

## **Saussure's concept of meaning applied to translation from French into English. Igbo and Kalabari languages of Malot's *Sans Famille***

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### **Abstract**

Translation can be said to be an exercise based on a tripartite comprehension: that of the text, the original author and the reader of the translated text. In translating therefore, an attempt is often made to create a text that would be comprehensible to the target reader. To effectively do this, several factors are considered, one of which is culture, especially in literary texts where culture is richly presented. A literary translator must therefore reproduce not just language but also culture. An illustration of this can be found in the translation of Hector Malot's *Sans Famille*, from French to English, Kalabari and Igbo. To adapt the translated version to the various target audiences, the cultural elements of the original French text have been replaced with those of the target languages but with the semantic content intact. This is known as cultural appropriation, an application of the semio-pragmatic theory. This theory affirms Saussure's structural linguistics thereby applying structuralism to translation.

### **Keywords**

culture; appropriation; literary text; meaning; structural linguistics

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## Introduction

This study is based on the appropriation of meaning in translation. It aims at illustrating the necessity and effect of adopting recreation or textual appropriation as a style of literary translation. Ken Liu, an American-Chinese fiction writer and translator, defines translation as an act of recreation, basically the creation of a text in another language. According to this definition, recreation is a major component of translation. On his part, Anyabuike (2015:12): sees translation as a professional activity that ensures the effective transfer of knowledge across cultural boundaries.

Mariane Lederer (1998: 13) reiterates Edmond Cary's definition of translation as:

une opération qui cherche à établir des équivalences entre deux textes exprimés en deux langues différentes, ces équivalences étant toujours fonction de la nature des deux textes, de leur destination, des rapports existant entre la culture des deux peuples, leur climat moral, intellectuel, affectif, fonction de toutes les contingences propres à l'époque et au lieu de départ et d'arrivée.

### *Our translation*

An operation that aims at establishing an equivalent between two texts written in two different languages. This equivalent is a product of the nature of the two texts, their destinations, their cultural ambiance, the historic era in which the text is set as well as the moral, intellectual and emotional climate of both source and target audiences.

These three definitions affirm that translation is not based solely on language but also takes into account other components, such as the nature of the document to be translated, the source and target languages, the culture and purpose for which the translation was initiated. This study aims at examining the different methods employed in achieving this purpose.

One major area of study is the problem of translatability and untranslatability of literary texts. This problem was addressed by Fortunato Israel (1994: 17) in the following terms:

En effet, trop souvent l'œuvre littéraire est jugée intraduisible sous prétexte qu'il est impossible d'en établir le double exact, de la reproduire en préservant toute la complexité de ses choix initiaux. Tenir un tel raisonnement, c'est non seulement se condamner à l'impuissance, nier toute possibilité d'accès aux littératures étrangères mais aussi oublier que, par définition, l'opération traduisante repose sur la dialectique du même et de l'autre.

Too often, literary works are said to be untranslatable on the pretext that it is not possible to reproduce an exact copy of a literary text while preserving all its complexities and initial style of figurative language, the art of translation rests on source and target variations. *Our translation*

The position taken by Israel presents literary translation as an impossible or possible act. At the end, he confirms clearly that all can be translated. This research seeks an answer to the question; how can the impossible be made possible, how can the untranslatable be made translatable? In response to this question, the translator may adopt one of four methods; the first is using an equivalent. This means that a word or expression in the target language having the same meaning is employed. The second method is literal translation. Thirdly, lexical borrowing may be employed, the loaned words however should be accompanied by explanation or description.

Cultural appropriation is a means of making the incomprehensible to be comprehensible, this is the fourth approach and the one to be discussed in this study.

For one to depict foreign cultural signs and symbols to an audience where these signs are completely absent due to environmental constraint, one may need to apply semiology to translation. This means the use of the semio-pragmatic theory. Semiology is the study of the system of science in a given culture, translation refers to the interpretation of these signs in another language. This study aims at proving the importance of semiology to literary translation.

The research is a demonstration of the application of Ferdinand de Saussure's structural linguistics to literary translation. Structuralism claims that *meaning* is a product of the cultural construction or identification according to the relations of signs that constitute the tradition.

These points are proven through the translation of a French text into English, Kalabari and Igbo. The selected text for translation is an extract drawn from Hector Malot's *Sans Famille*. Three English translations of *Sans Famille* already exist: *Without a Family*, *Nobody's Boy* and *Alone in the World*. The one presented in this study was created specifically for this work, and the version is created to aid comprehensibility of the French (source) text. Items depicting French culture have been replaced with English, Igbo and Kalabari cultural items in the translated versions. These prove that literary translation is truly the creation of a new text in a foreign tongue.

## **1. Language and Culture**

This study borders on literary translation. Literary texts are characterised by the presence of a secondary literary code superimposed on a stratum of unmarked language (Gibova 2017: 5). This secondary code may not have a direct equivalent in another cultural setting.

Culture is the totality of human behavior manifesting in thought, action and speech, formed through education or social experience. Cumming (2006: 43) defines culture as: the totality of transmitted behavioral pattern. The term *transmitted* suggests a social activity. Language is a medium to convey thought and these thoughts are borne by social experiences. Evelyn Mbah (2017: 306) defines language as a vehicle through which the thought system or culture of a people is expressed. Mbah links the working of the thought system and language, hence affirming the proposition of Fowler (1986:26): "Linguistic codes do not reflect reality neutrally, they interpret, organise and classify the subjects. They embody theories of how the world is arranged resulting in worldviews and ideologies".

A literary translator is therefore faced with the task of transmitting language and culture. Standard literary translation is the one which reflects all cultural, social, emotional and linguistic specifications of the source text.

## **2. Saussure's concept of meaning**

According to Saussure's structuralist theory of language, the meaning of a term (a word or expression) does not begin and end with the speaker's experience or intention. The act of

speaking and intending presupposes a language already in place and upon which the speaker must rely in order to say anything at all. Concepts or meanings are picked out (signified) because of the differences in the network of words that make up the language, each word finds its own relative position or node within the network of differences.

In other words, the meaning of a particular term in a language is due to its relative difference from all other terms in the language. The meanings of words are arbitrary and depend on the agreement of a group of speakers.

Ferdinand de Saussure's theory proposes three angles to language; a sign/symbol, a signifier and a signified. A concept or idea, is properly understood in terms of its position relative to the differences among a range of other signifiers (words with different positions in the network and, hence, different meanings).

Saussure (sited by Mahadi 2012: 230) defines language as a system of differences, in this sense he believes in the difference of meaning of a sound-image or written shape in different languages. Noting that translation is an inter-lingual art, the relationship between *meaning* and culture make translation a cultural activity. The relationship between meanings rely on source and target language and culture. In literary translation, cultural mediation is not only expected but also demanded. In the view of Danica Seleskovitch, there are three processes of comprehension, déverbalisation and reformulation. These always come into play in the course of appropriating terms for the recipients of a linguistic exercise such as translation.

Speech events differ cross-culturally, in the same way social distance and closeness cannot be determined in a universal way. It is culture-specific and the translator/interpreter has to determine the practicality of the situation to know whether or not to employ the strategy of disturbing the original message with a view of conveying the message appropriately in the target languages without causing any offence. (Ozidi 2015: 14). The translator should take into consideration the speaker or writer's intention and the listener or reader's inference or comprehension. A great deal of cross-cultural misunderstanding occurs when the meaning of words in two languages are assumed to be the same. And this misunderstanding may lead to negative stereotypes of other cultural groups.

### **3. Presentation of selected text**

The text selected for this study is *Sans Famille*, a novel written in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by Hector Mallot. The version used for this illustration is that published by SPECTRUM, this version was adapted into 1500 words for learners or beginners in the use of French language. The whole novel was not presented but an extract (the first chapter) titled *Mère Barberin* was translated for a Kalabari and Igbo audience.

Nigeria has thirty-six geo-political state with over four hundred indigenous languages, English serves as the language of administration. These indigenous languages are grouped into major and non-major languages. Igbo, Hausa and Yoruba are considered major Nigerian languages. Igbo-speaking people cover seven geo-political states; Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, Imo, parts of Delta and also parts of Rivers. Igbo is considered as one of the developed Nigerian languages.

Kalabari, on the other hand, is one of the major languages spoken in the Southern part of Nigeria. It is often referred to as Kalabari-Ijo and it belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, specifically the East-Ijo group. According to Dapper (2003: 7), Kalabari is one of the Ijaw tribes that inhabit the Niger-Delta region of Nigeria. Speakers can be found everywhere in the world but more specifically in the states of Rivers, Bayelsa, and parts of Delta.

**Source Text : *Sans Famille* (Mallot, 1878; here the 2006 version is used)**

**Original text in French**

**Mère Barberin.**

Je suis un enfant trouvé. Jusqu'à huit ans, j'ai cru que j'avais une mère : quand je me couchais, chaque soir, une femme venait m'embrasser. Si je pleurais, elle me serrait doucement dans ses bras, et elle arrêta ma peine.

Mais, un jour, arrive de Paris un homme. Il venait dire à ma mère, la Mère Barberin, que son mari était tombé du toit d'une maison pendant qu'il travaillait. Il était maintenant à l'hôpital, et ne pouvait plus nous envoyer d'argent. Le seul moyen d'avoir quelque argent était de vendre la vache ! Mais une vache, c'est la nourriture du paysan. Si nous la vendions, nous n'avions plus de beurre ni de lait, ni de fromage, ni de tout ce que nous achetions avec quelques litres de lait par jour. Nous l'avons quand même vendu et, depuis nous avons seulement mangé du pain le matin, des pommes de terre au sel, le soir, et c'est tout.

Pourtant, le jour du Mardi-Gras, Mère Barberin a une bonne idée : avec deux œufs, un peu de lait, un peu de farine, elle fait des crêpes. Nous commençons ce bon dîner, quand on frappe à la porte.

-Q'ui est là? demande Mère Barberine.

Puis elle se retourne.

-Ah ! Mon Dieu c'est toi, Jérôme ! dit-elle. Et, me poussant vers un homme qui venait d'entrer, elle ajoute :

-Remi, c'est ton père.

**English Translation: *Without a Family***

**Mother Barberine.**

I am an abandoned child. Until the age of eight, I thought I had a mother.

This was because a lady came to embrace me every night before I slept. When I cried, she held me gently in her arms and she'll stop my pain. But one day, a man came from Paris. He told my mother, Mother Babarine, that her husband had an accident. He fell while working on the roof of a house. He was now in a hospital and could no longer send us money. The only means of earning a little money was to sell our cow. Sell the cow? The means of sustenance for country man. Selling it meant we would not have milk, cheese or butter, nor would we have the little things we buy in exchange for a few litres of milk. We however sold the pick-up van. Since then, our meal has been dry bread in the morning and salted potatoes in the evening and that's all!

Today is *Fat Tuesday* Mother Babarin had a wonderful idea; with two eggs, a little flour, and a bit of milk we made pancakes. We were just about to settle down to this lovely dinner when there was a knock on the door.

-Who' is that? Asked Mother Barberin as she got up to get the door.

Ah! It's you Jerome. Then she pushed me towards the man who had just entered and said

-Remi, it's your father!

**Igbo translation: *Nwa Enwe Nne***

**Nne Barberine.**

Ábu m nwá atụtụ tara atụtụta. Rúkwáá áfọ ásáto, échèrè m nà énwèré m íné. Ìkè à bụ n'íhì nà ó nwèrè ótù nwáànyị ná- élétá m ányá mgbè ọ bụlà m nà- àràhụ ụrā. Mgbé ọbụlà m bèrè ákwá, Ọ kúrú m n'áká yā àbụọ mà méé kà íhé mgbú m kwụsị.

Mà nà ótù ụbọchị, ótù nwókè sị òbòdò Aba wéé bjà. Ọ gwàrà íné Babarine nà dí yā nwèrè íhé mbèrèdé; nà ó sị n'élú gbámgbám ụlọ wéé dàá mgbè ọ nà- àrụ ọrụ. Ọ nwéghizí iké ízitèrè ànyị égō n'íhì nà ọ nọ n'ụlọ ọgwụ. Náánị ụzọ ànyị gá- èsì nwétá égō bụ síté n'írè éwu ànyị nwèrè. Réé éwu áhụ? Éwu bụkwanụ àkụ nwá ógbènyè. Anyị ree ya. ànyị agaghị enwezikwa ànụ ma obụ ihe nde ànyị

n'azuta site n'iji nwa ewu agba ibe. Anyi mechàrà n'ikpéazu réé éwu áhù. Kémgbè ubochi áhù, anyi ná- àta zí náání aki n'ututu ná jí mmánu n'ábàlì. O gwulá.  
Táá bú ubochi írì jí. Nné m wàtàrà óbéré jí wéé síé mà sọ yā. Ó jikwàrà náání ayiya ná ugu síté óbéré ófē. Ózúgbó anyi chorọ inoro àlà wéé rié omárichá nrí à, á kuru áká n'uzọ. O bú ònyé? Nné m juru mgbè ó biliri otọ imèghè uzọ. Ah! o bú gi Jerome. O kwàgàrà m n'ébé nwókè áhù bátára nọ wéé sí, Remi, ónyé à bú nnà gi

***Kalabari Version: Mina ofori be tubo***

**Aya Baberini**

A mīna nyana a. Wenii, a ọo nine-a kura la, a sīnbara a nyingiọo nyanam. A gotẹ ọkọ me sīn ye, dīn goyegoye, gboru ẹreọo ọo te i fīnamari. A r'owuari ẹẹẹ, ar' i bobo te, a mono ọa. Ọo gboru ene la saki, gboru oyibọ nweni Port Harcourt bú sime te ọo. O ọuko Aya Barberini pirim minese ye a di bú pakate. O kpoli te wari isun telemar' ogbo, o hikim. Mi gboru saki, o bu-gwowaari bu emi, te o bari ine igbiki ke wane firima bi-a. Wa ye fi bim ẹẹẹ, anie wa boko doki te wamine gboru aru deri ọa. Wamine gboru aru deri mo? Anie ama-ongono be apu ke bu paliaari ye me? Wa anj deri kuma, inji ba bara bari ofori, isam tan bara na ngbe pele bara so, bari ofori, te dokodoko ai ma te wa inji ke faar' ai ma so, bari ofori ọa. Aniso, wa aru me derim. Wa an deri te so, dede fiye oo mbrakasin na songu na, ọo bari wa nkata baku te k'isila bar', fate!

Mingba, oo owuti alali. Aya Baberini meni ihi kroma nyana te, buru kalaye doki, biate mbana doki, te ani ke onunu na iwo inji odun so. Wa pa legite ani fi be ye ari kuma, gborubo boko baku te.

O tubo?" Aya Barberini gbola te bokọ finji ẹe muar'.

- "Ee, Jeromi, ọwu iyeri." A mie ọuko ar' ogbo, ar' i sukuruma mu oyibọ ẹe la te.

- "Remi, anie i da."

Oyibọ ẹe nweni wamine na deble bu legi. A ye me fiari, ori idiki ari.

- "Or'opuma yefi a-a?"

- "Ibioku, ori ibima yefi fim." Aya Barberini pakrite.

- "Buru i tari-a?" O ọo i gbola te. A ọem buru i tari-a, ekwen so piki i tari-a.

- Anie o ọo i ẹe ye: "Ibila kpoli te mono, fanya!"

#### **4. Analysis of the translated versions**

This study presents three translations; English, Igbo and Kalabari. One must note that all three have not been published prior to this study but were create for the purpose of this research. Though one may see published English translations, the version shown in this study was made uniquely for this research, cultural appropriation is not applied to this version. It is also very necessary to note that the English version is not captured in our analysis. This is because the study focuses on African culture and its' effect on translation. Cultural appropriation is employed in ten different points as indicated in table 1 below:

**Table 1: Translation of key terms of *Sans famille***

FRENCH	ENGLISH	IGBO	KALABARI
Sans famille	Without a family	Nwa enwe nne (motherless child)	Mina ofori be tubo (Child without relations)
Paris	Paris	Aba	Port Harcourt
Vache	Cow	Ewu (goat)	Aru (canoe)
Lait	Milk	Anu (meat)	Inji (fish)
Fromage	Cheese	Akpukpo Ewu (goat skin)	Isam (periwinkles)
Beurre	Butter	Igbawa ebe (collateral)	Ngbe (oysters)
Pain sec	Dry Bread	Aki (palm carnels)	Mbrakasin na songu (cassava and pilchards)
Pommes De Terre Au Sel	Salted Potatoes	Ji Mmanu (yam and palm oil)	Isila (mudskipper)
Mardi Gras	Fat Tuesday	Iri ji (New yam festival)	Owu ti (masquerade dance)
Crêpes	Pancakes	Nri Ji n'ofe (pounded yam and soup)	Onunu (yam and plaintain delicacy)

Source: Self-made.

The French version of the selected text (which is actually the source text) presents ten cultural symbols. The first is the title *Sans Famille* (Without a Family). This title depicts how lost Remy (the principal character) was, he did not know his roots so he was without a family. The story (taking note that this research presents only a fraction of the story) shows the nomadic life Remy had to live. In Igbo society, being without a mother is considered a terrible state. It is believed that children may survive without a father but not without a mother. The Igbo version adopts the title Nwa enwe nne (Motherless baby). In Kalabari culture, it is believed that the community owns a child, ties with relations are therefore very strong. To be without relations to lean upon is considered truly terrible and so the Kalabari translates the title as Child With No Relations

The second aspect of culture presented in the source text is a commercial town – Paris. Paris is the administrative and commercial capital of France. The French version presents Remy and his mother living in the countryside while his father was away in the city to make money and send to them. The administrative capital of Nigeria is Abuja but its commercial capital is Lagos. In Rivers State where Kalabari is largely spoken, the commercial nerve centre is Port Harcourt and is the direct equivalent of Paris in this context. Igbo speaking people live in the south-east region of Nigeria, this region has two main commercial towns; Aba and Onitsha. For the purpose of this research, Aba is adopted, this is because it is close to Port-Harcourt.

In *Sans Famille*, the picture of a nineteenth century French society is painted where agriculture is the mainstay of the economy (especially in the rural villages or countryside). One very important farm animal in France is a cow. A cow is a source of milk, cheese, meat and butter. Losing one's cow represents a significant loss. In the source text, Remy and his mother had to sell their cow to raise money. The Igbo people also practice agriculture. Goats are reared in most Igbo villages, these are a source of meat, skin (hide) and a goat may be a form of collateral when money or items are borrowed. In the Igbo translation, goat is employed in place of a cow. The Kalabari are a riverine people who live on islands surrounded by water. A boat, more appropriately a dug-out

canoe is an extremely useful item to have. It has a commercial, cultural and utilitarian value. Without a canoe, a Kalabari man cannot provide fish (inji), periwinkles (isam) or ngbe (oysters) for his family. That is akin to starvation!

The fourth, fifth and sixth cultural items that were appropriated would be taken together, these are milk (lait), cheese (fromage) and butter (beurre). These are basically dairy products obtained from a cow and they are of high domestic and economic value. Igbo and Kalabari people do not have milk, cheese or butter, these are foreign to them. In the Igbo version, meat and hide replace milk and cheese, while in the Kalabari version, fish, periwinkles and oysters replace milk, cheese and butter. Creativity is a vital aspect of translation, for this reason, the Igbo translation replaces butter with young goat (kid), the exchange done with liters of milk in the source text is appropriated into using kids for collateral when items are borrowed.

Remy and Mother Barberine ran out of funds (due to the sale of their cow), they fed poorly. This poor feeding constitutes the seventh and eighth aspects of cultural significance to be captured by the translator. The source text depicts poor feeding with dry bread (Pain sec) and salted potatoes (Pommes de terre au sel). In the Igbo society, palm nut (Aki) can be afforded by most people in Igbo land (Nigeria is one of the worlds' largest producers of oil palm, most of these is produced in the south-east region). Igbo people eat and celebrate yam a lot. For the rich, yams may be boiled, pounded and eaten with sauce (prepared with fish or egg). Poor people boil yam and eat it with red oil (palm oil). The Igbo translation thus employs palm nut and yams. For the Kalabari people who live mostly in the creeks of the Niger-Delta area of Nigeria, being unable to catch or afford marine produce is a big indicator of poverty. The very poor feed on cassava shavings with fish fingerlings or pilchards which are often rejected by fishermen. At night, they hide and go to pick mudskippers (isila) from latrines built on water. When the tide ebbs, the mudskippers are easy to pick but no well-to-do person would condescend to do so.

Religion is part of culture. French history (especially before the French revolution of 1789) presents France as a Christian state with the Roman Catholic Church being the dominant church. Christian feasts (such as Christmas, Ascension, Assumption, etc.) are observed as national public holidays in France. Lent is one of such religious feasts, it is period of forty days during which time one prays for forgiveness of sins. Lent begins on a Wednesday known as Ash Wednesday and ends on a Sunday which is Easter. In French culture, the Tuesday before Ash Wednesday is celebrated by disguising one's self, parading and preparing pancakes. This feast is known as Mardi Gras (meaning fat or greasy Tuesday). Igbo people and their Kalabari counterparts do not celebrate Mardi Gras nor do they have pancakes as part of their indigenous diets.

There are however some notable Igbo religious feasts. As previously stated, Igbo people eat and celebrate yams. After the harvest, new yams are sacrificed to the gods. This sacrifice is followed by merriment where pounded yam is served with sauce prepared with meat, fish and crayfish. Poor people (like Remy and his mother) may make their sauce with only crayfish. This feast is called Iri ji (New yam Festival). Iri ji is employed in the Igbo translation in place of Mardi Gras.

In the Kalabari version, the closest cultural equivalent to the religious feast in the French text is the play of masquerades. Masquerades have cultural and spiritual significance for island dwellers who believe that they represent water spirits and can help them communicate with the gods. Masquerades also represent periods of merriment and celebration and local delicacies are

prepared to mark them. In Kalabari land, one of such delicacy is called onunu, a dish prepared with yams and ripe plaintains pounded together and served with homemade fresh fish stew. It can serve as cultural appropriation to replace Mardi gras in this context.

## Conclusion

As mentioned at the beginning of this study, we have approached the translation of our selected text from the perspective of a tripartite comprehension process involving the text, the original author and the reader of the translated text. The cultural appropriation of terms to be translated has helped to achieve this. It would also appear that this exercise lends credence to the translatability theory promoted by linguists like George Mounin (1962) who are of the opinion that there are universals which underlie all human activities. Mounin was able to identify cosmogonic universals, biological universals, cultural universals, linguistic universals, etc., and concluded that, at least, at the level of universals, translation is possible between all languages.

Other scholars like Catford (1965: 65: 99) make a distinction between linguistic untranslatability which is the “failure to find a Text Language equivalent due entirely to differences between the source language and the target language”, and cultural untranslatability which, according to him, arises “when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the Source Language text, is completely absent from the culture of which the Target Language is a part.”

We hope to have demonstrated that in both instances, cultural appropriations which assure target audiences of readability and comprehensibility, can prove to be veritable solutions to the age-long issue of untranslatability. Also, applying Saussure’s concept of meaning according to the structuralist theory of language, we have attempted to show that each term actually finds its relative portion within the network of differences. It is expected that the speakers of Igbo and Kalabari will be able to relate to the cultural appropriations in the translations and achieve a significant level of comprehension of the intended meaning of the original author of the French text.

In this paper, Sans famille has served as a model for the application of Saussure’s concept of meaning for cultural appropriations in Igbo, and Kalabari. This has been adopted as a translation strategy to effectively bridge the gulf of incomprehensibility created by cultural divergence.

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