
THE FRENCH TRANSLATION OF RAMONU SANUSI'S *THE SPIRIT CHILD*: AN EXAMINATION OF TWO TRANSLATION TENETS

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Abstract: *It is obvious that there is a continuous need for translators, even in the modern society with various advanced technologies. The peoples of the world do not speak the same tongue. For the purpose of peaceful co-existence, mutual co-operation and development, the need for translation and translators cannot be overemphasized. In this study, we examine the use of lexical borrowing and explanation as a translation technique and strategy respectively employed in the French version of Sanusi's *The Spirit Child* (2005) translated as *La vie d'un enfant mystérieux* by Joel Akinwumi and Kehinde Makinde in 2016. Textual analysis is adopted as the research methodology while the functionalist approach provides the conceptual framework on which the study is premised. The functionalist approach believes that language and extra-linguistic properties such as sociocultural variables are needed in the construction of meaning of an utterance or a text. Findings reveal that in literary translation like other forms of translation, both the grammatical (language) and the sociocultural contexts are important in the construction of meaning and interpretation. Hence, the study concludes that the message in a given source language which is transmitted to another target language cannot be well understood and appreciated unless the components of language and that of culture are effectively fused together.*

Keywords: *Functionalist approach, lexical borrowing, peaceful co-existence, situational context, translation*

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INTRODUCTION

Translation is not mere changing of one language to another. It is a serious and conscious task of transmitting the message coded in a source language to a target language. Translation requires a good mastery of at least two distinct languages; for instance, English and French. The language in which the message is originally coded is termed the “source” language while the language to which the message is transmitted, rendered or delivered is described as the “target” language.

However, the message in any language is better understood when it appeals to the audience grammatically, semantically, psychologically and socioculturally. In other words, to arrive at intended meaning of utterances or texts, the grammatical and cultural make-ups are significant in the translation of such materials.

The study of language is seen as part of culture and society whose task defies clear delimitation (Pride 1971, p. 1). Since language is a form of convention, it is, therefore, tied to the culture of the people that owns and uses the language for different functions. In functionalist view, the formal elements of a language is combined with its situational dimensions by putting into account the linguistic and extra-linguistic forms and functions of language in the determination of meaning.

Context of situation is postulated by Bronislaw Malinowski who asserts that “language was primarily a form of action” (Bloor and Bloor, 1995, p. 248). He also affirms that an understanding of the “concrete” context of situation is important to the understanding of an utterance, hence, the meaning of an utterance is to a greater extent anchored on the social context in which it is uttered. Butler (1985: 4) perceives functionalist approach as “ ethnographic and anthropological”. All of these are in line with our conviction that a good translation should respect not only the language components of a message but also the sociocultural background of such message.

The functionalist approach helps in shaping modern translation by making culture a central focus. The sustenance of social structures and cultural contexts in translation depends largely on the application of functionalist approach. Nord (2001, p. 151) is of the opinion that functionalist approach views translation as “a communicative action carried out by experts in intercultural communication. The translator plays the role of a text producer aiming at some communicative purpose.” A translator is able to active the “communicative purpose” if he/she ensures the transmitting of the intended meaning of a given message.

The meaning of a text goes beyond the words or linguistic codes. In other words, there is a need to understand the extra textual context of a text. In the functionalist approach, it is established that the function of a text in the target culture should determine the method of translation. The functionalist ideal is more concerned with the alternative skopos rather than the equivalence-based approach (Nord, 2002, p. 92-93 & Kolawole, 2013, p. 15). The conversion of the linguistic interpretations to sense is the focus of the functionalist approach. This technique helps to free translators from an absolute adherence to the original text in terms of linguistic codes and paves the way for a purposeful transmission of meaning to the target audience without underplaying cultural contexts. In brief, a good translation requires a deep knowledge of facts, cultural and linguistic instruments.



ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

There are certain translation techniques and strategies which are very useful to translators in carrying out their tasks. Such techniques include but not limited to word for word (direct) translation, equivalence, adaptation, modulation, reduction, substitution, lexical borrowing and explanation. The choice of these tenets of transmitting one language to another depends largely on the typology of a given text or the purpose and the audience of such a text.

In the French translation of Ramonu Sanusi's *The Spirit Child*, our focus is on the use of lexical borrowing and explanation as a technique and a strategy of translation respectively. These two strategies are widely applied in transmitting sociocultural contexts in the novel. The translators use the two processes of translation hand-in-hand in some cases. Through the use of lexical borrowing, native Yoruba concepts, practices and belief patterns are preserved. The use of explanation provides vivid and clear semantic accessibility and clarity to non-Yoruba speakers. Therefore, the sociocultural elements in the story are sustained and the required sentiments, feelings or appeals are equally transmitted to the target audience.

The Use of Lexical Borrowing

This is a technique of translation that allows the use of words and expressions in the source language when transmitting the message to a target language. The retention of an original term when translating to another language is described as lexical borrowing. It is a form of paying homage to the cultural context of the original text or utterance. The practice, lexical borrowing, permits the keeping of the original sentiments and other extra-linguistic flavour of a text, utterance or a given message. In this context, original words or terms are used directly and freely. It demonstrates a sense of fidelity to the sociocultural context. Lexical borrowing could be seen as the opposite of lexical equivalence where a translator makes use of a corresponding term or word in the target language.

Lexical borrowing of terms or words are often carried out on nouns. However, it is more popular on proper nouns which are ordinarily may not be translated from the source language to the target language. For example, names of people (e.g Adekunmi, Oyewo, Ajala, etc), villages (e.g Waasinmi, Ilaji, etc), towns (e.g Itasa, Ajara, Ikorodu, etc), cites (e.g Lagos, Ibadan, Enugu, Kano, Abuja, etc), countries (e.g Nigeria, Ghana, Japan, Germany, France, etc) and geographical features such as River Nile, River Niger, Mount. Everest, Lake Chad.

In the French version of Sanusi's *The Spirit Child*, the translators make use of certain Yoruba words and terms in their raw forms without any modification. Examples are given in the extracts below:

a) “Toutefois, la tradition avait enseigné aux villageois tant de choses à propos de l'enfant **abiku**.”) p. 8). The word **abiku** is a Yoruba term for a child that was born many times. The Yorubas believe such a child is capable of coming to life and going back to the spirit world several times. The French people might not have such a conviction. However, to sustain the sociocultural context surrounding the case of an abiku child, the Yoruba term is retained in the French translated version of the novel.

b) Des hommes habillés en **buba** et **sokoto** se prospertenaient alors que des femmes en **buba** et **iro** s'agenouillaient pour se saluer les uns, les autres.” (p. 13). The translators choose to retain the words **buba**, **sokoto** and **iro** rather than replacing them with possible equivalence that could have



made the sentence read thus: *Des hommes habillés en boubou et pantalon se prosternaient alors que des femmes en boubou et pagne s'agenouillaient pour se saluer les uns, les autres.*

c) L'**ofi** que ma mère portait était tissé chaque fois qu'une femme attendait un bébé dans le village (p. 16). Instead of settling for an appropriate alternative in French that will make the sentence to read as :Le vêtement traditionnel que ma mère portait était tissé chaque fois qu'une femme attendait un bébé dans le village, the translators employ the word **ofi**. **Ofi** is a kind of traditional fabric which the Yoruba people cherish a lot and often wear during special occasions such as wedding, naming, house warming ceremonies and traditional festivals. The translators believe that using “vêtement traditionnel” cannot capture the sociocultural context that “ofi” carries.

d) Ma mère devait observer cette cérémonie de danses avec des feuilles d'iroko dans la main gauche en les secouant par intermittence comme prescrit par le rite.” (p. 18). Iroko is a big forest tree that is often found in tropical regions and it is likely that the tree is unknown in France. Rather than using a likely alternative such as baobab to replace the word iroko, the translators do not let go the Yoruba word iroko. The sentence could have been: *Ma mère devait observer cette cérémonie de danses avec des feuilles de baobab dans la main gauche en les secouant par intermittence comme prescrit par le rite.*

e) Pendant longtemps, ma mère fut considérée comme une **emere** du fait de ses enfants qui mourraient constamment.” (p. 18). The word “emere” is retained in the translation not only because it is difficult to find an equivalence of the word in French but also to express a traditional belief. The myth about “emere”, an evil spirit-possessed female is probably better preserve in the use of the term in its untranslated form.

f) Les **aje** sont des sorcières réputées pour leur immense méchanceté (p. 19).

g) Mon nom parmi les enfants mystérieux était **Ajantala** (p. 27).

h) Outre cela, je mangeais aussi chaque jour sept **atare** (p. 30).

i) Elle savait déjà que seuls les gens étranges consommaient ou achetaient de l'**atare** et l'utilisaient pour des rites ou du **juju** (p. 33).

From the extracts labeled f to i, the translators refuse to fetch apt words for “aje”, “Ajantala”, atare and juju because of their alliance with the cultural context of the original text. One expects to see an utterance like *Elle fut accusée à tort par les villageois d'appartenir à ce groupe des esprits emere, qui sont beaucoup plus puissants que les sorcières* instead of *Elle fut accusée à tort par les villageois d'appartenir à ce groupe des esprits emere, qui sont beaucoup plus puissants que les aje* (p. 18 - 19). Similarly, the expressions *Outre cela, je mangeais aussi chaque jour sept poivres du paradis* and *Elle savait déjà que seuls les gens étranges consommaient ou achetaient de poivre du paradis* et l'utilisaient pour des rites ou du gris gris should have been used in extracts h and i respectively.

j) ...ils vont consulter des **babalawo** pour faire des sacrifices (p. 133). in the place of using the phrase “un sorcier-docteur” which could stand for and explains the Yoruba world view of the word babalawo, the translators maintain the word in the French version since language is meant to perform an action. And, the function that the word performs here is to reflect the cultural context.

k) Toutes les jeunes filles emere qui avaient initié ma femme dans leur secte s'en étaient déjà allées à leur destination respective et seulement **Olodumare** sait là où elles sont maintenant.” (pp.



149 - 150). The equivalence for the word “Olodumare” in French is “Dieu” or “le créateur”. However, the translators of the novel under review decide to keep the Yoruba word as a lexical borrowing in their translation to sustain the sociocultural context of the term. This same reason accounts for the use of **Yemoja** in the extract below:

“Les enfants mystérieux du géant arbre **iroko** n’avaient aucun pouvoir dans les eaux et c’est pourquoi ils ne pouvaient pas assujettir **Yemoja**.” (p. 161). Yemoja is the river goddess that can be alternatively translated as “la déesse de la rivière” in the French version of the novel.

The Use of Explanation

Explanation is another translation strategy that practitioners often employ in carrying out the tasks before them. In this process, a translator explains the message encoded in a source language to a target language. It is a way of breaking down a message in another language. Explanation is in the family of enlargement of information so as to drive home a message. It could be taken as the opposite of reduction where messages are compressed by economizing the use of words or linguistic codes. Most explanations in translation are introduced with expressions like “that is to say” and “in other words”. These expressions are put in French as “c’est-à-dire” and “cela veut dire”. Explanation is an interpretative model of transmitting messages to aid the understanding of a given text or an utterance.

The following extracts illustrate the use of explanation as a translation tenet in the French version of Sanusi’s *The Spirit Child*:

i) The title of the novel itself displays the use of explanation. Instead of using equivalence or word for word translation to arrive at a title which could have been simply put as “L’enfant mystérieux” (*The Spirit Child*), the translators carefully settle for an explanatory caption, *La vie d’un enfant mystérieux*. The translators use some grammatical items to enrich the title. This practice of enriching information is called *amplification* or *étoffement* in French.

ii) ...**abiku**, c’est-à-dire un enfant qui meure et qui retourne régulièrement dans ce monde (p. 8). For those who are not Yorubas, the translator explains the meaning of **abiku** as a child that dies and regularly comes back to this world.

iii) L’**iroko** était en fait la demeure des enfants **abami eda**, c’est-à-dire des enfants mystérieux (p. 25). Instead of using “un être étrange” which means a strange being, a spirit or a ghost, the translator retains the Yoruba phrase **abami eda** to project the cultural context of the text, utterance and/or message. The sentence could still be accepted if the translator has put it as “L’**iroko** était en fait la demeure des enfants mystérieux. However, the local flavour which **abami eda** provides will not be present in the utterance.

CONCLUSION

In the study, we have demonstrated how functionalist approach could help translators and probably interpreters too in handling their jobs more effectively. The study concludes that in every translation; particularly, literary translation, the inclusion of social factors like background knowledge, ideology, history, world view and culture are crucial. That is to explicate that context of situation and context of culture should be considered in the determination, translation and interpretation of a text or an utterance. It is evident that there is a clear and deep connection between language and sociocultural contexts.

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