

CULTURE AND TRANSLATION: A CRITIQUE OF MICHEL LIGNY'S FRENCH VERSION OF PROVERBS IN CHINUA ACHEBE'S THINGS FALL APART

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Abstract

Translation, the transfer of meaning from a source text to a target text as naturally as possible also implies detailed attention paid to "form". A lot of people who read translated works do not know they are translated because the translators succeeded not only in transferring meaning but equally in transferring style. Usually, it is left for other translators, translation teachers or critics of translations to, for academic reasons, mostly, find out if the translator succeeded in transmitting the author's message. This can only be effectively done by comparing the two texts: the original and the translated. In this paper we shall focus our attention on culture and its implications for translation, Achebe's use of language as well as aspects of culture in the original text: Things Fall Apart with a view to finding out whether the translator succeeded in the translated version: Le Monde s'effondre. The aspect of culture we shall examine is the use of proverbs with their flora and fauna connotations, bearing in mind Achebe's "africanisation" of the English language which he personally acknowledges. Whether Achebe's "new English" was effectively translated into a "new French" is, therefore, a question this paper seeks to answer

Keywords: translation, culture, proverbs, message, "africanisation", new English, new French

1.0 Introduction

In literary translation language both creates and fulfils itself (Babatunde, 115). It is an art whose creative genius is not only evident in the transfer of meaning from the source text to the target text, it also ensures that meaning is clothed in the style of the author and in the form of the original text. Translating literary texts involves great attention paid to diction, its effects and what it represents. It is a process in which the translator imitates in a creative manner the thoughts and feelings of the characters, setting and atmosphere contained in the source text to the target text without jeopardizing the language and culture of the target audience. No wonder Lederer (111) defines translation as follows:

... un processus de transfert de contenus notionnels et émotionnels d'une langue dans une autre, effectué par un traducteur parfaitement bilingue, totalement identifié à l'auteur du texte original et conscient des

réactions probables de lecteurs de son texte.

... a process that ensures the transfer of notional and emotional contents from one language to another, by a perfectly bilingual translator who identifies himself completely with the author of the original text and is conscious of the probable reactions of the readers of his text. (Our translation).

It is therefore a delicate balance which, if not maintained, justice will not be done to the original text and injustice will be meted to the target audience. The translator therefore has to be faithful to the original text as well as to the target text and audience. Faithfulness to the original text or the author entails the transfer of the author's message as he presents it while faithfulness to the target

language has to do with correct and effective use of it in such a way that the effect of the translation on the target audience is similar or almost the same as that of the original text.

In this paper our aim is to examine whether Achebe's "new" English is faithfully translated into a "new" French by Michel Ligny. To do this effectively, we shall examine culture and translation, Achebe's use of language as well as Ligny's translation of selected proverbs. It is instructive to note that our judgment shall be based on the linguistic theory of translation as espoused by Vinay and Darbelnet (1977).

Culture and Translation

Since translation, especially of literary texts, involves a transfer of culture via language which is also an aspect of culture, it is quite pertinent that we examine what it is as well as its implications so far as literary translation is concerned.

The first anthropological definition of culture according to Sakellariou (231) was given by Edward Tylor in 1903. Oke (19) does not seem to agree with him on the date though both of them are of the opinion that Tylor was the first to offer such a definition. Since then its meaning has so expanded that by the 1950s there were more than 200 definitions. Although, simply put, culture can be seen as the way of life of a people it is proper we examine three definitions since the word is central in this paper. Oke (19) posits that culture, in the usage of anthropology, is not restricted to such specialized fields of knowledge nor is it an attribute of persons who have good manners. Culture in our usage encompasses language, means of making a living, arrangement of family life, the focus of group loyalties and ways of perceiving the world, both the physical world and the world beyond... Each human group, therefore, has its own culture.

He further alludes to Edward Tylor's view of culture, made as far back as 1871 as "that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man as a member of society". Babatunde's view equally merits our attention. According to him culture refers to the cumulative

deposits of national knowledge, experiences, religious beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, values, attitudes, behaviours, motives or symbols that are transmitted socially denoting patterns of human activity in a particular society, time and space existing in every sphere of social life (116).

While we share in the views of Babatunde we wish to comment on the meaning of "national" which may be misleading. The word "nation" generally refers to a country; and as we know a country may have so many communities that have different cultures. So we can talk of the culture of the smallest community, the culture of a tribe or a race, the culture of a nation or country and the culture of the world. Putting on a dress or a form of covering for instance, is an aspect of culture that is universal. But the manner in which these dresses are worn, the styles in which they are sewn, vary from nation to nation, tribe to tribe and community to community.

This is also evident in what we refer to as "world view", that is, the angle of perception, the manner in which every people conceive and understand realities. This world view is transmitted through language as evidenced in the way people greet in various speech communities. In English, for instance, in the morning we say "good morning" (wishing the person addressed a good morning); in French we say "bonjour" (wishing the person a good day); in Igbo we say "I buola chi; in Kom, a language spoken by the Kom people of the North West Region of Cameroon, the greeting is in form of a question: "tuh lain mena?" (meaning has darkness cleared?). We can go on and on to cite the same concepts viewed from different perspectives by various cultures of the world. This poses a problem to the translator who must first of all understand how an idea or concept is presented in a source language and equally know how to present it in the target language without hurting the linguistic sensibilities of the target audience. In this regard, the use of images, especially in proverbs and idioms must be treated with great caution. This is why Lederer (111) stresses that the translator must be perfectly bilingual.

Although different cultures have different ways of expressing the same ideas in proverbs, in some cases

the same images are used to the extent that one is bound to think one is a direct translation of the other. In the case of English and French, let us consider

French

- 1 Quiconque se sert de l'épée périra par l'épée.
- 2 Quand le chat est parti, la souris danse.
- 3 Tel père, tel fils.
- 4 Rira bien qui rira le dernier.
- 5 Nul n'est prophète en son pays.

In example 1 above, the image used in French "épée" (sword) is the same in English. The same applies to "chat" (cat), "père" (father) and "prophète" (prophet) in examples 2, 3 and 5

French

- 1 Il ne faut pas réveiller le chat qui dort.
- 2 Une hirondelle ne fait pas le printemps.
- 3 Après la pluie, le beau temps.
- 4 Serpent qui change de peau est toujours serpent.
- 5 Ne confiez pas votre agneau à qui veut la peau.

In example 1, French makes use of "chat" (cat) while English uses "dog". In 2, "hirondelle" (swallow) and "printemps" (spring) are used in French while "tree" and "forest" are used in English. In this case we note that though the two peoples representing the two cultures share the same climatic conditions, there is a variation in the employ of flora and fauna in proverbs that mean the same. A speech community can only use those things that are present in its environment to craft proverbs and idioms. In the case of France and Britain, the "swallow" exists in both countries just as "trees" do. Yet the French proverb in this case uses fauna while the English prefers flora. A translator working with these languages must therefore know the proverbs in both languages in order to translate properly. Proverbs and idioms fall under what is commonly referred to in translation

some examples of proverbs in which there is great lexical similarity in the use of images.

English

- He who lives by the sword shall die by the sword.
- When the cat is away the rat dances.
- Like father, like son.
- He who laughs last laughs best.
- No man is a prophet in his own country.

respectively. However, in most other cases, different images are used in both languages to transmit the same message. Let us consider some examples.

English

- Let sleeping dogs lie.
- A tree does not make a forest.
- Every cloud has a silver lining.
- Wash a pig, dress a pig, it is always a pig.
- Do not set the fox to mind the geese.

parlance as "fixed expressions". The translator cannot exercise his creativity in this regard to the extent of using different lexical items, apart from the standard ones, in the translation of proverbs and idioms. We should, however, note that this particular proverb has a direct translation in English: "A swallow does not make a summer". Since not all of them enjoy this duality of expression, the translator has to be careful not to create his own.

Examples 3, 4 and 5 present similar variations in the choice of images in both languages. While in 3, French uses "pluie" (rain) and "beau temps" (fine weather), English prefers "cloud" and "silver lining". In 4, French makes use of "snake" while English uses "pig". In example 5, French prefers "agneau" (lamb) and "peau" while English is contented with "fox" and "geese".

These explanations show that while in some cases, similar images are used in the proverbs of both English and French, in most cases differences occur. The translator is therefore supposed to be very careful in order to translate the proverb properly in the target language. We shall now examine the nature of the images used in Achebe's proverbs.

Achebe's Use of Language

Achebe uses a lot of images in *Things Fall Apart*. These images are a reflection of the oral tradition that is rich in style, mode and delivery (Iyabode, 125). Imagery is the use of figurative language to represent objects, actions and ideas in such a way that it appeals to our physical senses. The author uses words and phrases to create "mental images" for the reader which helps him to visualize his message more realistically. In the case of Achebe, like other writers, he makes use of images found in his environment: cow, grass, hawk, toad, fly, palm oil, kola nut, lizard, bird, corn, etc.

A proverb is a simple, concise and concrete saying, popularly known and repeated by members of a particular community. Often metaphorical, it expresses a truth based on common sense or the practical experience of humanity. According to Iheanacho A.A. and Mombe M. (61), "proverbs are full blown autonomous statements which carry, in concise forms, the experience of the culture and people of which they are part". According to Echenim (95), the use of proverbs is one of the means of expression in oral tradition. He goes on to say that they have fixed forms that are not affected by time and they form an integral part of the story.

Achebe taps into this rich cultural heritage of the Igbo people especially in his first three novels to drive home what one can refer to as his mission statement in the literary world. Gikandi (56) puts it thus:

Chinua Achebe was to note in an influential essay published in the early 1960s, one of the key motivations for producing an African literature was to restore the moral integrity and cultural autonomy of the African in an age of decolonization. The fundamental theme of African writing, noted Achebe, was

that "African people did not hear of culture for the first time from Europeans; that their societies were not mindless but frequently had a philosophy of great depth and value and beauty, that they had poetry and above all, they had dignity

This beauty, poetry and dignity; this moral integrity and cultural autonomy can only be expressed in a sublime language replete with the use of a device with firm roots in oral tradition.

It must be stated that Achebe's trilogy (*Things Fall Apart*, *Arrow of God* and *No Longer at Ease*) according to Christian Anieke and others is already a translation from the Igbo language into English done by the characters of the novel who are referred to by Anieke (111) as "bicultural authorial narrators". We are more concerned with the task of each of these narrators. Anieke (111) states that "The bicultural authorial narrator of each of the novels is also a translator whose main task consists in translating elements of the Igbo culture into English" (111). That Achebe should use translators to convey the Igbo thought and way of life is quite understandable since the setting of *Things Fall Apart* covers the period of the colonial invasion of Igbo land, a period in which monolingualism still held sway before the establishment of churches and schools. The Igbo characters in these novels, therefore, could not have been expressing themselves in English. But Achebe as a master craftsman was able to put in their mouths an English cloaked in Igbo imagery to the extent that it sounds as if they were indeed speaking Igbo. Whether the bicultural authorial narrators/translators succeeded in their translations into English is a topic deftly handled by Christian Anieke in his seminal work, *Chinua Achebe's Trilogy: A Study in Bicultural Communication* translated into French by Yong as *La Trilogie de Chinua Achebe: Une Etude de la communication biculturelle*.

That Achebe uses English in a special way, as if it is Igbo, is not in any way a fault because as he declares:

Is it right that a man should abandon his mother tongue for someone else's? It looks like a dreadful betrayal and produces a guilty feeling. But for me

there is no choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it. [...] I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (62).

Achebe’s view is strongly supported by Raja Rao according to Makpu (148) who points out that this phenomenon is not only limited to the African writer. Other writers who have experienced British colonization such as the Indians are also victims of this dilemma. To buttress this point he cites Raja Rao.

The telling has not been easy. One has to convey in a language that is not one’s own the spirit that is not one’s own. One has to convey the various shades and omissions of a certain thought-movement that looks maltreated in an alien language. ...yet English is not really an alien language to us. It is the language of our intellectual make-up. We are all indistinctively bilingual, many of us writing in our own language and English. We cannot write like the English. We should not. We cannot write only as Indians.

This is exactly what Achebe does in *Things Fall Apart*. Some of the proverbs used by Achebe have direct equivalents in English but he chooses not to use them thus lending greater credence to the statement above.

It is clear that Rao and Achebe share the same view with regards to the “africanisation” or “nativisation” of the English language. However it is instructive to examine a contrary view espoused by another great African writer, Ngugi wa Thiong’o. As noted by Tyagraj Thakur (1), wa Thiong’o does not share this view. He puts it thus:

The use of the English language to represent the African native culture received a sceptic edge in the 1980s when the Kenyan writer Ngugi wa Thiong’o switched over to write in Gikuyu while renouncing English. Even wa Thiong’o in his article “On the Abolition of English Department” states that a non-native language cannot do justice to the representation of a native culture.

We do not share wa Thiong’o’s view because, like Thakur, we agree that Achebe, to a great extent, successfully represents his native culture and African tradition in a global platform of literature.

Let us examine some of the Igbo proverbs Achebe uses in *Things Fall Apart (TFA)* and *Arrow of God (AOG)* and their equivalents in English.

Igbo Proverbs	English Equivalents
1 When mother cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth (<i>TFA</i> 49)	Like father, like son.
2 The offspring of a hawk cannot fail to devour chicks. (<i>AOG</i> 128)	Like father, like son.
3 Whenever you see a toad jumping in broad day light, then know that something is after its life (<i>TFA</i> 143)	There is no smoke without fire.
4 The fly that has no one to advise it follows the corpse into the grave. (<i>AOG</i> 27)	He that will not be counseled, cannot be helped.
5 Did not our elders tell us that as soon as we shake hands with a leper he will want an embrace? (<i>AOG</i> 143)	Familiarity breeds contempt.

From the examples above we realize that although some of the proverbs have equivalents in English, Achebe decides to use English in a special way and say them just as they are said in Igbo. In doing so he brings to the fore the richness of the Igbo culture. How this richness, couched in a "new English", is translated into a "new French" is what we intend to address now.

Translation into French of Igbo Proverbs used by Achebe

Things Fall Apart has been translated into virtually all major languages of the world. For quite some time now, critics have simply found it safe to say that it has been translated into more than fifty languages. In this paper we are limiting ourselves to Michel Ligny's French translation as *Le Monde s'effondre* published in 1966. As stated earlier, our goal is to find out if Ligny captures the essence or spirit of Achebe's "africanisation" of the English language in his translation. To do this we have selected and examined some proverbs in both versions:

English	French
1. Among the Ibo the art of conversation is regarded very highly, and proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten (5).	Chez les Ibo, l'art de la conversation jouit d'une grande considération, et les proverbes sont l'huile de palme qui fait passer les mots avec les idées. (13)
2. As the elders said, if a child washed his hands he could eat with kings (6).	Comme disaient les anciens, si un enfant se lavait les mains, il pouvait manger avec des rois. (15)
3. When the moon is shining the cripple becomes hungry for a walk. (7)	Comme disent les Ibo : « Quand la lune brille, l'envie d'aller promener démange les infirmes. » (18)
4. As our people say, a man who pays respect to the great paves the way for his own greatness (14).	Comme dit notre peuple, un homme qui paie ses respects aux grands prépare le chemin de sa propre grandeur. (28/29)
5. ...as the saying goes, an old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb (15).	... comme on dit, une vieille femme est toujours gênée quand on parle d'os desséchés dans un proverbe. (30)
6. The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did (15/16).	Le lézard qui bondit au sol du haut du grand arbre iroko disait qu'il chanterait ses propres louanges si personne d'autre ne le faisait. (31)
7. Eneke the bird says that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching (16).	L'oiseau Eneke dit que, depuis que les hommes ont appris à tirer sans manquer leur but, il a appris à voler sans se percher. (32)

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| 8. As our fathers said, you can tell a ripe corn by its look (16). | Comme disaient nos pères, on peut distinguer le maïs mûr à son aspect. (32) |
| 9. But the Ibo people have a proverb that when a man says yes his <i>chi</i> says yes also (19). | Mais les Ibo ont un proverbe : quand un homme dit oui, son <i>chi</i> dit oui aussi. (38) |
| 10. A chick that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches (46). | Un poussin destiné à devenir un coq, on le remarque le jour même de son éclosion. (82) |
| 11. A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of hot yam which its mother puts in its palm (47). | Les doigts d'un enfant ne sont pas brûlés par un morceau d'igname chaude que sa mère lui met dans la main. (83) |
| 12. When mother-cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth (49) | Comme on dit chez nous : « quand la mère vache rumine, ses petits observent sa bouche » (87). |
| 13. But as the dog said, « If I fall down for you and you fall down for me, it is play » (51) | Mais comme disait le chien : « Si je m'abaisse pour vous et que vous abaissez pour moi, c'est de jeu. » (90) |

Example 1 above serves as a very succinct introduction to the importance of proverbs in African tradition. Achebe seems to use this statement as a prelude to the rich harvest of proverbs and idioms in *Things Fall Apart*. The image used in this case is that of the “palm oil”, a major produce from one of the main cash crops in Igbo land. That a people can only use those things, whether flora or fauna that are available in their community as images, is evident in this and other proverbs Achebe uses. Michel Ligny rightly translates this image into French as “l’huile de palme”. However, we wonder why he goes on to translate “with which words are eaten” as “qui fait passer les mots avec les idées”. The idea of “words being eaten” which conveys the “gusto” or the “relish” experienced in Igbo oratory is lost in the French translation. We do not think Ligny wondered why words

should be “eaten” because he later translates “What we are eating is finished” correctly as “Ce que nous sommes en train de manger est terminé”. In this case he is certainly aware that what is being referred to is “palm wine”. To fully preserve the “africanised” or the “new” English in his French translation he should have used the verb “manger”.

In example 13 the image used is that of a dog. Achebe wants us to liken the situation of bride price haggling to that of two dogs playing. There should be no hard feelings if both of them fall in the course of the game because, after all, it is just a game. The word “fall” is quite significant in the proverb and should be rendered appropriately in French. We, however, notice that Ligny uses “s’abaisser” which means “to lower, bring down, humiliate, reduce, mark down, go down,

stoop or fall". We are tempted to conclude that in his translation he does an interpretation of the haggling, a common feature during payment of bride price. Definitely, "lower, bring down and reduce" will fit in this context. However, our aim in this paper being to know if he creates a "new" French that tallies closely with Achebe's "new" English, we conclude that he should have used "tomber" which means "fall". Again, the use of "vous" in its singular form to refer to two dogs that are playing is inappropriate. We think "tu" (you), a pronoun that suggests familiarity should have been used instead of "vous" laden with formality and distance.

English

2. Honour to whom honour is due.
7. Once bitten, twice shy.
9. Nothing is impossible to a willing heart.
9. Every man is the architect of his own fate.
12. The apple does not fall far from the tree.
12. Like father, like son.

Conclusion

In this paper, our aim has been to examine Achebe's « new » English in *Things Fall Apart* especially as proverbs are concerned and to ascertain whether the translator of the French version, Michel Ligny, succeeded in crafting a "new" French that carries Achebe's message to the francophone audience while still maintaining the richness of the Igbo and African cultures. That Achebe uses the English language as if it is Igbo is seen in the transliteration of the Igbo proverbs he expresses through his "bicultural authorial narrators and translators". We have seen that he deliberately does this because even when some of the Igbo proverbs have equivalents in

In all the other proverbs quoted above (2-12), Ligny succeeds in transferring the essence, depth and meaning of the Igbo proverbs from English to French. As a result, like Achebe who successfully transmits the Igbo proverbs using English in a special way, he transfers most of them appropriately in a French language that preserves the richness of the Igbo culture. This assertion is buttressed by the fact that he does not use the French equivalents even when they are available in some cases.

Let us consider English and French equivalents of some of the proverbs above. They are numbered to tally with Achebe's and Ligny's translation above.

French

- A tout seigneur, tout honneur.
- Chat échaudé craint l'eau froide.
Chacun est maître de son destin.
A cœur vaillant rien d'impossible.
- Les chiens ne font pas des chats.
Tel père, tel fils.

English, he chooses not to use them. To a very large extent, Ligny succeeds too in translating them appropriately because even when he could have used French equivalents in some of the proverbs he decides to create a "new" French that succinctly captures the depth of the Igbo culture so far as proverbs are concerned.

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