

Translation of Children's Literature: A Tool for Cultural Education

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Abstract

Translation is an act of communication with three prongs: the message, the sender or the author and the recipient. The author of a text determines his audience even before he begins writing his message. He expresses himself by using terms that are comprehensible to his audience. The translator of such a text must also know his audience. In this study, translation is considered as a means of communication, with emphasis on the translation of children's literature. Aware that literary texts have many cultural symbols, the translator must determine the function of the symbols so that they can re-express them. This work discusses two approaches to literary translation; the semantic and the communicative. The study presents two of La Fontaine's *La Cigale et la Fourmi*, semantic translation is used in the English language to depict French culture. In the second translation, Igbo culture replaces its equivalents in the French. The Igbo version is appropriated in order to successfully transfer the message. This work employs the semio-pragmatic translation theory. The research proves that translation is a viable tool for cultural education in children.

Keywords: children's literature, culture, meaning, semiotics, pragmatics, communication

Introduction

Ken Liu, an American-Chinese fiction writer and translator, defines translation as "an act of recreation; basically the creation of a text in another language." Going by this definition, recreation is a major component of translation. Translation can also be defined as "an act of cultural information" (Macura, 65). Translation involves verbal and nonverbal communication. Anyabuike (12) states that "Translation is a professional activity that ensures effective transfer of knowledge across cultural boundaries." The term *culture* may be considered a recurring decimal in these three definitions.

Literary texts often contain a lot of cultural representations. Since languages express cultures, translators should be bicultural, not bilingual (Bassnett & Lefevere, 11). Being bicultural, a translator is *ipso facto* bilingual, for language and culture cannot be separated. This would imply that language is a component of culture.

Culture is the totality of transmitted behavioral pattern (Cunning, 43). The term *transmitted* suggests a social activity. Newmark (94) sees culture "as the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression." Culture is a social element

produced by a group of people; never by an individual. The existence of different worldviews should be kept in view always when different languages or language varieties are studied (Yule, 06). Translation is a means of studying different language varieties.

This study borders on literary translation. It particularly deals with the translation of children's literature. A fable may be described as a folktale in which animals act as human beings. The text selected for the study is a fable, thus this research considers it suitable for children. In this study, literary texts are seen as tools or instructional materials used in teaching culture to children. Teachers, according to Schofield (77), are people specially trained in the art of shaping behaviour. They interact with other people and direct their behaviours to suit the expectations of the society. Atanda and Lameed (306) see the teacher as a professional who imparts skills, knowledge, information, attitude, etc., into the learner. In this research, the teacher is the writer/translator and his materials are fables and folk stories. The intention is to pass cultural information/knowledge and the audience learner is the child reader.

Many translation researchers have done extensive investigations on the problems of translating for children, few explore the possibility of creating African literature through translating European texts. The study focuses on the translation of fables. Efforts have been made to write African fables in foreign tongues; works such as *The Drum*, *The Flute* and *Things Fall Apart*, all written by Chinua Achebe may be considered documentations of Igbo fables in English. Oguike's *Contestraditionnelle du Nigeria* is an expression of Igbo folktales in French. The fables are all translations from Igbo into English and French. On the contrary, this study presents the translation of European (French) fables into Igbo.

Language, as acknowledged by many pundits, functions as a medium of expressing thoughts. Thoughts are basically borne out of social experiences. Literature may be considered as a means of expressing one's experiences in writing. In the view of this research, the art of translating goes beyond the transposition of linguistic codes; it involves the interpretation of extralinguistic nuances, especially cultural ones.

The problem being examined in this research is the means of representing cultural signs across divergent borders. The solution proposed by the research is the use of the semiopragmatic translation theory. This theory is simply the application of semiology to translation. Semiology is the study of the system of science in a given culture; translation refers to the interpretation of these signs in another language. The semio-pragmatic translation theory proposes that the terms employed in the target text be drawn from the sociocultural environment of the receiving audience. According to semio-pragmatic transla-

tion theory, language is produced by culture and constrained by environment (Ngele & Ilaya-Amadi, NP).

In this study, translation is used for cultural education in children through the translation from French to English and Igbo of La Fontaine's *La Cigale et la fourmi*. The English version presented was translated by N.B. Spector. The Igbo version was created specifically for this research; it has not been published prior to this study. The source text is rendered first in English to portray the same cultural elements as in French, followed by the Igbo translation. This translation in an African language replaces the culturally pertinent terms in French with their cultural equivalents in African context. Based on these two approaches, it becomes clear that translation can help transmit meaning across cultural borders, thereby nurturing a child reader with a large cultural horizon and exposure.

Translation and the Semantic Triangle

Language is "a system of arbitrary signs which is accepted by a group and society of users" (Emmitt & Pollock 13). Citing Halliday, Mohammed (87) defines language as "a unique system of signs with a social function, capable of expressing the meaning which all other sign systems can make." In the view of Barthes, "A language is a purely abstract entity, a norm which stands above individuals, a set of essential types, which speech actualizes in an infinite variety of ways". Mba (306) defines language as "a vehicle through which the thought system or culture of a people is expressed."

Since language is a medium of communication used in a particular society, the terms or words employed in a particular language reflects the environment in which the society is set. Our interpretation of any sign is our psychological reaction to it (Agbedo 65). For this reason, language is viewed by many linguists as a form of sociocultural activity (Anohu411).

Ferdinand de Saussure proposes that the signs used in a particular language are usually arbitrary since meaning in itself is a function of societal agreement. The meaning of a word/expression is always arbitrary; it does not begin and end with the speaker's experience or intention. The act of speaking and intending, presupposes what a language already has in place and upon which the speaker must rely. Concepts or meanings are picked out (signified) because of the differences in the network of words (sound or graphic images) that make up the language.

Richard and Ogden propose the semantic triangle in their work, *The Meaning of Meaning*. This triangle traces the relationship between a word or object, the speaker's intended meaning and the thoughts or perception of the receiver. As the name implies, the semantic triangle has three angles: reference, referents, and the symbol. Many other linguists, such as Merabishvili, have attempted to

give their own descriptions to the designations of the three parts of the semantic triangle: nomination, concept, and referent. No matter the term employed in describing the three angles, the fact remains that they show the relationship existing between a sign or an object, the meaning or signification borne by this sign and the thought system of the receiver or hearer of the sign. The reference may otherwise be regarded as thought. This refers to the mental concept, emerging from association. Referents are actually the words/lexical items employed in presenting the speaker's intention, is the real thing whose existence is consciously noticed. The symbol is the cultural sign or the connotative meaning of the referents. By implication, the semantic triangle examines the psychoanalysis of cultural signs in speech.

Cultural Interpretation

If translation is a movement of words or ideas from one language to another, it stands to reason that translation is a cultural activity. As Bandia points out (2), "Translation is an intercultural activity as well as an intralingual one, as it deals with at least two linguistic systems embedded in two different cultures." To properly transmit culture, a translator may adopt one of two approaches; the first is semantic translation. This system [approach?] presents source culture without changes. The motive behind semantic translation is to make the reader of the target text appreciate the values of the source culture. Literature and reflective writing provide a natural tool for cultural sensitivity and stimulate discussions on culture (Roy 500). One can illustrate this through the translation of Shakespeare's sonnet No. XVIII, "Shall I Compare Thee to a Summer Day?" The reader of a semantically translated version of the poem would be struck by the beauty of English summer and become somewhat sensitized to the English culture.

In translating children's literature, a translator may choose to employ semantic translation. In this case, the source culture is represented without changes in the target text. This method is a means of exposing children to new worlds and through reading, children are exposed to foreign cultural horizons. In his epic piece *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe presents a very popular Igbo tale, "Why the Tortoise has a Broken Shell." Michel Ligny's semantic translation of this text into French is a mirror through which one may view the manner in which the Igbo people value the tortoise.

The second approach is communicative translation. This system encourages the translator to recreate the text by appropriating it into a target context. The extent to which a text is translatable varies with the degree to which it is embedded in its own specific culture in terms of the distance that separates the cultural background of source text and target audience based on time and space. The problem of untranslatability is usually solved by transferring the

values borne by the signs or symbols in the source text to the target signs in a situation where they have the same meaning. As indicated earlier with respect to Shakespeare's work, a translator may encounter some difficulty translating this piece semantically in the language of a country where summer is unpleasant. A communicative translation of this poem into a North African language, for example, will require another set of images that would obviously become an entirely different poem.

Communicative translation permits the child reader to access the values hosted in the source text. Cultural appropriation creates a medium for texts of unrelated cultures to find their correspondents in a new tongue. Since the act of translation involves the transfer of messages between languages, the appropriation of meaning would entail the transfer of the same meanings from one language into another.

The approach to be chosen by the translator should be determined by the function of the target text. The source text is usually embedded in a given situation, which in itself is conditioned by a given sociocultural background. The translation is therefore dependent on its function as a text implanted in the target culture, whereby [in which?] there is an alternative of either preserving the original function of the source text in its culture or of changing and adapting it to a specified need in the target culture. If the translator has succeeded in producing a functional text conforming to its needs, the target text will be congruent with the target text's Skopos (Nord 33).

According to Gibova (5), literary texts "are characterized by the presence of a secondary code which is superimposed on a stratum of an unmarked language". This secondary code may or may not have a dynamic equivalent in another cultural setting. A literary translator is therefore faced with the task of transmitting language and culture. Standard literary translation is, by this token, one which reflects all cultural, social, linguistic and emotional contents of the source text.

Translation of Children's Literature

As indicated earlier, this research borders on literary translation with particular reference to the translation of children's literature. Literary texts are made up of more than words; they are a set of culturally-loaded creations. Literature portrays the society of the writer. Every literary work is a reflection of a particular culture. Works such as Aladdin of Chinese origin, Carlo Collodi's Pinocchio of Italian origin may be classified as world literatures. Translation may be considered a viable tool for the projection of a text to the standard of world literature. International children's works, when properly adapted from one readership to another, enable a global transmission of literary resources. In the view of Popovic (16),"the literary text is not just a combination of verbal signs but

is a culturally-loaded linguistic system, and a consequence of thorough examination before the process of translation is carried out.” Hence, literary translations are an aesthetically oriented bicultural transfer since the literary translator is a mediator of intercultural communication.

Knowledge of cultural and social context usually widens the horizons of the mind (Adekunle 43). A semantic reconstruction of literary works exposes and transports the child reader to new cultural horizons. The result is a child reader with a broad cultural horizon. Translation also acts as a means of projecting lesser-known societies. Analyzing John Boring’s attempts to translate Czech literary works into English, Macura presents Boring’s view of translation as being a medium to bring lesser-known cultural areas into the full linguistic view of Western civilization.

Batchelder believes that “through translation, children come to know the books and stories of other nations and thus make a beginning toward international understanding, toward sharing experiences with children who speak and read other languages”. Translation is thus a means of exposing children to other cultures.

Literary texts usually perform social functions, such as educating the people on matters of public interest. They can speak for or against a government policy. If the target text is focused on passing the message of the source text, then cultural appropriation may be employed. With respect to children’s literature, cultural appropriation may be employed as a means of passing the moral message or achieving the social function of the source text.

In attempting to create an equivalent version of the source text. The equivalent version may not possess the same symbols presented by the source text but must bear an equivalent meaning. It can thus be argued that the appropriation of meaning in translation gives communicative value to the linguistic elements so translated, thereby enabling the child reader access the morals hosted in the source text.

Data Presentation

English is the language of administration in Nigeria. This country has 36 geopolitical states with over four hundred indigenous languages. These indigenous tongues are grouped into major and non-major languages. Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are the major ones because they are spoken by the three largest ethnic nationalities in the country. The homeland of Igbo-speaking people is in the five states of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, and in parts of Rivers and Delta states. Igbo is one of the indigenous languages taught in schools. Literary books, dictionaries and other instructional materials exist in the language. There are also TV stations that broadcast solely in Igbo.

This study presents three versions of the fable *La Cigaleet la Fourmi*. The first

is the source text written by Jean de la Fontaine. The second is in English and is drawn from *The Complete Fables of Jean de la Fontaine*, translated by Norman Spector. This translation exposes the English-speaking African child to French values. The third version is in Igbo. This translation was done solely for this study, with Igbo as its target audience.

French version

La cigale ayant chanté / Tout l'été, / Se trouva fort dépourvue / Quand la bise fut venue: / Pas un seul petit morceau / De mouche ou de vermisseau. / Elle alla crier famine / Chez la fourmi sa voisine, / La priant de lui prêter / Quelque grain pour subsister / Jusqu'à la saison nouvelle. / Je vous paierai, lui dit-elle, / Avant l'août, foi d'animal, / Intérêt et principal. / La fourmi n'est pas prêteuse: / C'est là son moindre défaut / Que faisiez-vous au temps chaud? / Dit-elle à cette emprunteuse. / — Nuit et jour à tout venant / Je chantais, ne vous déplaie. / Vous chantiez ? J'en suis fort aise / Eh bien! Dansez maintenant.

English version

"The Cicada and The Ant"

The cicada having sung / All summer long, / Found herself most destitute / When the north wind blew: / Not even one little morsel / Of fly or worm. / She went to plea her famish / To her neighbour the ant, / Begging her to lend her / A little grain so she'd survive / Until the new season. / "I shall pay you," she told her, / "Before the harvest, animal's oath, / Interest and principal." / The ant is not a lender: / This is the least of her faults. / "What were you doing during the warm season?" / She asks this borrower. / — Night and day, to anyone / I sang, please you if it may. / « You sang? I'm delighted: / Well, dance now."

Igbo Version

Ugon Okwa [The eagle and the partridge]

Okwabuonyena-ekweukwe [The partridge having sung]

O nwekwaraluogene [He has a sweet voice that rings like a gong]

Nka mere ogeowuweiheubi [For this reason, during the harvest]

O gaghioru [He did not work]

O nweghiotumbajimaobuede o debere [He did not keep a tuber of yam nor cocoyam]

Ugbu a okochiabiala [Now it's the dry season]

O gararjougoka o binyeaka [He goes begging the eagle to lend her some maize]

M ga-akwughachigin'udummiri ma tinyekwaomurunwa [I will pay you when the rains come and add a little interest]

Ana m anurugiyi [I swear an oath to you]

Ugo a bughionye obi ebere [The eagle does not have a merciful heart]

O juruokwaajuru [He asks the partridge]

Keduhe i mere n'ogeowuweiheubi? [What did you do during the harvest?]

Okwa wee si [So said the partridge]

Ejiri m ogeahukweukwe [I sang throughout that season]

Ugo wee zaaya [Then said the eagle to him]

Ọ bụrụna I kwechalaukwe [If you are through with singing,]
Gbawazieegwu [Then dance].

Results

Presented are three versions of the selected fable: French, English and Igbo versions. The research explored six cultural elements presented in Table 1 below:

Table 1: Presentation of cultural elements

French	English	Igbo
<i>cigale</i>	cicada	partridge
<i>fourmi</i>	ant	eagle
<i>été</i>	summer	harvest
<i>août</i>	harvest	rainy season
<i>graine</i>	grain	maize
<i>la bise</i>	north wind	dry season

The semiopragmatic theory (which is our working tool) borders on the re-expression of the pragmatic meanings of cultural signs. The pragmatic meanings of the examined cultural signs are shown in Table 2:

Table 2: Presentation of the meanings of cultural signs

Cultural signs	Functions
<i>cigale</i>	a singing lazy animal
<i>fourmi</i>	a hardworking animal
<i>été</i>	planting season
<i>août</i>	harvest
<i>graine</i>	food
<i>la bise</i>	cold period when no one can work

Analysis

The analysis commences with animal personification. In fables, animals act as humans. One may notice that the Igbo version appropriates the two insects into two birds that abound in the Igbo environment. The partridge in Igbo culture is known as a singer and a lazy bird. The eagle in most Nigerian cultures symbolize strength. The Nigerian coat of arms is designed with an eagle standing on a silver shield, portraying how strong Nigeria as a country is. Igbo people consider the eagle to be hardworking, unlike the partridge that plays away. Spector’s English translation retains the two insects as seen in the source text. The close similarity of English and French cultures may explain this. This semantic presentation is an opportunity for non-Europeans to appreciate the manner in which French consider the *cicada* (cricket).

The source text, written by a French philosopher, reflects French flora and

fauna. The seasons found in the source text are those found in the temperate regions: spring, summer, autumn and winter. Summer and autumn are periods of harvest. The harvest is principally in the month of August (*Août*). This month marks the transition from summer to autumn. During winter, due to cold, one stays indoors and feeds on what was gathered during the harvest. The cicada suffered during the winter for he had stored nothing.

English version does not appropriate the geographical seasons. This may be because Spector wished his text to be targeted at a pure English audience. England also presents these seasons. The English version maintains the *summer* season as an equivalent for *été*. The *north wind* blows from the North Pole. The expression *north wind* is also used in place of *Quand la bise fut venue*. Through reading, an Igbo child may come to know and appreciate Europe's seasons.

Igbo land is in the eastern part of Nigeria. The region has two distinct seasons, rainy and dry seasons. Plant cultivation is done during the early rainy season; April to June. The harvests are done during September and October. November usually marks the coming of the dry season. One does not plant during the dry season; rather, everyone feeds on what was harvested. The Igbo version portrays the partridge as having spent the rainy season meant for cultivation, singing and playing. The term *dry season* is employed in place of *cold (brought by the north wind)*.

In the Igbo context, just as in most parts of the world, birds feed on grain. Maize is a popular grain grown in Nigeria. Maize is harvested and stored up for the dry season, when it cannot be grown. The term *maize* is used instead of simply saying *grain*.

According to the source text, not being a lender is the least of the ant's faults. This implies that she has other bigger faults, one of which is mockery. One may notice that the ant mocks the *singer* by asking her to dance. This tone of mockery is maintained in all three versions. The source text presents rhymes and rhythms.

La cigale ayant chanté - Tout l'été,

Se trouva fort dépourvue- Quand la bise fut venue

Elle alla crier famine- Chez la fourmi sa voisine,

The homily borne by this fable is integrated in these rhymes. An effort to reproduce this lyrical structure is done in the English version: "The cicada having *sung- All summer long.*" Due to language structure and environmental constraint, the Igbo version does not carry this lyrical pattern. The Igbo translation transmits the moral message borne by the source fable but cannot make its audience appreciate its poetic style.

Conclusion

This study explores the relationship between language and culture and their relevance to translation, identifying the challenges involved in translating from and into other cultures. Culture gives birth to language and as such translation and culture are intimately connected. Meanings in both source and target languages are profoundly affected by their cultural context. Signs and symbols usually contain cultural subtleties that, unless they are accounted for, can bring just the opposite meaning than is intended. So translation without deep cultural consultation can be dangerous, especially when meanings are rooted in culturally-divergent settings.

Noting the intrinsic understanding of the link between language and culture, this study examines the relationship between the author's intention and the perception or comprehension of the reader. This study proposes appropriation as a means of ensuring that the author's intended meaning is received by the target audience. For instance, the Igbo version employs elements that are known to Nigerian society. However, the characteristic features of the selected elements are akin to those used in the foreign (source) text. Translators must be sensitive to the moral and emotional value-associations of the words and symbols in the language to find meaning equivalents.

The research proves that translation is a viable vehicle through which children may be transported to other worlds. The semantic translation presented may be considered a channel through which the Nigerian child may come to appreciate French values.

Finally, the study agrees with Bachelder that the value that children derive from foreign folk stories is their exotic settings and presentations of new worlds. In other words, translation enables children become endeared to books and stories of other nations.

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