

TRANSLATING FRENCH PLAYTEXTS INTO ENGLISH: SOME INSIGHTS

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ABSTRACT

In the interlingual translation of playtexts into English, extralinguistic and paralinguistic factors play a dominant role in the sense that every playtext is implicitly characterized by the spatial, gestic or gestural dimension (GD), which is essentially devoid of printed words. It is at the pre-performance stage that the imagination of both the interlingual literary translator and the producer of the work of art captures with dexterity the ontological essence of the spatial, gestic or gestural dimension (GD) of playtexts. Any attempt to neglect this golden rule in the translation of playtexts amounts to an unfaithful rendering in the target language.

KEYWORDS: Literary Translation, Playtexts/Drama, GD, SLT and TLT.

INTRODUCTION:

Translation as a discipline is a late starter in Nigeria despite the fact that it dates back to 3000 BC during the Egyptian Old Kingdom, the area of the First Cataract, Elephantine (Newmark, 1981:2). Its relative newness, perhaps, explains its *raison d'être* only at a Postgraduate level in many Universities in Nigeria. There are various Schools of thought in Translation Studies. Some are of the view that Translation is possible while others say that it is an impossible exercise. Whichever way one looks at it, the bottom line is that Translation involves the faithful rendering of the message from a Source Language Text (SLT) to a Target Language Text (TLT).

Following the typology of Roman Jakobson (1959) cited in Obasi (2005:19) there are three basic types (not domains) of Translation: (a) Intralingual (b) Interlingual (c) Interssemiotics. The first type of Translation involves translating the signs of one language into other signs of the same language. The second focuses on translating the signs of one language into the signs of another language. The third type of translation deals with translating the linguistic signs by means of non-linguistic signs or vice versa. Interssemiotic translation handles all types of sign languages such as codes for the deaf, traffic lights, etc.

Generally, there are two broad areas of categorization of texts: (a) Literary and non-literary texts. Irrespective of the above classification of texts, there are some elements that are common to all texts since they overlap at certain conditions and levels. The power of printed words include such elements as syntax, word-disposition, vocabulary, idioms, figurative expressions, synecdoche, metonymy etc. Whether the SLT is literary or non-literary, the translator strives in the TLT to arrive at an acceptable or appropriate equivalence.

At this juncture, it is necessary to mention that in translating both literary and non-literary texts, the distinction is clear-cut. The latter is deeply rooted in the use of precise and appropriate terminology while the former deals with a work of imagination. This undoubtedly explains why Obasi (2005:29) describes a literary translator as one who works with printed words, in printed words and through printed words given the fact that a literary translator carries out a surgical operation on language. The linguistic mediator otherwise known as a translator, examines carefully the behavioural pattern of each of the languages that he is working on. Furthermore, he carries out a series of structural analysis with a view to determining areas of convergence and divergence. This *fait accompli* propels him to render the thinking of the original author.

SOME GENERAL PROBLEMS AFFECTING THE TRANSLATION OF DRAMA INTO ENGLISH:

The translation of a work of art is generally bedeviled by a catalogue of difficulties. In this paper, therefore, we shall examine some examples of the general problems and also attempt possible solutions to such difficulties. As a matter of fact, plays are better appreciated when mounted on stage for an audience especially since it is space and time-bound. It is noteworthy that in a novel, the reader is at liberty to decide his reading time and consult experts, dictionaries and other reference materials in order to understand better the meanings of some unfamiliar lexical items and expressions. The reader does this at his own speed and level of concentration. Paradoxically, drama has no room for this kind of individual liberty and reading time. In view of the fact that the above has obvious implications for the translator, he (the translator) is advised, in his work of recreation, to use appropriate vocabulary and language that are within the intellectual level of the audience. After all, the primary essence of every communication act is to communicate to the receivers of the target text. At this stage what is expected of the TL audience is not necessarily the minimal requirement for adequacy in translation but rather the maximal requirement for translational adequacy which posits that receptors of the translated text would respond to the text both emotively and cognitively in a manner essentially similar to the ways which the original audience would respond (Nida, 1991:26). Furthermore, the literary translator should take note of the fact that playwrights infuse their characters with ideas depicting the reality they paint in their works.

Another problematic area in the translation of drama is the fact that in creative writing, the translator is faced with a work of imagination characterized by the personal experiences of the original author, which are not always collective. The content of such a play may have limited diffusion. This is so because the interpretations of some literary themes vary from one artist or community to the other. In the translation of drama, the active participation or collaboration of the interpreter is of great significance according to Jan Ferencik, a researcher on 'translatology' (Harris, 1977) or traductology (Vasquez, 1977) cited in Newmark (1981:19). The interpreter mentioned above refers to a person who is in love with plays and who has the technical know-how i.e. the producer or director. The producer has the right to modify the structure of the TLT in order to achieve what Nida (1991:44) calls dynamic equivalence or what Reiss, cited in Nida (1991:26), calls functional equivalence. The producer can advise the original author to effect changes on the SLT. Still in support of this

view, Ferencik rightly states that in drama, the scheme is not more as in a novel, (author-translator-book-public) but rather author-interpreter" (i.e. producer-translator-spectator) hence the producer acts as a link between the translator and the SLT. This, therefore, presupposes that a good literary translator should be knowledgeable in tradaptation.

SOME NOTES ON DRAMA AND TRANSLATION

In drama, According to Uzochukwu (1995:2) actors imitate characters in a play to express views, ideas or thoughts about man, society, life, death, creation which in turn evoke positive or negative emotions or feelings of love, hatred, anger, pity, fear, sorrow etc. The thoughts expressed and the feelings evoked in the work of a playwright are the basic ingredients that constitute the content while the artistic, colourful, aesthetic, connotative and imaginative use of language, touch his readers or audience.

The literary translator of a play must be vastly experienced in plays in all their ramifications. The above statement is in line with the opinion of Chapman (1973:4) cited in Uzochukwu (1995:2) that "literary language has been chosen and manipulated by its users with greater care and complexity than the average language user either can or wishes to exercise." Chapman is, therefore of the view that a literary artist can manipulate, bend or even break language at will for specific literary purposes. Underscoring the issue of artistic language, Boswell (1960:116), cited in Uzochukwu (1995:2), observes that "Irene, considered as a poem is entitled to the praise of superior excellence analysed into parts, it will furnish a rich store of noble sentiments, fine imagery and beautiful language..."

According to Uzochukwu (1995:3), the critic, James Boswell, in his observation on Irene's work, is emphasising the two main aspects of a work of art. By writing of "noble sentiments", he appears to be concerned with the content of the work; and by writing of "fine imagery" and "beautiful language", he seems to be concerned with the form.

MAJOR AREAS OF DRAMA:

Following Aristotle's theory in his *Poetics*, Nwankwo (1992:9-11) defines drama or a playtext as:

The oldest and the richest of the literary forms. It is also the most active because of its unique form of practice. Drama is the form of literary work where men take up characters and act in the imitation of real life and situations. It is the triumph of imitation on the stage. Plays are acted to teach a particular experience. To a European, drama is imitation of real life but an African believes that drama is the actual exchange of qualities of the object by the subject and he personally holds this view. This is the conjunctive nature of drama as it relates to the African. And for a piece to be drama for an African, the total exchange of qualities must be "complete, watched by participating audience in a preter-physically charged space" or place!

He also identifies four basic areas of a playtext as:

- a. MEDIUM - The medium of drama is that of action: where acting living men speak for themselves.
- b. THE NATURE OF DRAMA - This lies in the imitation of living men of a particular plot. The imitation in the plot must be whole and complete of a certain level of content.
- c. ELEMENT - The elements of drama are made up of composite parts of the whole drama in which we have the plot, characters, thought, diction, song, music, spectacle etc.
- d. STRUCTURE/FORM OF DRAMA - The structure and form of a drama may be classified according to

content or formal characters and method of presentation of the plot.

This is where we have types and classes of drama e.g. tragedy, comedy, tragi-comedy, folk drama, melodrama and farce.

SOME METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS IN THE TRANSLATION OF DRAMATIC TEXTS INTO ENGLISH

First and foremost, it is advisable to get the formal permission of the original writer of the play and its publishers. Then, the source language text (SLT) should be thoroughly read several times, that is, sentence by sentence, scene by scene, and act by act depending on the structure of the play. Then, the translator should commence the translation sentence-by-sentence, scene-by-scene, act-by-act etc. The translator should attempt an independent translation of the play several times. The major theme and sub-themes of the play should be noted. In addition, problem areas should also be noted and specialists consulted at every stage of the work.

Secondly, it is suggested that before a tentative version of the Target Language Text (TLT) is adopted, a specialist in linguistics of the TLT with a penchant for drama should be consulted for a monolingual evaluation of the text. Before adopting a final version in the TLT, it would be in the interest of the addresser and addressees to contact a competent revisor who is co-ordinate bilingual in both the SLT and TLT. Efforts should also be made to mount the translated text on stage first before submitting it for publication. This will help to correct or modify perceived problems in the drama especially in the area of time and the spatial, gestic or gestural dimension of playtext.

This is important because plays are time-bound and are meant to be acted on stage within a short period. Long plays bore the audience. The time frame in the SLT should correspond to that of the TLT. However, the difference in time (if any) should not be too long. Furthermore, if there is a pre-performance of the translated playtext, it will shed light on its spatial, gestic or gestural dimension to both the interlingual translator and the producer of the work of art especially as the implicit GD in the playtext is not expressed in verbal signs.

THE NOTION OF SPATIAL, GESTIC OR GESTURAL DIMENSION OF DRAMATIC TEXTS

In literary translation, interlingual communication is made possible when the semantic and formal components of the source language (SL) are well understood by the consumers in the target language (TL). However, this is not always the case owing to a whole host of reasons which undoubtedly include inter alia linguistic, extralinguistic and paralinguistic factors. But in this paper, we will not discuss linguistic problems. In the translation of dramatic texts, the phenomenon of spatial, gestic or gestural dimension according to Bassnett (1991:99) is the "concealed, incomplete, inherent and partially realized aspect of the theatre text".

This inherent trait in plays makes it impossible for a play meant to be mounted on stage, to lend itself well to real dramatisation. This intrinsic problem in theatre texts is as old as the hills and it puts the literary translator on an enormously complex relationship with both the SL and the TL audience. In her contribution on the gestic dimension of dramatic texts, Bassnett (1991:99) who was the head of the Graduate School of Comparative Literary Theory and Translation Studies at the University of Warwick and CERA Professor of Translation Studies at the Catholic University of Leuven in 1991, is of the opinion that:

In the twentieth century, the notion of a spatial or gestural dimension that is seen as inherent in the language of a theatre text becomes an issue of considerable importance, and a whole series of theoreticians attempt to define the nature of the relationship between the verbal text on the page and supposedly gestic dimension that is somehow

embedded in that text, waiting to be realised in performance... The notion of the gestic text that is somehow encoded into the written in a way that so far has defied any definition is particularly problematic for the interlingual translator.

A careful analysis of Bassnett's opinion cited above, ultimately brings to light the crucial role of the performability of plays. Obviously, the translator, doubles as a co-author and as an intermediate point between the SL and TL. First and foremost, the linguistic mediator decodes the theatre text already encoded in the SL that is, in most cases, diametrically opposed to the linguistic structures of the TL. At this level, the translator merely receives and tries to comprehend the SL text in all its ramifications. After this level of cognition, the translator proceeds to the stage of transcoding the SL text (SLT) into the TL text (TLT).

It is during these processes of decoding and transcoding into the TLT that the hidden gestural dimension of a dramatic text usually captures the imagination of the translator. The difficulty in identifying the spatial, gestural or gestic dimension (GD) lies in its nature as a theatrical component characterised mostly by nonverbal signs. The obvious implication of this knotty problem to the translator is that he has to go the extra mile to solve it. Every human language is culture-sensitive and, therefore, the translator whom we also regard as a translational surgeon is saddled with the arduous responsibility of penetrating the civilisations of the SLT and TLT. In addition, the translator should insist (under normal conditions) that the theatre text be provisionally mounted on stage before the production of the final TLT. This methodology is of immense value in the sense that, with the benefit of hindsight, paralinguistic and extralinguistic nuances, the linguistic mediator will be in the 21st century at a vantage point of capturing the imagination and of arousing the aesthetic effects of his TL audience even though the issue of the GD is a hard nut to crack in translational circles. But we believe that it is surmountable. Stressing the importance of the concept of performability with regard to the serious problem of the GD, Patrice Pavis, cited in Bassnett (1991:100), opined:

Where translation for the stage is concerned, "real translation takes place on the level of the *mise en scene* as a whole" ... translation in general and theatre translation in particular has changed paradigms it can no longer be assimilated to a mechanism of production of semantic equivalence copied from the source text. It is rather to be conceived of as an appropriation of one text by another.

Wrestling with the same labyrinthine complexities of the spatial, gestic, or gestural dimension of theatre texts, Patrice Pavis places more emphasis on the performance of the actors/actresses on stage if the 'real' translation is to be achieved. He is of the view that unless a play is first mounted on stage before the production of the final version, its actual and full translation into English is impossible and should, therefore, be regarded as an "incomplete entity and an unrealised text"

Still on the issue of the conundrum of theatre texts, the pendulum has swung dramatically and continues to swing with the emergence of translationalists with a penchant for playtexts. Susan Melrose cited by Susan Bassnett (199a: 110) argues persuasively and perhaps convincingly too that the spatial, gestic or gestural dimension of theatre texts (gestus) is, strictly speaking, culture-bound and, therefore, should not be perceived as a universal phenomenon. It is in the light of the above that Susan Melrose, theatre analyst and translator posits that

gestic response to written texts depends entirely on the cultural formation of the individual performer, affected by a variety of factors, including theatre convention, narrative convention, gender, age, behavioural patterns etc. In consequence, she argues for an ethnographic approach to theatre.

A careful analysis of the opinion of Susan Melrose shows that it agrees with those of other playwrights

and theoreticians of playtexts that theatre has its own conventions, which we consider a *fait accompli*. However, she places more emphasis on the ethnographic dimension in the writing, interpretation and translation of playtexts.

CONCLUSION

In this paper we have examined some dramatic bottlenecks that usually bedevil playtexts. First and foremost, the translation into English of playtexts written in other languages is an interpretive skill which is squarely on literary translation and which uses human language as an indispensable tool. The power of the printed word in artistic translation to influence human attitudes and behaviours cannot be overemphasised.

In the translation of playtexts into English language there are rules, which the interlingual translator must adhere to in order not to fall foul of them. Postgraduate students in Universities who choose to translate playtexts must obtain the formal permission of the publishers and sometimes the permission of the authors. But the permission of the publishers is more crucial. In drama, communication between actors and actresses, is essentially through dialogue. Characters are made to use words that appeal to the sensibility of the audience thereby heightening the desired effect on them. The use of language oils and propels the arduous disposition of the events of the play otherwise known as the plot.

Undoubtedly, the logical admiration of the performance of the actors and actresses is anchored on the full realisation of the playtext, which must take cognizance of the hidden or concealed aspects of the drama, which are theoretically known as the spatial, gestic or gestural dimensions. Gestic dimensions are skilfully captured by the translator and the producer at the pre-performance stage of playtexts through a thorough knowledge of extralinguistic and paralinguistic factors of both the SLT and TLT. The obvious implication of the GD is that every interlingual translation is culture-sensitive based primarily on its specific setting and thematic structure. The logical conclusion, therefore, is that the GD should not be considered as a universal feature to all playtexts

With regard to the interlingual translation of playtexts in English language, especially as it concerns the gestic dimension, literary translators are expected to heed the clarion call that is now urging them to professionalize in the interlingual translation of novels, poetry or drama. The more a literary translator professionalises, the more he acquires the nitty-gritty of the genre and the knotty issue of having a square peg in a round hole will then be a thing of the past.

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