

## **Impact of Translation on Universal Values and Cultural Nexus in Yoruba, English and French Proverbs and Idioms**

- **RASAQ THOMAS, PhD**, Department of Foreign Languages, Faculty of Arts, Lagos State University, Ojo

### **Abstract**

Fixed expressions or expressions figées in French (idioms and proverbs) incarnate sayings, real life situations and universal moral values; therefore bequeathing words of wisdom and morality to generations. These expressions or sayings represent autochthonous cultural emblem attributable to a particular distinct linguistic community. However, there exist some natural and universal cultural affinities which are globally shared with the aid of written and oral literature. The translation constraints of these fixed expressions are associated with establishing equivalent cultural euphoria of wisdom or morality in these proverbs or idioms, putting into account different languages. This article attempts to highlight the universality of fixed expressions in (Yoruba-English-French) languages, their overt/covert translations and the commentaries/analysis of cultural nuances that may play out during the translation process. Eugene Nida's Approach of Formal Equivalence and Dynamic Equivalence have been adopted to analyse cultural/contextual nuances and literal translations identified in the article.

**Keywords:** Fixed expressions, Idioms, Proverbs, Cultural equivalence, Translation

### **Introduction**

In any community, language plays a major role in communication and expression of thoughts intrinsically revealed by culture. More often, the convention of language varieties stems from different cultures and the survival of any language is ultimately anchored on the existence of the culture of the milieu.

The global study of cultures is indicative of the fact that diverse ethnic groups speak different languages and express different worldviews in their daily relationships. Ostensibly, language has proven to be an exigency in the transmission of cultures from generation to generation and also a vehicle for cultural heritage. More often, two or more different languages express the same universal realities, posing the challenges of finding the equivalence of these realities. On the one hand, the thrust of this article centers on universal expressions (proverbs, idioms) which are moral and didactics inclined. On the other hand, we shall provide comments and analyses of the proverbs and idioms taking into account the constraints of establishing equivalent sensations between the source and target languages of the different cultures. The translation of these fixed expressions poses enormous linguistic and extra-linguistic inhibitions, even though there are shared, imbibed moral values and socio-cultural aesthetics across the various languages and cultures involved.

Generally, Sociolinguistics as a branch of Linguistics studies the (intra/inter) relationships between language and society. Sociolinguistics, through Anthropology, focuses on the same relationships between language and culture, both locally and universally. Studies on language and culture make it possible to detect the socio-cultural behaviour and perceptions of a linguistic community and their world view. This convention culminates into fusion and exchange of socio-cultural and aesthetic values. However, the barriers could be remedied with the aid of translation.

### **Literary Translation as a remedy to linguistic and cultural barrier in understanding Idioms and Proverbs**

Translation as a natural term is poised to resolving communication barriers among languages and cultures, whether intra or inter. To facilitate cross-cultural understanding and globalization in all fields of human endeavours, translation becomes imperative. On the one hand, translation plays a



pivotal role in harmonizing multilingual and multicultural worlds. On the other hand, it exposes the universality of moral and cultural values embedded in a thousand of languages and cultures across the world.

John Catford describes translation as a branch of linguistics with specific linguistic theory. "Translation is an operation performed on languages: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another. Clearly, then, any theory of translation must draw upon a theory of language - a general linguistic theory". (1)

Eugen Nida views translation as "the closest natural equivalent of the source-language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style." (12)

### **Intrinsic contextual difficulties in Proverbs and Idioms**

Language is a natural endowment bequeathed to man and his or her community. Communication is a daily activity of expressions, thoughts and means of interaction. The choice of words in the act of communication could be literal or metaphoric and this may influence the concept of equivalent reaction in a discourse.

Generally, the translation of proverbs is a difficult task because their meanings are culture-bound and hard to guess. As a corollary to this, Lakoff, G. and Johnson, M. refer to proverbs by affirming that "a culture may be thought of as providing among other things, a pool of available idioms and proverbs (...) for making sense of realities". (12) They also refer to Nida's postulations that proverbs have specific meanings, and translators as well as foreign language learners should be able to recognize these special meanings in both the source and the target languages in order to understand them correctly. The above assertions show that proverb is culture/reality dependent and semantically intriguing, with some degree of specificity in its translation and acquisition.

Owomoyela Oyekan provides a more encompassing feature of proverb when he observes that "proverb is often incisive in their propositions and terse in their formulation, are deduced from observation of life and their characteristic and habits, the environment and natural phenomenon and sober reflection on all these express an exceptionable truth..." (12).

Cited by Lawal Noah, J., Whiting, B.J. defines proverb as "a short saying of philosophical nature, of a great antiquity, the product of the masses rather than the classes, constantly applicable and appealing because it bears a semblance of the universal truth." (144)

In the non-literary discourse of proverbs, Lawal Noah J. employs the term 'proverbiality' which according to him discusses the linguistic consideration of a text as proverbial (or as a proverb), a distinction that sets it apart from other known texts like poems, riddles, songs and folklore. (144)

Capping off the definition of proverbs, Iheanacho Akakuru and Micheal Mombe affirms that:

one way of defining a proverb is to conceive it as a 'short saying or sentence' generally known by many people, and which usually contains words of wisdom, truth or morals that are based on commonsense or practical experience. It is often a description of a basic rule of conduct that all people generally follow or should follow. Proverbs are figures of speech and are found in all natural languages. (61)

### **Idioms**

In Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, idioms are referred to as "a group of words whose meaning is different from the meanings of the individual words: 'Let the cat out of the bag' is an idiom meaning to tell a secret." Cited by Amineh Adelnia and Hossein Vahid Dastjerdi, Mona Baker, (1992) in her book *In Other Words*, states that idioms are frozen patterns of language which allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings which cannot be deduced from their individual components. So by stating this definition she considers five conditions for idioms which come as follow:

1) The order of the words in an idiom cannot be changed. The way the words are put together is



fixed and they cannot change their place. E.g. “go to rack and ruin” not “go to ruin and rack”.

2) The words in an idiom cannot be omitted. We as the users of the language are not permitted to delete some of the words of a particular element. E.g. “shed crocodile tears” not “shed tears”. 3) There are no extra words that might be added to an idiom. E.g. “have a narrow escape” not “have a narrow quick escape”.

4) No words in an idiom can be replaced by another word. E.g. “out of sight, out of mind” not “out of sight, out of heart”.

5) The grammatical structures of an idiom cannot also be changed. We have the idiom of “ring the bell” but we don't have “the bell was ringed”.

As for Iheanacho Akakuru and Micheal Mombe the word 'idiom' is an omnibus term. In its generic sense, it refers to any specialized language form (autonomous) expression (non-autonomous) specific to a domain and co-substantial with a particular linguistic or cultural community". (5)

The synopsis of all these definitions is that proverbs and idioms are fixed, independent, purposeful and didactic expressions derivative of true observable, pragmatic dispositions and experiences of the people of a particular linguistic community. Proverbs and idioms are culture-dependent, literary and intrinsically difficult to understand and translate. The choice of word is specific and may not be attributed to any particular convention. They are arbitrarily coined without due consideration of any given word formation order.

### **Diversity, Universality of Language and Culture**

Translation of languages is a way of having recourse to their cultural contexts when the translator is faced with the choice of profound or superficial meanings of certain expressions. Lotman (1972) succinctly affirms that "No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture; and no culture can exist which does not have at its centre the structure of natural language." Cited by Pratima Dave (2012), Susan Basnett creates a fusion and analogy of language and culture as follows:

language is the heart within the body of culture and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the body that surrounds it, so the translator cannot separate the language from the culture. (6)

The diversity of language and culture, stems from a divine creation and pre-biblical precept to reprimand the builders of the "Tower of Babel". Over the millennia, this incontrovertible assertion has become a blessing and gift to man to communicate and interact in one or more languages and cultures. It is an axiom that language variation culminates into cultural differences. In George Yule's postulation, "given the process of cultural transmission by which languages are acquired, it makes a lot of sense to emphasize the fact that linguistic variation is tied very much to the existence of different cultures." (246) Language reflects cultures and its plurality ostensibly permeates different cultural practices and world views. It is important to emphasize the study of the world's cultures and its relationship with different languages. Yule, in this regard points out that “in the study of the world's cultures, it has become clear that different groups not only have different languages, they have different world views which are reflected in their languages.”

Universality of language and culture has become expedient for the survival of the human race. This is borne out of globalization, dictated by economic exigencies, socio-cultural and literary imperatives, international trade, politics and diplomacy. This is achievable with the aid of literature, science and technology. Wen Liang aptly puts it:

Mankind entered the new millennium today. With the progress of science and technology; the development of the society and the wide dissemination of



information; the exchange and cooperation of international economy, politics, education, science and technology; increasingly frequent exchanges and contacts between the state and the nations promote the mutual penetration between different cultures and accelerate the integration and convergence of different cultures. Cultural globalization emerges. (1)

It is indeed a global phenomenon that world cultures are espoused through languages. The plurality of languages and cultures is a reality. Suffice to say that the universal values embedded in the linguistic and cultural varieties is not a myth. Even though there are varieties and diversities of language and culture culminating into different worldviews, there are evidently cases of similarities and universalities of values, ideals and ethos revealed in these cultures which are central to human evolution and moral baggage. As Ekundayo Simpson affirms:

... a grammar of culture covers any area of endeavour under the sun : political economy, management, business, science, technology and agriculture, medicine, law, education. Each of these sectors is an outpost, if not an arm, of culture. "There is thus a link between the Ministry of Culture and the Ministry of Science and Technology, which even those who work there may not realize. But then a breakthrough in technology is a cultural breakthrough, just as defects in our technological education and impact can constitute serious cultural defects. (247)

The import of most assertions above is that diversity of languages and cultures often reflects in universal worldviews and sharing of moral values through literature, science and technology and ultimately translation activity.

Whether local or universal, translation of proverbs and idioms can either be literal or context-bound, depending exclusively on the intrinsic features of the texts. Some are ostensibly facile to understand and translate while a large preponderance of them appear oblique. The pertinent question is what approach does a translator adopt when confronted with a seeming obscure proverb or idiom? This discourse leads to the concept of 'cultural equivalence', an approach that we consider apt and pragmatic for translating proverbs and idioms.

### **Cultural Equivalence**

Equivalence is ultimately viewed as a translation procedure or approach requiring a context and situational form of extra-linguistic variables to translate texts. Vinay and Dabene affirmatively postulate that equivalence is translation process which expresses the same situation or reality as in the original text but having recourse to different linguistic and stylistic structures. (20) This definition is a precursor to the overall concept of equivalence, considering the difficult nature of literary texts.

Eugene Nida notably classifies equivalence into two broad types: formal equivalence and dynamic equivalence. (3) Nida maintains that formal equivalence focuses on form and content as identically as possible in source text and target text. Emphasis is laid more on the grammatical structures, word, phrase or sentence usage and meaning as determined by source content. Dynamic equivalence, on the other hand, considered as pragmatic, attempts to convey message from the source text to target text as naturally as possible. It pays premium on linguistic and applied linguistics dictates of the text. A literary text which contains cultural elements of multilingual communities is essentially bicultural and the task of rendering them from the SL to TL is problematic for the translator.

The concept of culture specificity in translation can culminate in the problem of 'untranslatability'. John Catford identifies two types of untranslatability – linguistic and cultural:

The non-availability of lexical, semantic and syntactical features of the ST in the TT,



then the linguistic untranslatability arises. Cultural untranslatability creeps in when the appropriate or relevant cultural context or situation of the SL does not exist in the TL. It is imperative to point out that with the emergence of translation studies which is interdisciplinary and pragmatic the problem of untranslatability has been laid to rest. Any linguistic or cultural element in the SL that does not exist in the TL can be annotated or explained beneath the text. (1)

Catford's postulation is indicative of the dynamics of translation and the attendant research strives in resolving translatable and non-translatable features in cultural texts. Both literary and non-literary texts normally present nuances that defy context-bound and culturally imbued translations. The translator is saddled with the onerous task of establishing equivalent meanings in the target text whether they exist or not. This is achievable through adaptation or explanation of the items that exist in the source text but are missing in the target texts.

### **Yoruba Language and Proverbs**

Yoruba is a tonal language spoken in West Africa. With an estimated number of speakers hovering around to 30 million people, (*ATLAS- Yoruba Introduction*) Yoruba is spoken principally in Nigeria and Republic of Bénin. It is a medium of communication in Togo, Ghana, Cote-D'Ivoire, Sierra-Leone, Cuba, Brazil and other parts of the Americas and Europe. It is a Kwa language belonging to the family of Niger-Congo. Yoruba is one of the three major ethnic languages in Nigeria.

Fabunmi F. and Salawu A., in their description of Yoruba reveal as follows:

Yoruba language occupies a privileged place within the entire range of African studies. A relatively abundant literature exists on the language both in the European languages and in the Yoruba language itself.

The Yoruba language is in contact with many other language groups in Nigeria and in some African countries; so it has several exonyms (outside names) like Yariba, Yorubawa, Nago, Anago, Lukumi and Aku. (2)

### **Yoruba Proverbs**

According to Yoruba customs and traditions, proverbs designate 'owé', stemming from verbal constructions of coded and observable events and scenarios of different cultures. As pointed by Omolewa:

Yoruba language and speech practices do feature forms that are practically, if not exactly, identical with English proverb, but not all of them will qualify as òwé for the Yoruba speaker. On the other hand, some verbal forms that come under the general rubric of owe do not have equivalents in English proverb corpus. (2)

In Omolewa's estimation, Òwé seems to be formed from the contraction of *o-wé e*, literally "something that wraps it." The root is the verb 'we' (wrap [something] around something else)". (3)

### **Analysis and Commentaries on Yoruba Proverbs, English and French Equivalents adopting Eugene Nida's Approach of Formal and Dynamic Equivalence**

I. **Yoruba Proverb** : Mààlú tí ò ní irù, Olúwa ló nba lé eṣinṣin.

**English Equivalent**: God always provides for the lowly/needly.

**French Equivalent** : A barque désespérée, Dieu fait trouver le port.

**Comment**: This is a universal proverb with lexical and equivalent variation. Covert equivalence is used to describe the global reality in different languages. **God is the Divine Provider for all His creatures.**

ii. **Yoruba Proverb**: Òkóbó ò nbí ọmọ sí itòsí.



**English Equivalent:** Long ways, long lies.

**French Equivalent:** A beau mentir qui vient de loin.

**Comment :** Literal and identical lexical description of a universal reality. **A liar usually attributes an undeserving success to himself/herself.**

iii. **Yoruba Proverb:** Ilé làbọ simi oko, àjò ò dà bí ilé.

**English Equivalent:** There is no place like home.

**French Equivalent:** À tout oiseau, son nid est beau.

**Comment :** This is a universal proverb with lexical variation. Covert equivalence is used to describe the global reality in different languages. **It is natural to be home sick during a sojourn away from one's home.**

iv. **Yoruba Proverb:** Ọmọ tó bá sípá ní iyá è ngbé.

**English Equivalent:** Heaven helps those who help themselves.

**French Equivalent:** Aide-toi, le Ciel t'aidera.

**Comment:** Literal description of a universal reality. This is a natural and global proverb that enjoins: **whoever seeks help should show stern seriousness and commitment.**

v. **Yoruba Proverb:** Ní ilú àwọn afọjú, olójú kan ní jọba.

**English Equivalent:** In the land of the blind, the one-eyed man is king.

**French Equivalent:** Au royaume des aveugles, les borgnes sont rois.

**Comment:** Literal description of a universal reality: **A mediocre or parochial view thrives amongst the ignorant.**

vi. **Yoruba Proverb:** Tí abá fi ọwọ ọtún bá ọmọ wí, áafi tòsì fàá mọra.

**English Equivalent:** You chastise a child with the right hand, and embrace with the left hand to counsel him/her.

**French Equivalent:** Qui aime bien, châtie bien.

**Comment :** This is a universal proverb. Technique of adaptation is used to describe the global reality in different languages. This is another natural adage which emphasizes that **people who show genuine love must chastise / reprimand wrongdoings when they occur.**

vii. **Yoruba Proverb:** Orúko rere sànjú wúra àti fàdákà lọ.

**English Equivalent:** A good name is better than silver or gold.

**French Equivalent:** Bonne renommée vaut mieux que ceinture dorée.

**Comment:** Literal and identical lexical description of a universal reality. **Hard earned dignity and integrity must be protected from being smeared.**

viii. **Yoruba Proverb:** Ebi kì nwọnú kí ọọ ìmíràn wọ.

**English Equivalent:** A hungry man is an angry man.

**French Equivalent:** Ventre affamé n'a point d'oreille.

**Comment:** Literal and identical lexical description of a universal reality. **A hungry man is naturally impervious to a sensible discourse and easily irritable.**

ix. **Yoruba Proverb:** Gbogbo ohun tí ó ndán kọ ní wúra àti fàdákà.

**English Equivalent:** All that glitters is not gold.

**French Equivalent:** Tout ce qui brille n'est pas d'or.