

## THE ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF INDIGENOUS LANGUAGES IN NIGERIA

By

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### **Abstract**

*If the wealth of nations were to be measured in terms of the number of indigenous languages, Nigeria would be ranked as one of the richest in the world. Given this scenario and in view of the fact that both the government and the people pay lip service to the development and use of this rich cultural heritage, we have undertaken, in this study, to examine the role translation could play in enhancing the development of indigenous languages in Nigeria. We reviewed existing literature so as to place the two key concepts – translation and indigenous languages in their proper perspectives. It was discovered that translation could play much role not only in enriching and popularizing indigenous languages but also in making such languages more attractive. We therefore suggested that the potentials of translation should be harnessed for this purpose so as to reverse the dwindling fortunes of indigenous languages in Nigeria.*

**Key words:** *Translation, Indigenous language, Language development, Cultural heritage.*

### **Introduction**

Translation is a professional activity that makes it possible for a text written in one language to be read in another. This has made this human activity a rich source of knowledge for man. Through the instrumentality of translation, valuable ideas that would have remained hidden in foreign languages have been made available to different peoples of the world in their different languages. This invaluable contribution has led to unprecedented development in the economic, political, social, cultural, religious and educational fronts in many countries especially the developed ones. The developed countries of the world have since realized the potentials of translation in fast-tracking developments in different areas of human endeavour. Both the Soviet Union and United States of America made extensive use of translation in prosecuting the cold war that raged between them from 1945 to the late 1980s as vital documents from both sides were translated to gain clarity and fine tune strategies (Craciunescu Olivia, 2002:1). The fact that these two countries are ahead of others in all aspects of development could be traceable to their ability to know where to go at any given time for the answers to their questions.

Nigeria, however, is one country that is yet to realize the immense benefits derivable from translation (Anyabuike, 2015:2). This explains why she has not thought of harnessing the potentials of translation in resolving her numerous economic, political, religious, cultural and social challenges. We do feel, however, that Nigeria can maximize the potentials of translation in reversing the dwindling fortunes of her indigenous languages.

Nigeria has numerous indigenous languages, yet none has been elevated to the status of a national language. The most worrisome is that most of these local languages may soon go into extinction due to lack of native speakers. The Nigerian government seems not to know why and how these indigenous languages should be preserved for posterity. The parents who prefer English to their local languages are not keen on getting their children to speak these languages while most of the children would do anything to evade learning their mother tongues in schools. This is the unfortunate lot of indigenous languages in Nigeria today.

Given this scenario, we have undertaken, in this work, to examine the role of translation in the development of indigenous languages. We will examine the two concepts – translation and indigenous languages so as to place them in their proper perspectives. We will also examine the specific roles translation could play in the development of indigenous languages. There will be analysis of findings as well as recommendations and conclusion.

**The Concept of Translation:** The Chambers 21<sup>st</sup> Century Dictionary (Revised Edition) defines translation as “a word, speech, written text that has been put into one language from another”. The above definition highlights the product of the professional activity called translation. The act of translating involves a process that requires skill, training and experience (Morry Sofer, 2004:15). Many, especially the uninitiated only see translation as the passage from one language to another; however, most experts in this field of human endeavour also view the act of translating as the passage from one culture to another (Mounin, 1963:236, Sumner-Paulin, 1995:548, Cordonnier, 2002:1, Wuilmart, 1990:239). Valero-Garcés (2005:2) also shared the same view when he highlighted the mediatory role of translation as follows:

In some settings and under certain conditions translations participate more actively in the communication process, producing oral or written texts in which forms and words are manipulated to extend further understanding across cultures.

The aspect of the translation process highlighted in the above quotation is particularly important for this work. This is because we are examining the role of translation in the development of indigenous languages. Language is not only a cultural element but also an indispensable vehicle for the transmission of culture. Consequently, the knowledge that the translator could play a mediatory role across cultures is very reassuring as this portrays him as one that could positively influence language development since language, itself, is embedded in culture. The translator is not only conversant with the structure of his two working languages but he is fully aware of the two cultures from which the two languages evolved. This surely will facilitate any linguistic operation he may wish to carry out in both languages as the need arises. The exercise of his functions may necessitate his creating new terms in the target language. He consciously takes every step without injuring the sensibilities of the target culture.

From the foregoing, it becomes very clear that the translator is a skilled professional who has full mastery of his two working languages and who facilitates communication across linguistic and cultural lines. Having clarified the concept of translation, we shall now x-ray the meaning of indigenous language.

### **What is Indigenous Language?**

There is abundant literature on the meaning of indigenous language. Wikipedia, the free encyclopedia defines it as follows:

An indigenous language or autochthonous language is a language that is native to a region and spoken by indigenous people, often reduced to the status of a minority language. This language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations.

Thesaurus Wikipedia also defines it as “a language that originated in a specified place and not brought to that place from elsewhere” Meta, a Wikimedia indigenous language project also made this contribution

An indigenous language” is a language that is native, or aboriginal to a region and spoken by indigenous people, but has been reduced to the status of a minority language. In some instances, this may include an island of speakers removed from their language communities by trauma and diaspora. Synonyms are “small languages”, “endangered languages: and “autochthonous languages”

The above definitions highlight the main features of an indigenous language. The first is that it is usually localized to a given place or region. The second is that the language must have survived many generations of speakers in the community in question. This perhaps explains why one’s native language serves as his first identity for as soon as one opens his mouth to utter such a language, he inadvertently reveals his place of origin to those who are familiar with the terrain. The twist added by Wikimedia should also be noted, that is, that if all or some members of a community relocate to a new settlement for any reason whatsoever, they usually move with that language that is indigenous to them. Though, they may constitute an “island of speakers” in their new environment, the language they use still remains their native language.

Another definition of indigenous language that is quite revealing especially as it affects Nigeria is the one given by Jibir-Daura (2014:11). According to him:

Indigenous languages are the tribal, native or local languages spoken. The language would be from a linguistically distinct community that has been settled in the area for many generations... There are about 400 indigenous languages spoken in Nigeria, and only few of these languages have written forms.

The above definition agrees with the previous ones in terms of identifiable features of an indigenous language, but differs from them by highlighting the unique attributes of indigenous languages in Nigeria. According to him, there are about four hundred indigenous languages in Nigeria and many of these languages do not have written forms. His first observation is debatable for there are some experts who opine that Nigeria has well over four hundred indigenous languages (Aziza, 2011:1, Ezeafulukwe, 2015:1). The second observation which has to do with most of these languages not having written forms raises a developmental issue for indigenous languages in Nigeria. Nigeria, no doubt, is a pluri-linguistic society. It, however, behoves on Nigerian linguists with necessary assistance from government to identify these indigenous languages without written forms. Serious efforts should be made to get them documented as soon as possible to save them from going into extinction for such languages usually disappear with the exit of their current speakers.

To end this segment of the work, it might be pertinent to stress that every indigenous language is a rich cultural heritage that should be preserved for posterity. This is why the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues highlighted that:

Saving indigenous languages is a matter of great urgency and is crucial to ensuring the protection of the cultural identity and dignity of indigenous peoples and safeguarding their traditional heritage. As a result of linguistic erosion, much of the encyclopedia of traditional indigenous knowledge that is usually passed down orally from generation to generation is in danger of being lost forever. This loss is irreplaceable and irreparable.

Having examined the essence as well as the significance of indigenous languages, people should appreciate why steps should be taken to ensure the survival and development of such languages. It is in the light of the above that we will now examine the role of translation in the development of indigenous languages.

### **Translation and the Development of Indigenous Languages**

Translation could facilitate the development of indigenous languages in several ways. Perhaps the most crucial contribution translation can make in the development of indigenous languages is in the area of enriching such languages through term creation. This idea was shared by Jibir-Daura (2014:14) who argued that:

Indigenous languages can be made richer by finding ways of including new science and technology terms in the languages. This will disabuse the minds of those who believe that it is only English that has means to explain such concepts.

This same author goes further to add that; “technological and scientific terms should be translated into the various languages to make teaching and learning easier”. Jibir-Daura was not the only person to recognize the ability of the translator to create terms as a means of enriching languages. The same idea was expressed by Bernacka (2012:1) when she said that:

I will stress the translator’s creative role, which often involves creating a new vocabulary in order to successfully convey the message of the source text. In doing this the interaction between the disciplines of translation studies and development education will become more apparent.

From the foregoing, it becomes obvious that translation can contribute to the development of languages especially indigenous languages - that are often lacking in these new terms – through the creation of new terminologies for the purpose of enriching the languages in question.

Indigenous languages are valuable because they convey the cultures of the different peoples of the world. Aspects of these cultures could be popularized through translation. The languages themselves also benefit from this popularization. This view is shared by Bernacka (2012:2) when she said that:

Officially African languages were supposed to be treated equally, but in practice nothing much was being done to popularize lesser known African languages. Currently, however, scholars such as Antje Krog, Rosalind C. Morris and Humphrey Tonkin are undertaking an initiative to promote the translation of

African languages – such as Zulu or Xhosa in order to spread a better knowledge of these cultures.

The above quotation highlights the role of translation in popularizing indigenous languages and cultures. Some Nigerian languages have benefited from this as our analysis will show later in this work. Through this way, the cultural values of languages going into extinction could be preserved. It is also known that translation can contribute in making indigenous languages more attractive. Similar view was expressed by Seth Kaplan (2013:2) when he opined that:

Investing in translating and circulating important foreign books will increase the attractiveness of local languages and allow a large number of people to access knowledge. The Arab world, for instance, needs to invest far greater resources in Arabic translations of science, technology and literature translation.

Though it would seem as if the Arab world was being addressed in the above quotation, it should not be forgotten that what is good for the goose is also good for the gander. Nigeria that would soon lose most of her indigenous languages because the young ones are finding them unattractive is in dire need of the above piece of advice more than the Arab world. Translating the popular literary and science books into the Nigerian indigenous languages is one sure way of making these languages very attractive to both the adult and young Nigerians who hold the wrong notion that materials in these disciplines can only be accessed in foreign languages.

Having seen the various ways translation facilitates the development of indigenous languages, we will proceed by analyzing each of these points very critically in the next segment of this work.

**Discussion on Findings:** This study has revealed that there are three major ways translation could contribute to the development of indigenous languages. These three ways include the enriching of the vocabulary of indigenous languages through the creation of new terminologies, popularization of indigenous languages as well as making such languages more attractive.

Translation has indeed contributed to the development of indigenous languages through the creation of new terms in the languages involved. The general feeling is that Nigerian indigenous languages do not have adequate vocabulary for the expression of all the concepts in all the areas of human endeavour. This is very true especially with the recent developments in science and technology which necessitated the use of novel concepts that are completely alien to the indigenous languages. Translations are known to have created new terms to fill such gaps observed in their target languages. This, no doubt, leads to the enrichment of the vocabulary of the language in question. Igbo language which is an indigenous language spoken in the south eastern part of Nigeria has benefited immensely from this as shown in the table below.

<b>English Language</b>	<b>Igbo Language</b>
Technology	nkanụzụ
Bomb	Ogbu n'igwe, bọmbụ
Computer	kọputa
Atomic bomb	Ngwagha ogwuru mba
Aeroplane	Ugbo elu
Ship	Ugbo mmiri
Handset	ekwe ntị

Library  
Spectacles  
Missile

Oba akwukwo  
enyo anya  
Ogbu n'igwe n'efe efe

Translation also plays a great role in popularizing indigenous languages. The Igbo language has also benefited from this. The translation of Chinua Achebe's "Things Fall Apart" into French has led to the popularization of Igbo language and culture in the francophone world. After reading the French version of the text, the reader could say so much about the Igbo culture. Such a reader could give almost all Igbo names, explain the mode of worship of the people, describe their mode of dressing and even the kinds of food they eat. He should also be able to describe the judicial system of the traditional Igbo society as well as the forms of occupation prevalent in the society. A careful reader could even discern the temperament of the average Igbo man. The above shows that almost all the aspects of the people's lives were captured in the story.

It should be noted that "Things Fall Apart" is one Nigerian novel that has been translated into well over fifty languages of the world. This means that all the pieces of information about Igbo people that have been made available to the French speaking public are also accessible to all the other fifty linguistic communities of the world. There can be no better way of popularizing some elements of culture than this.

It is also important to state here that cultural elements of any language that is going into extinction could be preserved through this method. Once the relevant aspects of the culture are captured through translation, they live in the target language for posterity.

It was also highlighted that translation could contribute to the development of indigenous languages by making such languages very attractive. When vital pieces of information are expressed in indigenous languages, lovers of knowledge would certainly seek out such information in the language in which they are expressed. The missionaries were quite aware of this, hence they made the content of the Bible available to people in their local languages. This perhaps explains why the Bible is the most widely read book in the world.

In view of the fact that young Nigerians do not find the study of their indigenous languages very appealing, translators and linguists should explore this opportunity as a way of making such languages very attractive to them. Very important foreign books that are not easily come by could be translated into the local languages so as to make these languages attractive to those who, ordinarily, would not have shown some interest. To make this work, the point has to be made that no one book can serve the purpose of all the indigenous languages in Nigeria. A team to carry out this assignment in each linguistic group should do a survey to ascertain what material will be appropriate for their own environment. The distinctive nature of the different peoples in Nigeria makes it absolutely unlikely that any one text or group of texts could serve the purpose of people in the North, the west, the East and the Southern part of the country. That is why serious efforts should be made to look for texts that would serve the diverse interests of the different peoples of these zones. From all that has been said, it becomes very clear that translation could contribute immensely towards the development of indigenous languages in Nigeria.

**Recommendations:** Having highlighted the positive role translation plays towards enhancing the development of indigenous languages, we wish to make the following recommendations.

- 1) Government at all levels should demonstrate genuine interest in and support every effort necessary to enhance the development of Nigerian indigenous languages.
- 2) Serious efforts should be made to ensure the proper documentation of the more than four hundred and fifty indigenous languages in Nigeria.
- 3) Success in this endeavour means that the Federal Government should give financial support while the six regional levels should implement actions needed to actualize the dream.
- 4) Each geographical zone should constitute a committee to identify all the distinct linguistic communities in its area of jurisdiction. This way, all the four hundred or more indigenous languages could be identified.
- 5) Another team made up of linguists and translators should also be constituted to verify which of these languages are properly documented and which ones are not.
- 6) The same team of experts should take necessary steps to ensure the proper documentation of those that are yet to be documented.
- 7) The translators should assess the strength and weaknesses of each of these indigenous languages so as to take appropriate steps to facilitate the development of each of them.
- 8) There should be adequate motivation for all those involved in this exercise so as to achieve maximum result.
- 9) Everyone involved in this project should realize that the development of all the indigenous languages is in the best interest of Nigeria and its people. It will reduce tension and bring about harmony in the polity.
- 10) At intervals, the various zonal teams could meet at the national level to assess the progress made and brainstorm on new strategies to achieve better results.
- 11) Where any of the indigenous languages could not be saved for one reason or the other, the translators should take appropriate measures to ensure that the relevant elements of the culture are preserved.
- 12) Given the popularity of information and communication technology, computer scientists could be engaged to design beautiful programmes in the indigenous languages for the attention of people especially the young ones that are always fascinated by these ICT programmes.

**Conclusion:** In this work, we examined the role of translation in the development of Nigerian indigenous languages. It was observed that Nigeria has well over four hundred and fifty indigenous languages, some of which are not properly documented while most Nigerian youths lack the motivation to learn the local languages. The work revealed that translation could have tremendous influence in the development of indigenous languages. Translation could contribute to the enrichment of the vocabulary of such languages. Translation could also help in making local languages popular as well as in making them more attractive to the young Nigerian learners. It was, therefore, suggested that the potentials of translation could be harnessed for the effective development of Nigerian indigenous languages.

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