

# Literary Translation as Rewriting

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## Abstract

In the days of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, even up to the time of Molière, a lot of works were produced, especially in the dramatic arts and poetry. In those periods, writing was generally done in ink with a pen or ordinary feather, in long rolls of well-kept manuscripts. Shakespeare wrote almost exclusively for England and the English audience, while Molière's readers and audience were mainly in France, apart from a few outsiders who had acquired foreign languages. Towards the end of the last century, globalization has so expanded national literatures beyond national boundaries that it has become even difficult to identify some literary production with particular nations. Technology has made it possible to read other works on-line and on the internet. And with the development of expertise in translation, the Americans now read Jean- Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, etc, while the French can now appreciate George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway and other American writers by reading them in French. Literary translation therefore, in no small way, helps to nurture a type of crossbreed of cultures throughout the world by making the socio-cultural contents of literary works available to others in their own languages. But in order to do this successfully, the translator must, apart from decoding the language of the original work, make some extra effort to adapt the translated work to suit the socio-cultural sensibilities of the users of the target language.

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*Index terms—*

## 1 Introduction

In the days of Shakespeare and the Elizabethans, even up to the time of Molière, a lot of works were produced, especially in the dramatic arts and poetry. In those periods, writing was generally done in ink with a pen or ordinary feather, in long rolls of well-kept manuscripts. Shakespeare wrote almost exclusively for England and the English audience, while Molière's readers and audience were mainly in France, apart from a few outsiders who had acquired foreign languages. Towards the end of the last century, globalization has so expanded national literatures beyond national boundaries that it has become even difficult to identify some literary production with particular nations. Technology has made it possible to read other works on-line and on the internet. And with the development of expertise in translation, the Americans now read Jean-Paul Sartre, Albert Camus, etc, while the French can now appreciate George Orwell, Ernest Hemingway and other American writers by reading them in French. Literary translation therefore, in no small way, helps to nurture a type of crossbreed of cultures throughout the world by making the socio-cultural contents of literary works available to others in their own languages. But in order to do this successfully, the translator must, apart from decoding the language of the original work, make some extra effort to adapt the translated work to suit the socio-cultural sensibilities of the users of the target language.

## 2 II.

### 3 Definition

As long as language bears the cultural stamp of a people and since the narrative or discourse, proverbs or songs to be found in a literary work is enveloped in that culture, the job of the literary translator must be more of a socio-cultural adaptation than a linguistic transposition. Let me dare define translation here as the rendition and adaptation of a written text in a different language. By extension, literary translation is the rendition and adaptation of a literary text into a different socio-cultural and linguistic environment. The translated

Copy is usually called a version. Hence we have for instance the French version of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* as *Le monde s'effondre*; the German version as *Okonwo*, and the English version of Mongo Beti's *Une vie de boy* as *The House Boy*, etc.

In a wider context, if the translations were to be exact copies of the original, then there would be no need for anyone to look for the so-called original version of text in order to resolve some controversial nuance or find out what may have been meant by certain expressions, concepts or phrases. For example, those who usually interpret Christ's penultimate word on the Cross, "It is finished" to mean "the assignment or mission has been accomplished", must have been inspired by the original Hebrew version in that direction. Otherwise, there is nothing in "It is finished" per se to suggest that traditional interpretation. Indeed, many a conservative has always preferred books in that original language, believing that translations are always approximations of the original. But in the current era of globalization and massive productions and consumption of texts, it has become imperative that other linguistic groups have access to versions of sociocultural products and scientific breakthroughs for a complete and rapid enrichment and cross fertilization of ideas. We tend to take for granted the immense behind-the-scene labour which make it possible for the Germans, the Russians, the French, the Slovaks and Danes or the Chinese to access the latest information on the most current English-based breakthroughs in science and Technology, Literature and Literary Theory, Economic theory, History or Anthropology in their own languages. If such break through occur in French or in these other languages, they are almost immediately available in English. We are a bit lucky in West Africa that literature is limited to French and English, for now, thanks to colonialism. Today's European Union has so far with about twenty seven languages, all participating without hindrance in the Union's cultural, political and socio-economic activities on a daily basis. A glance at any edition of Euronews or Eurosport will leave no one in doubt about the level of interpretation and translation going on.

However, the translation of a purely factual document as in the Pure and Applied Sciences, History, newspaper report and reports from research, etc. is not quite the same as in literary and other art works whose overall output is usually based on impression, not factual interpretations and data. This paper sets out to demonstrate that barring all possible cases of acceptable deviations as well as some tolerable gains and losses, the translated version of a literary work could even surpass the original in aesthetic value and therefore, rating and reception. In this regard, Amos Tutuola's *L'Ivrogne de la brousse* has become more popular in the francophone world than *The Palmwine Drinkard* has been in Nigeria and the Anglophone world.

## 4 III.

### 5 The Translator as Writer

The literary translator needs a minimum gift of creativity and imagination in order to be able to meaningfully recreate somebody's original art work into another version. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (1975: 1424) defines version as a translation, ... A adaptation of a work of art or literature into another medium or style ? a variation of any prototype, etc. version in a broad sense here is so central to the concept of standard and well known texts that it often takes a capital V, as in the King James' Version of the Bible. Therefore, if the translator of a literary work has to take a look at the original work, transform, adapt and produce a version or even dub, then he is re-creating and re-writing the same thing, without losing sight of the original context and environment at any moment. He must therefore bear the qualities of a writer, except that he cannot claim original authorship. He can legitimately claim second authorship, or the author of his version. And this carries a great responsibility and imagination.

So, in spite of the problems posed by cultural works and expressions, and in spite of apparent intranslatability of ideas that may be so foreign to the target language, that they even seem to lack equivalent, we can transpose skillfully and rewrite imaginatively, such that the new reader will not bother about lexicocultural details as long as a picture of the universe of the novel or play, as the case may be, is effectively portrayed. What we are saying about the translator's freedom or free hand is only possible with or relevant to the overall decor. The same cannot be true of the main story, which remains the major frame of the work and an eternal property of the original author. Here we must not lose sight of the fact that many readers of versions of literary works have never had any idea about the so-called original. Hence, for millions of readers of *L'Ivrogne de la brousse*, it is *l'ivrogne de la brousse de Tutuola*. They have not given a thought to the concept of the *Palmwine Drunkard* in which a rather significant semantic segment *de la brousse* or in the bush (English) does not feature at all. Again one is tempted to ascribe more imagination to the translator, relative to the actual content of the novel where the main character featured mainly in the bush.

## 6 The Riddle of Titles and Titling

The problem of what suitable title to superpose on a work of art, a book, a write-up, a piece of poetry or even a thesis, especially in literature, to effectively portray the overall, exact message is a perennial problem for anyone who claims to be an author of any category. Some writers effectively work from a title which descends upon them by some rare inspiration. Others receive an inspiration on a subject matter, sit down and write and develop it over times. But even after scribbling a book-size material, sometimes running into hundreds of pages, the title remains elusive. At this stage he may battle between scores of alternatives which cross his mind at a time. It could really be quite harrowing to settle for the most catching, the most representative of the content of the book or piece of writing and the best for all times.

In this regard, the dilemma of the translator is different, greater and double. The ideal title to affix on somebody else's original work is more of a riddle. In the first place he cannot be in a position to be inspired, as long as the original idea is not his. He must sacrifice time to find out for instance why Achebe settled for *Things Fall Apart* or why Sony Labou Tansi decided on *L'Anté-peuple* for his third major novel. Secondly, and in terms of procedure and methodology, the translator must not work from the text to the title, else he misses the overall message. Indeed, the overall message is embedded in the title. Henri Mitterand (1979:90), after a careful study of the novels of Guy des Car, a famous contemporary French novelist, concluded that titles of novels are compressed high levels of ideological position 1. What one is saying here is that the title of a literary work, whether in poetry or drama, or in the novel, is big source of insight to the original author's overall message and intention. A good translator must take note of this fact as he sets out to translate any such work. All the same, in the context of our theory of rewriting the title should serve as guide because a good combination of the original title and the content can well give the translator a new insight to even improve on the output without deviating from either the milieu, the context or the décor. In that case, the translated copy could well become more popular than the original as we have seen above in the case of Tutuola's *The Palmwine Drinkard*.

## 7 Volume XIV Issue I Version I

### 8 ( A )

A Comparative V.

## 9 The Problem of Equivalents

Many linguists do agree with the principle that any language can express any idea or any concept if it has to, meaning that as long as those ideas exist or come into existence, there will be words or expressions to denote or connote them. Georges Mounin (1963:180) does not agree less in saying that every cognitive reference and its classification must find an equivalent in any existing language 2. Of course Mounin was quick to specify a particular type of reference, the cognitive, having to do with straight knowledge, easily discernible. Just like one word or name-titles or noun-phrase ones like *Oliver Twist*, *Jane Eyre*, *Macbeth*, *the Bridge*, etc. What about the affective areas of human behavior as well as abstract things? If equivalents were absolute and reliable, how do we reconcile building a castle in the air with construire un château en Espagne? Apart from socio-cultural and linguistic difference's, the different races and peoples of the world have other distinctive marks like colour, behavior, world view and other characteristics like architectural design and building patterns. A typical American dog would be different in shape and size from a Spanish dog. A good literary translator must consider these behavioral patterns and attitudes of the users of the translated version and decide whether Achebe's *Girls at War* would be better in the francophone world as *filles en guerre* or *femmes en guerre*. Jean de Grandsaigne has repeatedly been criticized for using *femmes* (women) instead of *filles* (girls). But one tends to believe that *femmes* would be more generally acceptable in French, for the world of women covers girls. Moreover, Achebe had used the word *amazons* in the text which just girls might not portray fully. Many scholars have at different times criticized the translation of *Things Fall Apart* even as *Le monde s'effondre*, meaning literally "the world crumbles", starting from the title, which Arowolo (1982) describes as misrepresentation. However, since then, a lot of progress has been made in the area of translation and its professionalization. And as argued above, literary translation cannot be equated with that which deals with scientific and factual texts. To the extent that "le monde s'effondre" has been able to survive as French equivalent for Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and enjoyed legitimacy for several decades, it has successfully filled up a vacuum, transmitting the message of the novel to millions of French and francophone readers. Even then, the Ibo country of Umuofia and environs belonged to pre-colonial Igbo nation which knew no other world than the Igbo world of the Lower Niger region of West Africa. That world crumbled with the advent of the white man and his new Christian values.

But that is not to say that very bad translations do not still circulate around the globe, unknown to the regulatory and professional bodies. In trying to resolve the dilemma, Osazuwa (1992:115) offered the following advice:

In spite of the above problem however, we must recognize that translation is a painstaking and rather unmotivated rewriting, with the translator being in the dilemma of being marginalized between being a creator and an interpreter?? They are legitimate Volume XIV Issue I Version I 65 ( A )

versions which could sometimes be more interesting and even more successful than the original? it is gratifying to note that most translators now work closely with their authors in order to minimize divergences.

## 10 VI.

## 11 Conclusion

Even though the translator of a novel, a play or nay type of poetry cannot lay claim to the inspiration r even the creativity of the work he translates, let alone full authorship, we must not fail to recognize his utility in the new world now connected in a worldwide web (www) of information through the internet explosion, desktop and electronic publishing. The literary translator stands out above many other professionals in the pursuit of a global culture, rapid diffusion or circulation of translated works no longer poses any problem. And with the rapid growth of the entertainment industry in terms of films, home videos and other packaged multi-media programmes unlimited avenues are opened to the translator. However, in order to succeed and be appreciated, he needs to sharpen his wits, broaden his imagination and sense of creativity. Above all, he must be prepared to fit into the feeling and thinking and vision of the producer of the original work. He is no longer just a translator but a writer, a producer and an artiste. We borrow the last word from Richard Darnay in one of John Buchan's classics, the Thirty-Nine Steps, when he he posed as a road mender under subterfuge: "The Secret of playing a part is to think yourself into it. You would never succeed, at least, for long, unless you were able to convince yourself that you were it."

The translator must therefore key into the breath and vision of the writer for any particular job he does. In doing so he stands a good chance to obtain equivalent reactions from his readers, many of whom may not even have heard of the original, loet alone seen or read it.

## 12 VII. Notes

1 In his article "les titres des romans de Guy des Car" in Sociocritique, Paris, Nathan, 1979, p.90, 2 Personal translation of "toute reference cognitive et sa classification sont transférables en n'importe quelle langue".<sup>1</sup>

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	Original Title	English Version	French Version	Observation
1	Mission terminée (Fr)	Mission Kala	to	Translated version appears more explicit
2	Oliver Twist (Eng)		Olivier Twist	No change, just oliver to Olivier
3	Die Brücke (Ger)	The Bridge		No change, proper noun.
4	Une vie de Boy (Fr)	The House boy		Mere substitution of equivalent Could well be the life of a houseboy but the houseboy is more catching, less literal.
5	Le vieux nègre et la médaille (Fr)	The old man and the medal		Quite imaginative. Much better than the the old negro and the medal for instance
6	Die Leiden des jürgen Werter (Ger)	The sufferings of the young Werter		Direct translation is alright, message direct
7	L'appel des arenes (Fr)	The wrestling grounds		Very imaginative inter lingual translation
8	The palmwine drunkard (Eng)	L'Ivrogne de la brousse		Concise and even more explicit than the original.
9	Things Fall Apart (Eng)	Le monde s'effondre	Okonko	German version is most imaginative because the action is centered around the protagonist.

Figure 1:



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- 182 [Achebe ()] , Chinua Achebe . *Things Fall Apart* 1958.
- 183 [Achebe ()] *Le monde s'effondre*, Paris, *Présence Africaine*. Translation into French by Michel Ligny, Chinua
- 184 Achebe . 1972.
- 185 [Mouin ()] George Mouin . *Les problèmes théoriques de la traduction*, (Paris, Gallimard) 1963.
- 186 [Osazuwa ()] Simeon Osazuwa . *African Literature and the language dilemma*, 1992. p. .
- 187 [Arowolo ()] *The problems of translation in Africa writing*, E O Arowolo . 1982. Paris, *Présence Africaine*. p. .