onye kwe chi ya ekwe	When a man says yes, his <i>chi</i> says yes.	Si un homme dit oui, son <i>chi</i> dit oui également:
4) Okenye anaghi ano n'ulo, ewu amuo n'agbu.	When an adult is in the house, the she-goat is not	Lorsqu'un adulte est dans la case d'une brebis, celle-



	left to suffer the pains of parturition on its' tether.	ci ne souffre pas les douleurs de l'enfantement abandonnée à son piquet.
5) Onye nna ya dunyere ohi n'oji ukwu agbaka uzo.	A boy sent by his father to steal does not go stealthily but breaks the door with his feet.	Un garçon envoyé par son père n'y va pas en cachette mais brise la porte avec ses pieds:
6) A nu n'oku gbara nwoke, anaghi aju ma ogbakwara afo onu ya.	When we hear a house has fallen, we do not ask if the ceiling fell with it.	Quand s'est écroulée, doit-on se demander si le plafond est tombé avec elle?
7) Awo anaghi agba oso ehihie n'efu.	A toad does not run in the day time unless something is after it.	Un crapaud ne coure en plein jour que lorsque quelque chose le poursuit.
8) Onywe ahugho nwuo onye ahugho eli ya.	When a man of cunning dies, a man of cunning buries him.	lorsqu'un homme rusé meurt, c'est homme rusé qui l'enterre.

9) Ijji n'adighi anu ihe n'eso ozu ala n'ili.	The fly who has no one to advice it follows the corpse into the grave.	Si personne ne lui donne des conseils, la mouche suit le cadavre dans sa tombe:
10) Okuko mara n'aka ejiri yo okwa ka aga eji yo ya.	The slave who sees another thrown into a shallow pit should know that he would be buried in the same manner when his day comes.	Cependant que l'esclave qui voit l'un de ses semblables jeté dans un tombe peu profonde sache qu'il sera enterré de la même façon le jour que son tour viendra

### 5. Analysis of the Selected Proverbs: Presence and Absence of Local Flavour

Translation is said to be successful when it is based on context. Since the source text was based on the Igbo context, the target text must also represent the nuances referred to in the source text. A good example is the proverb 'A new wife is not brought into an old homestead'. This stems from the Igbo proverb *Anaghi eji ngwo ohuu etinye n'udu mmanyi ochie*, meaning that new things/wives need new containers/homes. Ezelu in the novel wanted to make his sons see the urgency in preparing new barns for freshly harvested cocoyam. The French version does not depict the same meaning. The proverb was translated: '*Une nouvelle femme ne doit pas entrer dans une ferme*

*inachevée*, meaning ‘a new wife is not brought into an uncultivated farm’.

The second example is taken from the Igbo proverb: *Ekwe m aka gafe ikpere aka, oghola ihe ozo*. This means that one must be careful not to abuse a privilege. This was rendered in English by Achebe as: ‘When a hand shake passes the elbow, then it is turning into another thing’. The French version is: *Lorsqu’on serre la main et que la secousse se ressent au-delà du coude, c’est que cette poignée de main est devenue autre chose*. Though the English and French versions are word for word translations of the original Igbo proverb, the meaning is not lost.

Another illustration of translation based outside the original context is the rendering of the Igbo proverb *Onye kwe chi ya ekwere* in English as ‘When a man says yes, his ‘chi’ says yes’ and in French as *Si un homme dit oui, son chi dit oui également*. The English and French versions are word for word translation of the Igbo version. These translations, though they showcase the Igbo culture to a foreign world, they do not depict the desired meaning. The Igbo ‘Chi’ or personal god is said to accept or reject whatever man accepts or rejects. Man has a role to play in his destiny; man must move, then his ‘Chi’ will move. The ‘Chi’ does not exist in the European context and may not be understood by a European reader. To properly put this proverb in the European context, the local flavour of ‘Chi’ may be lost. A better rendering should have been: ‘Heaven helps those who help themselves’: *aide-toi et le ciel t’aidera*. This is certainly what would have brought the message closer to the target audience.

Gerontocracy was often the practice in pre-colonial Igbo society. Elders are supposed to guide the young not to go wrong. The Igbo people have a saying: *Okenye anaghi ano n’ulo, ewu amuo n’agbu*. Achebe puts it this way: ‘When an adult is in the house, the she-goat is not left to suffer the pains of parturition on its’ tether’. The French version is a direct translation of the English version:

*Lorsqu'un adulte est dans la case d'une brebis, celle-ci ne souffre pas les douleurs de l'enfantement abandonnée à son piquet.* An adult is supposed to foresee and avert avoidable dangers. A literal translation is not likely to convey the appropriate meaning that a mature person should not sit back and watch things go wrong.

The fifth proverb is, 'A boy sent by his father to steal does not go stealthily but breaks the door with his feet'. This stems from the Igbo Proverb: *Onye nna ya dunyere ohi n'iji ukwu agbaka uzo*. When an adult sends a child to do evil, he should not expect that child to do it with caution. The meaning is retained in the English and French translations; *Un garçon envoyé par son père n'y va pas en cachette mais brise la porte avec ses pieds*.

The Igbo people say, *A nu n'oku gbara nwoke, anaghi aju ma ogbakwara afo onu ya*. This may be interpreted 'when a man burns, his beard definitely burns as well'. This means that when the base is shaken, everything else would go down with it. Chinua Achebe puts it this way: 'When we hear a house has fallen, we do not ask if the ceiling fell with it'. This may not be a direct translation from Igbo to English but it does not lose the meaning. The French version, *Quand une maison s'est écroulée, doit-on se demander si le plafond est tombé avec elle?* is a direct translation from the English. It however retains the original meaning.

The seventh proverb: 'A toad does not run in the day time unless something is after it'. This is translated into French as: *Un crapaud ne coure en plein jour que lorsque quelque chose le poursuit*. The original Igbo proverb: *Awo anaghi agba oso ehie n'efu*, means that nothing happens without a cause. Toads are nocturnal animals. Therefore, if a toad is seen running in broad daylight, there must be a problem. The misinterpretation of this proverb in French stems from its misinterpretation in English. A better rendering in English would have been: 'There is no smoke without fire'.

Another case of translation out of context is: *Si personne ne lui donne des conseils, la mouche suit le cadaver dans sa tombe* – If no one

advises the housefly, it follows the corpse to the grave. This is a misrepresentation of the proverb presented in English as: 'The fly who has no one to advice it follows the corpse into the grave'. The root Igbo proverb is: *Ijiji n'adighi anu ihe n'eso ozu ala n'ili*. The lesson Ezelu wanted to teach his people is that all should learn from Akukalia's death, lest they suffer the same fate. The English version is semantically right but needs explanation for a foreigner. Hence the wrong French translation.

The same lesson is depicted in: 'The slave who sees another thrown into a shallow pit should know that he would be buried in the same manner when his day comes' - '*Cependant que l'esclave qui voit l'un de ses semblable jeté dans une tombe peu profonde sache qu'il sera enterré de la même façon le jour que son tour viendra*'. From this proverb, Ezelu warns all that hope to attempt the same act as Akukalia that they would suffer the same fate. This direct translation of: *Okuko mara n'aka ejiri yo okwa ka aga eji yo ya* is not out of context.

In the novel, Akukalia tells his companions, 'When a man of cunning dies, a man of cunning buries him'. By this, he means that he is as cunning as the people of Okperi, so should be left to handle them. This is properly translated into French as: *Lorsqu'un homme ruse meurt, c'est un homme ruse qui l'enterre*.

### Conclusion

Literary translations and especially the translation of proverbs presuppose the existence of a previous creative communication in another language. It is in making reference to the previous communication that one will be able to find the extent to which the translation succeeds in capturing the message of the original. In the case of Achebe's *Arrow of God*, the essentials and comprehension of the proverbs used have their root in the culture of the host community – the Igbo. This is embodied in the aspect of oral

literature of the Igbo people but it is generally absent in most European languages into which the text has been translated. Therefore the translation of the proverbs in *Arrow of God* by the use of equivalence or literal translation usually falls short in conveying the import of the message as in the original. Because Achebe himself was constrained by linguistic limitations he had to make use of the English language, which also had difficulties in conveying the same kind of feeling the proverbs evoked among the Igbo. The loss of local flavour is therefore inevitable when translated. This study shows that the essential components of imagery as well as emotional and psychological evocations were lacking in most of the translations. This means that the target audience will certainly understand the translations but hardly have the same kind of feeling generated in the host community of the proverbs.

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