

*Full Length Research Paper*

# **Semiotic translation and the expression of African thoughts and cultural values in English**

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**This paper identifies different situations which give rise to translation from the indigenous African languages. The relationship between language and thought on one hand and between language and culture on the other is fully discussed. Also stressed in the paper is the role of language in promoting cultural understanding. Attempt is made in the paper to identify different types of translation. As many scholars have already written on intralingual and interlingual types of translation, this paper focuses on offering possible solutions to the problem of distortion of African thoughts and cultural values arising from semiotic translation from the native African languages.**

**Key words:** Translation, semiotics, African thought, language and culture.

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Translation involves the use of two languages- the language from which a text is translated, referred to as the source-language, and the language to which a text is translated which is the target-language. In translation, the task, which a translator faces, is the rendering of a source-language text into a target language in such a way that the surface meaning of the text in the two languages will be similar. Accordingly, Urgese (1989) simply defines translation as any transfer, for any reason, of any text from one language code to another language code.

As this paper involves semiotic translation, it is pertinent to dwell a bit here on what semiotics is all about. the term 'semiotics' refers to the science of signs and is derived from the Greek word 'semeion'. This science proposes that all human communication is made up of signs. Semiotics concerns the study of the signs-systems by which meaningful communication or literary discourse occurs. In mythologies, for example, a study of social semiotics, which concerns the connotations which social and cultural signs carry in popular culture, has

been established.

In short, the translator's objective is to completely transfer into another language the merits of an original work in such a manner that the translated work is so distinctly apprehended and strongly felt by a native speaker of the target-language as it is by those who speak the source-language of the original text. It should be noted that the term 'text', as used in translation, is not restricted to a paper, a poem, a novel or a story. A text is a describable and patterned piece made out of language. It is used in linguistics to refer to any passage, spoken or written, of whatever length. There are various situations which give rise to translation. We are now in a modern world which is rapidly transforming into a global village. This transformation, in turn, gives rise to the need for close relationship and better understanding of peoples, cultures and civilizations. It is only through effective communication and cooperation among people in various parts of the globe that this need can be realized. In order to achieve all these, translation must be utilized since there are as many languages in the world as there are

nations. Moreover, it is through translation that people have access to some literary works irrespective of the languages they use. As a way of illustration, Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, originally written in English, is also available in French and German. Similarly, Oyono's *L'Aventure Ambigue* is also available in English. However, in translating from one text to another, there are certain issues a translator should put into consideration. These include the intended message and the audience of the original author, his situational analysis and his background and period. These issues should guide the translator in the choice of words and manipulation of other aspects of language usage in such a way as to minimise the weakening of meaning of the original text.

One other situation that gives rise to translation is the interpreter-mediated communication involving spontaneous face-to-face interaction. There are various kinds of professional encounters which necessitate this kind of translation. The commonest among them include the police, immigration and welfare services, interviews, doctor-patient interviews, business negotiations, political interviews, lawyer-client and courtroom interpreting and so on.

The colonization of most African countries by Europe from the 15<sup>th</sup> century to the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century created a special need for translation in Africa. Within this prolonged colonial period, most Africans were made to cherish and imbibe the cultures of their colonial masters to the detriment of their indigenous cultures. The adoption of the western culture by Africans featured most in language, among other areas. As a result of this situation, African creative writers, while thinking in their indigenous languages, use European languages as a medium in their writing. This is a form of translation. All the issues highlighted above account for the prominence given to translation studies throughout the world today.

## Objectives

The article has a three-fold objective. In it, efforts are made to explain what translation in general and semiotic translation in particular are all about. Secondly, the problems associated with the use of translation in African creative writing are highlighted. Finally, ways of minimising the problems created while translating from African languages to European languages are suggested.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to get this article well situated, a literature review is needed. This literature review is based on the key aspects of the study. The views of experts on the aspects clarify the issues related to the article thereby making it easy to be understood.

## Language, culture, thought and translation

Language, culture and thought are interwoven. These three phenomena are so interrelated that the use of one often entails the use of the other. The word 'culture', although within people's daily vocabulary, is often misunderstood and misused. Culture is an all-embracing term. It refers to all the aspects of a people's life. This is why Ikegulu (1989) sees it as the total life and experiences of a people at any given moment of history. Quoting Malinowski, Biobaku (1982), on his part, elaborately defines culture as *that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, customs, and any other abilities acquired by man. Culture, accordingly, encompasses those conventional understandings and practices which give a people their uniqueness and thus render such a people distinct from all others.*

The implication of the above definitions is that culture embraces all the aspects of a man's life. It is language that determines one's concept of reality. Language is no mere passive recording instrument, which reflects a pre-existing reality of which we are aware. It is an essential factor in forging what our conception of reality is. In other words, a people's world view is a function of the language they use. It is for this reason that Yule (1996) cautions that the existence of different world views should not be ignored when different languages or language varieties are studied. The relationship between language and culture is a truism. People in different societies perceive and conceive of the world in radically different ways and these differences are largely to be explained in terms of their possessing radically different languages. This fact amply demonstrates that language and culture are inseparable.

Scholars have also emphasized the role of language in promoting cultural understanding. Giving a reason why priority should be accorded language learning, Adekunle (1995) states that cultural and social contexts usually widen horizons of the mind. As he puts it, languages are a means of opening the gates to the cultures of other countries. They help us to look out and participate in the other world. As he observes, the fact that language has far-reaching implications for national cohesion, cultural identity and economic development of all countries makes governments all over the world try to decide on ways of treating or managing language resources within their territories.

Undeniably, a close relationship also exists between language and the ability to think. Language is a creative power – a means through which we do most of our thinking. For instance, there is no way we can think without using words. Even when we are not speaking, we constantly use words in our heads to help us to think. Thinking cannot go on at all without using words. It should be noted, however, that translation may involve non-verbal communication. In this case, a translator should employ a high degree of imagination and language

skills to enable him to interpret gestures and actions.

It has also been affirmed by experts that it is only by clothing his thoughts in words that a writer can think at all. The inability to put his thoughts in words creates a barrier to his thought. In short, language is not only the medium of thought but the very stuff and process of it.

Akwanya (1999) (APA Style) describes language as a tool that is used in conveying information about the contents of the mind, and the shape of the world. He goes further to add that writing, an aspect of language, is an agent for conveying a thought which already exists in the mind while speech represents thought through conventional signs. From the views highlighted earlier, the important close relationship that exists among language, culture and thought is not in doubt at all.

Commenting on the problem involved in translating African creative works, Dijk (2010) observes that translating African creative works is a double 'transposition' process: a primary level translation, that is the expression of African thought in a European language by an African writer, and a secondary level of translation, that is the transfer of African thought from one European language to another by the translator.

Hanada Al-Masri (2009) stresses the importance of cultural understanding in translation. According to him, cultural understanding during the process of translation of is extremely essential, especially in the translation of literary texts. Translation of literary texts requires an effort on the part of the translator to retain the cultural information of the source text in the target text. Cultural translation involves the translation of linguistic structures as a part of culture in which the translator takes into account not only the equivalence of meaning but also investigates higher levels of contents, context, semantics and pragmatics.

On his part, Gottlieb (2005) believes that style and talents of the individual translator play a key role in shaping the translated text. It is his view that the individual translator and his or her specific choices are the most decisive factor in the translation of language. Jiang (2003) emphasizes the need for the translator to understand the motivations underlying the linguistic choices in literary language. Actually, reflecting on and trying to understand the linguistic choices made by the author will go a long way in helping the translator to arrive as closely as possible at the original meaning of a text.

In summary, the literature review has brought into focus the major issues involved in this article. These include the relationship between language and culture, the issue of language and thought and that of translation.

## METHODOLOGY

The issues in this article are anchored in the theory of Critical Discourse Analysis-CDA. Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is the general label for a special approach to the study of text and talk, emerging from critical

linguistics, critical semiotics and in general from a socio-politically conscious and oppositional way of investigating language, discourse and communication. In short, language use, discourse, verbal interaction and communication are central in CDA. The theory studies discourse and its functions in society and the ways of society, especially how social issues are expressed, represented, legitimated or reproduced in text and talk. Discourse denotes language in use as a social practice with particular emphasis on larger units as utterances, paragraphs or whole texts.

Critical Discourse analysts raises issues that are relevant to and important for a study of text and talk. A text is a describable and patterned unit made out of language. It is a structure of messages or message traces which has a socially ascribed unity. Texts have their place in a social system of signs that is dynamic. Interpretation of texts focuses on the ways in which they operate in the world, including how they are made, disseminated and read. CDA analysis take an explicit position and work hard to understand, expose and ultimately resist what may prevent the production of unbiased thought in text and talk in the social and political context. Among the aims of CDA studies is the attempt to uncover, reveal or disclose what is implicit, hidden, or otherwise not immediately obvious in a discourse. According to the theory, language users as social actors have both personal and social cognition. This cognition includes personal memories, knowledge and opinions as well as those shared with members of a social or cultural group. Both types of cognition play an important role in the reception of the contents of text and talk.

CDA stresses the relevance of context to the understanding of text and talk. Context is defined as the mentally represented structure of those properties of the social situation that are relevant for the production or comprehension of discourse. In other words, context helps in the production or comprehension of text. Recipients of the contents of a text or talk need the knowledge and beliefs associated with the information to which they are exposed for a full understanding. This fact emphasizes the importance of the whole communicative situation. Context of situation which refers to the social context of a text makes allowance for meaning to be fully understood. While a description of a speech in a text may refer to such formal features as vocabulary, syntax and other linguistic structures, it is the social context that elicits them and makes them meaningful. CDA typically studies how context features influence the reception of the contents of text or talk.

The discussion of the issues raised in this article is in accordance with the provisions of the Critical Discourse Analysis. As is the case with the method of Critical Discourse Analysts in investigating language, discourse and communication, meaning is given a lot of prominence in the article. Different factors which affect meaning in the process of communication are identified and fully discussed. Among these factors which a translator should

take into consideration are such social issues as the cultural values and the living manners of the people. Similarly, the issue of misunderstanding concepts and how this can affect the understanding of the original text is highlighted in the article. This is in line with the importance attached to the need to avoid what may prevent a clear understanding in communication. Furthermore, as provided in CDA, the article stresses the need for a translator to project the spirit and psychology of people involved in a communication process in a text to ensure a full understanding by the readers.

In consonance with the practice of the critical discourse analysts while analyzing a text, a form of stance is taken in the article. As a way of improving translation from African languages to English, African creative writers in English are enjoined to embark on the domestication of English by using the language creatively. The works of some African creative writers enjoy a lot of popularity as a result of their creative use of English. Using English this way enhances the understanding of their texts. From the points made earlier, it is clear that the article is written within the theoretical framework of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA).

### **TRANSLATION AND THE EXPRESSION OF AFRICAN THOUGHT AND CULTURAL VALUES**

Three types of translation can easily be identified. These include intralingual translation, interlingual translation and semiotic translation. Intralingual translation operates within the same language. It involves an interpretation of the verbal signs by means of other verbal signs in the same language. This operation is often referred to as rewording. Interlingual translation, on the other hand, operates within, at least, two languages, the source language and the target language. In this type of translation, the target language is used to express the verbal signs of the source language. In semiotic interpretation, language code units are used to convey messages. A sign itself has two essential components, namely a material signifier and what is mentally signified. Accordingly, words and other expressions are held to be signs which, in some sense, signify or stand for other things. This fact actually complicates the whole world of translation since each language has its own system of signs. In other words, the signs used in one language are different from those used in another language. It is, therefore, the translator's task to make sure that the words and expressions which he uses in the target language bring out as much as possible the original meaning expressed in the source language.

Semiotics involves the investigation of apprehension, prediction and meaning. It delves into how it is that we develop meaning, making predictions and apprehend the world. This science concerns the study of the sign-systems by which meaningful communication or literary

discourse occurs. In mythologies a study of social semiotics, which concerns the connotations which social and cultural signs carry in popular culture, has been developed.

### **Semiotic translation**

The relevance of the concepts highlighted above to the theory of semiotic translation is of vital importance. As mentioned earlier in the paper, semiotics concerns the use of signs for the purpose of communication. Semiotic translation refers to the mental effect produced by a sign. This mental effect is referred to as a concept. Concepts are concerned with the relationship that holds between language and the world. In short, a concept is an idea, thought or mental construct by means of which the mankind apprehends or comes to know things. In this case, concepts mediate between words and objects. An individual concept is a natural sign of the object and it can be regarded as the meaning of the written or spoken word, which, by convention, signifies it in a particular language.

In another sense, semiotic translation can be seen as a process by which the chain of signifiers that constitutes the source language is replaced by a chain of signifiers in the target language. It is on the basis of interpretation that this type of translation is carried out. The translator goes about this by the process of decoding in the source language and recoding in the target language in order to arrive at the equivalent meanings or messages from one culture to the other. For example, a writer who is translating from the Igbo language to the English language will decode the Igbo word 'uno' and recode it as 'house' in English. Most African writers who use European languages as their media for writing engage in this type of translation. For an illustration, an Igbo writer who uses English as his medium will have to replace his Igbo concepts or signifiers with the English concepts or signifiers.

As a result of the prolonged British colonization of some African countries, the English language plays a unique role in the continent. In most of the countries concerned, English is the official language, the official medium of instruction at the primary, secondary and tertiary levels of education and a common language which the masses with different native languages use to talk to each other. Above all, English is predominantly the language of writing in these countries. Stressing this fact, with reference to Nigeria, Adama (1989) points out that a lot of creative activity in the country is carried on in English. He observes that most novels, plays and poems are written in English. The implication of all these is that the creative writers in the former British African colonies use semiotically translated English in their writing. These creative African writers conceive their ideas in their native languages and translate these ideas into English. The

implication of this situation is highlighted below.

### **The negative impact of translation on African thought and cultural values**

Signs and what they stand for have been given a lot of attention in linguistics. Consequently, a variety of meanings of “meaning” has been distinguished. Linguists are concerned with the problems of misunderstanding and misinterpretation arising from the use of signs for communication. These problems are the direct result of the tendency to think that there is some inherent and indissoluble link between signs and what they stand for. Communication will actually be improved and clarity of thought facilitated if it is realized that the relationship between words and signs is purely derivative – an imputed, non-causal relationship, arising from their association in the mind of the speaker and listener, or writer and reader during the process of communication.

Most linguists agree that, whatever might have been the case at some earlier stage of man’s evolutionary development in all known languages, the connection between a word and what it stands for is, with relatively few exceptions, arbitrary. Moreover, different societies live in distinct cultural worlds. The language of any society is culture bound and represents the social reality that is peculiar to it. No two languages are, therefore, ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality.

It is in this context that the problems associated with translation from the African languages to the European languages can be fully understood and appreciated. There can be no perfect equivalence through intralingual, interlingual or semiotic translation since each language unit has embedded within it a set of non-transferable associations and connotations. It is on the basis of this fact that critics of literary translation of African creative writing have based their argument. They are of the view that a reliable translation of inbred characteristics of African thoughts and beliefs as well as societal perception of man and cultural values of man into European languages is impossible. Undoubtedly, there exist untranslatable cultural, philosophical and behavioural shades of meanings in African expressions.

African creative writing is so interwoven with culture that it can also be referred to as cultural texts. In these texts there are numerous terms, words or images which reflect much cultural significance that is untranslatable into English or any other European language. Senghor, for instance, often invokes images of ancestral funeral rites in his writing. In short, African creative writing is largely a rendering of African living manners and ways of life that are innate in Africans and are not similar to the English or other European ways of life.

Contracting or eliminating such expressions in the source language which are not translatable into the target

language is quite injurious to the original text. Unfortunately, some translators resort to this practice while translating. Missionaries and colonial administrators adopted this manner of translation during the colonial era. In their translation, they used criteria that did not transcend purely linguistic decoding and recoding and ignored the fact that culture acts as a frame within which external signs or reality are interpreted. It is this practice by missionaries that led to the wrong and controversial translation of the Igbo word ‘ekwensu’ into English as ‘devil’. Reacting to this translation, Opata (2005) laments that the colonial language is generally the official language in the former African colonies of Europe. Consequently, he goes on, many indigenous concepts in translation have suffered semantic traumas. The concept of ‘devil’ does not even exist in Igbo world view. This type of translation, which ignores the culture and reality of the target language results in the production of a text that is not original. It also destroys the African thought and cultural values, which an author wishes to portray in his text.

### **CONCLUSION**

The amount of distortion, misconception and mis-representation of African world and cultural values arising from translation is a matter of concern for every patriotic African. African writers have risen to this challenge through one way or the other. Many African scholars have called on African creative writers to discontinue with the use of the English language in their writing. African writers who think that they feel at home in the European languages are challenged to be honest enough to admit that they are yet to be faithful to their culture which they claim they are promoting in their writing.

It is of utmost importance for African nations to work very hard to bring their languages to the limelight. This will, in no small measure, minimize the need for translation. It is not out of place for African policy makers to dream of getting their indigenous languages to enjoy the same status as enjoyed by such cosmopolitan languages as English and French. A virile language policy is urgently needed in African countries.

The present – day reality, however, makes it imperative for the use of translation to continue. Since we have texts written in different numerous languages of the world, the role of translation cannot be jettisoned. What is desirable rather is to think of ways of improving translation theory and practice, hence, the suggestions made below.

### **Suggestions**

One of the ways of improving the quality of translation is through the domestication of the target language. In the process of translation, foreign languages should be used

in such a creative way as to project the psychology and spirit of the African peoples as well as portraying their original thought and cultural values. This is responsible for the huge success enjoyed by Achebe and Oyono in their writing. These two authors manipulate their use of English and French respectively in such a way as to project the psychology, spirit, values and mannerism of their people. As Okolie (2000) asserts:

*By seizing the English or French word, wringing off its neck, and subjecting it to basic apprentice in African culture, sensibility, linguistics, psychology and sense of rhythm, the African writer or translator has hardly any more gags to his ability to put across his feeling.* This is actually what Achebe and Oyono have done in their use of English and French respectively to convey their feelings effectively in their writing.

For the already translated African writing, it is strongly advocated here that the mistranslated African concepts require some type of recuperation. In other words, those African concepts which have suffered from stigmatization, misunderstanding and misconstrue as a result of translation should be recuperated. This exercise involves recovering what these concepts mean in their indigenous settings, how the people who own the concepts use them and what they designate with them.

Furthermore, translation studies should be taken seriously for the sake of improving translation practice. The objective of the studies should be to train translators who are capable of choosing signifiers to reproduce the original text in such a way as to reproduce the original thought and cultural values of the foreign author. In short, such translators should appreciate the need for an integrated approach to translation theory and practice.

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