

FIDELITY EROSION: BACK-TRANSLATION ANALYSIS OF SOME SELECTED VERSES OF THE *BIBLE NSO* VERSION

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Abstract

This study investigates the washing away of meanings during translation process and the cause of this erosion. The research makes use of back translation technique to show how culture and some linguistic tendencies such as ambiguity, limited vocabulary lexical mismatch, word order or structural mismatch affected the translation of English Bible (King James Version) to the Igbo Bible (Bible Nso version translated by Thomas J Dennis). To achieve this, the research adopts the theory of sense translation also known as descriptive theory. Some verses of the Bible Nso were randomly selected and back translated to contemporary English for analysis through content analysis method. This research reveals that there are some loss of meanings or erosion of meanings during translation process of the Igbo Bible, of which when back translated to English does not produce the same effect as the original source, whereas, the ultimate goal of a translation is to give same sense effect to the target language as the source language. Random sampling method was used to select some verses in the Bible cutting across the old testaments and the New Testament. The findings of this work shows that cultural factors as well as linguistic factors such as ambiguity, limited vocabulary or lexical mismatch, word order or structural mismatch, figurative expressions are the major cause of the washing away of meanings.

Keywords: Fidelity Erosion, Back Translation, Lexical Mismatch

Introduction

Translation has been part of communication system in the world and inevitable because of the multi lingual structure of the world. The ultimate goal of a translator is to transfer meaning from one language to another, and to efficiently do this, there are linguistic and cultural nuances to be put into consideration. When the correct meaning is transferred the translation is said to be fidelity. Fidelity or faithfulness according to Munday is “the extent to which a translation accurately renders the meaning of the source text without distortion” (12). Therefore, when there is inaccuracy or distortion of meaning in the translation which may be as a result of cultural or linguistic tendencies, then, the situation is termed Fidelity Erosion which was first coined by Prof. Enoch Ajunwa.

The Holy Bible in Igbo (union version) also called “Bible Nso” translated by Rev. Thomas J. Dennis with his committee including some Igbo indigenes. This was translated by having recourse to different dialects which include: Onitsha, Owerri, Unwana, Arochukwu and Bony keeping idioms and proverbs common to all, intended to be a sort of “central” or “compromise” Igbo, playing the role of a literary medium to the Igbo people (Oraka, 17). However, many Igbo speakers faulted the combination of various dialects in this translation. But whether there are faults in the combination of dialects in the translation is not the concern of the research, but the language in general. Ajunwa posits:

Translation can be viewed at one or more levels. In the first level, the translation is done directly from the source language (SL1) into a target language (TL1). Then the second level, the TL1 now becomes the source language (TL2). The English translation of the Bible is TL1 to the original source languages which are Hebrew and Greek respectively. (30)

There are many translations of the Bible. The Bible first existed in the Hebrew language and Greek before any other language. The Igbo translation was directly from English and not from the original Hebrew translation. So, this paper concentrates on the two languages, which are the English language (source language) and Igbo language (target language). Although back-translation is employed to back translate the Igbo Bible text to English language to determine the extent of fidelity erosion in the Igbo Bible translation. The cause of this fidelity erosion which in other words is the problem of translation forms the bases of this paper. Back-translation is a technique used to evaluate errors or extent of fidelity erosion in any translated document.

Fidelity Erosion

The theory of fidelity erosion was propounded by Professor Enoch Ajunwa in his book, *A Textbook of Translation: Theory and Practice* published in 2014. He uses the word erosion which he said is “the gradual wearing away of rock or soil by physical break down, chemical solution, and transportation of material, as caused by water, wind or ice” (22). He then applies this to translation by saying that:

Erosion takes place if the level of fidelity is reduced during a translation process by such factors as the translator’s shallow knowledge of one or both languages, his shallow knowledge of the subject-matter being translated, faulty translation tools being used, lack of professional training and exposure, as well as intellectual, cultural and linguistic factors. (22)

In the words of Ajunwa, “Fidelity means the extent to which a translator accurately transfers meaning of a source language text into a target language text without distorting, violating or betraying the message as well as the style of the source language” (17). The question is if absolute fidelity is achievable in translation. On this Nida has this to say:

If we insist on a translation without any loss of information, therefore, not only translation, but also all communication will be effectively be impossible, because no communication whatsoever...may take place without some loss or gain of information. The loss or gain of information is an integral part of the process of communication. (47)

Attempting to review a translated work will definitely be in order since many scholars such as Newmark have posit that translated work can “usually be improved” and to him “there is no such thing as perfect, ideal or correct translation” (6).

Concept of Back Translation

According to Language Scientific, “Back- Translation” is the practice of taking a translated document and translating it back into the original language as a means of checking the accuracy of the translation (par, 4)

Comparison of back- translation with the original text is used as a check on the accuracy of the original translation, as carried out in this paper.

Theoretical Framework

To properly articulate the dynamics of the cultural and linguistic problems of translation in the Igbo translation of the Bible (*Bible Nso* version) from the English version, this study engages the theoretical expositions of the theory of sense also known as interpretive theory of translation. The concept of fidelity in translation is within this framework with different studies applying it in different aspects.

Faithfulness to word-order and linguistic styles of the source language are almost against this theory of sense translation. Given to this, this research is not in any way trying to advocate for exactitude of word-order and other linguistic style between the source language and the target language, but upholds the concept of equivalence where meaning and sense is the ultimate goal of a translation.

The interpretive theory of translation or theory of sense as we may call it, was developed by Danica Seleskovitch and Mariana Lederer (researchers at the Ecole Supérieure d’Interpretes et de Traducteurs (ESIT) at the University of Paris III). According to the theory, the ultimate goal of a translator is to translate text and not the languages. Hence, interpretation as the name of the

theory implies, is the understanding speech and rewording that understanding in a different language.

However, Jungwha Chon explains that ‘Interpretative theory is built upon four pillars: command of the native language, command of the source language, command of relevant world and background knowledge and command of interpretive methodology’ (par,7). He further elaborate on interpretive process to state that it is inaccurate to say that a paper is “French” or “English”, that the graphic signs the paper carries are not meanings but rather symbols and that the meaning of the symbols are in the reader’s or listener’s mind. If it is so, comprehension of linguistic and non linguistic (such as culture) knowledge of the source language is required to understand the speaker’s intention.

Therefore, fidelity or faithfulness is to the speaker’s intention and not to the source language. In other words, the concept of fidelity in translation is when the speaker’s or writer’s intention is rendered in a target language irrespective of the graphic symbols. Fidelity erosion then means when the speaker’s intention is not well represented in the target language.

Based on this theory, this research tends to expose how culture and linguistic tendencies caused fidelity erosion in the Bible Nso version of the Igbo translation. Since some of the selected verses could not tally in meaning with the source language, or not clearly understandable in the target language or unambiguous statements in the source language becomes ambiguous in the target language, therefore there is need for this research, as to determine the cause and suggest possible solutions.

Cultural Problems

There is no difference between culture and language, they are like indivisible twin compass, even if one stretches them; they are still welded together at their joint. In Psalm chapter 23:5, let us review the role of culture.

King James Version: thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies...

Igbo Translation: I nedo table n’usoro n’irum n’anya ndi nakpabum...

Back Translation: You arrange a table in order before me in the presence of my oppressors...

Pragmatically, the two sentences in the different versions are not the same because the sentence “prepare a table before me...” is a figurative way of saying ‘He provides food for me’ or ‘he makes a feast for me’. Because “table” is a mytonomy of food in the western and palestine culture. Looking at this verse of the Bible, one will find out that the word “table” which existed in English also finds its way to the Igbo translation. The question is why is it so? According to Chinwuba Culturally, the Palestine kingdom of which Bible has

its background from has this culture of serving their food on the table and the sentence “preparing a table before me” is a popular saying in Jewish culture which means ‘serving food for someone’. The English culture has similar culture of serving food on the table. And whenever one hears “prepare a table” it means ‘providing food’ or ‘serving’ food in Jewish culture. Contrary to the culture of the Palestine and English (westerns), Igbo culture does not have ‘table’, and so, doesn’t associate with serving food or making a feast. Because of this, the translation was very wrong in the sense that the translator used word- for- word (metaphrase) and thereby meaning another thing, which is ‘Arranging in order a table in front of me’. Schonpenhauer quoted by Ajunwa, observed that:

Not every word in one language has an exact equivalent in another. Thus, not all concepts that are expressed through the words of one language are exactly the same as the ones that are expressed through the words of another. (72)

King James Version: For ye have not received the spirit of bondage again to fear; but ye have received the Spirit of adoption, whereby we cry, **Abba**, Father.

Igbo Translation: N’ihi na unu anatagh mo nke ibu-oru ilaghachi n’egwu ozo; kama unu natara Mo nke ido-ka-nwa-nwoke, nke ayi neti nkpu nime ya, si **Aba**, Nna

Back Translation: because you did not receive the spirit of slaves to fear again; but you have received the spirit of sons by whom we cry Aba Father.

In Romans 18:15, where “Abba Father” was unable to be translated rather it was translated as “Abba nna” in the Bible Nso version. The meaning of “Abba” still remain a mystery to Igbo speakers. But according to Bible Dictionary, “Abba” is Aramaic word for father. Only used by Jews where both parents of a real son were Jews, or of a proselyte of the covenant. Not used when the mother was a slave. Also according to New concise Bible Dictionary, “Abba” means Aramaic word for ‘father’ conveying both warm intimacy and respect; never used by Jews for God. But Jesus applied it to God (Mark. 14:36); Paul saw it as a symbol of a Christian’s adoption as a child of God (Romans 8:15, Galatians 4:6) (‘Complete Christian Dictionary’)

From the above definitions one will understand that “Abba” means ‘real Father’, or intimacy which can be represented in Igbo as ‘mu’. So in Igbo translation the word “Abba Father” supposes to be ‘Nna m’ or ‘Nna murum’. Again, one may argue that the reason for lifting the ‘Abba’ is to avoid fidelity erosion, but nevertheless, the target language audience now views the word as a proper name for God, whereas, the word is a determiner to the word ‘father’

which the Jews use for their biological father. But Jesus Christ used it for God to show the world that God is his biological father. Then in adoption, according to Paul, we see God as our real father.

Linguistic Problems

Culture will not be entirely left out in analysing this linguistic problem, as it has roles to play in shaping the language of the people. Under this linguistic problem, the selected verses will be categorized and analyzed to answer the research question. The categories include; ambiguity, limited vocabulary, word order and figurative expressions.

1. Limited Vocabulary/ Lexical Mismatch

Understandably, there are languages that are richer in vocabulary than other. The Igbo language comprises far fewer words than English. According to Steve Frank, the author of *The Pen Commandments* claims that English has 500,000 words with German having about 135, 000 and French having fewer than 100,000. Although, if it is counted by the number of words in dictionary,

Korean will be the highest with about 1,100,373 words.

Now looking at how limited vocabularies affect translation, it is obvious that when a source language is richer than the target language, it is always difficult to translate, sometimes the translator ends up loaning words or use a whole lot of sentence in translating one word. Many times it results to fidelity erosion.

In Galatians 5:21, “revelling” and “ite-egwu” are two words to be considered. The Bible Nso version translated ‘revelling’ as ‘ite-egwu’ which can be back translated as just ‘dance’. “revelling” or orgies in another word is a type of dance which can be called “seductive dance” and can be likened to “partying”. The dictionary meaning of “revelling” is a wild drunken festivity, especially one at which indiscriminate sexual activity takes place which also involves dancing. So if ‘revelling’ is a type of dance the Igbo translation for it should not be “ite-egwu”(dance), but there is no vocabulary in Igbo language that will be equivalent to the English word. So it becomes a problem. In the Igbo translation. While the English translation is talking about a particular type of dance, the Igbo version generalised it. The cause of this mistranslation is limited vocabulary. The Igbo language does not have a word for “revelling” as type of dance, and to an Igbo speaker the Bible says “do not dance”. This fidelity erosion has formed a doctrine among Igbo rural communities where English Bible is rarely read, of which the only translation they use is Igbo translation. Though one may not blame Dennis who had already justified himself by saying that the “poverty” of the language is one of the difficulties they encountered during the translation, (Christian Missionary Review, 1983). The poverty he meant was poverty of vocabularies.

2. Ambiguity

John Chapter 3:16 shows the ambiguity of the word ‘so’. The word ‘So’ can mean more than one thing in English language, it can be

(a) “such an extent” (adverb) as in “why are you so angry”, and can also mean

(b) ‘as previously mentioned or described’ as in “I think so”.

In the context of the Bible passage the word “so” means “a great degree”, which can also mean “very much”. There is a probable washing away of meaning in the back translation, caused by ambiguity of the word ‘so’. Looking at the sentences in the Igbo version which says thus: “N ihu na Chineke huru uwa n’ anya otua...”, one will find “so” being translated as “otua”, of which if translated back to English will mean “Like this” while the right translation should be “Nke ukwu” which means “very much” or “so much” in English. Though some may argue that the ‘so’ in the verse is not an adverb of manner but a pointer or demonstrative word to ‘that he gave his only begotten son...’ but whichever way the ambiguity of the word has posed a problem to the translator. The right translation should be “Nihi an Chineke huru uwa n’ anya ke Ukwu” instead of “Nihi na Chineke huru uwa n’anya otua”. But nevertheless, ambiguity gives room for argument.

3. Word Order/ structural mismatch

According to Ajunwa (159), Word order is the arrangement of words in a sentence in terms of their lexical and structural interrelations. He further opines that no two languages are so close as to be lexically and syntactically identical. In the other hand, structural mismatch occurs where two languages use the same construction for different purpose, or use different construction for the same purpose.

Since every language has its unique way of constructing sentence, the problem is whether the target language will be faithful to the source and still retain its uniqueness or lose some meanings in the process of trying to be unique in its construction

Psalm chapter 23:1

King James Version: The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want

Igbo Translation: Jehovah bu onye nazum dika aturu; o dighi ihe korom

Back Translation: Jehovah is the one that feeds me like sheep; I lack nothing.

In Psalm 23:1, ‘the Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want’ is translated as ‘Jehovah bu onye nazum dika aturu’ O dighi ihe korom’. The two languages do not have same construction of sentence but they term to serve the same purpose. The only likely problem is that during back translation to English

there will be fidelity of erosion as we have here. The back translation of the Igbo version now read thus; ‘Jehovah is the one who feeds me like sheep, there is nothing I lack’.

The two notable things in this back translation are that firstly, the word ‘shepherd’ was not translated in one word. The clause ‘the Lord is my shepherd’ is not entirely the same with ‘Jehovah is the one that feeds me like sheep’ because the original version is metaphor while the back translation is simile. Dennis in his unique way presented the verse in simile and in the process filtered the meaning. The argument may arise that someone may feed you like sheep but not your shepherd. Now, in the Igbo translation as reflected on the back translation, the attention has been shifted from ‘The Lord as the shepherd’ to the manner in which he is being fed. In other words; it changes from apposition to adverb. The closest option in Igbo to this translation should be ‘Onye nwem bu onye ozuzu aturu m’.

Secondly, the latter clause ‘I shall not want’ actually changes tense in the Igbo translation which is back translated as ‘I lack nothing’. On a careful observation, one will understand that the original text is futuristic while the back translation is present situation. One may not actually be lacking now, but may lack in future. The writer has assurance that as God is his shepherd he will not lack anything.

Again, Romans 12:10 presents us with yet another situation where by the underlined clause ‘preferring one another’ is translated as ‘nacharanu ibe-unu uzo’, which when back translated it will be; ‘make way for another’ has to do with structural mismatch. The reason for this erosion may be given to the fact that the word ‘preferring’ is context bound and unique to the language. In the context, according Concise Bible Dictionary means ‘to go before or show the way’. In other words, the verse interpretation is to point that ‘you should be the first to show respect or honour’. The Igbo translation tries to go with the same word order as the English version and on the process produced another thing all together. ‘Nacharanu ibe-unu uzo,’ as translated in Bible Nso, means to make way for another as in when someone wants to pass through a direction you are. Trying to transliterate exactly the word order of the source language may do the meaning a lot of damage or produce what the target language audience may find difficult to comprehend as seen in this verse.

Figurative Expressions

Figurative expressions and metaphorical expressions are strictly culture-bound. Absolute understanding of both languages will help the translator to know the equivalent expression to be used. For instance, the Igbo culture sees Tortoise as the ‘trickster’ while Ghanaian culture sees Anansi the spider and in North American Coyote and the Raven are seen as the trickster. Also in

Europe and South and Central America the trickster can be Fox or Wolf. Therefore, to tell an Igbo person that ‘Obi is a tortoise’ will bring to his sense that Obi is a trickster and will not have same effect to a Ghanian or an American. (Wikipedia, par 7)

In Mark 10:25, ‘Camel’ wasn’t translated and the phrase ‘eye of a needle’ was a merely transliterated as ‘anya agiga’. Also the whole expression is figurative and so culturally sensitive. Firstly we should know that Camel is an animal that carries loads and mostly found in Asia, especially in Palestine desert area. Secondly, eye of a needle according to history from Manners and Customs of the Palestine, the ‘eye of a needle’ was a narrow gateway into Jerusalem. Since camels were heavily loaded with goods and riders, they would need to be un-loaded in order to pass through. Therefore, the analogy is that a rich man would have to similarly unload his material possessions in order to enter heaven. Remember that Jesus said this after he told a rich man who came to visit him to sell all he has and share to the poor. The ‘eye of a needle’ is metaphorical expression common among the Palestine area. Most theologians are made to study the Manners and Custom of the Palestine where the Bible culture is set for proper interpretation. Same goes to translators.

If eye of a needle is not literary the needle in which we use to pass thread through cloths, then transliterating it as seen in the Bible Nso will affect the meaning and thus wash out some meaning. A translator will be said to have failed if his translation could not have same effect as in the source language culture.

Conclusion

The study has shown that some words and phrases could not make sense to the target community because the translators may have wanted to stay faithful to the word-order and some linguistic uniqueness of the source language. Some fidelity erosions that occurred in the translation of the Igbo Bible(Bible Nso) were as a result of little knowledge and mastery of Igbo culture and its language by the translator(Dennis John Thomas). Most of the fidelity erosions caused by different translation problems such as cultural differences, ambiguity, limited vocabularies, figurative expressions and unique structure of the source language are technically avoidable. For instance, the ambiguity of ‘Jehovah bu onye n’azum dika aturu’ (Jehovah is the one that feeds me like sheep) would have been avoidable, had the translator used the right word for ‘shepherd’ which is ‘Onye Ozuzu aturu’, then it will be ‘Chineke bu onye Ozuzu aturu m’ (The Lord is my Shepherd).

The causes of fidelity of erosion shouldn't be taken lightly in the process of translating because most of them have the capacity to destroy the sense of a given work of source language. Ajunwa (25) submits that it is dangerous to toy with translation operations because it could result into embarrassing and, at time, fatal consequences. The main focus of this research as previously mentioned, is to show that there are some fidelity of erosions in the translation of the Igbo *Bible* through applying back translation to English language which is the source Language.

The research also highlighted the causes of these erosions which formed the topic of this research: Cultural and Linguistic Problems of translation.

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