

The Role of Translation in Intercultural Communication

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LE RÉSUMÉ

La traduction comme une activité professionnelle a bien contribué au développement de la société humaine sur le plan politique et économique ainsi que sur le plan social et culturel. Ce travail cherche à établir le rôle que joue la traduction dans le domaine de la communication interculturelle. On a fait une revue de la littérature existante. Nous avons fait également l'analyse de la traduction de quelques expressions Igbo dans la version française de *Arrow of God* de Chinua Achebe. C'est révélé, au cours de cette étude, que la traduction facilite la transmission des messages entre des participants lors d'une communication interculturelle. On préconise donc qu'il faut avoir recours à la traduction pour parvenir à une entente mutuelle entre des individus et des groupes qui ne parlent pas les mêmes langues.

ABSTRACT

Translation as a professional activity has played key role in advancing human society politically, economically, socially and culturally. This work seeks to highlight the role of translation in intercultural communication. We did extensive review of literature in the domain in question. There was also the analysis of the translation of some Igbo expressions in the French version of *Arrow of God* written by Chinua Achebe. The study revealed that translation facilitates mutual understanding between the parties involved in any communicative act. It was therefore suggested that the resources in translation should be effectively harnessed to further enhance mutual intelligibility among individuals and groups with different cultural backgrounds.

Keywords: Translation, culture, intercultural communication.

INTRODUCTION

The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary defines communication as "the exchanging or imparting of ideas and information". Ter-minasova quoted by [1], defines it as "a dialogue act, connection between two and more individuals which is, first of all, based on mutual understanding". It is obvious, from the above, that in every act of communication, there is some level of exchange of "ideas and information". It is also an act that usually involves two or more people. Ter-minasova also stressed that communication is based on mutual understanding. This implies that communication cannot be very effective if mutual understanding is lacking. There is, however, no doubt that people have been communicating for centuries. It is also obvious that there is mutual intelligibility

whenever a common code exists. Linguistic and cultural differences often create barriers in communication. When there is break in communication as a result of differences in language, the translator is usually called in to 'mediate' so as to facilitate the process of communication. [2], [3].

Translation is the professional activity which ensures that a text written in one language is recreated in another language so as to make it accessible to the speakers of the second language. This implies that as a professional activity, translation furthers in no small measure the communicative process by completely removing or attenuating all linguistic and cultural barriers. In Nigeria, for instance, there is mutual suspicion among the different linguistic groups- the Hausas,

the Yorubas and the Igbos. It is obvious that people who belong to the same linguistic group tend to communicate better among themselves. However, with individuals belonging to different linguistic groups, communication may be stalled or ineffective.

The point has to be made that when we talk about communication here, we are not only referring to oral communication such as conversation between two or more people, interviews, speeches and broadcasts but the exchange of ideas and information could be in the form of letters, text messages, contracts, general documents of any type as well as literary works such as poems, plays and novels. These are various ways individuals and artists get their ideas across to their target audience. Communication could go on unimpeded when the parties involved operate within a mono-cultural setting. However, when both parties have different cultural backgrounds, linguistic differences could present some difficulties that may require the services of a translator.

In this study, therefore, we intend to examine the specific role of translation in intercultural communication. In the course of the study, we intend to examine the concept of translation. The notion of culture will also be discussed. The meaning of intercultural communication will be highlighted. After this, it will be time to examine the role of translation in intercultural communication. There will also be analysis of translations of some expressions in *Arrow of God*. The French translations of some of these expressions will be critically examined. Finally there will be discussion on findings as well as conclusion.

The concept of translation

It is generally agreed among practitioners in the field that translation, as a professional activity, refers to the process by which information contained in any document in one language is made accessible to the speakers of another language into which the source text is translated. The Chambers 21st Century Dictionary (Revised Edition) defines translation as “a word, speech, written

text that has been put into one language from another”. The same dictionary also adds that it is “an act or instance or the process of translating”. The two definitions above bring to the fore the dual nature of translation as a concept. That is, translation as a process and translation as a product. The word, speech or written text referred to in the first definition above only highlights the product of the translation process. The above definitions could give the impression that translation is purely a linguistic activity. There is, however, a school of thought that focuses on the cultural aspect of this professional exercise. They indeed conceive translation as a passage from one culture to another [4], [5], [6], [7]. In his contribution, [8] said:

The focus on culture as a constituent part of text and hence of translation has largely developed out of understandings of translation as an act of intercultural or cross-cultural communication rather than just an interlingual communication.

The above quotation captures the general perception among most practitioners that translation is not just an interlingual exercise but also a cross-cultural one. There is no doubt that translation is a process that usually involves two working languages. It is also true that language is one of the elements of culture [9], [10]. Seeing language only from the optic of a linguist might be very limiting. This is because the linguistic units analyzed by the linguists do not only reflect the sounds articulated by the human speech organs but they also project the social and cultural realities of the speech communities in question. This is why the realization of the cultural implications of the translation activity can be described as a positive development in the translation industry. Having discussed the concept of translation, we will now examine the notion of culture which is also very pertinent to this work.

Culture as a concept

Our intention here is not to delve into the controversy over the meaning of a concept that has been described as “one of the two or three most complicated words in the English language” [11] and which is said to have had more than 200 definitions by the 1950s [12]. Given the limitless nature of the scope of translation as a professional activity, one could say that the interest generated over “the polysemy of the term” is very critical and desirable. This is because the translator needs to know the various shades of meaning of this term to be able to function effectively in all the fields where the term, ‘culture’ is applied.

For the purposes of this study, we will adopt the following definition of the term. [13] defines 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”. In the above definition, Newmark clearly highlights the essential aspects of any culture. The first is that culture has to do with the way of life of the people of a given community as well as the various manifestations of this way of life. He also made it clear that every culture has a language that serves as a vehicle for expressing the culture. There is no doubt that there are manifestations for the way of life of any group of people. These manifestations make it possible to distinguish a member of any cultural group from someone from another cultural group. These manifestations could be in the form of language spoken, dressing pattern, eating habit, mode of worship, and even occupational habits. The view expressed by [14] about culture also buttresses what Newmark said above. According to him:

The view of translation as a means of intercultural communication follows from the idea of language as a culture component, and culture as an aggregate of material and spiritual achievements of the

society, including all the varied historical, social and psychological features of the ethnos, its traditions, views, values, institutions, behavior, living condition- in short, all the sides of its life and consciousness including language

By referring to language as a “culture component”, the author cited above has also aligned with those who see language as one of the essential elements of culture. He also highlighted that culture has to do with all the aspects of life of any society. These bits of information about the meaning of culture are very relevant to the translator. The general documents as well as the literary works which the translator works with from time to time are reflections of the people’s culture. This explains why the translator should have a thorough mastery of the cultures which his working languages reflect. Having discussed the notion of culture, we will now take a look at the meaning of intercultural communication.

What is intercultural communication?

Given the fact that we are working on the role of translation in intercultural communication, it is pertinent that we clarify the meaning of intercultural communication. [15] as having said that intercultural communication refers to “communication between people from different national cultures”. This definition clearly highlighted the main feature of any intercultural communication which involves interaction across different national cultures. At least two different cultures must be involved in an intercultural communication. [16] also highlighted that “intercultural communication is adequate mutual understanding of two participants of a communicative act belonging to different national cultures”. The authors cited above also stressed the fact that intercultural communication involves exchange of ideas across different national cultures. It is obvious that a communication across different national cultures implies a communication across two different languages. If two people

who speak different languages must communicate, it means an intermediary has to be sought for to create what the above authors called “adequate mutual understanding” to facilitate the communicative act. The intermediary adequately prepared for this kind of professional activity is the translator. The translator therefore intervenes to mediate in the communicative process to facilitate the interaction between the two people that speak in different tongues. The specific role which translation plays to facilitate intercultural communication will be discussed in the next segment of this work.

Translation and intercultural communication

Intercultural communication has been going on among different peoples of the world for thousands of years. This has been possible because of translation. Translators have been professionally prepared to remove the barriers that could have impeded communication across linguistic and cultural lines. [17] has this to say:

Communication is impossible unless the message is transmitted and is understood by the communicants. However, this understanding can be achieved only if the information contained in the language unit corresponds to the background knowledge of the facts mentioned in the message.

The above statement is very true. No one can decipher any message that is coded in a language that is alien to him. This explains why language professionals should strive to use linguistic resources that are familiar to the target reader. Highlighting the central role of the translator in the communicative process, [18] Said, “the mediator can be understood as someone who undertakes some form of action to enable communication to occur; that is, the translator as the mediator is an agent of intercultural communication”. The author

identifies the translator as the mediator who facilitates the act of communication. [19] stresses the specific role of the translator as “an agent who acts as an intermediary between two cultures and who tries to reconcile those differences that can act as communication barriers” It is clear, from the above, that the translator usually identifies the differences between the two cultures in contact with a view to reconciling these differences so as to facilitate communication. The same author also quoted [20] as having opined that “the translator must adequately transmit and adapt the message across cultures”. This implies that the translator should have profound knowledge of the cultures in contact so as to enable him convey specific cultural information in the source text to the target audience, even if it means adapting any source text cultural reality which is non-existent in the target culture to something that could have similar effect on the readers of the translated text. In his article entitled “Translation as a means of cross cultural communication: some problems in literally text translations”, [21] remarked about what he called ‘problems of fundamental nature’ which is ‘the understanding of a social, economic, political and cultural context as well as connotative aspects of a more semantic character’. The author continued by suggesting the approach which the translator could adopt:

As with all text of foreign literature, historical, political and other cultural references are always of a certain importance and the TT reader is unlikely to have a full understanding of such notions. When considering the cultural implication for translation, the extent to which it is necessary for the translator to explain or complete such an information gap should be taken into account; the translator should decide

how much may be left for the reader to simply infer.

The author has given a great deal of information about the nature of problems encountered in an intercultural communication as well as the relevant solutions which the translator should apply. Obviously, a foreign text could contain some historical or cultural allusions which could be puzzling and which impede the communicative process. These allusions have been described by Leppihalme as 'culture bumps' [22]. The 'bumps' could result in what [23] called 'culture shock' [24]. It was [25] who defined culture shock as the "emotional reactions to the disorientation that occurs when one is immersed in an unfamiliar culture and is deprived of familiar cues" [7]. There is no doubt that some level of disorientation occurs when one encounters some 'culture bumps' in the course of any communication. It is the duty of the translator to ensure the free flow of information by either removing the 'bumps' through adaptation or attenuating the effect through the use of explanatory notes.

In another article entitled "Translation as intercultural mediation: setting the scene" [11] reviewed the mediatory role of the translator in a multicultural setting. He concluded that "the translator's intercultural mediation is reflected in the need to negotiate culture-bound terminology, semantic gaps between language and the like". To negotiate here should be understood in the sense of "to bring about an agreement" or "to cope with something successfully". While negotiating the culture-bound terminology, the translator should aim at ensuring the success of the communicative process. The translator can be said to be successful only when there is closeness between the source text and the translated text. This view is shared by Glodjović when he said that "the message in the receptor language should match as closely as possible the different elements of the source language (2010:3). In intercultural communication, therefore, the translator strives to resolve the linguistic and cultural differences so

as to facilitate the process of communication.

Analysis of the French version of *Arrow of God*

In this segment, we will examine the French version of *Arrow of God*: As the title suggests, the source text is in English but the author, Chinua Achebe projected Igbo cultural values in the work. In this analysis, we critically examined how the translations resolved some of the cultural problems and assessed the possible effects of the solutions on the target text readers.

Source text: Onwaatuo!...Onwaatuo!(p.2)

Target text: Onwaatuo!...Onwaatuo(P.12)

In the example above, the translators adopted the option of borrowing (loaning). The result is that all the Igbo words that featured in the source text are represented in the target text. Borrowing is a recognized and acceptable technique in translation. However a translator is usually required to adopt this option as a last resort when there is no equivalent or when there is the need to project some local color. It is possible that the translators took a cue from the author of the source text who may have been motivated by the desire to popularize some Igbo expressions. The translators could have done better in this case because the two words in question here are translatable into French. This 'culture bump' could have been avoided to make the text more accessible to the target readers. The French words **voilà la lune** could have been more appropriate. The use of these words communicates the intended message to the target text readers. However, if the Igbo words must be featured in the French text, the meaning in French could have been given as foot note to reduce the 'cultural shock'.
Source text: For three markets Ibe could barely rise from his bed (p.12).

Target text: Pendant trois semaines de marché, Ibe put à peine se lever de son lit (p.24)

The translation of 'three markets' by 'trois semaines de marché' can be explained in two ways. It is either that the translators (Irene and Simpson), are following the footsteps of Michel Ligny

who translated *Things Fall Apart* or they want to clarify that 'market' in this context does not simply mean 'marché' which is the French equivalent. In spite of the addition of this new word in French, the problem is still not solved and the communication problem is still there. Without a supplementary note, there is no way 'trois semaines de marché' can be understood by the average French reader. This is because of the different connotation which 'market' has acquired in this context. As we explained in our previous study [8], among the Igbo people, it is easily understood that 'market' in this context means 'eight days'. When the author of the source text said 'three markets' he in reality meant 'twenty four days'. No French reader can ever establish a link between 'market' and 'eight days' unless he was born in Igbo land or he has learnt this aspect of the people's culture. It is therefore better to translate the line in question as follows for easy communication. "Pendant vingt quatre jours, Ibe put à peine se lever de son lit"

DISCUSSION ON FINDINGS

The examples above clearly illustrate that cultural elements could pose serious problems in the communicative process. It might be pertinent to review the effects of these French expressions on French readers. The expressions include: 'Onwaatuo', 'Igbo and Olu'. It is obvious that the average French reader will have serious difficulty in pronouncing these words. There is also no way they can decipher the meanings without supplementary notes. It has also been clearly shown that these expressions can be translated into French. The question that is very pertinent in this case is, the projection of local color or popularization of Igbo expressions and ensuring effective communication, which should take precedence over the other? It is our contention in this paper that the author of the source text is at liberty to adopt any linguistic style to achieve his purpose but the mission of the translator is entirely different. In as much as he should be faithful to the author of the source text, he should not forget his obligation

Source text: They talked about the great Eke market in Okperi to which folk from every part of Igbo and Olu went. (p.19).

Target text: Elles parlaient de ce grand marché du jour d'Eke à Okperia auquel se rendaient des gens venus d'Igbo et d'Olu (p.32).

In translating the source text above, the translators still borrowed the Igbo expression 'Igbo and Olu' which was translated as 'd'Igbo et d'Olu'. The appearance of this Igbo expression in the French version can be explained in two ways. The translators still want to maintain their faithfulness to the stylistic forms of the source text or they did not fully understand the meaning of the expression. The expression 'Igbo and Olu' in this context, means 'different parts of the world/country'. The proper French translation should have been "tous les coins du monde/du pays". The French translation of the source text should therefore have been:

"Elles parlaient de ce grand marché du jour d'Eke à Okperia auquel se rendaient des gens venus de tous les coins du pays"

towards his target audience, which is to make his source text accessible to them. If the 'culture bumps' should remain after the translator has done his duty, there is still something wrong with the translation exercise. To succeed therefore, a translator should strive to ensure total comprehension of the message of the source text by resolving all the impediments towards effective communication. This he can do by digging deep to understand what each linguistic unit means or connotes in the context of the source text. Where a 'culture bump' has to remain in the target text after translation, the negative effect should be attenuated through an explanatory note. Rather than see the footnote as a sign of failure on the part of the translator as expressed by [2] in the preface to Georges Mounin's *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*, it should be seen as a conscious effort by a committed translator to reduce the incidence of failure in the process of communication.

CONCLUSION

In this study, we examined the subject, The Role Of Translation in Intercultural Communication. We reviewed the key concepts, translation, culture, intercultural communication and concluded that translation is a professional activity that makes it possible for a text written in one language to be made accessible to speakers of another language while intercultural communication has to do with exchange of ideas across different national cultures. We also analyzed the translation of some expressions in the French version

of *Arrow of God* and came up with some suggestions which will help to make the target text more accessible to the target audience.

Finally, the study revealed that the presence of 'culture-bumps' in some translations can negate the whole essence of the translation activity. It was therefore suggested that intercultural communication could be enhanced if translators work hard to remove any existing 'culture-bumps' in the source text or by attenuating the negative effects through explanatory notes.

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