

### Opinion Article

## THE CHALLENGE OF TRANSFER OF THE MEANING OF CULTURAL TERMS IN TRANSLATION: THE CASE OF *THINGS FALL APART* (1958) OF CHINUA ACHEBE

### ABSTRACT

Transfer has become a significant instrument for the spreading of culture: material, linguistic, political, economic, and religious as well as other form of culture. To translate from one language to another is to learn and understand new cultures, and to come in contact with other realities. The translator therefore must have the mastery of both the culture of the source language and that of the target language. Chinua Achebe the author of *Things Fall Apart* looks back at his Igbo society, specifically at the period the white man broke into it as a missionary, trader and administrator. He analyzes the destruction of African culture by the appearance of the white man in terms of the destruction of the bond between individuals and their society. In doing this, he translates Igbo myth and proverbs from his native Igbo language into English. Some of the items used belong exclusively to the Igbo culture and do not have lexical correspondence in the receptive culture. Often, he uses Igbo items to retain their Ibo meaning and form. Where it is possible, he attaches an English word to the Igbo item to help the reader understand or he tries to explain the Igbo item. Achebe also uses coinage to paraphrase the Igbo concept. This paper therefore examines the challenges Chinua Achebe faced in trying to translate the meaning of these cultural terms into English language and how he overcame them. It also looks at what extent Chinua Achebe's translation was socially and culturally acceptable to the target audience. It is expected that this paper would better the understanding of readers, especially non-Ibo speakers, as to what is linguistically at work in the English of Achebe.

*Keywords: Culture, cultural transfer, translation, meaning, source language, target language*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

*Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe is said to be the most popular and renowned novel that deals with the Igbo and their traditional life. It portrays Africa, particularly the Igbo society right before the arrival of Europeans. *Things Fall Apart* analyzes the destruction of African culture by the appearance of the white man in terms of the destruction of the bonds between individuals and their society. Achebe in most of his novels including *Things Fall Apart* teaches us about Igbo society and translates Igbo myth and proverbs from Igbo into English.

In exploring the Igbo life, the writer had to "alter" the English language so as to incorporate Igbo language features and thought processes. His language is an ethnic variety of Nigerian English, which is characterized essentially by lexical innovation (Igboanus, 2001) [1].

Igboanus (2001) argues that when writers who are Igbo, for exchange, write in English, they may have two classes of audience in mind the Igbo or African audience and the European audience readers. They use the English language which is European in such a way that they incorporate the idiom and language resources of Igbo while ensuring that the English language grammar is not terribly distorted. According to him, the problem with the use of English in creative writing by African writers is largely a problem of culture. They carry and transfer some of the cultural nuances of the indigenous African people into English. In doing this the structure of native speaker English has to be adjusted. Onwubu (1976), cited in Igboanus (2001), opines that for the English language to express adequately, the way of life of a different culture, it must endure some internal structural changes. Achebe, also cited in Igboanus (2001), advocates that real African creative writer must alter the English language to suit African surroundings. Although Chinua Achebe writes in English, his Environment and sources of creativity are entirely Igbo. Igbo elements and speech habits are easily observed.

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Through the processes of transfer and translation, Igboanus (2001) identified seven linguistics category as the sources of Igbo literary tradition. They include: loan-words, coinages, loan-blends, translation equivalents, semantic extension, collocation extension and colloquialisms. This paper looks at the concept of culture in Igbo society, the concept of translation and culture before examining the translation of some Igbo cultural elements in *Thing Fall Apart* base on some of the linguistics category mentioned above.

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## 2. CONCEPT OF CULTURE IN IGBO SOCIETY

Culture refers to the cumulative deposits of national knowledge, experiences, religious beliefs, arts, laws, morals, customs, values, attitudes, behaviours, motives or symbols that are transmitted in a society denoting pattern of human activities in a particular society, time and space, existing in every sphere of social life. Culture is a universally shared knowledge by members of a given community. It also involves symbolic communication which has their own meanings which are learned and retained by members of a given society. No nation can exist without a culture which regulates their life style and belief system. Culture as the nexus of society encompasses the food, religious worship, language, and world views of the people. Igbo race as integral part of society is endowed with a riche culture capable of changing their life such as respect for elders and interest in food production, honesty, hospitality, trading and little taking. Through these cultural values, good traits are inculcated into citizens for sustainable transformation and national development as well peaceful co-existence (M. U. Ezea, International Conference of the World Education Forum held in the university of Buea, Cameroun, Unpublished communication). Culture, influences peoples way of life such as building, belief system, dressing code, good governance, etc. Proverbs, myths, legends and folklores are used to show the tribal tradition and culture which are transmitted orally from one generation to another in speech or song and may take the form of folk tales, ballads, songs and chants (SalyaNathPegu, 2020)[2].

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The language of the Igbos is filled with word pictures. The speech culture of the Igbos is deeply rooted in the use of proverbs. A man who is skillful in the manipulation and use of proverbs is often regarded as intelligent and wise. According to Iroegbu (2020) [3], African proverbs are rich sources of wit and wisdom. The Igbo sometimes use the proverbs to clarify an idea or to add color to a speech and to provide an image of some universal truth (Stone, 2021) [4]. Among the Igbo, proverbs play a very significant role in the preservation of their lore and norms. Nwoga (1975), cited in Onyejekwe (2001) [5], categories proverbs into basic usonyeages: The "illuminating usages" which uses proverbs to reinforce message and The "Corrective Usage" which comments on behaviour with intent to correct. Kalu (1978), also cited in Onyejekwe (2001), on the other hand states that every society possesses philosophy that are certain basic beliefs about the universe and man which an individual or a society holds in the light of existing social environment. The Igbo proverb is thus an accumulation of the Igbo view about life, practical experiences and beliefs held over the generations. Proverbs inquire into the nature of thing, the philosophy life, family structure, social structure, taboos, politics, moral values, etc. (Onyejekwe, 2001). A very popular notion of proverbs among the Igbo according to Achebe (1958) cited in (Onyejekwe, 2001) is that proverbs are "palm oil with which words are eaten". This implies that proverbs are highly metaphorical in character and encapsulates the wisdom of the ages.

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Ritual, ceremony, social hierarchy, and personal achievement are given great importance in Igbo culture. Age is respected among the people, but achievement is revered. The concept of honour and title taking is of decisive importance in contemporary thoughts and feelings of the Igbos. Religion and traditional worship have a rich amalgam of cultural elements. It is believed that esalyaach individual has a chi, a 'spirit being' parallel to his physical being. Animal sacrifices for different purposes, healing, divination and incantation, etc. all form part of the heritage of the Igbos and their culture.

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## 3. THE CONCEPT OF TRANSLATION

Translating is said to be a very complex task. According to Crystal (1987:344) [6], "Translators not only need to know their source language well; they must also have a thorough understanding of the field of knowledge covered by the source text, and of any social, cultural, or emotional connotations that needs to be specified in the target

language if the intended effect is to be conveyed. The same special awareness needs to be present for the target language, so that points of special phrasing, contemporary fashions or taboos in expression, local (e.g. regional) expectations, and so on, can all be taken into account". In other words, the translation must convey the source words as well as the source ideas. It must produce the same effect on the reader as it did on the reader of source text.

According to Delisle (1987:53) [7], translation can be defined as the operation by which the relevant signification of linguistic signs is determined through reference to meaning as formulated in a message which is then fully reconstructed in the signs of another language. Vennewitz (1993:87) [8] on the other hand opines that "The final cause of translation is to get an idea as exactly as possible out of one mind into another". For Nida and Taber (1969) [9], translating consists of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style.

Hariyanto (1996) [10] asserts that following the explanation of Nida and Taber on "closest natural equivalent", we can infer that cultural consideration is considered. They maintain that the equivalent sought after in every effort of translating is the one that is so close that the meaning/message can be transferred well. A translator is faced with an alien culture that requires that its message be conveyed in anything but an alien way. That culture expresses its idiosyncrasies in a way that is culture-bond: cultural words, proverbs and idiomatic expressions, whose origin and use are intrinsically and uniquely bond to the culture concerned. The translator is call upon to do a cross-cultural translation whose success will depend on his understanding of the culture he is working with (Karamanian, 2001) [11].

#### 4. TRANSLATION AND CULTURE

Achebe translates proverbs, idioms, images and cultural rich expressions from Igbo into English and transfers Igbo words and expressions into English. Translating consist of reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style (Nida and Taber, 1969). In the opinion of George Mounin (1963) [12], a French translation theoretician, it involves the passage from on cultural world into another. Translation therefore is an activity that involves two languages and two cultural traditions (Toury, 1978) [13]. Linguistic investigation have revealed that divergences do exist between languages belonging to different cultures and language families of the world and that the greater the divergences the most difficult it is to translate from one language to another (Ajunwa, 1991) [14].

Translation, involving the transposition of thoughts expressed in one language by one social group into the appropriate expression of another group, entails a process of cultural de-coding, re-coding and en-coding. The process of transfer, i.e. re-coding across cultures, should consequently allocate corresponding attributes vis-à-vis the target culture to ensure credibility in the eyes of the target reader (Karamanian, 2001). Giving that each language group has its own culturally specific features, translators are permanently faced with the problem of how to treat the cultural aspects implicit in the source text (ST) and of finding the most appropriate technique of successfully conveying these aspects in the target language (TL).

According to Kate James (2002) [15], the cultural implication for translation may take several forms ranging from lexical content and syntax to ideologies and ways of life in a given culture. The translator, therefore, has to decide on the importance given to certain cultural aspects and to what extent it is necessary or desirable to translate them into the target language TL. The aims of the source text (ST) will also have implications for translation as well as they intend readership for both the source text (ST) and the target text (TT). Considering the cultural implication for a translated text implies recognizing all of these problems and taking into account several possibilities before deciding on the solution which appears the most appropriate in each specific case. In this paper some cultural elements translated from Igbo into English in *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe will be examined with the aim of highlighting the techniques used and some of the challenges faced by the translator.

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## 5. THE TRANSLATION OF SOME IGBO CULTURAL TERMS INTO ENGLISH IN *THINGS FALL APART*

Izevbaye (1995), cited in Igboanusi (2001), opines that literature is often an expression of a culture's perception of its problems and of the solutions to these problems. The writer's sources of creativity are his tradition. His mode of expression is English. Through *Things Fall Apart* Achebe teaches us about Igbo society and translates Igbo myth and proverbs. Nwanjoku A. (Unpublished PhD Thesis, 2006) has observed that Igbo proverbs, apart from mirroring a people's cosmology, also unravel their cultural society and even religious behaviour. Since they are derived from culture, a complete system of habits and behaviour of a people, and language itself being a part of culture, it follows that the meaning of proverbs should be derived from the culture. An equivalent procedure is expected. In other words, a word-for-word rendering of Igbo proverbs and idiomatic expressions will not only fail to convey the equivalent but also not match the way it is said. So, what the translator needs is to possess a high sense of imagination and creativity and a cultural baptism in the two languages to arrive at the proper equivalent required of the situation (A. R. Uhuegbu and A. C. Nwaujoku, 2<sup>nd</sup> International Conference on French studies in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, University of Benin, Nigeria, Unpublished communication). Below are some of the strategies adopted by Chinua Achebe in *Things Fall Apart*.

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### 5.1. Loan Words

These are words which do not have direct lexical equivalent in English or have partial equivalent in English but their equivalents may not accommodate all the social and semantic nuances of the Igbo language items. They retain their Igbo meaning and form. They reflect titles, food, religion, traditional customs, etc. Although an English reader may not understand the full meanings of the loan-words, the context in which they are used may give some insight into their meanings (Igboanusi, 2001). Here are some examples:

- i. "He could hear in his mind's ear the blood-stirring and intricate rhythms of the *ekwe* and the *udu* and the *ogene*, and he could hear his own flute weaving in and out of them, decorating them with a colourful and plaintive tune" (TFA, P. 5) [16].  
(*ekwe*, *udu* and *ogene* are musical instruments popular among the Igbo).
- ii. "Okonkwo said yes very strongly, so his *chi* agreed" (TFA, P. 21).  
(*chi* refers to one's own personal god).
- iii. "It is an *Ozo* dance, the men said among themselves" (TFA, P. 47).  
(*ozo* is a loan-word for Igbo social rank, i.e. a title holder.)

### 5.2. Loan-Blends

Loan-blends combine items from English and Igbo to form new meanings. In loan-blends, the items from the source language and its partial equivalent from the target language are placed side-by-side to form a nominal group. In the minimal group, the English word functions as the headword while the Igbo item functions as the modifier. The English items help the reader to understand the meaning of the Igbo items. Loan-blends provide a good source of the Igbo tradition in the Igbo English novel (Igboanusi, 2001). Below are some examples:

- i. "... Stories of the tortoise and his wily way, and of the *bird eneke-nti-oba* who challenged the whole world to a wrestling contest and was finally thrown by the cat" (TFA, p. 43).
- ii. "I think it is good that our clan holds the *ozo title* in high esteem, said Okonkwo" (TFA, p. 55).
- iii. "After the death of Ekwefi's second child, Okonkwo had gone to a medicine-man, who was also a diviner of the *TheAfa oracle*, to inquire what was amiss" (TFA, p. 61).

### 5.3. Loan Words with English Explanations

We have a good number of loan-words from Igbo in the novel for which the Author attempted to provide English explanation. Perhaps he believes that without such explanations English reader may not understand the meaning of loan words since there are no indices in the context in which they are used that may give some insight into their

meaning. On the other hand, the use English language expression alone may not properly communicate the intended message. Here are some examples are:

- i. "The Elders or *ndichie*, met to hear a report of Okonkwo's mission" (TFA, p. 10).
- ii. "He had a bad *chi* or *personal god*, and evil fortune followed him to the grave, or rather to his death, for he had no grave" (TFA, p. 14).
- iii. "It came from the direction of the *ilo*, the village playground" (TFA, p. 34).

#### 5.4. Coinages

According to Igboanus (2001), coinages are newly coined words resulting from the prevailing socio-linguistic factor in Igbo land, in particular, and Nigeria, in general. Most of these coinages appear in the form of compound English words, which merely paraphrase the Igbo concept. Below are some examples:

- i. "He was very good on his flute, and his happiest moment were the two or three moons after harvest when the village musicians brought down their instruments, hung above the *fireplace*" (TFA, p.4). (*Fireplace* is where women's there-pot stand for cooking is located).
- ii. "She did not marry him then because he was too poor to pay her *bride price*" (TFA, p. 32). (Bride price is the dowry or money paid by a man the parents of the girl he wants to marry.)
- iii. "Some Kinsmen ate it with egusi soup and other with *bitterleaf soup*" (TFA, p.133). (*Bitterleaf* is a bitter vegetable used in making soup commonly used in Igboland).

#### 5.5. Translation equivalent

Igboanus (2001) has categorized translation equivalent in the works of Igbo English writers under three sub-titles: igboisms, proverbs and imagery.

##### 5.5.1. Igboism

Igboanus (2001) defined Igboisms as usages that reflect traditional Igbo life and cultural habits. These expressions are easily understood in Igbo but are either lacking in English contexts or are used in ways deferent from the English forms. He went on to explain that Igboisms are clearly different from coinages. Although words are coined to reflect Igbo experience, coinage may be formed through paraphrase but not through literal translation, as is the case in igboism. Here are some examples:

- i. "Adigo had said Igwelohad *a job in hand* because he has married his first wife a month or two before" (TFA, p. 17).
- ii. "Their clan is full of the evil spirits of those unburied dead, *hungry to do harm to the Living*" (TFA, p. 25).
- iii. "'Is that *me*'?Ekwefi call back. That was the way people answered calls from outside" (TFA, p. 33).
- iv. "Ezinma sneezed. Ekwefi muttered '*life to you*'" (TFA, p. 83).

##### 5.5.2. Proverbs

In *THINGS FALL APART*, Chinua Achebe translated so many Igbo proverbs into English. These are statements which follow the pattern and style of Igbo thought rendered into English. Though they have been rendered into English, they retain the vivid imagery and culture of the Igbo language (Igboanus, 2001). Below are some examples:

- i. "He who brings kola brings life". (TFA, p. 5). (Onyewetereojiweterendu.)
- ii. "Proverbs are the palm-oil with which words are eaten" (TFA, p. 6). (Ilu bu mmanu e jieriokwu)
- iii. "If a child washed his hands he could eat with kings" (TFA, P.7).

(Ntwakwochaa aka yanaezeerokoonri.)

A proverb seeks to communicate a message. It is this message that the translator must try to restate. Chinua Achebe in an attempt to conserve the structure of these proverbs did not propose their English equivalents giving that any pre-existing equivalent may not give the exact meaning of the situation he is trying to describe.

### 5.5.3. Imagery

Chinua Achebe draws images, from the indigenous culture of the Igbos and incorporated them into English through translation. While proverbs are well-known statements that “enable the speaker to display his wit, wisdom and his distinctive ability to manipulate the language” (Emanyonu (1978) cited in Igboanusi (2001)), images adopt imaginative comparisons to convey a meaning (Igboanusi, 2001). Here are some examples:

- i. In the end Okonkwo threw *the cat*” (TFA, p. 3).
- ii. “Go home and work like *a man*” (TFA, p.14).
- iii. “The clan was like *a lizard*; if it lost its tail it soon grow another ” (TFA, P.137).

## 6. CONCLUSION

In this study we have examined the translation of the Igbo elements and speech habits into English in *THINGS FALL APART* by Chinua Achebe. Four linguistic approaches: loan-words, coinages, loan-blends and translation equivalent out of the seven proposed by Igboanusi (2001) were used to illustrate how Chinua Achebe transferred Igbo words and expression into English and how he translated proverbs, idioms, images and cultural words from Igbo into English. While attempting to ensure that content and language present in the source language context is fully acceptable and comprehensible to the target language readership, the translator maintained the nuances of certain aspect of the tradition and environment.

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