# INTER-CULTURAL CHALLENGES FACING TRANSLATION IN IGBO AND ENGLISH LANGUAGES

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#### **Abstract**

This study is about inter-cultural challenges facing translation of Igbo language into English language or vice versa. English language referred to here is the British English. The study tries to find out the cultural elements that pose challenge to translation where Igbo language is the source language and English language is the receptor/target language; and where the English language is the source language and Igbo language is the receptor/target language. The study was guided by the theory of indeterminacy of translation and use theory of meaning. The researcher used face-to-face encounter with the teachers and speakers of English language who are of Igbo origin as the method of data collection. At the end of the study, the researcher discovered that sometimes when Igbo language is the source language and English language is the receptor/target language or vice versa, translators are faced with the problem of representing to the receptors what is completely outside their experiences. This is because Igbo culture is widely different from British culture. The cultural divergence is noticed mainly in some cultural exhibitions like food processing and eating habit, religious beliefs and practices, housing system, etc. At the end of the study, the researcher suggested some solutions to the problem. Some of them are adoption of words that will serve as equivalent to some of the cultural terms in both languages. There is need for indigenous Igbo-English speakers to make effort to adopt words that will be equivalent to the Igbo cultural terms in question. Then translators should pay more attention to the central message of the source language.

## Introduction

Language is the basic system of communication. Without language, communication system will not exist. Every language is equal because they perform one and the same basic function which is communication. However, languages differ from each other because of cultural, social and geographical differences. That is why different people perceive the world differently; according to their world-views which they express through their languages. It shows that two or more languages can express a phenomenon differently and comfortably. This is what brings barrier in languages of the world. For an expression in a language to be properly expressed in another language, there is need for an intermediary who is at home with the two languages. He or she does the work of interpretation. This is what we call translation in written text.

Translation is the transfer of meaning and expression from one language to another. In translation, minimum of two languages are involved. They are the source language and the receptor or target language. So, it is essentially the process of the transfer of meaning, message or concept from the source language into receptor/target language.

Furthermore, culture plays important role in the process of translation, because language as a system of symbols is culturally conditioned. It constitutes the heart of every culture, because each word of a language is culturally charged. Thus, when it comes to translation, cultural elements have to be considered and they constitute the major elements. So, translation is often difficult when translating into a receptor language whose culture is widely different from that of the source language. This is because the translator will face the problem of representing to the receptors what is completely outside their experience.

Igbo language is one of the major languages in Nigeria, and in Africa. Igbo people are culturally oriented people. They are culturally blooded people in the sense that they live out their culture in everything they do. As such, their language is anchored on their culture. So, for a smooth and easier translation from

Igbo language to any other language, the receptor language supposed to have a similar or related culture with the Igbo. On the other hand, English language is the language of the British people situated in the far Europe. Their language is also anchored on their culture which is quite different from the Igbo culture. So translation from Igbo language into English language, or vice versa, will definitely encounter some cultural challenges.

This research is about inter-cultural challenges facing translators from Igbo language into English language or vice versa. The researcher tries to point-out those cultural factors that pose challenges in translation of Igbo language into English language or vice versa, and then offer some solutions on how the problem could be solved.

It has been observed that some researchers and translators had made efforts in the past to research on problems encountered in translation processes. However, there is no recorded evidence of any research on this topic; and this has been a challenge to Igbo language to English language translation or vice versa. So the researcher saw that there is the need to research on this topic in order to bridge the gap left by previous researchers and to offer solutions to smoothen the process of translation from Igbo language as the source language to English language as the target language or vice versa.

This work will be of great value to the general public because it will bring to their notice the intercultural challenges encountered by translators who translate from one language to another, especially the translators of Igbo language to English language or English language to Igbo language. Besides, it will help the translators to know of the cultural differences between the speakers and owners of those languages in order to find the solution to bridge the gap for easier and smooth translation. It will equally be a foot stool to future researchers on the topics related to this.

# **Conceptual Frame work**

In order to do justice to this topic, there are basic concepts which have to be looked into. They are culture, language and translation. These three concepts have to be studied in order to solidify the foundation for further action.

# Culture

Culture means different things to different people. Tylor (1871) gives a foundation definition of culture as the umbrella term which encompasses the social behaviour and norms found in human societies, as well as the knowledge, beliefs, arts, laws, customs, capabilities, and habits of the individuals in the society. This definition shows that cultural norms codify acceptable conduct in society. It is seen as a guideline for language and behaviour in a social group. It means that humans acquire culture through the learning process of inculturation and socialization which are manifested by the diversity of culture across societies.

Furthermore, Ilorah (2010) defines culture as the way of life of a people. This definition appears to be simple but it embodies a lot of meanings. The way of life comprises the results of group experience from the past up to the present time. His definition suggests that everything one does is influenced by the culture of the place where one is residing.

Besides these definitions, as it concerns this research, the researcher defines culture as the generally accepted way of life in a society, which forms the world-view of the people of that society and which differentiates their orientation from the people of other societies. This definition shows that culture differentiates one society from another. As such, it influences and molds the people in that society and gives them life orientation different from those in other societies. It is on this stand-point that we discuss the inter-cultural elements affecting the translation of Igbo language as the source language into English language as the receptor/target language or vice versa.

## Language

Every person knows what language is because every person lives in a language community and makes use of language; but only a few persons can attempt to offer a definition of language. This is because

the more one tries to define language the more words of definition eludes one. However, there are some scholars who define language from different perspectives.

Hall (1969) defines language as the institution whereby humans communicate and interact with each other by means of habitually used oral-auditory arbitrary symbols. This definition speaks more of language as an institution. Hall's definition sees language is an agreed human invention. It is not an individual invention, but it belongs to a community and it is the community that makes use of it. It means that language is built and it grows on daily bases. So it is part of the community and it affects the life of the community that speaks it.

Besides, Lyons (1981) defines language as the mental faculty which allows human beings to undertake linguistic behaviour, to produce and understand utterances. In this definition, Lyons emphasizes the biological bases for human capacity for language as a unique development of human brain. The supporters of this view argue that language is inbuilt in human brain; that is why children who grew up in a particular environment will learn the language of that community just by daily interaction with members of the community, without formal education on that language. As such, a language can grow up in an environment where the people living together can formulate and make up a language

On the other hand, Campbell (2004) gives a definition of language as a formal system of signs governed by grammatical rules of combination of utterances to communicate meaning. This shows that language is meant to pass message. Every statement in a language is meant to communicate something. So, language is a close structural system which consists of rules relating a particular sign to a particular meaning. It means that Campbell is stressing the fact that every language differ from the other through different signs that means different things.

Furthermore, Hauser and Fitch (2003) define language as a system of communication that enables humans to exchange verbal or symbolic utterances. Their definition emphasizes the social function of language. People in society use language to interact among themselves and to express their intentions. It means that a language must have vocabularies which are signs relating to different meanings.

As it concerns this study, the researcher defines language as a structured system of communication which is culturally conditioned and differs from one linguistic community to another. This definition stresses the fact that language is influenced by the culture of the environment that speaks and owns the language; as such linguistic experiences differ according to culture.

# **Translation**

Translation is understood based on its Latin derivation – 'translatio' derived from 'trans' which means 'across' and 'latio' meaning 'to carry'. So, translatio means to carry across or to bring across. As such, translation literally means to carry a text across from one language to another. It is on this that different people stand to give different definitions of translation.

Kasparek (1983) defines translation as the communication of meaning of a source language text by means of an equivalent target language text. This definition shows that in translation minimum of two languages are involved and meaning is the primary target of translators.

Nida (1969) sees translation as a decoding from one language and encoding into another language. This definition appears to be simple, but it is pregnant with meanings. According to him translation in this sense involves three tasks. They are,

- a) The analysis of the message in the source language.
- b) The transfer of message into receptor language
- c) The restructuring of the transferred message in the receptor/ target language.

From this definition, it follows that in translation, the translator analyzes the message or the concept as it is in the source language. He/she transfers the result of the analysis towards the receptor language. Then he/she tries to restructure the transferred meaning in accordance with the structure of the receptor/target language.

As it concerns this work, translation is defined as the transfer of meaning from the source language into receptor language considering basic cultural and environmental factors in both languages.

#### **Theoretical Framework**

This work centers on translation as one of the basic features of language. In translation, we look for meaning. It means that translation without meaning is useless. The aim of translation is to carry-across meaning. So this work will be guided by two major theories, one is theory of translation; while the other is theory of meaning. The theories are theory of indeterminacy of translation and use theory of meaning.

# Theory of indeterminacy of translation

This theory was propounded by a 20<sup>th</sup> century American analytic philosopher, Willard Quine in 1960 in his book, *Word and Object*. This theory holds that words are born out of language that forms part of the divergent and dynamic cultures, and meanings are assigned to words by their users who are members of the dynamic and ever developing community. So words have their meaning within the cultural background of the language which they form part of.

This theory is saying that there is no objective or real meaning that could be seeing in all the languages. Thus, for one to understand a sentence means that one has to understand the language of the sentence to the grass-root level. So meaning is contextual as it depends on the use of the word in a particular setting.

This theory is qualified to guide this study because the study centered on inter-cultural elements that hinder translation of Igbo language into English language or vice versa. The Igbo culture is widely different from British culture. This affects translation in both languages.

# **Use Theory of Meaning**

The chief proponents of this theory are Ludwig Wittgenstein and Paul Horwich. Their efforts in establishing and expanding this theory appeared differently in their various works. Wittgenstein (1953) proposed this theory in his famous book, *Philosophical investigations*. Here he examined the content of each word in different language and geographical locations. He noticed and explained that the meaning of each word depends on the context and language of the word.

In the same hand, Horwish (1990) supported this theory in his book, *Truth*. Here he criticized referential theory of meaning, which places meaning in the reference. Then in 1998, he published another book, *Meaning*. Here, he supported Use theory of meaning by saying that truth is not necessary in giving meaning to an object or a statement. Meaning of a word depends on the use of the word as applied in the language it is used.

So Use theory of meaning holds that the meaning of a word depends on the context the word is used in the language it is used. A word can mean different things in different contexts. This theory suits this work because the context of the word which gives meaning to the word depends on the cultural background of the owners and the speakers of the language in question. This is one of the factors that affect translation from one language to the other. In Igbo language, cultural background and shortage of vocabularies made it that one word can mean different things in different contexts. This should be put into consideration whenever translation involves Igbo language as the source language, and even as the receptor language.

## The place of Language in a Culture

The place of language in a culture has to do with the relationship between language and culture. This will bring into light the influence of culture in translating from one language into another language. Language is part of culture. The place of language in a culture is too deep and hooked up that one cannot take language away from the culture of its origin. That is why every word in a language can only be totally understood within the cultural setting of the people that own and speak the language. A word can mean two or more things which not all the meanings can be understood outside the cultural setting.

It is culture that houses language. At the same time it is language that expresses culture. As such without language, culture cannot grow and expand. Culture influences every part of human being including thought, emotions, feelings, etc. So, when we talk of the relationship between language and culture, we are at the same time pointing at the relationship between language and thought, because culture influences people's linguistic world-view. That is to say that one thinks within a culture, meaning that one thinks within a language.

# **Inter-cultural influence in Language Translation**

The relationship between language and culture grows into the cultural influence in language translation. As we already mentioned, language and culture are tied with the same rope. None can exist independent of the other. When one talks of translation, one talks of the movement of one language into another language. Since language moves with culture, translators find it more difficult translating from the source language into receptor language which has different cultural setting with the source language.

Since culture influences the linguistic behaviour of people living in a society, it equally conditions their thought. As such, words have meaning within the cultural context they exist. Therefore, a word in a language is embodied with culture, emotion, thought and world-view. This is the case of Igbo language which is well influenced by the Igbo culture. Igbo words are pregnant with meanings. This is because one word can mean different things depending on the setting and the intention of the speaker. That is why, when translating from one language to the other, attention is on the transfer of meaning. This leads to the problem of meaning in translating Igbo language as the source language into the receptor language which has different cultural background with the Igbo or vice versa.

# **Necessity of Meaning in Language Translation**

The target of language translation is meaning. Any translation that is devoid of meaning is no translation at all. Translation should be able to depict, in the receptor language, the mind of the speaker/writer in the source language. Jakobson (1959), says that the meaning of any linguistic sign is its translation into some further alternative sign. In line with this, Ewelu (2010) says that the meaning of a word in translation is that which is transferred from the word in the source language to its equivalent in the receptor language.

Based on Quine's theory of indeterminacy of translation, Quine is of the opinion that the meaning of a sentence in a language is that which it shares with its translation in another language. If this is the case, then meaning, in translation, is determined by means of translation. This is where the problem of our discussion lies, because some objects that exist in a language do not exist in another language. This exposes translators to the problem of incomplete equivalent of the untranslatable and the loss of information coming from the source language to the target language. This problem exists because of cultural background of the owners and the speakers of the languages involved.

## **Method of Data Collection**

The researcher had face-to-face eye contact interaction with teachers and speakers of English language who are of Igbo origin, and some teachers and speakers of English language who are of Igbo origin. Some sentences were given to them to translate, which they were choked up on the process, because some words in the sentences have no direct English equivalent. Such words are Igbo cultural terms which are out of experience to the British people. Likewise, some English words have no direct Igbo equivalent.

## **Data collection and Analysis**

Here some data were collected based on the method stated above. Those data are based on the following subheadings: Food processing and eating habit, Religious worship, Housing system.

# **Food Processing and Eating Habit**

Culture of a people affects every aspect of their life including food processing and eating habit. Igbo and British method of food processing and eating habit are affected by their respective cultures. This affects translation when one is the source language and the other is the receptor language.

Example 1.

Igbo: - *O na-elo utara* 

English: - He/she is swallowing fufu English: - He/she is eating fufu.

Example 2.

Igbo:- Okeke na-ata mango

English:- Okeke is chewing mango English:- Okeke is eating mango

Example 3.

English:- Ikenna is eating salad Igbo:- *Ikenna na-ata saladi* Igbo: *Ikenna na-eri saladi* Igbo:- *Ikenna na-ata agbugbo* Igbo:- *Ikenna na-eri akwukwonri* 

In the sentences above, the cultural differences in both languages pose challenge in the easy translation of the words therein. In the Example.1 *Q na-elo utara*. The verb, 'na-elo' as it is used here is alien to British culture because it is not in their eating habit. The People of Britain do not have the habit of direct swallow of food without chewing. The translator will bear in mind that the food has been chewed before the stage of swallowing, but that is not the mind of the writer in the originating language. So if 'na-elo' is translated as 'is swallowing' or 'is eating' then the original meaning is lost. Besides, 'utara' as a food is equally alien to them, so there is need for equivalent word to meet up with the translation.

## Example 2

Okeke na-ata mango

Here, the verb, 'na-ata' depicts the Igbo manner of eating fruits. In the surface meaning of the English translation, it is 'is chewing'. If it is taken in the translating the sentence involved, it will mislead the audience, because it is contrary to the British manner of eating fruits. So the verb, 'na-ata' now changes to 'is eating'. Thus the sentence is translated as, 'Okeke is eating mango.'

# Example 3

Ikenna is eating salad

In the Igbo translations given above: *Ikenna na-ata saladi*. Here, 'na-ata' could mean 'chewing' in the normal English translation. That is not the original meaning being conveyed by the narrator. Then *Ikenna na-eri saladi*. Here 'na-eri' is the proper verb for eating in Igbo language; but if one uses it in this context to match the English equivalent, one loses the Igbo meaning in that context.

Furthermore, 'salad' is not traditional food of the Igbo people. As such to get the actual name in Igbo language becomes difficult without borrowing of words. In the sentences in example 3 it poses a challenge in getting the exact translation. As such, it is translated differently like: *saladi*, *agbugbo* and *akwukwonri*. These are indications of the difficulties posed by cultural differences in translation.

## **Religious Beliefs and Practices**

Traditional system of worship of the Igbo people differ greatly from that of British people. In Igbo traditional religious beliefs and practices such words like *okpesi*, *ogu*, *ofo*, *ikenga*, *ogirisi*, etc are alien to British people and their religious beliefs and practices. As such, when one comes across such words in sentences, it poses challenge in translating them into English language; likewise, some religious terms used by the British people are alien to the original Igbo traditional religious beliefs and practices. Such items equally lack direct word equivalent in Igbo language.

Example 4

Igbo; - Eji m ogu, eji m ofo

English: - I am holding ogu, I am holding ofo

English: - I am holding symbol of justice, I am holding symbol of authority.

In the above sentences, it becomes difficult to get the exact translation of the sentence in the context is was used. Ogu and ofo are alien to British culture. As such, there is no direct word equivalent. So the sentence was translated differently in the effort to get the equivalent words. So in order to draw meaning from the sentence, one can refer to ogu as the symbol of justice and the ofo as the symbol of authority.

However, that can only provide the surface meaning of the sentence. The actual meaning of the sentence in the context in which it was used is 'I am standing in justice and authority'.

# Example 5.

Igbo: - Ha ji mmonwu gaa akwamozu

English: - They went for condolence with masquerade

English: - They went for condolence with spirit of the dead

In the example 5, the translation of *mmonwu* in the Igbo sentence becomes a problem because in English language and culture, *mmonwu* is just a masquerade, but in Igbo cultural understanding, the picture of mask is totally out of place. In Igbo understanding, *mmonwu* is an embodied human spirit. As such, it has a spiritual connotation. So in this context, *mmonwu* cannot be translated as masquerade. So, there is a problem in trying to get the direct equivalent of *mmonwu* in English language to depict the context it is used here.

## Example 6.

English: - He is reading his Bible Igbo: - *Q na-agu Baibul ya* 

Igbo: - Q na-agu akwukwonso ya

# Example 7.

English: - He is reading his Quran (Koran)

Igbo: - Q na-agu akwukwonso ya

Igbo:- Q na-agu koran ya

In example 6. 'Bible' is the Holy book for Christians, but it was introduced into Igbo culture during the advent of Christianity. As such, it has no proper Igbo name. So, for the actual translation of the sentence, the Bible is called Holy book (*akwukwonso*) or it is called *Bajbul* in Igbo coinage.

Then in the example 7. Koran is the Holy book for Islamic religion. It is equally alien to Igbo traditional religious beliefs and practices. As such, there is no direct Igbo word equivalent for it. So it has posed a challenge in translating the sentence in example 7 above. As such, in example 6 and 7, the Igbo translation of Bible and Koran is 'Akwukwonso', whereas in English language they were translated respectively as 'Bible' and 'Koran'. This shows that differences in culture affect translation drastically.

## **Housing System**

Housing system is another way of proving that culture affects meaning and translation from one language to another. In the topic at hand, it is obvious that Igbo traditional/cultural system of building differs greatly from those of the British people. As such, it affects translation in both languages.

## Example 8.

Igbo: - *Ite ahụ dị n'elu uko*. English: - That pot is in *uko* 

English: - That pot is on the basement.

In the example 8 above, the exact English word for 'uko' becomes a problem, because it is not in British system of building. As such, it is given different names in order to drive meaning into the ears of the audience.

# Example 9

English: - Please open the windows Igbo: - *Biko meghee windo ga* Igbo: - *Biko meghee mpio ikuku ga* 

The example 9 shows the difficulty encountered by the translator to get the proper Igbo word for 'window'. This challenge is because window was not in the initial plan of housing system in Igboland. The Igbo original house system had no place for windows. As such, it is given different names like 'mpio ikuku' or 'windo' just to drive home the intended meaning of the sentence by the speaker.

## **Findings**

Having analyzed the data collected, the findings of the research proved that language is built on culture. That is why culture influences linguistic behaviour of every citizen in the society that owns and speaks the language. As such, each word in a language is built on the culture, world-view, thought, and emotions of the speaker. So people think and speak with reference to the things that exist in their environment. It is in this context that the researcher viewed the inter-cultural influence of translating Igbo language as source language into English language as target language or vice versa.

From the data collected, the researcher was able to find out that there are a lot of inter-cultural elements causing obstacle in the process of translation from Igbo language as source language to English language as the target language or vice versa.

In the first place, some human formed habits which have cultural undertone differ widely in the two language communities. For example, Food processing and eating habit of the Igbo people is quite different from the one of British people. In Igbo community, some foods are meant to be swallowed without chewing; but the British people chew every food before swallowing. When translating a sentence like *Q na-eri nri* 'he is eating'. One can easily translate this into English language as 'he/she is eating', but when one says in Igbo language *Q na-elo nri* 'he is swallowing food', to translate it into English language, one finds it difficult to get the exact meaning because the tone of the source language is out of experience to the speakers of receptor language. Likewise, when one says in English language, 'he is eating fruits', the Igbo literal translation will be '*Q na-eri mkpuru osisi ga*'. But the verb 'na-eri' is not used to describe the Igbo method of taking fruits. The normal translation is, '*Q na-ata mkpuru osisi ga*'.

Furthermore, the Igbo understanding of the universe and its components is quite different from the British understanding of it. This understanding influences Igbo man's speech in different settings, especially in religious/cultural settings. Igbo proverbs, for example, are pregnant with meanings and are formed within a religious/cultural setting. As such, for one to have a proper understanding of the proverbs or the idioms as the case may be, one needs to be well founded in Igbo cultural/religious beliefs and practices. The traditional system of worship in the Igbo community differs widely from that of the British people. There are some items used in the worship that have no English word equivalent. Example, in Igbo traditional religion, ofo is the symbol of authority. Although British people may have a symbol of authority, there is no exactly the same symbol in British traditional worship system. Likewise such traditional religious symbols like ogirisi, okpesi, ogu etc. are not performing the same function in British world-view. This poses a challenge when translating a sentence involving this from Igbo to English language. When an Igbo man says, for instance, "Eji m ogu, eji m ofo". This statement surpasses the surface meaning of holding ogu and ofo. The inner meaning of "Eji m ogu, eji m ofo" in this context is 'I stand in justice and authority'. So for proper understanding of some Igbo words, there is need to ask the traditional meaning of the words and the setting in which they are used. These factors affect translation from Igbo language into English language whose thought and believes are different from each other.

Besides, in Igbo community, the culture requires that some ritual must be performed in Igbo language and no other language. For instance, the ceremony of kola nut must be performed in Igbo language. Thus the Igbo say, "*Oji anaghi anu asusu ozo o bu naani asusu Igbo ka o na-anu*". (Kola nut does not understand any other language except Igbo language) When such is the case one cannot translate the words of such ceremony in English language because it is culturally out of place and it cannot be made use of.

In addition, the traditional housing system of Igbo community is quite different from British system of building. In Igbo community, for example, there is a part of the building called *uko*. This is an upper part of the building where kitchen utensils are kept. There is no such provision in British system of building. So for one to translate an Igbo sentence as this: *Ite ahu di n'elu uko*. One finds it difficult to get direct equivalent, because of cultural differences between the community of the source language

and that of receptor language. On the other hand, the British system of building differs from that of Igbo people. Parts of building like window, stair case etc are not part of Igbo original housing system. They equally pose challenge in translation from English language to Igbo language.

# **Green Light in view**

Once there is life, there is hope. The inter-cultural barriers to translation of Igbo language into English language or vice versa are gradually being erased. A lot of positive factors are pushing it forward.

In the first place, globalization which is the talk of the day is making many distant countries and cultures to come together and exchange elements. As such, a lot of Igbo people have travelled and came in contact with the British people and are at home with British culture. Therefore, the onus is on the Diaspora Igbo people in Europe to form and give names to those items which have Igbo cultural origin and are strange to British cultures and have no name in English language. If this is done, gradually items of Igbo cultural origin will have names in English language. As time goes on, the inter-cultural barriers between the Igbo language and English language will disappear.

Furthermore, modernity is gaining position in the life of many people. The Igbo traditional method of building, like mud and thatched houses, are losing attention in air-craft speed. The same are some Igbo traditional system of living. As such, some generations to come some of the cultural elements that hinder smooth translation of Igbo language into English language will become a history. When such is the case, some Igbo cultural element would marry British cultural elements like system of building and others may become the same. That will lead to inter-cultural balance.

In addition, translators of Igbo language to English language should pay more attention to the central message which the Igbo language as the source language wants to pass to English language as the target language or vice versa. So they have to blend both faithfulness and transparency which will lead to a reasonable meaning. They have to consider the problem of incomplete equivalent in translation. This will help them to strategize the central elements and capture the message of the source language and cushion it to the target language.

# Conclusion

This work has manifested conspicuous evidence of inter-cultural constraints in the process of translation from Igbo language as the source language to English language as the target language or vice versa. The researcher has succeeded in bringing out those cultural elements that constitute hindrance in the process. Some of them are method of food processing and eating habit, religious beliefs and practices and housing system. These militating factors can be suppressed and cleared by translators through word formation and borrowing. The Igbo people living in Britain can form words for those Igbo cultural terms that have no British direct equivalent. Besides, translators should pay more attention to the central message of the source language in order not to water down the message by looking for the direct meaning.

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