The Imperatives of Translating Poetry in African Indigenous Languages into English: A Study of Mudi Sipikin’s “Wasiyyah Sipikiyyah”

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Abstract
Every work of art is meant to be interpreted and understood by readers and audience. The process of presenting the intention of the artist comes through the use of language. However, not every language is universally understood hence, the need for works to be translated into the language of the reader, listener or audience. In light of this, translation becomes a necessity. The art of translation also embodies processes. This paper discusses the imperatives that must be adhered to when translating poetry from African indigenous languages into English. It covers problems associated with meaning, rhythm, rhyme, tonal and stress patterns, using Mudi Sipikin’s “Wasiyyah Sipikiyyah” as a guide. To achieve this goal, the paper adopts the free translation method to discuss these imperatives.

Introduction
The word is from Latin translates, which means “carry across”. It is not limited to language. You can translate sales in dollars, or a play into a movie. When used that way, translate means changing something from one form to another.

Translation in its most basic sense is the conversion of words from one language source to another. However, in most cases, not only words are merely translated, concepts or ideas as well. To engage in translating a work of whatever kind, one must be an expert in the target language. The translator or interpreter must be fully trained, certified professional and totally fluent in both source and target language. The translator must be highly developed and must have acquired memory skills and knowledge and cross-cultural awareness.

The need for translation has existed since time immemorial and translating important literary works from one language into others has contributed significantly to the development of world culture. Ideas and forms of one culture have constantly moved and got assimilated into other cultures through the works of translators. The history of translation is related to the history of the often invisible cross-cultural interaction of the world. Ideas and concepts from the east notably India, China and Iraq have influenced the Western culture since as early as sixth century B.C. when trade ties were first establish between India and the Mediterranean countries. Translators have enabled Holy Scriptures like the Bible written in esoteric languages like Latin to be understood by ordinary people by translating them into more common languages without depending on few elite priests or the members of clergy to explain what they contained. One of the earliest recorded translations of considerable effort in English is perhaps the translation of the
Bible ground 1100AD. Translations have made important contribution over the centuries in dissemination of ideas and information to a larger audience, in shaping of cultures and in a sense helped United the world.

Methodology use is a free one. A free translation is a translation that produces the general meaning of the original text. It may or may not closely follow the form or organisation of the original.

The imperative of translating poetry in African indigenous languages into English covers the problem of translating from one language to the other. This is associated generally with the problem of representation of two single words in a language which can never mean the same thing. Here, we can say no single word in a language can mean exactly the same in another.

All translations only approximate one another, no translation can adequately capture the meaning of the original, it can only give and approximate meaning of the initial word of the target language. Even in situations where the translation captures the meaning, it can’t capture the rhythm. An example could be seen in the following statement in African indigenous language (Hausa).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HAUSA STATEMENT</th>
<th>ENGLISH TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Ku taho mu tafi.</td>
<td>Come let us go.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In the above statement, the meaning of the words are not exactly the same, but it only approximates the set of words. Also, the rhythm is not the same and have no connection, by looking at the meaning of rhythm as the pattern of beats or stresses in a poetic line, conveying a sense of movement or harmony.

The possible interpretations are always different. No two people’s interpretation of a word or statement can be the same as no two peoples work can interpret a single work in the same way. Just as no poet no author has his meaning alone. Our manner of interpretation must be in different dimensions.

Below is a sentence which can have different interpretations from African indigenous language into English.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>HAUSA STATEMENT</th>
<th>ENGLISH TRANSLATION</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mai wuri yazo mai taburma ya nade.</td>
<td>The rightful owner of the mat has arrived, therefore, the squatter should get up.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The owner of the mat place has come, so</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The owner of the mat should fold it.

The above statement and its translation in the former manner, we can see that the word ‘Taburma’ has no connection with the word ‘squatter’. While in the latter, is just a direct translation of what has been said in the African indigenous language. Yet the former is what best approximate the original statement for these reasons therefore, and some more of it, it is quite a challenge and not possible to translate one composition from one language to another but only an approximation can be given.

**Problems of Translation in Poetry**

The problem of translation is compounded in poetry which has a defined convention. These problems are discussed below:

1. Poetry is composed within a defined meter. It is not like other genres of literature which have the free flow of words (prose in particular).
2. Poetry has rhythm and above all, African languages are tonal in nature, whereas English is a stressed language, so it will be very difficult to translate poetry written in African indigenous language into English.
3. Poetry may have a rhyme pattern which cannot be translated into English from the African indigenous language.

For these reasons, therefore, they constitute the imperatives which must be taken into account for translating poetry in African indigenous languages into English language.

The multi-cultural nature of African indigenous languages makes it elusive to capture a proper definition of the term “African Indigenous Poetry”. In Nigeria, where the languages are multi-dimensional, with hundreds indigenous languages jostle with one another, translating collected materials even into the so-called three major languages still presents the insurmountable obstacle of meaning for several more millions or teeming potential readers, therefore, making translation of African indigenous poetry a complex task.

The conventions of poetry in African indigenous languages can be oral, written and folk-songs. In collecting an item of oral literature, one of our major concerns is obviously with preservation. Were we to ponder on our raison d’etre, in other words; the why of translation, then, an answer will not be far to seek. One of the perennial arguments in African literature remains that what language it should be written in? And while a writer like Ngugi wa Thiang’O has courageously taken the language bull by the horns, the fact remains that African writing in his mother tongue will reach far fewer audiences or readers, a situation with immense implication for his popularity as well as (some would say, more importantly), his financial wellbeing.
Hausa as an African indigenous language of Northern Nigeria has the oral, written and folk songs, “songs” by both freelance and “tied” singers will be considered as poetry as well as poems written in indigenous languages and derived from a foreign tradition. While one can see a difference between songs written poetry, Wakar baka (the “waka of the mouth”) and rubutacciyar waka (the “written waka”), what Graham Furniss call them, they are both poetry. The convention of Hausa poetry (sound, rhyme and rhythm) are derived from Arabic.

There is an irony of an early Afro-Islam/ Arab poetic tradition in Hausa and Fulfulde, before any form of written poetry tradition in other parts of Nigeria arose. When Shehu Usman Danfodiyo and his daughter, Nana Asma’u, a renounced poet, were writing in the early 19th century, there was no comparable tradition of written poetry in what has become Nigeria. A vibrant tradition of poetry in Hausa has also flourished from the 19th century through the 1970s to the present. It is ironical therefore that while the North can be said to have blazed the trail in the written poetic tradition in Nigeria, today there is paucity of renowned writers, especially poets, in English from the area.

Northern Nigeria has a rich tradition of oral and written poetry, the oral and intrinsic part of folk life and the written inspired by religious devotion. There appears to be a vibrant popular Subaltern poetry both oral and written that is not matched in popularity and strength by contemporary poetry in English in Northern Nigeria. The oral poems, according to Furniss, have variable length verses with refrains and use rhythmic patterns not derived from Arabic meters (131). The oral poets often perform their songs with accompaniments. The written Hausa poetry in Northern Nigeria was carried out by Malams, scholars and their students it was inspired by the Jihad led by Usman Danfodiyo, which opened the Hausa to a wealth of Arab/Islamic traditions of poetry. These poems have “regular stanzas, line-end rhyme schemes, and operate with Arab derived meters,” (131).

The question of translational possibilities lies on the objectives or alternatives of the target language. Oral poetry in African indigenous language is notoriously difficult to translate because it relies on the sound in addition to the meaning it makes. Similarly, in oral poetry composition, it makes use of words whose meanings are improvised as such they are difficult to be translated into English.

Since rhythm and rhyme are what constitute some imperatives of translating poetry, and one of the qualities of Hausa written poetry is reliance on poetic arrangement, which may not be the same in English. Hausa written poetry follows a convention which is similar to that of the oral composition specifically. In Hausa, even written poetry is meant to be sang, unlike in English which is meant to be read. For that, translating it can’t be easily done without distorting the rhythmic quality, the convention is not the same in the two.

The tonal nature of African languages too is another issue, because the patterns in the two are not the same, English is a stressed language whereas African languages are tonal, therefore translating
African indigenous poetry become difficult. Below is an Example of Hausa written poetry with two versions of translation into English.

Translating into English as posits Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (2005), the translator should make an attempt of grasp the writer’s presuppositions. Translation is not just the stringing together of the most accurate synonyms by the most proximate syntax.

“Wasiyyah Sipikiya”
The poem by Mudi Sipikin is a poem in codes “will”, in Hausa poetry you hardly see the poet speak directly to the reader. The usual practice is for the paradigm, and also seek for paradise. It consists of 15 stanzas written in a free verse form. It is built around an idea, i.e identity of the poem is one build by death. In some ways, the poem is a poetic of death and more importantly as an Elegy since it is a lament for a deceased body, (for a soon to be). The poet speaks directly to the reader, he speaks about himself as he wish to be apprehended.

It is evident that no two people’s writing can be the same, same is applicable to translation. The poem “Wasiyya Sipikiya” having undergone two version of translation by scholars, have different approach. For instance in line 1 where the translators have as:

A’ala ina rokon ka ranar da zan cika
“O Lord! I request that day I should pass away”,
“I would like to pray to my creator”,

The second translators didn’t look at the word death in line 1, which if this work is only to be focused on line 1 the reader would not have the idea of death as the subject of the poem.

Gaban duk iyalaina da ‘ya’ya da ‘yan uwa,
Before my family members, children, and siblings,
Let it happen the midst of all my children and relatives.

In line 3 the author wish to die in the presence of his family members, children and relatives at large, the other translators eliminate the word, “Iyalaina” which means “my family members” and went ahead to use children and relatives but in real sense, the author separated each category.

Ismail Bala Garba, in Beyond the Deathly Finalthty: Self-Elegy and Metaphoric Death in Mudi Sipikin’s “Wasiyya Sipikiyya” says, As with any translation, the translation of “Wasiyya Sipikiyya” rendered here raises, as it were, the thorny issue of cultural translation or the transportation of one linguistic, textual and cultural tradition into another. As such, in order to “compensate” and make obvious the loss arising out of translating Mudi Sipikin’s poem from Hausa to English, this show what is inevitably lost in the translation process, the elements of rhythm, diction, figures of speech, theme and stanza lay outing; hence the necessity not to explore the question of metrical and prosodic properties of the poem. This provide and evidence to the
imperatives associated with translation from African indigenous languages into English, words used can only be approximators not complete meaning.

Conclusion
In conclusion, inspite of the necessity for competency of the translator in both source and target language, it musts be stated that every translation will necessarily entail a loss of at least some aspect of the original piece, especially in oral poetry where some extra-linguistic devices pointed out to be crucial may be unimportant in the written form when translated. Difficulty in translating such features of the oral performance mechanism as modulation of voice (from say, loud, to soft, to jarring), these features involves severe losses in the total artistic message of the performance, hence, leading to a total loss of some degrees of translation activities. Although, the work aims at the translation of poetry from African indigenous poetry into English, the same can be done to other aspect/genre. The approach enunciated is equally appropriate, bearing in mind its text, texture and context. All translations as pointed out earlier can never be the same with the source language, only and approximation may be given.

Works Cited