

# LITERARY TRANSLATION INTO INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA AND NATIONAL DEVELOPMENT: SOME INSIGHTS

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## ABSTRACT

This study makes out a case for the thorny problem of literary translation into Nigeria's indigenous languages and its role in national development. In this paper, we outline the way forward given the fact that literary translation into Nigerian languages had gone through a sticky patch. Federal, State and Local governments in Nigeria, including the Niger-Delta Development Commission and Multinationals, should work in tandem with translators, linguists etc, to ensure that literary translation into Nigerian languages is given its rightful place in the scheme of things. This paper places much premium on the fact that literary translation into Nigerian languages is a vital tool for building bridges of relationship, peace, unity, cultural understanding and integration across States in Nigeria.

**KEYWORDS:** Literary translation, Nigerian languages, national development, IMT and FMTTMT.

## INTRODUCTION

The title of this paper obviously outlines its direction and, therefore, a working definition of each of the three key concepts will help to illuminate the work. Simply put, literary translation is the faithful re-expression, reformulation or rendering of a literary work of art from a source language (SL) into a target language (TL). In this research, the notion of Nigerian languages refers to indigenous or vernacular languages in Nigeria used by communicants or native speakers who have a geographical location on the map of Nigeria. National development refers to the growth of the nation in terms of unity, education, economic well-being, mass participation in government etc. Elugbe (1990) in Emenanjo (ed.) (1990:14). In the course of our analysis we shall elaborate on the above mentioned-definitions and also make references to them as the need arises. Our mission is to briefly highlight the vital role that literary translation into Nigerian languages will play in national development.

There are two broad areas in Translation Studies. The first is literary translation and the second is generally referred to as the non-literary which includes the general/pragmatic and the technical /scientific domains of translation. In non-literary translation, especially in technical/scientific translation, terminological exegesis takes precedence over and above every other linguistic consideration because there is an objective one-to-one correspondence, precision and exactitude of relevant terms in both the SL and TL. But in literary texts, it is the exact opposite. Literary texts do not have in both the SL and TL an objective one-to-one correspondence. Aesthetic literary works of art are essentially characterised by subjectivity, implicitness, ambiguity, estrangement, etc. Through the skilful manipulation of language, the literary artist creates a fictional reality. This is because inter-literary translation is basically a work of imagination and literary creativity. Literary translation is, ipso facto, a clear case of inter-lingual translation because it involves communicants or receptors from two different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Without the re-expression of the contents and form of the SL into the TL, the linguistic hurdles which researchers and translatoologists consider a cog in the wheel of human progress will continue to pose a serious threat to both national and international development.

Advances in every sphere of human endeavour is *ceteris paribus*, an enormous asset to a nation. Literary

translation cannot be left out in the scheme of things given the fact that it makes communication and exchange of ideas possible between geographical entities that are diametrically opposed both linguistically and culturally. Every literary work of art is to a large extent culture – sensitive in the sense that there is always nonverbal background information deeply rooted in the culture of each language. Language and culture are essentially intertwined. From time immemorial, literary translation has been a powerful tool and an ideal vehicle for penetrating and shaping the minds of people for the general well-being of the citizenry.

This is true because it (literary translation) is, undoubtedly a citadel of independent thought and rational thinking. It is a known fact that no human language is entirely complete. All human languages borrow from one another. The incompleteness of each human language is worrisome to inter-lingual literary translators moreso when some loan-words cannot be found in any dictionary in both the SL and TL. When a literary translational surgeon (i.e a literary translator) is confronted with the sort of linguistic problem mentioned above, he (the interlingual literary translator) is bound to go the extra mile to solve problems relating to untranslatability and realia. Even when a translational difficulty is overcome, translating the rest of the literary work of art is not downhill all the way, because every creative writer, in the words of T. S. Eliot, cited in Yankson (1987:15), "wrestles with words and meanings". The interlingual literary translator is also a creative writer and a co-author, whether he is involved in "inbound, outbound or crossover translation" Song, (1975) cited in TTR (1991: 65). The literary translator is always expected to empathise with the original writer in order to render faithfully his unique thinking, vision and stylistic features into the TL. The assertion above is in line with the opinion of Professor H.G. Widdowson cited in Yankson (1987:15) on creative writing:

At the heart of literary creation is the struggle to devise patterns of language which will bestow upon the linguistic items concerned just those values which will convey the individual writer's personal vision.

## Literary Translation as a Veritable Tool for Cultural Exchange and for Dissemination of Knowledge

In this era of globalisation and government reforms in

Nigerian, there is a clarion call for all disciplines or professions to justify their *raison-d'être* with regard to their contribution to nation-building both in terms of quality and quantity. All moribund professions in Nigeria are to be on their toes otherwise they are likely to be on the verge of extinction because they will be swept aside by Reforms in the education sector.

Undoubtedly, the present reforms in Nigeria's education sector call for a re-appraisal of the role being played by literary translators. Globalisation is, *inter alia*, an indicator of a rapid and steady progress in World progress, and therefore, all hands must be on deck if the present tempo is to be maintained or even surpassed and the output sustained. Literary translators worldwide have since realised the validity of the assertion above. Literary translation is necessarily of a high utility value to any nation in view of the fact that it is a veritable tool for the spread and diffusion of knowledge.

Many literary translators have left their footprints on the sands of time. Interestingly, the great philosopher cum literary genius of old, Plato, in his masterpiece *The Republic*, translated by B. Jowell in 1888, presents an allegory of the cave which evidently influenced all search for truth, knowledge in Western tradition. According to the allegory, human beings are imprisoned in a cave and while in the cave, there is only a very dim light. In the cave, images of objects are cast on the wall of the cave and those people imprisoned in there see such wall images as realities when in essence they are not realities but appearances. Plato, therefore, concludes that what is really in the cave is similar to what happens in the real world. Many people go through life without coming into real contact with realities and so the only possible option will be to liberate those in the cave so that they can have a clear perception of things. In other words, human beings should be educated. The import of the translation of the philosophical cum literary work of Plato has favourably increased the tempo of the world's civilisation process.

In a similar development, Plato, in his books - *The Cratylus*, *The Theaetetus* and *The Sophists*, thematised the correlation between language, reality and by extension fictional reality (fictional reality, mine) In *The Cratylus*, there was a discussion between two discussion partners Cratylus himself and Hermogenes. The discussion centered on what or how names relate to objects. Do names derive their nature from objects themselves or do names reflect the essence of things or not? According to Cratylus, names reflect the essence of things which is linguistically referred to as semantical naturalism. In the opinion of Hermogenes, names derive their nature from convention, agreements or arbitrary discussion of some cultures which in linguistic circles is known as semantical conventionalism. These two positions, semantical naturalism and semantical conventionalism are very crucial in any discussion on semantics whether in linguistics, stylistics, literature, translation, law etc. Without translation, knowledge of semantics as enunciated by Plato would have remained in the Greek language. Today, the conception of semantics has been brought to the doorstep of English-speaking countries of the world. Leaning on the definitions and explanation of Plato, further modifications and expansions are anticipated by researchers in English and other languages.

*L'aventure ambiguë* (1961) by Cheikh Hamidou Kane has been translated into English as *The Ambiguous adventure* (1963) by Kirk Woods. The translation of Kane's novel into English has opened the mind of the English-speaking readers to the complex and incubus problems of religion and culture. The English speaking world is in a position to appreciate the importance of the diversity of African cultures, religious tolerance and understanding. Sembène Ousmane's *Xala* (1973), translated into English as *Xala* (1976) by Clive Wake, has brought to the fore the attendant problems of polygamy, greed, illiteracy, financial mismanagement, etc. This has helped immensely to give shape to the ideas expressed in the original novel by one of the greatest minds from West Africa. In the same vein, Ferdinand Oyono's *Une Vie de boy* (1956)

and *Le Vieux Nègre et la Médaille* (1956), were translated into English by John Reed in 1967. The translation of Oyono's novels into English, has helped to bring to limelight the dehumanizing, degrading and bastardized experience of many Africans in the hands of the French colonial masters with their policy of Assimilation which sought by all means to brainwash Africans on African soil. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958) and *No Longer at Ease* (1960) have since been translated into French as *Le Monde s'effondre* (1974) and *Le Malaise* (1974) respectively by Michel Ligny and Jocelyn Robert. Even though the novels of Achebe mentioned above, were translated by foreigners as indicated above the translation has helped to showcase Nigeria's rich culture and the plight of the Nigerian civil servant and political intrigues in post-war Nigeria.

#### Literary Translation into Nigerian Languages: Towards Possible Strategies

Literary translation into Nigerian languages, has some obvious implications. Generally, literary translation cannot take place in an indigenous language that is yet to meet the basic linguistic requirements of codification standardization, modernization, development, reform, Capo (1990) in Emenanjo (ed.) (1990: 1). What this assertion means is that literary translation into indigenous languages in Nigeria is only possible in Nigerian languages that already have standard orthographies. In this context codification refers to graphization, primers, spelling books, grammar books dictionaries, etc. Perhaps this explains why Capo (1990) in Emenanjo (ed.) 1990:1) succinctly says:

Most of the time, codification refers to writing, but it is more embracing than graphization whereas the latter seems restricted to devising an alphabet or any other writing system (such as syllabary) the former includes the production of primers, spelling books, grammar books, dictionaries etc.

It has been established beyond reasonable doubt that nobody, for now, can say categorically the exact number of indigenous languages in Nigeria. Rather, there have been conjectures on the number ranging from 150-500, Essien (1990) in Emenanjo (ed.) (1990:155). However, it is generally known that the major Nigerian languages (Hausa, Yoruba and Igbo) and some of the minor languages like Efik, Ibibio, Fulfulde, etc have already been standardised to the extent that graduate and postgraduate degree programmes on them have since been mounted in some Nigerian Universities and abroad. To both linguists and translators, this is a welcome development. The civilisation process of mankind is not moving at the same pace or speed the world over. Some civilisations are galloping ahead of others. The second group is gradually and steadily tagging along with the first group while those in the third category are evolving and bringing up the rear.

Leaning on the hypothesis above, the same goes for indigenous Nigerian languages. Literary translation into indigenous Nigerian languages that are ready especially Hausa, Yoruba, Igbo, Efik, Ibibio, Fulfulde etc, can go on in a more conscious and determined manner, while the others follow suit. From the internal and external focalization of a literary work of art translated into Nigeria's indigenous languages, native language speakers and readers of such translated works will have the unique opportunity of comprehending and analysing possible conflicts and resolutions among literary characters. This translation journey or voyage through focalisation embarked on by the reader in the TL will certainly open his eyes to a number of linguistic, literary and cultural factors that will help shape his mind alright

for the good of all. The above assertion is in line with the opinion of Walter on development (1972:9):

He opined that at the level of the individual, it implies increased skill and capacity, greater freedom, creativity, self-discipline, responsibility and material well-being... What is indisputable is that the achievement of any of those aspects of personal development is very much tied in with the State or the society as a whole.

A careful analysis of Walter's viewpoint above clearly indicates that the term "development" is not only in terms of economic growth which is usually measured in Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Development, therefore, entails not only an increase in the level of consciousness of citizens but also a kind of internalised positive experiences that lead to self-perception, self-discipline and by extension that of an entire geographical locality or nation. From the foregoing, it stands to reason that there should be a concerted effort to tackle head-on the dearth of translated literary texts into Nigerian languages and also encourage their growth and development in order to avoid an abysmally bleak future. In this vein, therefore, the following translational strategies will be a step in the right direction:

#### (a) Intervention of Government

Literary translators into Nigerian indigenous languages are to carve a niche for themselves in this domain. The intervention of the Federal, State and Local governments is very crucial. The Federal Government should as a matter of urgency and priority, propose a bill to be considered and passed into law by the National Assembly, seeking to recognise literary translation into Nigerian languages and the rights of literary translators. State and Local legislatures should take a leaf from the National Assembly. Literary texts in foreign languages should be translated into our vernacular languages. In the same vein, available literatures in various ethnic groups in Nigeria should be faithfully rendered in other indigenous languages in the country. This will afford each ethnic group the rare opportunity of penetrating the ethnography, civilisation and culture of other linguistic communities in the country, thereby fostering understanding, peace and cultural tolerance.

The business of literary translation is complex and painstaking moreso when it is more tedious than any other domain of translation because of its various shades of meaning. This intellectual human activity should receive adequate budgetary allocation from the three tiers of government (Federal, State and Local). The synergy that will be achieved will make literary translation into Nigerian languages a whirlwind of energy and enthusiasm. Once this comes on stream, Nigeria will be an active participant in the *League of Translators and the "universal rendez - vous of give and take"* according to the Martinican literary guru, Aimé Césaire. The nitty-gritty of this translational exercise can be fleshed out by a committee of government for proper implementation and monitoring.

#### (b) Team Spirit of Native Speakers of Indigenous Languages

Native speakers of indigenous languages in Nigeria should have a team spirit and also speak with one voice with regard to the translation of literary texts into their various vernacular languages. They should show interest in the development of their literatures before asking for a helping hand. They should form Indigenous Language Literature Associations that strive to promote the study and development of their languages and literatures especially through translation. It is this unidirectional type of rendering from a foreign language into an indigenous language which Song

(1975) in TTR (1991:65) calls "inbound translation"; we would like to give a clear and a concise equivalent as *IMT* (into-mother-tongue) translation.

In the context of our study, there is another typology which Song (1975) cited in TTR (1991:65) did not discuss and that is the translation of a native language into another native language for example Igbo-Hausa, Yoruba-Urhubo, Itsekiri - Efik, Ibibio - Bekwara etc and vice versa. Since this is from mother-tongue to-mother-tongue, we would like to call this category of translation FMTTMT. Interestingly, there are political bigwigs and people who are stinkingly rich in some communities. Such persons could be approached to help sponsor projects aimed at promoting the development of their languages and literatures through translation. Even wealthy persons interested in the development of vernacular languages and literatures who are from different ethnic groups could be approached to help out in this direction. After all, what is wrong in asking people like the Chairman/Managing Director of DANGOTE GROUP OF COMPANIES who is a muslim but whose staff recruitment exercise cuts across the length and breadth of Nigeria, in the South-South, South-East and South-West geo-political, zones to sponsor other indigenous language and literature projects through translation?

#### (c) Role of Intervention Agencies and Multinationals

For now, crude oil and other petroleum resources located in the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria is the mainstay of the country's economy. For decades, some multinational companies like The Shell Petroleum Development Company Plc, AGIP Plc, Mobil Plc, TOTAL Plc, Halliburton Plc, ELF Plc, etc see this rich treasure region as a happy hunting-ground; they have a field-day without adequate compensation to the communities. This apparent neglect has been the major cause of crisis between oil companies and their host communities. The corollary of this unhealthy development is the fact that some militants from the area give full vent to their feeling in sporadic outbursts of violence.

It is gratifying to note that the present Obasanjo-led administration has taken the bull by the horns by tackling head-on some of the teething problems of the Niger-Delta region especially the coastal areas. In the context of the development of language, literature through translation in the Niger - Delta areas, multinationals operating in the zone should partner with government, indigenous language Associations, the Linguistic Association of Nigerian (LAN), Departments of Linguistics and Nigerian Languages in tertiary institutions, the Nigerian Association of Translators and Interpreters (NATI) and its regulatory Agency otherwise known as the Nigerian Institute of Translators and Interpreters (NITI), currently headed by the founding-father of academic translation in Nigeria who is also an Executive member of the World Federation of Translators, the erudite Professor Ekundayo Simpson from Lagos State.

Furthermore, an intervention agency like the Niger-Delta Development Commission (NDDC), a brainchild of the Obasanjo-led administration which has been putting smiles on the faces of people from the Niger-Delta and even beyond, should start thinking of how to achieve peace in the Niger-Delta through language and literary translation into Nigeria's indigenous languages. UNESCO, world-wide, has a programme in Africa called LINGUAPAX which simply means, how to achieve peace in Africa through language. Given the multiplicity of indigenous languages in the Niger-Delta area, and the urgent and dire need for a lasting peace in the area, NDDC should without further delay set in motion the necessary machinery for LINGUAPAX in the Niger-Delta.

If this option of conflict resolution and re-integration is explored, the recurring decimal of abduction and hostage-taking will be a thing of the past. Militants in the Niger-Delta will no longer vent their rage on innocent oil workers in their communities. This will contribute meaningfully to national development and boost Nigeria's image abroad. For purposes

of effectiveness and efficiency of the various strategies highlighted in the preceding pages, The National Institute for Nigerian Languages, (NINLAN), Aba, which is generally referred to as the melting – pot in terms of matters relating to the development and promotion of Nigerian Languages and their literatures, should be charged with the responsibility of co-ordinating these strategies if optimum result is to be achieved in record time. The course of action we are now charting reminds us of the opinion of an erudite Chinese thinker, Confucius, on the development of a national communication policy. He was asked what he would do if allowed to rule China. Confucius, cited in Obasi (2005:52-53), replied:

It would be to correct language." When his listeners expressed surprise, he elucidated: "If language is not correct, then what is said is not what is meant, if what is said is not what is meant then what ought to be done remains undone; if things remain undone, morals and art deteriorate, if moral and arts deteriorate justice will go astray; if justice goes astray, the people will stand about in helpless confusion. Hence there must be no arbitrariness in what is said. This matters above everything."

The development of a language goes hand in hand with the development of its literature. Therefore the promotion of our vernacular languages through literary translation will prevent morals and arts from deteriorating and justice from going astray. The viewpoint of Confucius on the development of language could be replicated in literary translation into Nigerian indigenous languages. Today, in Nigeria, political campaigns by aspirants (and later party candidates) are hotting up and are also hot off the press. The sensitisation and mobilisation of the masses in indigenous languages through the translation of some literary texts will yield better results given the fact that majority of our citizens in villages are not literate in English. A thorny and complex issue like political campaigns, which aim at mobilising the population, will be better carried out using vernacular languages and literatures in translation as a medium of communication. Even in academic circles, literary translation into Nigerian languages will be of immense benefit. It is hoped that such translations whether *IMT* or *FMTTMT* will lead to a better understanding of the various ethnic cultures in Nigeria, enrich the plurality of ethnic literatures and vocabularies. It will also stimulate further scholarly interest in comparative literature, comparative linguistics, comparative stylistics, and contrastive linguistics, etc. Literary translation into Nigerian languages will open a wide range of possibilities to linguists and translato-logists.

## CONCLUSION

In this paper, we have briefly examined the relevance of literary translation into Nigerian indigenous languages whether *IMT* or *FMTTMT* translation or both and its contribution to national development and unity. In this age of globalisation and Reforms in Nigeria especially in the education sector, it has become very imperative indeed for all disciplines and professions to justify their raison-d'être in terms of their contribution to nation-building. Literary translation into Nigerian languages has gone through a sticky patch mostly because of lack of commitment on the part of government. The clarion call now is that people who are made of sterner stuff should come on board and take the helm with regard to the political will that can galvanise into action committed literary translators into Nigeria's vernacular languages or even from one indigenous language into another. The use of already translated texts for this exercise should be discouraged because translation from SL into TL involves, to some degree, some loss. National development and unity through literary

translation whether *IMT* or *FMTTMT* should be at the back of the mind of any literary translator in Nigeria.

In this research, we have also outlined some modest strategies as a way forward. If literary translators in Nigeria are to gain a firm foothold in the language of World translators, the issue of development of Nigeria's indigenous languages through literary translation should be uppermost in their minds. As a reiteration of our previous comments in the preceding pages, we would like to say that Federal, State and Local governments in Nigeria including the Niger-Delta Development Commission and Multinationals in Nigeria should stand four-square behind this laudable *IMT* and *FMTTMT* translation project if Nigeria is to come to grips with national development and unity through literary translation into our indigenous languages. Literary translation is, ipso facto, a veritable tool for cultural exchange, national unity, peace, integration and the dissemination of knowledge.

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