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## A Study of the Application of Comparative Theory in the Igbo Translation of *Motherless Baby*

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### Abstract

*The linguistic and cultural multiplicities all over the world lead to some communication problems which hamper the transmission of socio-cultural ideas among nations. The quest to address these problems in order to fill these gaps in human communication and to ensure a continuous development of the existence of man resulted in the introduction of the services of translators and interpreters. Translation studies in West African Languages have come of age. Here, we undertook a translation of Cyprian Ekwensi's novel, Motherless Baby, into Igbo language as Nwa enwe nne. This study stresses the need to be faithful to the original author in the course of translating a text as well as ensuring that the said translation is done in such a way that the target audience will easily understand the meaning of the text. In the translation, we adopted the seven technical procedures of translation recommended by two Canadians, J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet, who are well known propagators of the comparative theory of translation. The result of the study is that the comparative method of translation was found suitable for the re-expression of both the linguistic and extra-linguistic elements encountered in the said novel. In addition, we realized an Igbo text that not only promote Igbo language and culture but also inculcates the dangers of unwanted pregnancy in*

*the young and unmarried ones as reflected in the theme of the novel, Motherless Baby.*

**Keywords:** language, translation, interpretation, culture, literature, communication

## 1. Introduction

The primary reason for translation is communication. Two steps are involved in translation: understanding and re-expressing. According to Delisle, “translation can therefore 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” (53).

Translation is playing a key role today during bilateral talks between different countries of the world. According to Bassnet-McGuire, “... translation came to be used as a weapon in both dogmatic and political conflicts as nation states began to emerge ...” (47). Many other human activities such as tourism, international trade, and cultural exchanges cannot be carried out effectively without translation and interpretation.

The art of translation is evolving tremendously since the introduction of pedagogical translation in the academic world. Marianne Lederer buttresses this assertion in her book, *La Traduction aujourd’hui*, where she opines thus: “Plus l’on traduit, et plus on écrit sur la traduction. Il n’est pas de jour sans que paraissent de nouveaux ouvrages” (9). [“The more we translate, the more people write about translation. No day passes without new publication on translation.” (our translation)].

Meanwhile, given the fact that our study borders on literary translation, it is pertinent to know that culture is always embedded in literary works. According to Nida “Linguistic features are not the

only factors which must be considered. In fact, the cultural elements may be even more important” (130). This implies that any literary text is a product of the culture of a particular group of people. So, a translator is expected to penetrate the spirit and culture of the author of the original text to be able to produce a reliable translation. In other words, the translator should put self in the same atmosphere that the original author found self while writing the text to be able to get the same inspiration vis-à-vis the creative capacity needed to adequately transmit the author’s thoughts. For instance, there was a situation in the novel, *Efuru*, where two friends were drinking wine together and one said: “If I take another glass, it will enter my eyes” (208). It is unfortunate that a French woman named Marie-Jo Demoulin-Astre translated the statement to her French readers as “Si j’en prends un second verre, il pénétrera mes yeux” (228). Although the translation literally means “If I take a second glass, it will enter my eyes”, it is important to note that the French people may not understand that the meaning of the statement is that Ajanapu, the woman that made that statement, would become intoxicated if she took another glass of wine. So, the translator could not convey correctly the meaning of the statement because of cultural barrier. She does not know much about Igbo culture, especially as it concerns manipulations of language. According to Ajunwa, “Translation has become a significant instrument for the spreading of culture: material, linguistic, political, economic, and religious as well as other forms of culture.” (10).

Meanwhile, apart from those words and statements that border on culture, it also behoves the translator to look out for polysemous words in the course of translation. This is because a word could have two or more meanings and if not properly handled, could mar the translation process. For instance, one observed that the statement, “Chukwu tochie ego”, used by Nkoli, a character in a

Nigerian home movie entitled *Nkoli Nwa Nsukka*, to show appreciation to a man who gave her some money gratis was misinterpreted by the man as “May God block the source of the money”. This is simply because the man is unaware that the verb, “tochie”, has two meanings in Nsukka dialect, namely: replace and block. So, in the event of encountering polysemous words, a translator or interpreter is expected to possess contextual competence in addition to linguistic competence to be able to determine which of the words is suitable in that situation.

We, therefore, undertook this work in order to show the need to make understandable to foreigners, the literary and cultural facts of the Igbo tribe. In addition, we also intend to show the need to be faithful to the original author in the course of translating a text as well as ensuring that the said translation is done in such a way that the target population will easily understand the meaning of the text. It is worthy of note that translation is not a work on language and words, but a work on the message, which in other words implies the meaning. Every translator must possess some knowledge adjudged very important and necessary for the success of any translation work: knowledge of the language of the source text, understanding of the subject, and mastery of the target language. These qualities are needed to achieve a good translation because a translation that is not clear to the reader is not faithful to the meaning.

The problem that necessitated this study is that some translators who are alien to the culture of the target language, for instance, Igbo, always make cultural mistakes and end up misleading others as a result of these mistakes. Onuko cites Gerding-Salas’ emphasis on the negative impacts of lack of the necessary qualities expected of a translator thus: Through experience I have learned that the consequences of wrong translations can be catastrophic especially if done by lay persons and

mistakes made in the performance of this activity can obviously be irreparable. Just think of what could happen in cases of inadequacy in knowledge areas such as science, medicine, legal matters, or technology ... It is quite clear that a poor translation cannot only lead to hilarity or to minor confusion, but it can also be a matter of life and death (13). In a similar vein, Ajunwa cites Ekundayo Simpson as saying thus: ... the translation of scientific and technical texts demands precision as certain errors on the part of the translator could bring about tragic consequences. The translator of directions for use of machines and instruments of any type, of methods of repairing aircrafts or complicated machines finds himself entrusted with the responsibility of attaining a level of exactitude which is higher than that required of a literary translator, for example. To say then that scientific / technical translation is often a matter of life and death is nothing but an undisputable truth (92).

The objective of this study is to translate the novel, *Motherless Baby*, into Igbo language while paying attention to those statements that have Igbo cultural coloration. This study also aims at showing that a literary text is a product of the culture of a given people. In addition, another reason for translating this text into Igbo is because Igbo language is disappearing gradually as warned by UNESCO. One finds out that today's young parents of Igbo extraction hardly speak Igbo to their children while at home. So, we are of the view that this translation will contribute immensely in sustaining the existence and survival of Igbo language. Lastly, this study aims at counseling the youths on the consequences of unwanted pregnancy. The study addresses the following questions:

1. In event of running into polysemous words or expressions in the course of translation, what can be done to find the exact message?
2. How can one translate the expressions that contain Igbo cultural elements?

By the time these questions are addressed, the students of translation, especially the foreign ones, will definitely know how to translate works that have African cultural background.

The significance of this study is that apart from being beneficial to the students of translation in widening their knowledge horizon as it concerns the task of literary translation, many other researchers around the world who are interested in African literature stand to benefit from this study because the novel, *Motherless Baby*, used as the tool for this study contains many African cultural facts. In addition, this study not only promotes Igbo language and culture but also inculcates the dangers of unwanted pregnancy in the young and unmarried ones as reflected in the theme of the novel, *Motherless Baby*, which we translated as *Nwa enwe nne*.

Meanwhile, our scope of study in this work is literary translation with special reference to linguistic translation as proposed by Vinay and Darbelnet.

## **2. Methodology**

For our data collection, we studied the original text, *Motherless Baby*, and had it translated into Igbo language as *Nwa enwe nne*. The seven technical procedures in translation propounded by J. P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet were employed in the translation of the work. These seven technical procedures are embedded in the comparative theory of translation.

## **3. Presentation of Excerpts of the Application of Comparative Approach in the Igbo Translation of *Motherless Baby***

The seven translation techniques propounded by two Canadians, J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet, were adopted in the translation of this work.

These seven translation techniques belong to the comparative approach in translation. They are as follows: loaning, carbon copying, literal translation, transposition, modulation, equivalence, and adaptation.

In this section therefore, we discussed the meanings of each of these seven technical procedures of translation with some examples culled from our translation into Igbo of the novel, *Motherless Baby*. Here are some examples and few comments made in support of the methods applied:

### 3.1 Loaning

This is one of the seven technical procedures of translation. It means borrowing of words or expressions from one language and applying them in another language. Proper nouns, geographical names, figurative expressions, and those special words that are non-existent in the target language belong to this category. Here are some examples of loaning which we applied in the course of translating the novel, *Motherless Baby*, into Igbo language:

#### Extract 1.

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
The <b>Pedrolites</b> played <i>reggae</i> and they were the only band to challenge Sonny Okosun on Sthe charts. One of their records “Go, Go, Baby” made the gold disc and it was still climbing. Whenever they came to town to play, they advertised in the newspaper and put	Ndị <b>Pedrolites</b> na-agụ <i>reggae</i> , ha bụkwa naanị òtù egwu mara Sonny Okosun aka. Otu n’ime egwu ha, “Go, Go, Baby” gara ahịa, ọtụtụ mmadụ ka na-azụ ya. Mgbe ọ bụla ha bịara n’obodo mepere emepe igụ egwu, ha na-agbasa ozi n’akwụkwọ mgbasa ozi biazie manye <b>posta</b> n’obodo ...

<b>posters</b> around the town ... (11)	
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Comments:

In this extract drawn from page 11 of the original text, one notices few examples of loaning of words like *Pedrolites*, *reggae*, and *posters* in the target text as were presented in bold characters. Meanwhile, it is observed that in the Igbo version, the spelling of one of the loaned words, *posters*, underwent a kind of modification and was resultantly changed to *posta*. This particular action reminds us according to Ajunwa, that “... the loan words as they are called, more often than not, undergo some changes in their form, spelling and pronunciation.»(47).

### Extract 2.

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
The speaker had come to eat <b>akara</b> that morning and to drink <b>akamu</b> from the woman who sold food to early traders. (18)	Onye na-ekwu okwu biara ita <b>akara</b> na in u <b>akamu</b> n'ututu ahụ na nke nwaanyi na-eresi ndi ahia ututu nri.

Comments:

Still as it concerns loaning, the words, *akara* and *akamu*, presented in bold characters were retained in the Igbo version. The names of these two local dishes were retained in the Igbo version just as they reflected in the source text in order not to betray the style of the author and to create local effects. Akara is a local delicacy of fried balls which is common in Igbo culture. It has no other name in Igbo but *akara*. On the other hand, akamu is another local delicacy known

as pap in English language. It has no other equivalent name in the Igbo dictionary, and this is the reason for the loaning.

### **3.2 Carbon Copying**

Vinay and Darbelnet used this idea to describe the word-for-word translation of compound words. This simply means borrowing the structure or the constituent elements of a particular sentence from one language and translating same word-for-word in another language. Ajunwa posits that carbon copying (calque) could simply be referred to as loan or compound word translation (49).

In the course of our translation, we applied carbon copying. Here are some examples culled from our work:

#### **Extract 3.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
I shall return it to the water people, <b>the Spiritual Church.</b> (76)	Aga m ewegara ya ndị <b>ụka mmụọ nsọ</b> , ndị mmiri.

Comments:

In this extract, the phrase, ‘the Spiritual Church’ is a compound noun loaned into Igbo, which is the target language, and translated literally as ‘*ụka mmụọ nsọ*’. This is simply the technique of carbon copying at work especially given the fact that we see carbon copying as a translation of compound nouns or loaned words.

#### **Extract 4.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
She asked cautiously about the man, and she was told that his name was Diri, <b>an Assistant</b>	Ọ kpachapụrụ anya jụọ ajujụ banyere nwoke ahụ. A gwaraya na aha ya bụ Diri, <b>osote onye isi</b>

<b>Manager</b> , and that he had just come on transfer from the Kano Branch. (64)	nke e si na ngalaba dī na Kano wedata ebe ahụ.
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Comments:

The phrase, ‘*an Assistant Manager*’, is a compound noun. This is the reason we resorted to carbon copying as a suitable method of transmitting the meaning implied in the source text into the target language. As a result, we arrived at ‘*osote onye isi*’ as a suitable translation in Igbo language.

### Extract 5.

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
He swam ashore and lived among <b>hunter-fishermen</b> for a long time. (88)	O gwufere oke osimiri ga binyere <b>ndi na-achu nta akụ azụ</b> ogologo oge.

Comments:

This extract also contains a compound noun ‘*hunter-fishermen*’ carbon copied as ‘*ndi na-achu nta akụ azụ*’ in the Igbo version. It is worthy to remember that carbon copying implies the re-expression of compound words.

### 3.3 Literal Translation

Literal translation is simply a word-for-word translation of a complete sentence from one language (source language) to another (target language). *Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English* describes literal translation as “a translation that gives a single word for each original word instead of giving the meaning of the whole sentence in a natural way” (828). Here are few excerpts culled from the translation of *Motherless Baby* into Igbo language:

**Extract 6.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
Pedro awoke in the hospital. (55)	Pedro tetara n'ụlọ ọgwụ.

Comments:

Literal translation normally takes place where there is a simple sentence. A simple sentence has a conjugated verb and gives only an idea as a result. So, the Igbo version above has just a verb.

**Extract 7.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
They came into her office. (26)	Ha batara n'ụlọ ọrụ ya.

Comments:

This extract exhibits once again a literal translation. It is because the original text is a simple sentence that we were able to translate it literally.

### **3.4 Transposition**

In the following extract, we showcased transposition which is one of the seven technical procedures propounded by the theorists, J.P. Vinay and J. Darbelnet. Ajunwa posits that “transposition refers to a translation technique by which a particular part of speech (grammatical category) in the source language is replaced by another in the target language, without altering the meaning of the source language sentence”(57). Simply put, it implies a change of a grammatical category without altering the meaning of the message. Here is an extract from our work showing the application of transposition:

**Extract 8.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
Hearing the words of the medicine-man, she felt suddenly lonely and <b>in need of</b> her mother. (65)	Ka ọ nūrụ okwu ndị a, ahụ juru ya oyi, ọ <b>chọwa</b> nne ya.

Comments:

In this translation, the phrase, ‘*in need of*’, is a group noun while the word, ‘*chọwa*’ that was adopted in the Igbo version is a verb. So, the sentence, “Hearing the words of the medicine-man, she felt suddenly lonely and **in need of** her mother.” underwent a noun/verb transposition when it was translated as “Ka ọ nūrụ okwu ndị a, ahụ juru ya oyi, ọ **chọwa** nne ya.” in Igbo language.

**3.5 Modulation**

This translation technique simply means a change of point of view. It consists of transforming the structure of a statement made in the source language into a different structure altogether in the target language without affecting negatively the meaning of the message. In doing so, the message becomes much clearer to understand and direct to the point. Here are examples drawn from our work:

**Extract 9.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
<b>Sleep suddenly overtook her</b> and when she opened her eyes she was surprised to see that it was morning. (14)	<b>Ụra buuru ya</b> , ma mgbe o meghere anya ya, ọ tūrụ ya n’anya ihu na chi efola.

Comments:

Given the fact that the essence of modulation is to make clearer an idea, we are of the opinion that “*Sleep suddenly overtook her ...*” is better understood if it is rendered as “*Ụra buuru ya...*” instead of a literal but nonsensical rendition as “*Ụra gafere ya ...*”. Meanwhile, ‘*Ụra buuru ya...*’ is a very popular expression in Igbo language and constitutes a suitable modulation in relation to the English version above.

### Extract 10.

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
Ever since that attack in the sitting room after Ogbuka had left, she had never been herself again. <b>A kind of illness had begun to eat her up.</b> (77)	O nwetachaghizi onwe ya n’ihi na <b>o nwere ụdị ahụ malitere ịrịa ya</b> kemgbe ihe ahụ merenụ mgbe Ogbuka bịaara n’ụlọ ya mechara.

Comments:

Ascribing human characteristics to ‘*illness*’, which is abstract and inanimate makes this excerpt, “**A kind of illness had begun to eat her up.**”, drawn from the English version, very complex. This informs the reason for the application of the technique of modulation in the Igbo version. By so doing, the message becomes much easier to understand for the target population.

### 3.6 Equivalence

This translation technique is applied in the translation of proverbs, idioms, and clichés which are usually fixed expressions by nature. According to Eke, “It is not always that two languages correspond structurally and semantically. Culture is one factor that plays on translation. When culture inhibits a word-to-word translation,

translators find equivalent statements that can satisfy the same context”. Here are examples of equivalent translations drawn from the English and our Igbo version of *Motherless Baby*:

**Extract 11.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
<b>His voice had the sharpness of a razor.</b> His eyes were so red that Ngozi felt sure he was drunk. (73)	<b>Olu ya na-ada ka ogene,</b> anya ya kpụ ọkụ n’ọny nke na Ngozi chere na mmanyana na-egbu ya.

Comments:

Given the fact that in applying the technique of equivalent, it is expected of the translator to find the same contextual situation while applying stylistic and structural means that are completely different, we rendered the sentence, ‘*His voice had the sharpness of a razor*’, in Igbo with consideration to the Igbo culture. For instance, in the English culture, a sharp tone is compared to the sharpness of a razor. Meanwhile, in Igbo language, it is with the music instrument called ‘*ogene*’ that such a comparison is made, hence the translation, ‘*Olu ya na-ada ka ogene*’. Meanwhile, it would have been out of order to render it as ‘*Olu ya dị nkọ ka agoba*’.

**Extract 12**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
Chief Mbaju christened him <i>Amaechi</i> , which means in Igbo, “ <b>Who knows tomorrow?</b> ”(93)	Ichie Mbaju guru ya Amaechi, nke pụtara, “ <b>Echi dị ime</b> ”.

Comments:

In this extract, the clauses presented in bold characters are all proverbs. The statement, ‘*Who knows tomorrow?*’ is a common adage all over the world. So, given the fact that equivalent, as a translation technique, is applied mainly in the translation of proverbs, idioms and clichés, we had to search for the equivalent of this English version in the Igbo cultural milieu and arrived at ‘*Echi di ime*’, which also means ‘*Tomorrow is unpredictable*’.

### 3.7 Adaptation

This translation technique is simply a re-creation in context. In other words, it means to change the context of the message in such a manner that it will make sense to the target population in relation to their culture. This technique is applied when a particular situation that obtains in the source language does not exist in the target language owing to cultural differences. Here are examples of adaptation culled from our translation:

#### Extract 13.

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
<p>She had achieved her ambition to become an accountant, <b>had done her Youth Corps</b> and was now an employee of the African Continental Bank as a cashier. (57)</p>	<p>Echiche ya ìbù onye ndekò ego n’ùlò akù abịala na mmezu. <b>O feela ala nna ya</b> ma nweta orụ n’<i>African Continental Bank</i> di ka onye na-agụ ego.</p>

Comments:

In this excerpt, the term ‘*Youth Corps*’, alludes to an obligatory service to fatherland which every Nigerian graduate under the age

of thirty is expected to render. It is a one year service whose aim is to inculcate the spirit of patriotism and loyalty to the nation on the participants as well as train them to become disciplined compatriots. Meanwhile, within the first month of this service, the participants receive some basic military training. So, we adapted ‘*ife ala nna*’ as an adequate expression for this subject in Igbo language.

**Extract 14.**

<b>Motherless Baby</b>	<b>Nwa Enwe Nne</b>
<p>“Come home, Pedro. What have we done to you that you thus forsake us? Your teachers are worrying. You’re now in Class Two Secondary. Three years and you will take your <b>School Certificate</b> and start looking for university”. (53)</p>	<p>"Pedro, lṛta. Ọ bụ gini ka anyi mere gi mere i jiri gbakuta anyi azu? Obi erughi ndi nkuzi gi ala. I nṛzi n'ogo nke abuo n'ulo akwukwo Sekondiri. Ọ foduru afṛ atṛ ka i lee <b>ule ngwucha Sekondiri</b> gi ma malite ichṛ mahadum i ga-aga. "</p>

**Comments:**

According to Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English: NEW EDITION FOR ADVANCED LEARNERS, certificate “is an official paper stating that you have completed a course of study or passed an examination: *a degree certificate*” (261). The ‘**School Certificate**’ is the certificate awarded to students at the end of their secondary education in Nigeria and in other English speaking nations of West Africa. Meanwhile, given the fact that examinations are implied in the English version of the extract, ‘*ule ngwucha Sekondiri*’ is adjudged to be a veritable adaptation of the subject in Igbo language.

#### **4. Conclusion**

In conclusion, to translate a text means to render the message contained in that particular text in a manner that it will be comprehensible to the people who speak the target language. More so, literary translation does not ignore cultural dimensions. There is always a link between language and culture. Inasmuch as the translator should know the linguistic aspects of the two languages concerned, he is also expected to know the culture of the owners of the target language because ignorance of any of these two conditions can render the translated work meaningless.

Meanwhile, at the end of our study, we produced an Igbo version of the novel, *Motherless Baby*, entitled *Nwa enwe nne*, which took into cognizance the exigencies imposed by the characteristics of a Nigerian novel, so that it could produce on the readers the same effects as it concerns information, beauty and other traits that the original text possesses. To date, most translated African novels were translated to other languages of the world by the Europeans who are alien to African culture. It is worthy of note that literary works normally have cultural colorations. Most of the time, they showcase the culture of a particular group of people. This is the reason why we recommend that a translator of a literary text should always penetrate both the spirit and the culture of the original author to be able to realize a worthy translation.

Also, the UNESCO warning that Igbo language will go into extinction by 2025 if something is not done timely ought to be taken seriously by all and sundry of Igbo extraction. We recommend therefore that Igbo parents should encourage their wards to speak Igbo at least while at home.

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