

**THE ANALYSIS OF SOME SELECTED YORUBA PROVERBS TRANSLATED
INTO ENGLISH
BY**

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Abstract

This paper examined the content and form of some selected Yoruba proverbs translated into English. The English translation and the selected Yoruba proverbs were placed side by side. The work employed a contrastive analysis for the selected proverbs. Findings from the contrastive analysis were then discussed using Catfords and Newmarks theories of translation. The results showed that the proverbs, despite performing certain contextual functions in our daily interactions, the English translated version reflected certain lexico –semantic features such as meaning distortion, meaning substitution, meaning modification, meaning narrowing and in fact sometimes, the meaning is actually preserved. The study however concluded that translation practice in the uses of proverbs in communication process was inadequate in disseminating the cultural knowledge embedded in Yoruba proverbs. It also concluded that the practice was detrimental to second language learning.

Introduction

Language is a means of human communication among other non-verbal means such as signs and paralinguistic means of communication like wink, nod, facial expression, gesture and body movement. It is also the most complex innate skill a human being can acquire. It is through language that we understand the deepest secrets and inner feelings of other people as we appreciate the extent to which we share a common humanity by its means (Macwhinney, 2003), cited in Adedimeji (2006, 157). Brown and Yule (1983, 1-3) assert that language serves as a means of transactional and interactional communication. This was cited in Odebunmi (2003, 28). As transactional means, language is used to pass information. Both the spoken and written language, he states, are important communicative transactions, though the latter seems dominant. Various languages in the world are said to perform several similar functions. In the socialization process in human communities and homes, language is the means by which cultural values and traditions are imparted. This definition by Odebunmi (2003) corroborates the views that language is an aspect of a people's culture, and culture as the total way of life of a people.

On the interactional communicative function of language, Odebunmi (2003:30) states that language helps to establish and sustain social ties. This language function has been described as phatic communion by Malinowski (cited in Palmer, 1996).

Translation and Translation Theories

Both Catford (1965) and Newmark (1981, 1988) have been recognized as major figures in translation studies. Their contributions to translation as a field of study cannot be under

estimated. Catford's approach to translation equivalence clearly differs from that adopted by Nida and other contributors since Catford had a preference for a more cultural linguistic-based approach to translation and this approach is based on the linguistic work of Firth (1950) and Halliday (1994). His main contribution in the field of translation theory is the introduction of the concepts of types and shifts of translation. As far as translation shifts are concerned, Catford defined them as departures from formal correspondence in the process of going from the SL (source language) to the TL (target language) (Catford 1965: 73). Catford argues that there are two main types of translation shifts, namely level shifts, where the SL item at one linguistic level (e.g. grammar) has a TL equivalent at a different level (lexis), and category shifts which are divided into four types:

Structure shifts, which involve a grammatical change between the structure of the SL and that of the TL.

Class-shifts, when an SL item is replaced with a TL item which belongs to a different grammatical class, i.e. a verb may be replaced with a noun;

Unit-shifts, which involve changes in rank;

Intra-system shifts, which occur when "SL and TL possess systems which approximately correspond formally as to their constitution, but when translation involves selection of a non-corresponding term in the TL system" (ibid; p. 80). For instance, when the SL singular becomes a TL plural.

Catford has been criticized for his linguistic theory of translation. One of the most scathing criticisms came from Snell-Hornby (1988), who argued that Catford's definition of textual equivalence is "circular", his theory's reliance on bilingual informants is 'hopelessly inadequate', and his example sentences "isolated and even absurdly simplistic" (ibid; p. 19-20). She considers the concept of equivalence in translation as being an illusion. She asserts that the translation process cannot be simply be reduced to a linguistic exercise, as claimed by Catford, for instance, since there are also factors, such as textual, cultural and situational aspects, which should be taken into consideration when translating. In other words, she does not believe that linguistics is the only discipline which enables people to carry out a translation, since translation involves different cultures and different situations at the same time and they do not always match from one language to another.

Newmark's contribution to translation studies appears to be text-based. Unlike Baker (1992), Newmark (1988) opines that translation is not culturally affiliable as some other

researchers suggest. In Newmark's words "translation is 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" (Newmark, 1981:7). The term "equivalent effect" is a major concern of Newmark. Newmark (1988) sees Nida's (1964) 'equivalent effect' as the desirable result, rather than the aim of any translation. Newmark adds that equivalent effect is an unlikely result in two cases: (a) if the purpose of the SL text is to affect and the TL translation is to inform (or vice versa); (b) if there is a pronounced cultural gap between the SL and the TL texts.

Furthermore, Newmark (1988) argues that the text may reach a 'broad equivalent effect' only if it is 'universal', as in this case the ideals of the original text exceed all cultural frontiers. Newmark (1986) uses the term 'text-bound equivalence' in his discussion of equivalences while North (1981) works on 'functional equivalence'. Mona Baker (1992), six years after Newmark's submission devotes her work to equivalent types, and argues that equivalence is always relative in the sense that it is influenced by many linguistic and cultural factors.

Views on Proverb Meaning and Characteristics

Yorùbá proverb studies started in 1852 when Samuel Ajayi Crowther collected many Yorùbá proverbs in his book titled, *The Vocabulary of Yorùbá Language* (Adeyemi 2009: 531). Other scholars carried on the tradition. Bamgbose (1968), for example, focused on the structure and forms of Yorùbá proverbs. Other notable scholars include Ogundeji (1992), Ogunsina (1992), Adekeye (2001), Adebowale (2006), Ojoade (2004), Adewoye (2006), Owomoyela (1975), Yusuf (1994, 1995), Alabi (2000) and Odebunmi (2006). All of these focus on the form, function, and use of proverbs, and as such have contributed greatly to Yoruba proverb scholarship.

Lau, Tokofsky and Winick (2004: 8) drawing from the works of Taylor (1985), Whiting (1994), Mieder (1993), Arora (1994), Burke (1957), Dundes (1981), Honeck (1997), Winick (2003), etc., define proverbs as "short, traditional utterances that encapsulate cultural truths and sum up recurrent social situations". According to Lau, Tokofsky and Winnick (2004, p.6), 'proverbs can persuade and dissuade...express deference or confidence, show worry, instill fear or respect, or even mock listener'.

For the Yorùbá people, Adeyemi (2009:531) says 'modern Yorùbá novelists and poets portray colonial and post-colonial politics as they affect the historical past

and present, and the socio-cultural and economic life of the people by using proverbs in Yorùbá language to stimulate and provoke political consciousness in the readers. In Yorùbá literary scholarship, there is hardly any literary criticism on Yorùbá novel, play or poetry that does not mention the use of proverbs in a discourse.

Therefore, in the process of communication, speakers of Yoruba usually make use of proverbs to portray their views logically thereby enriching and beautifying the content of their speech. By doing this, the individual ideas or messages are being put in a concise manner and they achieve clarity of purpose. Sometimes, when such proverbs are translated into English, instead of providing an English proverb that has equivalent meaning, the proverbs are rather translated directly or literally. This invariably makes the proverb to lose its beauty and the cultural rooted meaning embedded in it.

This paper however, tries to compare the English translated version of some of these Yoruba proverbs that might arise in accordance to the situation of discussion among people in the process of communication.

Selected Yoruba proverbs and their English translations.

	YORUBA PROVERBS	ENGLISH VERSION
1.	....Bí a dé'ìlu'aka'á à še bí aka'ni.	–when you get to the land of the leprosy, behave like one
2.	.....N ò lè wa'ku'kan ò joyè ile'bàbà'ẹ̀.	–he who is not ready to face challenges cannot be called a leader.
3.	.....Eniyan bí igbín ní í he ìgbín.	–only people like snail can be together
4.	.....Ajò ò lè diun kó dà bí ile'.	– home is still the best.
5.	.....Mọ̀jà mọ̀sa' là a' makin loju'ogun.	–he who fight and run fight another day
6.	... Ọmọ tó sípá'niya'ẹ̀ n' gbe'.	–it is only the child that raises his hand that the mother will carry
7.	.....A kí í torí ebi gbé ẹ̀wà kana'.	–when you are hungry you shouldn't think of cooking beans
8	....Ọ̀ga' meji kò lè wamọ̀tò kannaá..	–who are you to go against me?
9	.....Ohun tí a kò jìyà fun kí í tọ́jọ'.	– whatever comes freely, will not last.
10.	....A kii fi oju oloore gungi	– Don't be an ungrateful fellow
11.Bayi'ì là a' še nilé' wa èèwọ̀ ibò miiran..	–what applies in my house may not be applicable in others.

12.	...Bí a kò rí àdán à a'fí òndẹ̀ şẹ̀bọ.	–lets seek an alternative.
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Discussion of Findings

Looking at the table above and considering our analysis of the proverbs, it is evident that, when speakers are trying to interpret Yoruba proverbs in to English in the process of communication, there are usually a great deal of meaning distortion in the translation of the proverbs. This is to say that, most of the proverbs are indirectly translated and usually the meaning is distorted. The translation does not follow the source language wordings but deduction of meaning through inferential processes. The speakers simply disregard the root message and translate the implied information literally as most of the imaginary and metaphorical characters that features in the source text are neglected. Examples of these can be seen in numbers 5,8,10,11, and 12 in the table above. Therefore, there is usually a great deal of semantic and pragmatic presupposition on the side of most speakers.

It was also observed that some of the proverbs were given an equivalent meaning translation. Examples of such can be seen in numbers 2 and 9.in this case, the translator finds an alternative relevant meaning that is available in his own data bank with which to render the information. There is also a case of inaccurate translation. One of such inaccurate cases can be found in example 4. The speaker has neglected ‘’ajo ko le dun’’ and just translated only the second sentence’’Home is the best’’. Rather it should read ‘’No matter how interesting a journey is, home is the best’’.

Occasionally, the meaning of the proverb may be modified as we have in example 3 above. The proverb here is given a partial direct translation. This is because the source text to a large extent is nearly perfectly translated, except for a slight change in lexical item in English translated version. This is done to suit the intended meaning of the proverb in question.

However, sometimes in the process of communication, some of the translated proverbs retains the original wordings in the source text and the translation still preserves the source language meaning. In such cases, the proverbs are directly translated and the meaning preserved. Example of such can be seen in numbers 1 and 6.

Proverb Analysis

Having discussed salient issues such as translation theories and perspective on proverbs, we will now present the analysis of the data presented above. Here, we are going to analyze the selected translated proverbs in terms of their lexical patterns and semantic characteristics. The selected proverbs are related to their source texts for the purpose of showing their differences in relation to their lexico-semantic formation.

In the first proverb above, one would notice that both the source text and the English translated version share the same structural arrangement. The key words in the source text are 'ilu', 'aka', and 'se'. These words are replaced with the words 'land', 'leprosy', and 'behave'. One can simply say that, the English translated version is a paraphrase of the source text conveying exactly the source information. There is a considerable level of lexical/semantic retention of meaning. However, the same proverb in Yoruba has an equivalent representation in the English proverbs, which is "when in Rome, do as the Romans".

In the second sample, we realised that the English version to a large extent substituted the original meaning intended in the source text with what the speaker deems relevant and equivalent in the English language. This can be noticed in words like 'ku', 'joye', 'ile', which is replaced with 'face challenge' and 'leader' instead of the words – 'death' and chieftaincy title'. The situation here is simply meaning substitution, the speaker disregards the root message and translates the implied information literally. The same proverb in Yoruba equally has an equivalent representation in the English proverbs – "No man is an Island".

The third proverb is also an example of a direct translation. The source text to a large extent are nearly perfectly translated, except for one lexical item in the English version. The speaker is a bit modest in his use of the word 'be' to describe the word 'he' which literally means 'find'. Though, the word can be used interchangeably, but the word find is the most suitable interpretation for the word 'he'. All other words in the statement are appropriately translated and the meaning preserved. This is a way of trying to modify the meaning. The equivalent English proverb for this is 'Birds of the same feather flock together'.

In the fourth example, the source text and the English version is the same. The key words that negotiate for attention include 'ajo' and 'ile', the translated version include 'journey' and 'home'. The semantic interest here is direct translation. The presence of all the key words verbatim in the source text presupposes that the translation retains the source language meaning. The English equivalent of this proverb is "There is no place like home". It

will be noticed however that; some part of the Yoruba version has been neglected. So there is an appreciable degree of meaning reduction.

In the fifth example above, the speaker in his attempt to translate the source proverb ended up giving a meaning replaced translation. However, the proverb eventually loses its root message. The metaphorical use of 'war' i.e. 'Ogun' has been downplayed and replaced by the phrase 'fight another day'. The English translated version is a complete digression from the source text. This has resulted in the loss of the original meaning of the proverb. Rather the equivalent English proverb for this reads 'Discretion is the greater part of valour'.

The sixth proverb, the content of the source text and the English version is completely the same. The key words that call for attention are 'omo', 'sipa', 'iya' and 'gbe'. The translated version includes 'child', 'raises hand', 'mother' and 'carry'. The semantic interest here is direct translation and it will be noticed that, the source language meaning is retained. We should however note that, the equivalent English proverb for the above proverb would be more suitable. This reads 'God helps those who help themselves'.

The same situation applies to the proverb in number seven above. The key words are 'ebi', 'ewa', 'kana'. These are translated as 'hunger', 'beans' and 'cook'. It is also a form of direct translation with source language meaning retained. The equivalent English proverb for this is 'A watched pot never boils'. Even if the translated version captures the intended meaning, the proverb has been literally translated.

In the eighth proverb, it is observed that, the form and content of the source text and the English version is completely different. In order to preserve the intended meaning, the translator simply disregards the root message and translates the implied information literally. Ironically, we know it is impossible for two people to drive a car together at the same time i.e. only a ruler can govern at a time. But instead the English version does not portray any of these images, rather what we have is 'who are you to go against me?' In the translation, the meaning is lost. The equivalent English version for this proverb is 'Too many cooks spoil the broth'. Also, the source text is presented as a conditional sentence, while the English version is strictly an interrogative structure.

In the ninth proverb, the translator simply finds an equivalent meaning substitution to capture the idea in the source text. The translator rather than translating the root information in the source proverb, finds an alternative relevant meaning in the English version 'whatever comes freely will not last'. The translator disregards the root message by neglecting that key

word 'jiya' meaning 'labour for'. The relevant English version for this proverb is 'Easy come, Easy go'.

The semantic interest in the tenth proverb is that of meaning shift. The proverb was given an equivalent meaning translation because the content and form of the source text and the English version are totally different. The translator ignores of the proverb and gives the direct meaning and information intended by the speaker, by saying that 'Don't be an ungrateful fellow'. The metaphorical use of the words 'aju' and 'igi' meaning 'eyes' and 'wood' are not reflected. The culturally rooted meaning embedded in the proverb in the use of these two objects is lost. The English equivalent version of this proverb is 'Don't bite the hand that feeds you'.

In the eleventh proverb, what we have there is also an implied meaning translation. The translator decided to paraphrase the proverb by translating it as 'what applies in my house may not be applicable in others'. Looking at this translation closely, one will observe that, the most important key word has been neglected. The word 'ewo' i.e. 'abomination', the absence of this key word in the English version has made the proverb lost its cultural value. The proverb looked too ordinary. However, the English equivalent version of this proverb is 'One man's trash is another man's treasure'.

In the last proverb, the speaker simply paraphrases the proverb. He ignores the wordings of the proverb and gives the direct meaning and information intended by the speaker. The metaphorical use of the words 'adan', 'onde' and 'ebo' are not reflected in the English translated version. Therefore, the culturally rooted meaning embedded in the use of animal imagery is completely lost. The content and form of the source text and English version are totally different. The semantic interest is that of meaning shift. The English equivalent version of this proverb is 'Necessity is the mother of invention'.

Summary and Conclusion

As proverbs sweeten and add colour to conversation and utterances, we cannot deny the fact that it performs certain salient function in our daily interactions. Some of these are; it teaches common sense, hard work, perseverance, cooperation, good behaviour, patience, kindness, honesty, courage, peace, friendship e.t.c. However, when these proverbs are rendered in English Language, our findings revealed that in most of the translations, the translator disregards the original word composition and the cultural rooted meanings of the source proverbs and translates the implied information literally thereby causing distortion in the

meanings of the proverbs. This is to say that, there is a great deal of semantic shift in the English translated version of the Yoruba proverbs. The speakers sometime, substitute, modify, narrow or even retains the meaning.

The styles of translation found in this paper corroborates Catford's (1965) concepts of "Translation Shift". Most of the proverbs are inferentially translated. Hence, there are lots of grammatical changes between the structure of the source text and that of the English version. This is to say that there are translation shift in actual or intended meaning of the proverbs as uttered by the speaker.

This findings, also buttressed Newmark's (1981) theory of "Translation Equivalent". During our analysis, we also observed that some of the proverbs were given an equivalent meaning translation. Rather than translating the implied information of the proverbs, the translator finds an alternative relevant meaning.

However, equivalence in source message and translator's version are found to be rare in the translation of these proverbs. From all indications, near perfect equivalent translation appears difficult in an inter-lingual exchange since expression listed in bilingual dictionaries do not qualify as equivalence. So, what most of the speakers do is to create equivalences arising from the situation and context of discourse.

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