

## IGBO VERBS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRANSLATION

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### **Abstract**

*Far from being an entirely textual engagement, translation is a completely intellectual enterprise. Some translation practitioners and theorists have perhaps erroneously tended to postulate that translation involves mere replacement of lexicons in one language with lexicons in another. This position has led to the concept of source language text (SLT) and target language text (TLT). In this write-up, we are not in any way condemning the idea of translation constituting a linguistic movement from one culture to another. All we intend to demonstrate here is that our research so far shows that translating between languages of little or no cultural affinity is not as simple as people may think. The Igbo language has no cultural affinity with English and French. This singular fact makes translation between them an up-hill task. The Igbo verb especially presents a difficult problem to translators working between Igbo and foreign languages especially English.*

### **1.0 Introduction**

It was Catford (1961:1) who rightly postulated that translation is ‘an operation performed on language, a process of substituting a text in one language with a text in another’. This postulate summarizes the translating act, a question of finding equivalents. The process of substitution as postulated by Catford in this definition entails an overhaul of the entire linguistics of the message. The term ‘operation’ refers to the linguistics analysis to which the text is subjected. The Catfordian postulate, as this position is popularly called betrays Catford as a linguist. He however went further to assert that for there to be translation *stricto sensu*, there must be phonetical and morphological correspondences.

Mc Guire (1980:13) seeming to give support to Catford, postulates that ‘No two languages are ever sufficiently similar to be considered as representing the same social reality’. This lends credence to our observation about translating between languages without cultural affinity. We venture to assert further that if no two languages of the world could be said to be similar, then languages without *lingua-cultural* affinity can by no means be translated easily either way.

### **2.0 Linguistic and cultural affinity**

Languages that belong to the same cultural backgrounds are said to have affinity. That is to say, that there might not be a lot of differences in their phonology, morphology and syntax.

Maduka-Durunze (1998:72) citing Bamgbose (1992) and Blench (1991) identifies two major linguistic groups (language families) in Nigeria: ‘Niger Congo for languages spoken below 12<sup>0</sup> latitude North (approximately, Afro-Asiatic for those North of this latitude. This precludes the Nilo-Saharan family of languages eg kamuri. Maduka-Durunze mentioned Ffulde or Fula (languages

of the Fulbe or Fulani people which could be found above this latitude, and yet belongs to the Niger Congo as do Igbo, Yoruba and Efik (1998:72). This analysis shows that position above or below the equator should not be seen as a criterion for the grouping of languages. On the one hand, English belongs to the Indo-European languages with German a co-group member. French belongs to the Latin languages of Europe. A casual observer might consider the factor of geographical proximity and group French and English together as cultural partners. Practical linguistic enterprise like translation will prove such a person wrong. If translation between English and French, neighbouring European languages could prove so irksome, what then will be the fate of a translator working between any of them and Igbo, or Yoruba or even Hasua? This explains why in this essay, we are concerned with the Igbo verbs in contact situation with foreign languages, especially English, to drive this point home.

### 3.0 Peculiarity of the Igbo Verbs

It is a generally accepted idea that a verb is the action word in a sentence. Betty KirPatrick contends that:

In simple terms the verb is known as a doing word... Nevertheless, the verb is usually the word in a sentence that is most concerned with the action and it is usually essential to the structure of the sentence.

There is no gain saying that the verb is perhaps the most important part of the predicate in every language. What differs from language to language is the form or structure of the verbs. The Igbo language has many areas of peculiarities in its verbs. These peculiarities will be discussed one after the other.

### 3.1 Agglutination

The Igbo language presents a case of agglutinated verb forms. What this means is that a translator working between it and English should drink a full dose of linguistics in order to identify each independent Igbo morpheme and translate it with a word. This is so because each morpheme in an agglutinated Igbo verb has a semantic change (J.K Okeke 1993). When the translator is working from English to Igbo he is expected to lump together different words (especially verbs and adverbs) to form a single verb. Let us demonstrate this with Igbo sentence.

- (i) Akịka *ripiachara* ákwà ahụ  
(Termites ate completely the whole cloth).  
The word in italics “*ripiachara*” is the agglutinated verb. An analysis of the verb shows:  
Ri: eat (main verb)  
Pja: up (adverb of manner)  
Cha: completely (adverb of manner)  
Ra: past tense marker (rv, depicting vowel harmony).  
Other examples are:
- (ii) Okụ *repiachara* ụlọ ya  
(fire burnt down his house completely)  
Repiachara – verbal group.  
Re: burnt (main verb)  
Pia: down (adverb in suffixal position)  
Cha: completely (adverb of manner)  
Ra: past tense marker (rv, showing vowel harmony)

- (iii) Nk̄jta *tachara* an̄u ah̄u  
 (A dog ate up the whole meat).  
 Ta: eat (main verb)  
 Cha: up (completely).  
 Ra: (rv, past tense marker, demonstrating vowel harmony).
- (iv) Ide *bupuchara* àkwà ah̄u  
 (Flood carried away the bridge) completely  
 Bupuchara – the verbal group.  
 Bu: carry (main verb)  
 Pu: away (adverbs in suffixal position)  
 Cha: completely (suffixal adverb of manner)  
 Ra: (rv) past tense marker.  
 Perhaps the analysis of a fifth verb will drive home further the point about dissolving the agglutinated Igbo verb and according to each morpheme a merited semantic charge.  
 Ozegidigidi *kwatuchara* ụlọ ya.  
 (A caterpillar pushed down completely his house)  
 Verb: kwatuchara  
 Kwa: push (main verb)  
 Tu: (suffixal morpheme)  
 Cha: completely (suffixal adverbial morpheme)  
 Ra: past tense marker (rv)

### 3.2 Case of Igbo verbs with inherent complements

Certain Igbo verbs have particles which are, at the same time, inherent complements. These complements look like direct object of these verbs. But Igbo scholars are in consensus about their function in each structure where they appear. One test of their function in the structure is that if they are removed or deleted from the structure, the sentence becomes lingua-culturally incomplete. Examples of such problematic verbs are as follows linguistically:

- (i) ile anya: to look (-)  
 O lere anya: He looked  
 (He looked eye) literally.

If the inherent complement ‘anya’ is suppressed, a casual translator will have the natural tendency to translate the above structure as: He looked eye which is its structurally acceptable, but culturally unacceptable as English Language.

- (ii) Ichi ọchi: to laugh (-)  
 Ọ chiri ọchi; He/She laughed,  
 (He/She laughed laugh) literally

A translator who is not conversant with the English structural linguistics will tend to transliterate here and write; He laughed laugh (sic). It becomes more tempting when the translator discovers that even in Hausa language; the Igbo structure about laughter lends itself to a structural literalism as in:

- (iii) Ọ chiri ọchi: Ya yi daria (Hausa) S+V+O  
 Ibe akwa: to weep (-)  
 O bere akwa: He wept

(He wept weeping) (sic) Ya yi kuka (He did cry) Hausa. (S+V+O) In Igbo, akwa or weeping is the inherent complement. The inherent particle which serves as a verb complement (weeping) is suppressed leaving the structure in current English as He wept. A real English translation of the Igbo structure will give us, “He wept.” The fanatic adherent of Igbo structural linguistics will ask: “what did he weep?” ( O bere gini?).

(iv) Ịkwa ụkwara: to cough (-)

This is another case where the question of inherent verb complement looking every inch the object of the sentence, introduces confusion into the Igbo/English translation.

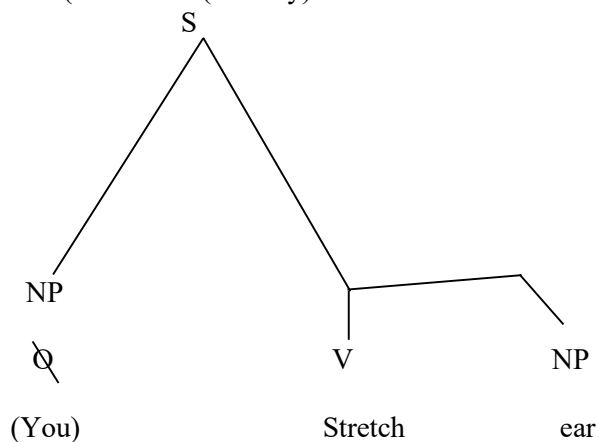
(v) Gee nti (imperative): Listen

(stretch ear). Literally.

This structure seems to possess a direct object complement (ear) even though it is the imperative. A structural analysis of the sentence gives us

(a) Gee nti (imperative)

(stretch ear (literally))

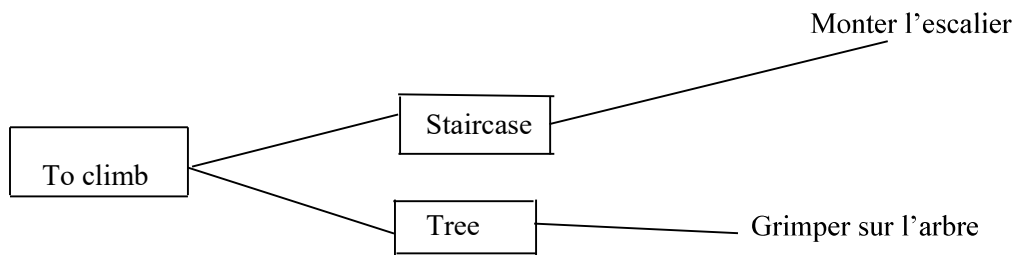


From the above analysis, there is no way *listen* alone could translate Gee nti, to the amateur translator. This explains why we insist that a translator should study very well the linguistics of his two languages of operation. Otherwise, he could be thrown overboard by little facts, such as the morphology of Igbo verbs.

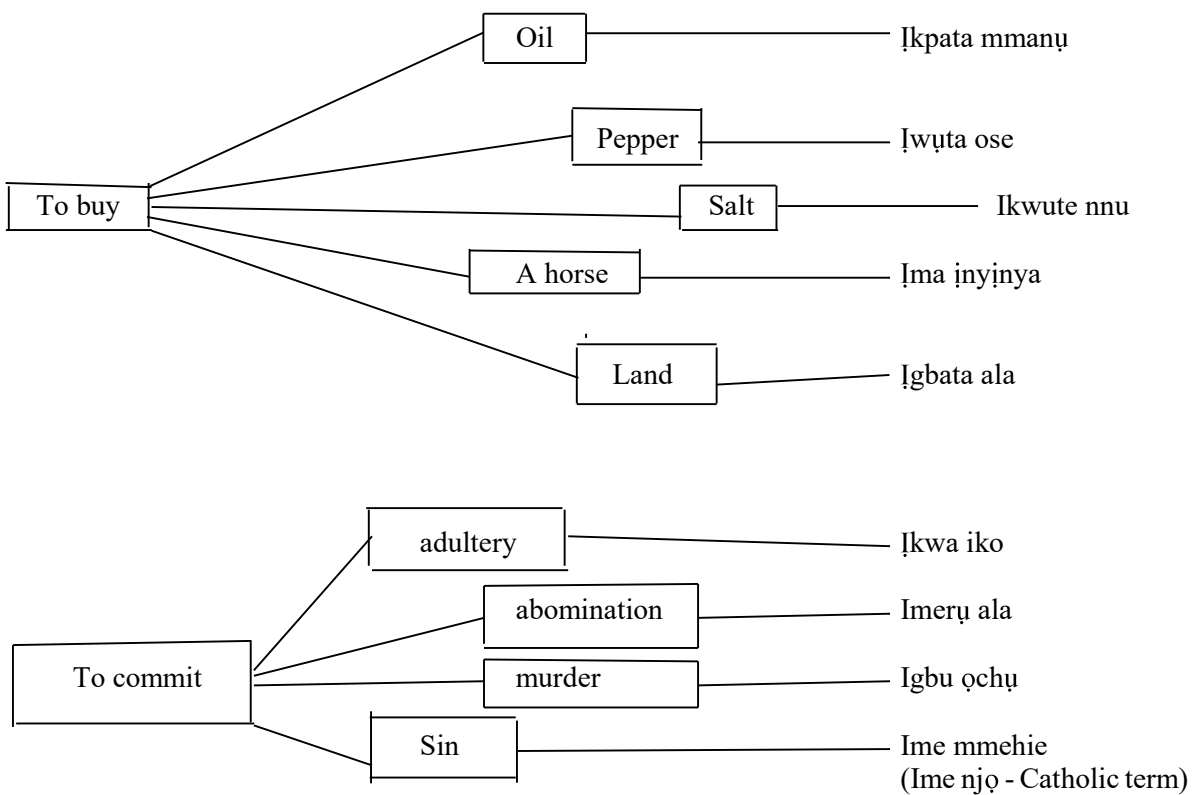
#### 4.0 The terminological tree

This is another area of difficulty to the Igbo verb translator. It is common to find in dictionaries words indicating the domain of each entry. The domain of each word in dictionary confection determines its translation in a given document. Igbo verbs show this difference due to domains where they belong. This is why the translator is advised not to translate each English or French word with a commonly known Igbo verb. He would first consider the domain in question before choosing the appropriate verb. Let us demonstrate with these lexicons.

## (a) English - French



## English – Igbo



## 5.0 Conclusion

Infact translating verbs with natural complements is one area that confuses the Igbo English translator. This is why in the beginning of this essay we talk of cultural affinity in translatology. It will be a serious mistake to think that because we were colonized by the English, translation between our language and theirs will always run literally. Ab initio we have demonstrated that English belongs to a different linguistic culture from Igbo. Translation between them is a serpentine journey, never straight. The translation of verbs introduces a kind of linguistic circumnavigation. Areas where the verb poses problems in Igbo/English or English/Igbo translations are many. We have dwelt on agglutination and structuralism in this paper. We hold no doubts that these verbal problems inherent in translating between English and Igbo or French and any other African language (Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, Fulfude, Ga, Ewe etc) especially among the languages in the coastal plains of the West African sub-region.

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