Lessons in translation: The English to Tiv example

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Received 9 November, 2013; Accepted 14 May, 2013

This paper examines the art of translation, the necessity of translation, the odd ends of translation, and how mistranslation can cause drastic changes in perceptions and policies and also alter a course of life and culture of a people. The paper supports its presentation with a historical analytical survey of misguided translation of English to Tiv lexicon and sentences, and how it affected an appreciation of the Tiv people and their psychology. It records how Christian religion of the colonial days in Tiv land was literally routed due to the “Traduttore Traditore” misinformation given to its converts by her own translators. Finally, the paper provides a guide towards effective translation.

Key words: Translation, culture, Traduttore Traditore, Tiv.

INTRODUCTION

The Latin expression “Traduttore Traditore” as quoted in Adeiyongu (2001) means “translators are traitors”. This expression provides the usually striking signpost for the discussion of infective translation and the effect it generates on a people and policies and implementation generally.

Translation means to transform or change a speech or written material to another language. Adeiyongo (2001) defines translation as the “art of re-writing or representing material rendered in one language or dialect into another with the aim of retaining its original meaning as much as possible”. The translated material can either be spoken or written.

Ajulo (1995), on the other hand, defines translation in relation to what he called “source language (SL)” and “target language (TL)”. Translation according to him is;

“The transfer of material from a source language (SL) together with its subsuming culture into another target language (TL) and its culture (p.7)”

Translators are necessary for effective interpersonal inter-language, or mass communication between people of varying linguistic and cultural backgrounds. It is in knowledge of this that the British colonial overlords trained (basically a half-baked training for targeted goals) and employed the services of interpreters and informants to guide them in the administration of the colonized states. In fact, interpreters or translators were core to the transformation of speeches or written materials, and the dissemination of decisions and policies of the administration to the colonized people of Africa.

The translators themselves saw their rise to importance and felt risen from their underprivileged position. In compulsion, or admittance of this, the colonized people saw translators as advantaged people of a higher class structure, walking shoulder to shoulder with the colonial leaders.

THE TIV PEOPLE AND LANGUAGE

The word Tiv refers to a triad reference point. First, it refers to an ethnic group occupying the savannah belt of River Benue in North central Nigeria; secondly, the word connotes a language and culture of this ethnic group, and
thirdly, it refers to the geographical area occupied by the ethnic group.

The Tiv people have as main home, the present Benue State of North-Central Nigeria, where they predominantly exist in fourteen of the twenty-three local government areas. There is however, a large population of Tiv people inhabiting as their ancestral home states like Taraba, Nasarawa, and Plateau, some northern parts of Cross-River and in the North-Western province of Cameroon. The Tiv of Benue State is surrounded by several ethnic groups like the Arago of Nasarawa State to the North, the Jukun, Kutub and Chamba of Taraba State to the North-East, the Igede (of Southern Benue), Iyala Gakem and Obudu of Cross-River state to the South-East and the Idoma to the South. There exists a short length boundary between the Tiv people and the Republic of Cameroon in the South-East, particularly in Kwande Local Government Area.

The Tiv language is spoken by millions of members of the ethnic group and by a few thousands of non-native speakers. Early attempts to develop the Tiv language were made by European scholars like Rev. W.A Malherbe, R.C Abraham and Rupert East but superficiality and inconsistency marred such attempts at developing the language linguistically. The scholars employed translators who were not well trained for the art (Adeliongo: 1991; East, 1969).

Among the Tiv, one such translator’s name became an epitome of excellence, a metaphor for western education and even synocdochical to standardized English. One often hears Tiv speakers say: “or ne fa yoo agera ka kwagh u nuben ga” (This man knows Standard English to a serious level). Or of a student telling his mate “or ne, me za hen yoo agera man me hide” (My man, I will go for studies before returning). Yoo Agera was a scribe and translator to a district officer under Tiv Native Authority.

TRANSLATORS AND THE PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

The art of translation poses problems to many translators. In films, books, radio, speeches and other media of communication, evidences abound of translators being traitors to their people, misinforming their people ignorantly or even consciously, or trying to appease their employers by not rendering the exact words or meanings.

The saswood ordeal or last measure tests-an equivalent of an Appeal Court session- which serious offenders were to undergo so as to dictate guilt, administer justice and punish offenders in Tiv was abolished because of Traduttori Traditore. But had the policy maker been better informed, and had cared to examine Tiv literature, and psychology they would have found a proverb “Kor ngu ken ato” (guilt is in the hearing).

Similar proscription was slammed on “Hoyo” (an anti-witchcraft movement), “Ibem” (organized group hunting) “Yamshe” (exchange marriage) and “Ibiamegh” (rites of harmony). And the reason was that translators had not found or cared to use or locate “the same semantic frame” or the same social and psychological connotations necessary to get their recipients understand these movements’ efforts in the development process of society.

One could not wholly blame the British colonial administrators but the translators in the abolition of “Yamshe” (exchange marriage). It was as much one trammel of traitorous act by the translators that limited the conception of their masters in taking the decision. It was widely believed that the translators told their overlords that “Yamshe” means “purchase marriage”, and not barter type of exchange of female wards or relations in marriage that it actually was, and traces could still be found in Tivland and even in some parts of Nigeria. Thus, the furious administrators wondered how on earth a people could undermine human rights by subjecting their females to a “purchase” marriage, immediately abolished the marriage system. Meanwhile, the people had no serious squabbles with the marriage system.

And this boils down to the issue of translating materials purely on an intuitive perspective or denotative level. Such a rendering of transferred meaning is both inadequate and telling on the incompetence of the translator. The consequences are both limitless and timeless. For instance, “Ibiamegh” was proscribed and it also went away with drumming and music making, ensuring the loss of some musical instruments and songs associated with it. The proscription of “Yamshe” equally dealt a dangerous blow on the Tiv nation in varying ways and degrees. The accompanying music and dance which ensured excitement, peaceful harmony and unity was punctured, and the atmosphere subdued.

Scholars, including European anthropologist have emphasized the integral nature and importance of music to Tiv life and culture. The Ibiamegh rites, according to Igoll (1987), were accompanied with dramatic performances and music making. So was Yamshe. While abolishing the Ibiamegh, the colonial overlords also dealt a “blow” on drumming and music making. This is because a special “music and dance style” was exclusively meant for the “initiates of Akombo a biam.” Also, special or re-twisted songs were lost.

The problems of translators are varied. An understanding of these problems would place us in a position of appreciation and objective assessment of their renderings. And at the same time it helps us to avoid those pitfalls which make translators liars.

The piece or linguistic property to be translated may contain certain linguistic, aesthetic, technical, cultural, political, ethnic or such other complex elements which may render effective translation almost impossible.

Robert (1971) Quoted in Adeiyongo (2001) believes in the near-impossibility of effective translation:

…There is no exact equivalent in one language for even the most concrete words of another. The word “bread”, for instance, cannot be translated into another language.
It has not the same weight, the same age, the same semantic frame, the same degree of expressiveness; it indicates the same object but without the same social and psychological connotations (p.250).

An anthropologist and British colonial administrator working on Tiv people and culture, Rupert East, admits the difficulty in the art of translation. He narrates his experience in translating a Tiv text Akiga’s Story (1939):

Linguistically, we lack points of contact for expressing even the most familiar objects let alone more intimate or abstract ideas. Words...not only represent different concepts in themselves but the associations which form their setting, especially these mystical associations are many poles apart (P.10).

ABOLITION AND DISTORTION OF LIFE AND CULTURE

Probably confronted with these problems and or perhaps serving as an excuse source to determined repressive decision making, the British overlord abolished certain established social and religious institutions in Tivland. Thus the socio-cultural, economic and religious life of the Tiv people was distorted and disrupted due to ineffective translation.

Celebrating marriage, extolling the marriage institution, and advising the bridegroom in a dance and song session were much elaborate social performances of “Yamshe” marriage. Also, the revolutionary songs of “Hoyo” movement which spurred the youths to be fearless in their pursuit, and the ibem and its fanfare all went with their abolition thus wiping away vital dramatic aspects of the social and cultural life of the people. The Tiv were far from being impressed, and this, according to Ahire (1993) “triggered violence in 1929, 1939, 1945 and 1948.”

The abolition of these cultural and dramatic aspects was subtly traced to the unrelenting pressure mounted by the Christian missionaries on the colonial administration. They misinterpreted Tiv cultural and religious nuances and attempted to garner an already prostrate support for the final onslaught.

Igoil’s (1987) anger lies on the crippling of Tiv vibrant music and dance. He insists:

The Christian missionaries have been in the forefront in causing change on the Tiv music and dance. Initially, the missionaries aimed their attacks on the belief system of the people and it was by extension that the music and dance was affected.

In their attempts to keep hold of converts, the missionaries insisted that Tiv music and dance was capable of “conjuring up witch elements”, as one elder put it, and the dance often “accompanied with drinking” (Igoil, 1987).

The missionaries however soon found their fault as they sooner integrated Tiv music into church activities. Rubingh (1969) attests to the missionaries’ withdrawal of decision and subsequent achievement:

By her greater willingness today to use indigenous forms of Music and liturgy, the Tiv church better interprets her purpose to the Tiv yet outside... (P.9).

This later incorporation of Tiv music into the church did not however help to regurgitate some of the lost musical instruments like “ibua” flute or the songs.

The Christian churches also have had a more than fair share of denotive, intuitive or literal interpretation and translation of materials in Tiv. Andrejezwski and Ernest (1975) have warned against literal translation:

...Instead of giving an insight into the original, distorts it by violating the rules of the target language to give a bizarre and aesthetically offensive impression that some readers may be misled into attributing to some defect in the source language (P.55).

PARADIGMS OF THE DESTRUCTIVE NATURE OF TRANSLATION

The Christian translators wore their traitorous garments in spite of the above warning, during translations of English to Tiv preaching. Their “art” is regularly related and mocked at during verbal discussions across the length and breadth of Tivland and the researcher found out in the empirical data sourced using the instrument of interview with Elder Kasha Doki, Tica Apir, Danboki Nongur, Pilabaki, Tarkighir Atulo, Naazenga Abochi and Uzan Agera Yough, respected community leaders and elders. The basic objective is to show errors and chart a way forward.

When the preacher said in English “we mean business” the translator’s transmission was “se soo kpenga” (meaning we want to engage in business activities). “se” literally means “we”, “soo” means “like” and “kpenga” means “business”. The translation here is direct and literal rather than being connotative.

Another such literal translation occurred when the preacher said “Jesus is coming around”. But the translator in his intuitive perception (provided he was sincere) rendered it differently: “Yeesu ngu van gbilititi”. Speakers of Tiv will laugh at this misinterpretation of the adverb “round” (uzenden van hen ijiir) for the preposition “around” (gbilititi).

Another obstacle which translators face is the misplacement of phonics sounds as can be observed in the following examples: “I am a Revered Father...” and the translator interpreted “mngu Fada u sha pue-kar-mom” meaning (I am the eleventh father). In this case, “Reverend” is confused for “eleventh” because of their similar sound in Tiv. In another example, an instruction
was given by the preacher to converts in efforts to ensuring punctuality: “Every individual should be punctual” said the preacher, and the translator traitorously conveyed, “Hanma or yo nan a ndivir ijuai shi nan a pan tswar” meaning rather differently in English (Every individual should twist his penis and expose his anus). The dicey pun is on the close sound systems in the word “individual” which is close in sound to “bending” or “twisting” (ndivir) in Tiv and “punctual” which sound similar to “pan tswar” (expose the anus). Unskilled translators!

Three other instances of phonic misapplication occurred in the following lines: “I have been to Lagos”. The translator’s intuitive rendering was “mngu a alev shin Lagos” (meaning in English “I have beans in Lagos”). The confusion here lies in the lack of clear demarcation of the sound system or the unclear comprehension of the speaker by the translator. And when the speaker continues “I have been to many places”, the confusion is continued as the translator relates: “mngu a alev ajir wue wue” (meaning in English “I have beans in many places”). In yet another confused translation, the preacher began feeling rather universal in concept “Every human being…”, the bizarre translation is “hanma or nan huma ambi” (meaning in English “Every body should fart”) “huma ambi” (fart) is close in sound to the English words “human beings”. Wonderful things translators can do!

THE CRESCENDO OF MISTRANSLATION AND THE EFFECTS

On that dramatic day when the preacher cautioned new converts that “Every individual should be punctual” and the translator offensively replied in Tiv “Every body should twist his penis and expose his anus”, the congregation was baffled and daunted even the women who possess no phallic organ. Many began to disperse. Feeling he only needed to calm down members of his congregation, which is expected during emotionally soaked preaching, the preacher said “Lend me your ears”. The translator’s intuitive sense directed him thus: “gbam nen injo i ato ene” (meaning in English “give me credit of your ears”). Not taking things for granted (a white man was never known to ask for credit! Certainly not of one’s ears, they may be cut off) the congregation continued their uproarious dispersal. No “native” could take the whiteman for granted.

Surprised, the preacher demanded “why are they running?” And the translator translated to the few around; “or u nan yevese gay o…!” (Meaning in English “the person who does not run…!”). More moved the converts increased their pace, and the perplexed preacher thundered: “call them back”. He too was certainly surprised at the translation this belated time around, or perhaps was dazed to see his sweat-earned converts trooping out of the church in numbers. The translation of “call them back” was “ikor mba ken ajime mbela” meaning in English “those behind should be caught”. “ikor.” “Caught” is close in sound to “call”.

Now nobody needed to be told that the preacher temporarily lost his hard-earned converts except the translator. As the last batch of converts was trooping out in the last row, it belatedly dawned on the preacher that his trusted translator had betrayed him, and he managed the few words he knew in Tiv “mkaa nahala ga” meaning in English “I haven’t said it like that”. But he was speaking not to his congregation except his translator. What bad translation can do!

AVOIDING THE PITFALLS OF MISTRANSLATION

The roadmap to effective translation is proffered by scholars like Andrezjewski (1975), Clara (1971) and Adeiyongo (2001).

The misapplication of sound similar to the one given should be avoided. If translators know that assonance (similarity in vowel sound) does not imply similarity in meaning, the misapplication of sound to the one given could be avoided. Should the translator study the sounds of the target language, misplacement of phonic sounds will not arise.

The translator should attempt to avoid literal translation since literal translation is a basically intuitive perception which leads to misinterpretations; the translator should attempt to avoid that and strive for (in fair terms) connotative interpretation and the associations attached to objects, concepts and ideas.

The translator should learn the rules and sounds of the target language and be conversant with the technical, aesthetic, ethnic, religious, political and socio-cultural aspects of the target language. Should the translator lack adequate knowledge and psychology of the target language, he should use idiomatic translation where according to Adeiyongo (2001) “the primary objective is for the message to remain the same instead of preserving the form.” This kind of translation reverses the inter- linear or word for word translation where words in the two languages are written on alternating lines; meaning is at the core of this kind of translation.

Basically, Nida (1969) and Ajulo (1995) postulate that translation should undergo triad stages: the proper analysis of a source text, the transfer of the analysed text, and restructuring of transferred text material for effective translation.

The long stretches of examples aim to show such areas of pitfall in the art of translation and how we could overcome them. As such, this paper is not to discourage the art of translation or denounce translation in so far as they are competent and sincere, but also very much to show the varying degrees of conflicting diversities, obstacles and the countering strategies for prevention. This is because, problems of translation according to Ajulo...
(1995) range from “degrees of difficulty to total impossibility”.

CONCLUSION

Translators should not however be daunted. They should strive for the connotative meaning, the semantic frame, the rules of both the source language and the target language, the proper association of words, concepts, intimate or abstract objects and images, psychology and socio-cultural frame of both languages.

Striving at success should be the watch word for translation is necessary in linguistic, political, economic, religious, administrative, judicial, social and cross-cultural communication. Chute (1971) believes that “Without translation, our world would narrow mercilessly.” But one needs to face the critical challenges in the art of translation, have an adequate knowledge of the two languages and employ intelligent skills to achieve an effective translation and then help disprove the Latin aphorism “Traduttore Traditore”.

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