Translation as a bridge across languages and cultures: The case of French and Igbo

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Abstract

This paper investigates the role of translation in bridging barriers, notably linguistic, cultural, economic, social and diplomatic among nations as well as in globalization. The objective of the paper is to examine some aspects of French and Igbo languages and cultures which translation has made possible. To achieve this, data are collected/drawn from different aspects of the two languages and cultures such as: idioms/proverbs, gastronomy/food, clothing/dressing and social activities. French is one of the Indo-European languages spoken in the metropolitan France and other Francophone countries around the world while Igbo is an African language of the Niger-Congo family spoken in Nigeria by the Igbo-speaking race and it is one of the three major Nigerian languages. The choice of the two languages is to show the translatability of human languages despite their genetic and typological differences. The exercise reveals that the two languages though different in many respects are mutually intelligible through translation as evidenced in our work and some others before it such as the translation of Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" (a compendium of Igbo culture) from English to French. The importance of translation in globalization as

an agent of human development and a bridge across cultures and languages is made evident in this article through examples drawn from the two languages and cultures.

1.0 Introduction

Translation as an academic and intellectual activity has been going on in every human linguistic community. The word translation derives from the Latin word 'transferre' which means 'to carry or lead something across'. What is led across from one language to another is obviously the meaning/message. Translation has been variously defined and described by different scholars. Some, for example, Ajunwa (1999: 13) defines translation as a means of communication born out of cultural contacts and interactions between speakers of different languages. Inggs & Meintjes (2009: xiii), extending the notion of translation beyond mere transfer from one language to another, include contemporary understandings of the various aspects of transnational and transcultural encounters that constitute the subtexts in the global context. Newmark (1981:7) defines translation as a craft consisting in the attempt to replace a written message and/or statement in one language by the same message and/or statement in another language. Eke and Ugoji (1999:1) describe translation as the transfer of the meaning of words and expressions from one language to another.

This paper agrees with all the definitions of translation above, but considers Newmark's definition and that of Eke & Ugoji as too narrow. This is because the paper wishes to apply the

various aspects of cultural encounter to translation and not to consider it only from the point of view of writing message/statement or transferring meaning of words & expressions from one language to another. It wishes to extend the scope of translation by including every aspect of human contact and relationship, any aspect of transfer, whether it is in the area of culture as in gastronomy, hospitality, clothing, literature, art, music, burial, entertainment, flora and fauna, etc. Every change in behaviour or outlook by any group as a result of contact with another group of different language and culture will be regarded as translation in this paper. The motivation for the paper is to highlight the importance of translation in globalization in making it possible for the two different languages from totally different cultures and outlook to communicate and interact effectively.

To achieve this objective, the paper examines the effects of translation by considering both its positive and adverse effects. Under its positive effects, translation will be discussed as an agent of change, as human uniting force and as an instrument for the cross-fertilization of languages. The adverse effects of translation will be discussed under the following factors namely, language endangerment, language shift, code-mixing/code-switching and language death.

2.0 Effects of translation

The effects of translation in human communication cannot be overemphasized because every knowledge of culture, progress and development among peoples and languages is achieved through translation. It is through translation that different countries of the world interact and achieve success in social, political and economic sectors. Translation bridges linguistic gap in all aspects of human development, progress and mutual intelligibility.

2.1 **Translation as an agent of change, progress and development**

The phenomenon known as globalization which conceives the universe as a global village in terms of information dissemination technology is today possible because of translation. Translation serves as a link between human beings across all cultures and languages because it provides the mutual intelligibility that `maintains contact among nations and peoples. It is an indispensable tool or intermediary that bridges disparate literary peoples and worlds. Translation is the major agent of change, progress and development among humans who in the absence of translation would remain linguistically isolated and incommunicado.

Change in this context includes improvements in the past which ignite progress that in turn leads to further development across cultures and languages. Translation cuts across cultural and linguistic barriers and by so doing, brings about mutual understanding and international co-operation among the peoples of the world. Mutual understanding and international co-operation are

the basic ingredients for human co-existence. Translation plays an important role in the spreading of cultures, be it material, linguistic, political, religious, economic or social. As a matter of fact, without translation there would have been no connection between the third world countries and the developed world. For instance, many Europeans and Americans used to think that Africans were monkeys and lived on tree tops because they did not know much about life in the third world countries. Through translation and literatures, they were able to understand that Africans are humans just as they themselves.

In the same vein, the peoples of the third world countries were also able to understand better the socio-cultural lives of people in Europe, America, and Asia, thanks to translation. It was the literature and the translation of the developed world that served as a catalyst for the emergence of the developmental consciousness among the third world countries.

2.2 **Translation as human uniting force**

In a multilingual nation like Nigeria where more than four hundred indigenous languages are spoken, translation serves as the sole instrument of national unity and political integration and collective bargaining. The lingua franca and official language of Nigeria is English which performs the role of language of national unity, political integration, socio-economic and cultural mobility. It

is only through translation that each of the numerous Nigerian languages can share in the functions of English as stated above.

2.3 Translation as an instrument for the cross-fertilization of languages

From the linguistic point of view, it is observed that translation has greatly enhanced the linguistic and cultural cross-fertilization of languages because translation has brought about and continues to nurture the lexical and syntactic enrichment of languages through the process of loaning and naturalization. Many languages have increased their lexical stocks through borrowing and coinages and these are possible only through translation. The more people interact, the more alike their languages become and this encourages borrowing among the participants.

The less the contact between language groups, the more likely it is that their language varieties will develop distinctive characteristics. In the same vein, when peoples from different cultures and speech communities come into protracted contacts for any reason, the tendency is for the individual speakers to borrow and use some of the foreign words which do not exist in their own languages. Gradually, some of those foreign words gain currency in the new language through the process of naturalization or domestication. With time the different cultures and speech communities in question would have borrowed a lot from each other and the processes of code-mixing and code-switching would have been established in the two languages thereby cross-fertilizing each of the languages in contact.

2.4 **Translation as a factor of language endangerment**

Translation has indeed played an immense role in the development of numerous world languages. However, it predisposes languages to all forms of language endangerment. This is so because when languages come in contact, there is the tendency for speakers to shift from one language to another in the course of their interaction. The shifting is always gradual but in some cases may result in total abandonment of one of the languages which may lead to language endangerment and eventual language death.

Language endangerment can be discussed as follows:

2.4.1 **Language shift**

Language shift is a gradual or sudden move from the use of one language to another (Crystal 1997: 215). It is a common phenomenon of multilingual communities where many languages are in contact. Language shift occurs when a particular language is replaced by another language or when a language is dislodged and its speakers desist from using it. This is essentially the case when one of the languages is adopted for official use and given a privileged status at the expense of the second or other language which is relegated to informal usage. Many Nigerian minority

languages without orthography may likely suffer language shift to the predator or 'superior' language which may be local or foreign.

2.4.2 Code-mixing/code-switching

Wardhaugh,(2002: 100) quoting Gal (1988: 247) defines code-switching as a conversational strategy used to establish, cross or destroy group boundaries; to create, evoke or change interpersonal relations with their rights and obligations. It is a bilingual/multilingual phenomenon which involves the transfer or mixing of linguistic elements from one language into another by bilingual/multilingual speakers either consciously or unconsciously. The case of Igbo-English bilinguals is noteworthy because the educated average Igbo can hardly hold out any length of conversation in Igbo without either code-mixing or code-switching between Igbo and English. This predisposes the Igbo language and its users to a serious socio-linguistic problem of language endangerment.

2.4.3 Language death/glottophagia

Glottophagia is the suppression of the minority language by that of the majority. It has been identified as one of the factors that make a people abandon their language for a predator language resulting in the death of the former. In other words, language death is a situation where a language goes extinct, i.e. it ceases to exist as a spoken language. A language dies when nobody speaks it

anymore. Such languages may still exist in the written form due to the documentation that linguists may have prepared when the language was ailing. A typical example of a dead language is Latin.

3.0 **French and Igbo languages in translation**

French and Igbo are essentially two different languages as we have seen elsewhere in this paper. In terms of genetic relationship, they are neither daughters nor sisters of a parent language. French spoken in France and other Franco-phone countries belongs to the Indo-European language family. Igbo is an African language spoken in Nigeria in all the South-Eastern States and in some parts of Delta and Rivers States. It is one of the kwa group of languages that make up the Niger-Congo language family. It is a tonal language. This means that tone plays a very important role in determining both lexical and grammatical meanings of Igbo words, phrases and sentences.

French on the other hand uses pitch and accent to replace what Igbo does with tone. French and Igbo are neither genetically related nor structurally similar. Even though French and Igbo have nothing in common, messages can nevertheless be expressed from one of the two languages to the other and vice versa, thanks to the technics of translation proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet (1977: 46). Again, the assertion of Jacobson (1963:81) confirms the fact that there is nothing like untranslatability, for according to him:

> Toute expérience cognitive peut être rendue et classée dans n'importe quelle langue existante. Là où il y a des déficiences, la terminologie sera modifiée et amplifiée par des emprunts, des calques, des néologismes, des déplacements sémantiques, et, finalement, par des circonlocutions.
>
> […every life experience can be rendered and translated into any existing language. Where there are deficiencies, the terminologies will be modified and amplified by borrowing, calquing and neologisms, by meaning shifts and finally by circumlocution(our translation)].

In what follows, we shall review the translation technics and their application in the Igbo and French translations. The technics according to Vinay and Darbelnet (1973:46-53) include three direct translation procedures and four oblique or indirect translation technics or procedures.

The direct translation technics include loaning, calquing and literal translation while the oblique translation processes are transposition, modulation, equivalence and adaptation. The data for this article consist of certain lexical items and expressions using parameters like meals, hospitality and some proverbs drawn from Igbo and French with their English equivalents. The data will consider these items in order to show that in spite of the inherent cultural and linguistic differences between the two languages, the intended message can be translated into both languages with the

same meanings, stylistic and pragmatic effects. Each language uses what is available in its culture to express an equivalent idea in another language.

Any object or event that is strange to a particular culture/environment will not have a name in the language of the community but will certainly have a type of equivalent to translate it. This is exactly what Sapir and Whorf mean by saying that language is conditioned by the environment which serves as a prism through which its speakers perceive the world. For instance, in the following proverbs, the meaning of each message in Igbo corresponds to the equivalent meaning in the French language because of the world-view of their speakers and their rapport with the equivalent elements of their environment in consideration to those of French and Igbo. What is actually translated is the message and not the language.

3.1 French and Igbo proverbs/idioms

Here are some of the proverbs/idioms in Igbo and their French equivalents and eventually their English translations

No	Igbo	French	English
1	Kwqq mmiri ka ọ dị n'ọgbụgbaọla.	Il faut battre le fer pendant qu'il est chaud.	Make hay while the sun shines.
2	Awọ	Il n'y a pas de	There is no

	anagh[agba ọsọ ehihie n'efu.	fumée sans feu.	smoke without fire
3	Onyemaechi ? / Echi di ime.	Les jours se suivent mais ne se ressemblent pas.	Who knows tomorrow ?
4	Igwe bx ike	L'union fait la force	Unity is strength
5	Akanri kwqq akaekpe, akaekpe akwọọ akanri.	Un service en vaut un autre	One good turn deserves another
6	Onye kwe chi ya ekwe	Vouloir c'est pouvoir	Will is way
7	Onye ndidi na-eri azx ukpo	Tout vient à point à qui sait attendre	Patience is golden
8	Anx bu ụzo na-añụ mmiri ọma	Premier levé, premier servi	First come, first served
9	Otu xzq mechie, ụzo ọzọ emepee.	Ce que l'on perd d'un côté, l'on le regagne de l'autre	When one door closes, another one opens.
10	Ogeanagh[ec hemmadụ.	Le temps perdu ne se rattrape jamais.	Time & tide wait for no one .
1	Agwq aghaghi	Serpent qui	A person is

11	ịmụ ihe toro ogologo.	change de peau est toujours serpent.	known by the company he/she keeps
12	Isikoteebu, q gbaa ya. Isi kotere ebu ka ọ na-agba.	Qui sème le vent récolte la têmpete.	He who lives by the sword dies by the sword.
13	Anagh[ama ụtọ akụilu site n'ụda ya.	L'apparence est trompeuse.	All that glitters is not gold.
14	Onye na-enwegh[ihe o bu enweghi ihe ọ na-akụwa.	Qui ne risque rien n'aura rien.	A clear conscience fears no accusation.
15	Xwa na-eme ntxghar[.	Le vent de prospérité change souvent de côté.	No condition is permanent
16	Otu osisi anaghi eme qh[a	Une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps	A tree does not make a forest
17	Eziokwu na-agba agba	Il n'ya que la vérité qui blesse	Truth is bitter
18	Onye anwx gbara na-atu okporoko ijiji egwu	Un chat échaudé craint l'eau froide.	Once bitten twice shy

19	Anaghi amx aka ekpe na nka.	On n'apprend pas à être agauché à quarante ans	A fool at forty is a fool for ever
20	Onye aghxghq nwụọ, onye aghụghọ elie ya.	Les loups ne se mangent entre eux	

A total of twenty proverbs/idioms are listed above in the two languages and translated into their English equivalents. Sometimes it is not just the grammatical equivalents that are provided, it may be a change of point of view or adaptation procedure so as to arrive exactly at the intended equivalent meaning in the other language. Our analysis will be based on a few numbers of the above proverbs in any order. Taking for instance the first proverb, literally the first Igbo proverb talks of evacuating the flood water while it is yet ankle-deep while the French equivalent talks of shaping a piece of iron while it is still hot, to produce the same cultural equivalent meanings and pragmatic effects in the two languages.

In the proverb number 6 (French version), 'vouloirc' est pouvoir' gives the general idea that the *will* to succeed counts on the effort one makes in life. In other words, for one to achieve any success in life there must be a strong determination to drive that will which must also be backed up with courage and effort. The Igbo cultural equivalent which says: onye kwe chi ya ekwe 'if one says yes, his/her God affirms' translates the French equivalent. The whole idea is that with determination, success is assured. Different

languages express the same message in different ways relevant to their experience and other languages understand exactly the intended meaning of the messages.

With respect to the proverb number 9, the French version states that 'what one loses on one side, he/she gains on the other' while the Igbo equivalent states that 'if one door closes, another one opens'. Proverb number 12 states in the two languages that 'man is the architect of his destiny'. While French version uses wind and tempest to illustrate the effects of the consequences of ones' daring actions, the Igbo cultural equivalence uses the sting of wasp on human head to illustrate the same French saying. The whole idea of the proverb is to warn that one must face the consequences of one's deeds.

The summary of all that is being said here is that translation builds a perfect bridge across languages. In each of the above proverbs, the same message is obtained in the two languages using various appropriate technics (especially the oblique technics) and cultural equivalents.

3.2 French and Igbo in gastronomy

In the domain of gastronomy/food/hospitality, it may be a question of translation of cultural equivalence. For instance, as a socio-cultural attitude, a French visitor who comes in and meets a fellow French host at table, wishes him/her *bon appétit*, this is literally translated as 'good appetite' in the English Language. This statement has no equivalent in the socio-cultural attitude of the

Igbo who would rather invite the visitor to 'come and share his/her meal with him/her'. Again, a translator who wants to explain to a French man/woman the real value of palm wine or precisely how the Igbo value palm wine will definitely equate palm wine to French vin(wine)which exists in different colours: red, rose and white.

The French have a particular wine for a particular menu. So, in this regard, vin(wine)is to a French man/woman what palm wine is to an Igbo man/woman. In like manner, the Igbo celebrate kola nut. An Igbo man/woman should give kola nut to his/her visitor as an expression of love and hospitality. If the kola nut is not readily available in the house, the host excuses himself/herself and apologizes to the visitor. By extension, the kola nut may not necessarily be the kola nut as we know it but any other edible thing can as well serve as kola nut for the Igbo. On the contrary, the French value café the same way the Igbo value kola nut and occasionally offer it to their visitors.

In the French culture, it is normally said that *un repas sans fromagen'est pas un vraire pas français* that is to say, *a meal without cheese is not a true French meal*. The near equivalent of cheese on the part of Igbo culture depends on the part of Igbo land in question. For instance, the Igbo around Owere value and eat *ụgba* (castor oil bean seed) so much that one can liken it to the French cheese. For the Igbo around Awka, it is *onugbu* (*bitter leaf)*which is part of their every menu or meal such that one can equally say that from age (cheese) is to the French what bitter leaf is to the Awka Igbo.

For the Oguta Igbo, it is ázù (*fish).* The Oguta people, because of their aquatic environment esteem and appreciate fish so much that they know and have different names for all kinds of fish. This is not possible in some other parts of Igbo land which are landlocked. The Enugu and Umuahia Igbo esteem and appreciate *abacha (cassava flakes) and achalla (a type of vegetable)* respectively. *Abacha* is a type of tapioca, a meal prepared from dry cassava while *achalla* is a type of vegetable used in cooking species of soup. These are special delicacies peculiar to these areas of Igbo land and each of these can be likened to cheese in the French kitchen.

3.3 French and Igbo in social life

Socially, the French usually live solitary and individualistic life while the Igbo are more gregarious and live communal and shared lives. The average French relaxes in the (café) bar or restaurant with friends on a cup of coffee. He does not believe in series of meetings and village/town unions in order to discuss anything about progress in the community. The Igbo on the other hand hold meetings from time to time at both village and town levels in an effort to address the issues in their community.

In France, road signs serve as direction guides or indicators so that strangers may travel without difficulties. The road indicators are so well designed and placed so that travellers understand easily the direction intended. In the Igbo culture on the other hand, human beings are used as road maps for indicating

directions. A stranger or a traveller relies on the direction given him/her by native passers-by as he goes along seeking his way in the community. All these can be translated as cultural equivalents.

In the traditional Igbo setting, the settling of disputes is a communal matter involving the 'adjudication of elders. In discussions, proverbs are often used to express certain messages that are not easily articulated in plain words and they are often a prerogative of elderly men/women of wisdom. For instance, when something happens in the community involving a *respected* elder, a meeting of elders is normally summoned to address the issue.

Most of the proceedings of such meetings in a typical Igbo environment are organized with proverbs and figures of speech such as metaphors, euphemism and litotes to minimize the unpleasant effects of the use of plain words that may wound the self-esteem of the elder. In the French setting, the equivalent mechanism of adjudication is the court, whatever the court decides stands. These cultural attitudes constitute special translation problems in the two languages.

4.0 Implication of translation for the Igbo language

Translation French/Igbo is not a threat to Igbo language because French is the third language for any Igbo child learning it. Secondly, French is neither the official language of Nigeria nor its lingua franca. Although it has been elevated to the status of the second official language, it is yet far from serving as the language of social integration in Nigeria as English does. It is neither the

language of national unity nor that of political integration. It has nothing to do with economic, social or cultural mobility of the average Igbo as is the case with English.

French is therefore not a threat to Igbo language. What can be compared between French and Igbo is at the level of culture which we have tried to do above. With English, Igbo can be said to be an endangered language because of the double status of English as the official language and lingua franca of Nigeria, a multi-lingual nation with more than four hundred languages. As far as the Igbo language is concerned, English is a predator language and not French.

Considering all we have said about translation, it appears that translation can be likened to a double- edged sword. This is so because translation which brought about mutual understanding among humans after the biblical *Tower of Babel* account may once again be an agent of unification of languages by causing the death of many. It is only through translation that languages come in contact and when this happens, the result is obvious: shifting, code-mixing and code-switching from one language to another which may eventually lead to language death. Igbo can be said to be endangered not because of its contact with French but with English which is a threat to it as is the case for many other Nigerian languages as a result of translation. Without translation, there would have been no language endangerment because both the developed and the under-developed languages would have been

contented with whatever situation that prevailed in their environments and times.

5.0 Conclusion

Many advantages have been attributed to translation as a bridge across languages and cultures for the cross-ventilation of knowledge among all the peoples of the planet Earth. The only inconvenience raised against it is the agentive function of killer language, for according to Emenanjo (2005: 15):

> With English as the turbine engine of globalization and the language of most of ICT, it is estimated that within a decade 2 billion people will be studying English and about half the world, some 3 billion, will be speaking it. The ascendancy and primacy of English as the global language will certainly trigger off strong language shift from small, local, national, regional and even international languages (such as French) to English now the international predator language. African languages and Africans are really in grave danger with the scenario painted above.

Translation therefore serves not only as a bridge that unites and provides mutual intelligibility among languages and cultures but also as a bridge that may collapse to bring about the drowning or death of many languages and cultures.

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