



The Use of Igbo Cultural Expressions in *Things Fall Apart* (1958) of Chinua Achebe and the Challenge of Cultural Transfer in Translation

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Author's contribution

The sole author designed, analyzed, interpreted and prepared the manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

Cultural transfer has remained a vital tool for the spreading of different cultures of the world. To translate from one language to another is to learn and understand new cultures, and to come in contact with other realities. Chinua Achebe, the author of *Things Fall Apart*, takes a critical look at his Igbo society whose culture as well as other African cultures have been destroyed by colonialism. This is with reference to the destruction of the bond between individuals and their society. In doing this, he translates Igbo myth and proverbs from his native Igbo language into English. Some of the items used belong exclusively to the Igbo culture and do not have lexical correspondence in the receptive culture. Often, he uses Igbo items to retain their Ibo meaning and form: these are known as loan words. Where it is possible, he attaches an English word to the loan word to help the reader understand or he tries to explain the Igbo item. Achebe also uses coinage to paraphrase the Igbo concept to overcome some of challenges he encountered in trying to translate the meaning of these cultural terms into English language. After analyzing Achebe's work, we can say that Chinua Achebe was able to render a translation

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that was socially and culturally acceptable to the target audience. For a translation to be acceptable, the translator must possess the mastery of both the culture of the language from which he is translating and that of the receptor. It is expected that this paper would better the understanding of readers, especially non-Ibo speakers, as to what is linguistically at work in the English of Achebe.

Keywords: Culture; cultural transfer; translation; meaning; source language; target language.

1. INTRODUCTION

Things Fall Apart by Chinua Achebe showcases the Igbos and their way of life: their values and their belief system. It describes the African traditional society, particularly the Igbo society before the advent of colonialism. It examines the destruction of African culture by the coming of the white man. Achebe in most of his novels including *Things Fall Apart* teaches us about the Igbo community and their traditional life. He translates Igbo myth and proverbs from Igbo into English. In describing the Igbo way of life, the writer had to modify the English language in order to integrate Igbo people's peculiarities and way of thinking. His language is a variety of Nigerian English spoken in Nigeria, which is peculiar to his ethnic group. It is characterized by the introduction of coined lexical expressions [1].

Igboanusi (2001) argues that when writers who are Igbos, for exchange, write in English, they write for two categories of people which include the Igbo native speakers or Africans and the European readers. They use the English language in a manner that integrates the Igbo language resources and at the same time upholding as much as possible the English language grammar. According to him, the challenge with the use of English in creative writing by African writers is principally that of culture. They carry and transfer African cultural items into English. In doing this, the native speaker's English has to be modified. Onwubu (1976, as cited in Igboanusi, 2001) opines that to use the English language to adequately express different cultural way of life, it has to undergo some structural changes. Achebe (1958, as cited in Igboanusi, 2001) advocates that real African creative writer must alter the English language to suit African surroundings. Although Chinua Achebe writes in English, his surroundings and sources of inspiration are entirely Igbo. His native Igbo elements and speech habits are easily noticed.

Through the processes of transfer and translation, Igboanusi (2001) identified seven

linguistics categories as the sources of Igbo literary tradition. They include: "loan-words, coinages, loan-blends, translation equivalents, semantic extension, collocation extension and colloquialisms" (Igboanusi, 2001, p. 54). This paper looks at the concept of culture in Igbo society, the concept of translation, translation and culture before examining the translation of some Igbo cultural elements in *Thing Fall Apart* base on four out of the seven linguistic categories mentioned above.

2. CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN IGBO SOCIETY

According to LaMort (2016), "Culture can be defined as all ways of life including art, beliefs and institutions of a population that are passed down from generation to generation. Culture has been called 'the way of life of an entire society.' As such, it includes codes of manners, dress, language, religion rituals, art" [2]. No nation can exist without a culture which regulates their life style and belief system. Culture as the nexus of society encompasses the food, religious worship, language, and world views of the people. Igbo race as integral part of society is endowed with a rich culture capable of changing their life such as respect for elders and interest in food production, honesty, hospitality, trading and title taking. Through these cultural values, good traits are inculcated into citizens for sustainable transformation and national development as well as peaceful co-existence (M. U. Ezea, FCT College of Education, Zuba, Nigeria, Unpublished communication). Culture influences people's way of life such as building, belief system, dressing code, good governance, etc. Proverbs, myths, legends and folklores are used to show the tribal tradition and culture which are passed orally from generation to generation in speech or song and may take the form of folk tales, ballads, songs and chants [3].

The Igbo language is filled with word painted in pictures. The speech culture of the Igbos is deeply rooted in the use of proverbs. A man who is skillful in the manipulation and use of proverbs

is often regarded as intelligent and wise. According to Iroegbu [4], African proverbs are rich sources of wit and wisdom. Proverbs are often used by the Igbos to add color to a speech or to clarify an idea. They also use them express certain universal truth [5]. Among the Igbos, proverbs play a very important role of preserving their lore and norms. Nwoga [6] categories proverbs into basic usages: The “Illuminating usage” which uses proverbs to reinforce message and the “Corrective Usage” which comments on behavior with intent to correct. Kalu (1978, as in Onyejekwe, 2001), on the other hand, states that every society possesses philosophy that are certain basic beliefs about the universe and man which an individual or a society holds in the light of existing social environment. The Igbo proverb is thus an accumulation of the way the Igbos see life, their belief system and their practical experiences. Proverbs probe into the nature of things, the philosophy of life, family and social structures, taboos, politics, moral values, etc. (Onyejekwe, 2001). A very popular notion of proverbs among the Igbos according to Achebe (1958, as cited in Onyejekwe, 2001) is that proverbs are “palm oil with which words are eaten”. This implies that proverbs are highly metaphorical in character and encapsulate the wisdom of the ages.

Ritual, ceremony, social hierarchy, and personal achievement are given great importance in Igbo culture. Age is respected among the people, but achievement is revered. The concept of honor and title taking is of decisive importance in contemporary thoughts and feelings of the Igbos. Religion and traditional worship have a rich amalgam of cultural elements. It is believed that every person has a *chi* which is “an individual’s personal god which account for the fortune or misfortunes that one experiences in life” (Achebe, 1958 as cited in <https://www.pulse.ng>Lifestyle> FoodTravel>). Animal sacrifices for different purposes, healing, divination and incantation, etc. all form part of the heritage of the Igbos and their culture.

3. THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION

Translating is said to be a very complex task. According to Crystal [7], “Translators not only need to know their source language well; they must also have a thorough understanding of the field of knowledge covered by the source text, and of any social, cultural, or emotional connotations that need to be specified in the target language if the intended effect is to be conveyed. The same special awareness needs

to be present for the target language, so that points of special phrasing, contemporary fashions or taboos in expression, local (e.g. regional) expectations, and so on, can all be taken into account” (p.334). In other words, the translation must convey the source words as well as the source ideas. It must have the same effect on the reader as it did on the reader of the original text.

According to Delisle [8], “translation can be defined as the operation by which the relevant signification of linguistic signs is determined through reference to meaning as formulated in a message which is then fully reconstructed in the signs of another language” (p.53). Vennewitz [9] on the other hand opines that “The final cause of translation is to get an idea as exactly as possible out of one mind into another” (p.87). For Nida and Taber [10], “translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style” (p.12). Hariyanto [11] asserts that following the explanation of Nida and Taber on “closest natural equivalent”, it can be deduced that cultural consideration is taken into account. The translator in his effort to render the meaning of the source language text in the target language is faced with cultural items he must convey appropriately. He is expected to do a cross-cultural translation. The success of his translation depends on a good understanding of the two cultures he is working with (Karamanian, 2001) [12].

4. TRANSLATION AND CULTURE

Achebe translates cultural rich items of Igbo language into English. These include proverbs, images and idioms. He transfers Igbo words and expressions into English. In the opinion of George Mounin [13], a French translation theoretician, translation involves the passage from one cultural world into another. Translation therefore is an exercise involving two languages and two different cultures [14]. Linguistic investigation have revealed that divergences do exist between languages which are not of the same language family and culture and that the greater the divergences, the more difficult it is to translate from one language to another [15].

Aneri and Sanjarani (2016, as cited in Makovhololo and Iyamu, 2020)[16] opine that “Translation, involving the transposition of thoughts expressed in one language by one social group into the appropriate expression of

another group, entails a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding” (p.2). The process of transfer which involves re-expression in another culture should look out for corresponding items in the target language to maintain credibility and ensure acceptability in the target reader’s culture (Karamanian, 2001). Giving that every language group is made up of its own specific cultural features, translators are most times confronted with the challenge of how to represent the cultural aspects present in the source language most appropriately in the target language culture.

According to Kate James [17], “the cultural implication for translation may take several forms ranging from lexical content and syntax to ideologies and ways of life in a given culture. The translator, therefore, has to decide on the importance given to certain cultural aspects and to what extent it is necessary or desirable to translate them into the target language TL. The aims of the source text (ST) will also have implications for translation as well as the intended readership for both the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). Considering the cultural implication for a translated text implies recognizing all of these problems and taking into account several possibilities before deciding on the solution which appears the most appropriate in each specific case” (p. 1). In this paper, some cultural elements translated from Igbo into English in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* will be examined. The main aim is to highlight the techniques used and some of the challenges faced by the translator.

5. THE TRANSLATION OF SOME IGBO CULTURAL TERMS INTO ENGLISH IN *THINGS FALL APART*

Igboanusi (2001) opines that “contemporary Igbo literature is the extension of Igbo oral literature. Igbo literary tradition can be said to be rooted in the language and culture of the Igbo. The contemporary Igbo writers write in the tradition of Igbo literature because of their general indebtedness to a unique oral literary heritage and the circumstance, which has made English their language of expression” (p. 54). Through *Things Fall Apart* Achebe teaches us about Igbo society and translates Igbo myth and proverbs. Nwanjoku A. (Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria, Unpublished personal communication) has observed that Igbo proverbs, apart from mirroring a people’s cosmology, also unravel their cultural society and even religious behavior. Since they are derived from culture, a complete

system of habits and behavior of a people, and language itself being a part of culture, it follows that the meaning of proverbs should be derived from the culture. An equivalent procedure is expected. In other words, a word-for-word rendering of Igbo proverbs and idiomatic expressions will not only fail to convey the equivalent but also not match the way it is said. So, what the translator needs is to possess a high sense of imagination and creativity and a cultural baptism in the two languages to arrive at the proper equivalent required of the situation (A. R. Uhuegbu and A. C. Nwanjoku, Abia State University, Uturu, Nigeria, Unpublished communication). Below are some of the strategies adopted by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.

5.1 Loan Words

These are borrowed-words from Igbo language which are used in the English text. They do not have direct lexical equivalent in English or may have something close but it does not portray the social realities and nuances of the Igbo language. The writer chooses to retain their Igbo meaning and form to maintain the local color. Some of these expressions or words have to do with traditional customs, religion, food, titles, etc. In this case, the reader will only depend on the context of their usage to understand their meanings. Here are some examples:

- i. “He could hear in his mind’s ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene*, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colourful and plaintive tune” [18] (*ekwe*, *udu* and *ogene* are musical instruments popular among the Igbo).
- ii. “Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his *chi* agreed” (Achebe, 1958, p. 21). (*chi* refers to one’s own personal god).
- iii. “It is an Ozo dance, the men said among themselves” (Achebe, 1958, p. 47). (*ozo* refers to a title holder.)

5.2 Loan-Blends

Here the writer combines his native form and English language to generate a new meaning. “In loan-blends, the item from the source language and its partial equivalent from the target language are placed side-by-side to form a nominal group. In the nominal group, the English word functions as the headword while the Igbo item functions as the modifier. The English items

help the reader to understand the meaning of the Igbo items. Loan-blends provide a good source of the Igbo tradition in the Igbo English novel” (Igboanusi, 2001, p. 61). Below are some examples:

- i. “.... Stories of the tortoise and his wily way, and of *the bird eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat” (Achebe, 1958, p. 43).
- ii. “I think it is good that our clan holds *the ozo title* in high esteem, said Okonkwo” (Achebe, 1958, p. 55).
- iii. “After the death of Ekwefi’s second child, Okonkwo had gone to a medicine-man, who was also a diviner of the *The Afa oracle*, to inquire what was amiss” (Achebe, 1958, p. 61).

5.3 Loan Words with English Explanations

We have several borrowed-words from Igbo language in the novel for which the Author attempted to provide English explanation. Perhaps he believes that without such explanations the native English reader may find it difficult to comprehend the meaning of the borrowed words since there are no indices in the context in which they are used that may give some insight into their meanings. On the other hand, the use English language expression alone may not properly communicate the intended message. Here are some examples:

- i. “*The Elders or ndichie*, met to hear a report of Okonkwo’s mission” (Achebe, 1958, p. 10).
- ii. “He had a bad *chi or personal god*, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave” (Achebe, 1958, p. 14).
- iii. “It came from the direction of the *ilo, the village playground*” (Achebe, 1958, p. 34).

5.4 Coinages

According to Igboanusi (2001), “coinages are newly coined words resulting from the prevailing socio-linguistic factor in Igbo land, in particular, and Nigeria, in general. Most of these coinages appear in the form of compound English words, which merely paraphrase the Igbo concept” (p.59). Below are some examples:

- i. “He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moment were the two or three

moons after harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the *fireplace*” (Achebe, 1958, p.4). (*Fireplace* is where women’s there-pot stand for cooking is located).

- ii. “She did not marry him then because he was too poor to pay her *bride price*” (Achebe, 1958, p. 32). (Bride price is the dowry or money paid by a man the parents of the girl he wants to marry.)
- iii. “Some Kinsmen ate it with egusi soup and other with *bitterleaf soup*” (Achebe, 1958, p.133). (*Bitterleaf* is a kind of vegetable bitter in nature commonly used in Igboland to make soup).

5.5 Translation Equivalent

Igboanusi (2001) has categorized translation equivalent in literary works of contemporary Igbo English writers under three sub-titles: “igboisms, proverbs and imagery” (Igboanusi, 2001, p. 63).

5.5.1 Igboisms

Igboanusi (2001) defined Igboisms as “usages that reflect traditional Igbo life and cultural habits. These expressions are easily understood in Igbo but are either lacking in the English context or are used in ways different from the English forms” (p. 63). He went on to explain that “Igboisms are clearly different from coinages. Although words are coined to reflect Igbo experience, coinage may be formed through paraphrase but not through literal translation, as is the case in igboism” (Igboanusi, 2001, p. 63). Here are some examples:

- i. “Adigo had said Igwelo *had a job in hand* because he has married his first wife a month or two before” (Achebe, 1958, p. 17).
- ii. “Their clan is full of the evil spirits of those unburied dead, *hungry to do harm to the Living*” (Achebe, 1958, p. 25).
- iii. “*‘Is that me?’* Ekwefi call back. That was the way people answered calls from outside” (Achebe, 1958, p. 33).
- iv. “Ezinma sneezed. Ekwefi muttered ‘*life to you*’” (Achebe, 1958, p. 83).

5.5.2 Proverbs

Achebe translated so many Igbo proverbs into English in *Things Fall Apart*. These are expressions that follow the style and Igbo thought pattern expressed in English. “Though

they have been rendered into English, they retain the vivid imagery and culture of the Igbo language” (Igboanusi, 2001, p. 65). Below are some examples:

- i. “He who brings kola brings life” (Achebe, 1958, p. 5). (Onye wetere oji wetere ndu.)
- ii. “Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten” (Achebe, 1958, p. 6). (Ilu bu mmanu e ji eri okwu)
- iii. “If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings” (Achebe, 1958, p.7). (Ntwa kwochaa aka ya na eze erokoo nri.)

A proverb seeks to communicate a message. It is this message that the translator must try to reconstitute. Chinua Achebe in an attempt to conserve the structure of these proverbs did not propose their English equivalents giving that any pre-existing equivalent may not give the exact meaning of the situation he is trying to describe.

5.5.3 Imagery

Chinua Achebe draws images from the Igbo tradition and integrate them through transfer into English. “While proverbs are well-known statements that enable the speaker to display his wit, wisdom and his distinctive ability to manipulate the language” [19]; images use imaginative comparisons to pass across a meaning. Here are some examples:

- i. In the end Okonkwo threw *the cat*” (Achebe, 1958, p. 3).
- ii. “Go home and work like *a man*” (Achebe, 1958, p.14).
- iii. “The clan was like *a lizard*; if it lost its tail it soon grow another ” (Achebe, 1958, p.137).

6. CONCLUSION

In this study we have examined the transfer of the Igbo elements and speech habits into English in Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart*. Four linguistic approaches: loan-words, coinages, loan-blends and translation equivalent out of the seven proposed by Igboanusi (2001) were used to illustrate how Chinua Achebe transferred Igbo words and expressions into English and how he translated proverbs, idioms, images and cultural words from Igbo into English. While translating, he maintained vital aspects of the Igbo tradition and his environment. He ensured that the message of the source language rendered in the target language is credible and acceptable to the target reader.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Author has declared that no competing interests exist.

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