

Cognitive bases of semantic variation in the translation of African drama texts: A cross cultural communicative approach

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ABSTRACT: This article analyses the cognitive bases of semantic variations in theatrical qualities of dialogue in the translation of African drama texts. It offers a practical framework by examining some case studies which show how different notions of semantic variations operate in multilingual African contexts where French and English are in close contact. The distinction arising from these variations is considered to be capital in establishing the cognitive base of potential meaning in a multicultural setting. The paper stresses that community attitude towards switching and shifting are of interest to linguists in general and translators in particular as they enrich communicative pragmatics with cultural patterns alongside socio-cultural behavior. The implication of this systematic analysis and codification of the sign system are of great importance in understanding the language in which a drama text is written and to assess the degree at which language in drama is only one sign in the network of auditive and visual signs that unfold in time and space.

KEYWORDS: Communicative pragmatics; cultural appraisal, socio-cultural behavior, multicultural setting, target language, social communication.

1 BACKGROUND

Communication across cultures has a long-standing history that can be thought of as an obvious exercise especially when it concerns African communities. The research is based on the grounds that African drama texts translation, like any other form of social communication, cannot be effective, meaningful and deep-rooted if the target community's cultural acceptabilities are not integrated into the mainstream of the translation process. The courses of lexico-semantic variations examined in this work make a significant contribution to the study of universals in language specifics and comparative fields of descriptive analysis. Its findings are essential for the understanding of the meanders of cross-cultural communication observed in some excerpts of the translation of *The lion and the Jewel*, an African drama text of W. Soyinka .

The article aims primarily at achieving three main goals:

- To examine the courses and types of these linguistic variation in cultural communication,
- To exemplify such particularisms as in the case of intertextual analysis,
- To highlight some implications in relation global communication.

The ultimate concern of this research is how to engage a lexico-semantic variation approach in the collaborative nature of communicating across cultures in the translation of African drama texts for a foreign culture audience to achieve target

community sociocultural impact. This concern is particularly relevant given the fragility observed in cross-cultural differences in the sociocultural interpretation of meaning. A fragility resulting from the existing shared language patterns and different cultural traits wrapped up in the sociology of theatre.

In an attempt to foster semantic agreement and intelligibility, the work examines and presents major difficulties in African drama texts translation necessitating a lexico-semantic variation analyses .

Several kinds of studies have been carried out on language and usage in Cameroon. Simo Bobda [2], JIKONG [1] however; very few of these have attempted a consistent systematic survey of usage and the influence of the French language per se. Though earlier studies have acknowledged the existence of non Standard English usage as being important in characterizing the uniqueness of some Cameroon standards usage, it is important for such usage to be thoroughly analyzed in order to assess the degree of aberration from standard norms.

Recent studies carried out in four state Universities, (Buea, Dschang, Douala and Yaoundé) demonstrate that the present generation of Cameroonians students are experiencing a natural concomitant of the English and French languages in contact. Such situations course obvious lexical interference with different denotations and collocations from those of the source language.

In Cameroon, we have identified three main causes of these particularisms being:

- Socio-cultural differences between the English and French language users
- The pragmatic aspects of the dynamics of a multilingual context
- Concepts of cultural value recognition and endogenous knowledge preservation.

2 MATERIAL AND METHODS

The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English has as part of its definition of culture the following:

The peculiar system of art, thought and customs of a society; the art, customs, beliefs and all other products of human thought made by people at a particular time.

From this definition, we gather that socio-cultural differences between the English and French languages closely used in African context constitute a fertile ground where new lexical items sprout.

The introduction of French and English into African cultures and their subsequent adoption as official languages has given them important functional roles inter – and - intra ethnical. The resulting cross-linguistic and cross cultural pollination dynamics become a principal background for the blossoming of varied lexico-semantic particularism. Many of such particularisms are born out of the necessity of translating ones thoughts either from the mother tongue or French into English.

Equally, the fact that language is at the centre of communication across cultures further complicates matters in that, opinions on culture will always vary. Many linguists and anthropologists including Watson [5] Lefever [4] and Zuber [5] have come up with definitions on culture. However, the commonality in these definitions is that language is found in all cultures of the world and it is a symbolic system of sounds which when put together according to a certain set of rules conveys meaning to its users. By implication language is subjected to and helps determine social norms and behaviour. But what connection has lexico-semantic variation got with communicating across cultures?

The whole process of communicating across cultures requires conforming or changing established sets of conduct and social behaviours that the society recognizes and accepts as part of their life style. From this, the questions that come to mind are: Does communicating across African culture into English or French need a semantic variation to articulate the socio-cultural richness of its local colour in the target language? Or does English or French constitute a clash of ideological mindsets with local languages? If language is strongly linked to culture and society, does the Western ideology and culture of communication constitute a linguistic barrier or variance to communicating African socio-cultural identity through drama text translation? What can be the best approaches that enhance local colour cross-cultural translation of African drama texts into English or French? Is the whole concept of translation based on language fidelity not incomprehensible within the frameworks of customs and traditional concepts of communities being portrayed through drama? The list of interrogations could be long. Our argument here is that, if the context and concept of drama texts is wrapped up in a mixed cultural imbroglio wherein socio-cultural beliefs have a bearing to peoples understanding of their community, then in drama texts translation, emphasis must be laid first on the communicative components of the target community so that the target

audience can be engaged with cultural mapping from their own frame of cultural mindsets. This can only be achieved through a lexico-semantic shift in the target text culture

A critical analysis of the present trends in drama text translation reveals some short comings in communicating African drama in modern European languages. The most recurrent are language mismatch and de-contextualization. This is what a socio-cultural approach to inter cultural communication seeks to redress by resorting to lexico-semantics strategies

The lexico-semantics approach is an overall attempt to view communication from the relationship between language and socio-cultural behaviour and all other aspects of language in use. It is a two dimensional model where the first part emphasises the lexical and linguistic aspects of the utterance based on the concept of transliteration, while the second dimension looks at the social and cultural aspects of translation in relation to language and cultural behaviour. The importance of such an approach is to reveal that the capacity for making meaning from resources available in one language into another language is an essential creative process of language use as manifested in the writing of drama texts.

3 RESULTS

Studies carried out by Aaltonen [6] and Bassnett [7] have demonstrated that the pragmatic consequence of the presence of many languages in a particular context involves lexical borrowing, languages mixing, and code switching

Different linguistic systems often have to mutually co-exist especially in the African context where not only English and French co-exist as systems of international standards, but over 1000 local languages exist as lingual Franca.

In the Cameroon context, the French language, due to its prominence has out done the English language, establishing itself functionally as *Primus inter pares*. Consequently, it now looms large in practically every activity. This predominance brings it daily into contact with the English language spoken by a lesser majority of Cameroonians. As a result, there is lexical interference owing its origins to the multilingual complex situation of code switching and loan translations into English.

The concept of intercultural communication also aims at clarifying the various socio-cultural characteristics which stimulate and regulate the integration of theatrical signs to create inter-linguistic meaning. Although this aims at simplifying and contextualizing communicative patterns within a sociolinguistics framework, the final result will be that of mapping socio-cultural meaning in the target language which can provide and evoke an integration of non-verbal theatrical signs in the interpretation of meaning in a performance.

To exemplify this concept, we shall analyze some excerpts of Chuto and Laburthe's translation of The Lion and the Jewel.

Sidi: [widely excited]

I know. Let us dance the dance of the lost traveler.

[Shouts]: Yes let's.

Sidi: Who will dance the devil- horse?

(p.13)

French version:

Sidi: [Follement excitée]

J'ai une idée: Dansons la danse du voyageur égaré

Le groupe [cris]: Oui d'accord.

Sidi: Qui dansera le cheval du diable?

The devil horse can refer here to two nonverbal signs with a distinct cultural significance. Thus the word is able to evoke a double meaning as a command for the dance to be effected and as a request that somebody be chosen to play the role. Depending on which reference is chosen to be presented in the performance, the acting will differ. The remark referring to the general context calls for more action than the situational context of dancing alone evokes. In the entire situational context, the dance suggests a range of behavior such as nervousness, hopelessness, embarrassment or even concern. By asking that someone dances, Sidi makes the crowd aware of her discomfort. In another context, the expression "dance the devil-horse" can establish a different level of meaning referring to the background situation.

The translation as “*Qui dansera le cheval du diable*” conveys only the literary meaning but not referring to the background context. The theatrical production can shift this meaning to another structure. The translator thus selects for the stage different theatrical signs and codes according to the actual or chosen theatrical norms. Obviously it is important for the dramatic text and its theatrical potential (TP) to offer and to retain the potential meaning and the potential ambiguity in translation. For this to happen, the expression “dance the devil-horse” must carry the same semantic value and semantic collocation in the target language. This can only be achieved through cognitive base analysis to establish the lexico-semantic variance required for an adequate inter-linguistics transfer as exemplified in the excerpt below:

The drums resume beating a different darker tone and rhythm, varying with the journey. Full use of “gangan” and “iya ilu”. The “trees” perform a subdued and unobtrusive dance on the same spot. (p.15)

French version

Les tam-tams se remettent à battre, sur un ton et un rythme différents. Plus sombre, qui varient en fonction des étapes du voyage. Plein usage de “gangan” et “iya ilu”. Les “arbres” exécutent sur place une danse calme et discrète.

The choice the translator has made in using the word *gangan* (drums) and *iya ilu* (flute) affects the linguistic potential of the text and thwarts the local colour potential interpretation.

By choosing to use “gangan” in the place of drum and “iya ilu” in the place of flute, the playwright creates a reference to the background context at the verbal level of the performance. The interpretative potential of the text is oriented towards a socio-cultural marked model whereby, the context is meaning bound. That is to say it provides the set of premises used in interpreting the utterance. In this case where communicating across cultures is particularly concerned with the effect of contexts, presuppositions and mythology, considering these several contexts of situations and character as well as the general and pragmatic contexts, makes it possible to analyze concrete semantic items in the text which suggest and allow a great dynamic contextualization. Words such as *gangan* and *iya ilu* are aesthetic dominants though culturally loaded. The problem faced by the translator is not only to retain or translate them but first of all to recognize them, then select the code that best interprets them in the target language.

The various textual transformations (interpretative, interlinguistics, intersemiotics), are based on these aesthetic dominants. These dominants may refer to a whole network of socio-cultural beliefs that may lead to multiple semantic references and thus different meanings. This multiple interpretative contextualization also occurs in narrative text or poetry. But what is specific to the dramatic text is the permanent double reference of utterances to two communicative internal and external systems which theatre provides in addition to other multiple contexts.

From this perspective, the theoretical conclusion that one may arrive at is that a text which is embedded in its culture is both possible and impossible to communicate it across other cultures into other languages without resorting to a cognitive based linguistics analysis. If practicality is considered first, however, every translation is possible. The degree of closeness to the source text culture and the extent to which the meaning of the source text is to be retained is very much determined by the purpose of the communicative art. In effect, we are asserting that the translator needs to consider and analyze cognitive elements embedded in the language codes to communicate culture-bound utterances or expressions.

4 DISCUSSIONS

Libraries abound in literature on translation procedures and especially cross-cultural communication, Catford [8:74], Lefevere,[4:53], Aaltonen [6: 96], Bassett [7:37], yet the theory of drama text translation is still a preoccupation of researchers in the domain of African drama. This is due to inadequacies in bringing action, culture and words especially in translating drama text. Cultural discrepancies as of now have not been adequately handled due to the complexity of the theoretical quality of dialogue. Within this context of complexity, one could cite the limitation of African local dialects to surface meaning in developed languages like English or French. This is as a result of the absence of a developed and operational linguistic code thus the non-universality of African languages and cultural barriers that complicate the situation. Language is the framework in which the world view of a culture is molded, and it describes the boundaries and perspectives of a cultural system. Language barriers disarm a communicator’s ability to assess meanings, intent, emotions, and reactions, creating a state of dependency on the one who understands the codes - the cultural communicator.

Culture more precisely reveals in a fundamental way what we perceive as our social reality today, for it creates its very basement, the human substratum of the society and decides directly who belongs and who does not belong to the society we live in and so, shapes the forces our social reality is made of.

The example of Cameroon bilingualism and national integration is a real manifestation of a common principle: our societies and consequently our perception of the social reality are culturally framed. It is in this context that the notion of communicating across cultures or more precisely, of socio-cultural communication has got an immense importance. For it can be applied on both sides of the contradiction between essentialist and constructivist understanding of culture, which is either in order to arrange relations between different cultures or in order to subvert – as a sort of a reconstructed universalism – the very idea of an original cultural identity. In other words, the concept of socio-cultural communication can be generally understood and applied in service of both contradictory paradigms of postmodern theory and postmodern political visions: multiculturalism and deconstruction.

Multiculturalism is based on the concept of the uniqueness and originality of cultural formations. It assumes that there is an essential connection between culture and racial, sexual or ethnic origin. From this perspective, multiculturalism challenges the very idea of universality, for it sees every universal concept as culturally relative. This entails that there is no universal culture, but a plurality of different cultures either tolerantly recognizing or violently excluding each other. From the multicultural point of view there is only a plurality of specific canons instead, each of them originating in some sort of essential identity. Therefore we cannot talk about world literature, but only about “Cameroon”, “African”, “American” or “white”, “black”, or “male”, “female”, literature including also a combination of these identitarian features like “white male”, “black female”, or “African-American female”, literature or culture.

Deconstruction challenges the concept of multiculturalism in its very kernel, in its essentialism, that is, in the idea that every identity has an origin in some sort of a pre-given essence. For deconstructivists, a culture is a system of signs, a narrative without any historical or physical origin. Signs are in relation only with one another. This applies even to the difference between signs and non-signs, which constitutes still another level of the sign system. According to this approach, there are no origins at all, but only their traces, only their copies instead and there is no end to the progression or regression of signs in space and time.

This actually means that cultures, too, are never reflections of some natural state of things, but rather constitute or construct their own origin, beyond any racial, sexual, ethnic or genetic essence. Therefore, being “Anglophone African /Francophone African” or being “black”, “white”, French or English etc. is simply a product of a specific cultural activity, a sort of cultural construction. For deconstruction, every identity is from its very beginning culturally constructed. In the case of communities, this implies that, each community is associated with what clearly distinguishes it from other communities and has stable boundaries. This further implies that the so-called unity of nation has been constructed through certain discursive and literary strategies. Nation is narration, writes Zomer [5:71]. “It emerges in human history at certain points in time and as a consequence of certain economic and socio-cultural development”. For Watson [3:47] these are the “conditions for the production of standardized, homogenous, centrally sustained high culture: a free market in commodities as well as labour for instance, or the emergence of a civil society, which can be sufficiently differentiated from the state, so that a sphere of autonomous culture could develop, etc.”

This is extremely important for our understanding of the phenomenon of communicating across cultures in that, its social and linguistics roles become clear only on the ground of a holistic communicative process. Only in this context does cross cultural exchanges acquire meaning, which transcends a purely linguistic horizon and becomes a cultural and social phenomenon that we can refer to as “cultural communication”.

5 CONCEPTS

From the discussions and the presentation of the case studies, we have arrived at some findings and observations that should help reinforce the process of communicating across cultures. These centre principally on the concepts of cultural value recognition and endogenous knowledge preservation. Yet, if the purpose of translating a text is to present all the meaning, beauty, and style contained in it, then, translation is impossible. A good translation creates a possibility for the target language reader to get the same impressions in terms of the meaning, message and style.

Appropriate procedures used to carry across culture-bound sentences, words, and expressions embedded in African culture into English or French should incorporate lexico-semantics analysis,

However it is not always easy to determine if theory is negated when it comes to the prevalence of meeting the audience’s expectations and providing a successful intercultural transfer. Nonetheless, drama texts translation has been referred to by different names such as theatrical translation or stage translation, associating the idea of translating with the stage of theatre. Even though translation theorists like Bassnett [7] have been against performability of the plays, because the concept of performability has been used as a pretext so that the status of translation is considered inferior to that of theatrical writing, the researchers argue that Performability is imperative in theatrical intercultural transfer. This argument is

justified by the fact that theatre semioticians see play texts as linked to their performance. From this perspective, it is important to consider the linguistic elements of the play text as one of the semiotic systems that make up the theatrical event. The existence of the linguistic element relies on its relationship with the other systems. Reference [7:138] emphasizes the existence of two separate entities with two different semiotic systems, the *mise en signe* and the *mise en scène*. They are not interdependent but simultaneous without prioritizing one element over the other. Even though he is against the idea of finding a play text in performance, he does not see text and performance as non-related systems that can exist on their own. It is therefore impossible for a translator to deduce any gestural under-structure from the source text, on the grounds that there cannot be one single grammar of performance embedded in a text when there are as many potential translations of the text as there are different readings. By implication, the drama text translator constantly wrestles with the linguistic units, the speech rhythms, the pauses and silences, the shifts of tone or of register, the problems of intonation patterns; that is, the linguistic and paralinguistic aspects of the written text that are decodable and recordable.

Communicating drama texts across cultures requires manipulating the original play texts for the theatrical social communicative event. Therefore intercultural communication starts from the foreignized text, where no attempt is made to acculturate the source text, through various stages of negotiation of meaning, up to a complete acculturation, where problematic elements of the source text are normalized and domesticated to suit audience expectation and the constraints of the receiving theatre social communicative system.

From this perspective, the researchers argue that cross cultural drama text communication is not merely the furnishing of pleasure or fun; it is an engagement of thought, of self, of mind that marks it difficult to remain faithful to the source text. The play has to have emotion and the translator has to add it, handle it, and help deliver the emotion to the receiving language culture. The translator determines and defines what emotions should be included in the play because he wants the audience's participation. This has to do with stage communication that is, the way in which the play text should be performed. This is justified in the sense that each play that is translated is part of an on-going communicative process that has its own demands and the translator, actors and director employs different linguistic methodologies to make them acceptable and communicable to the target public.

Since the process of stage translation, involve adaptation to new circumstances; that is, all translations are adapted to an audience during performance, and the more attuned the translator is to a given production, the more finely focused the communication will be. That is why for the researchers, African drama texts possess enormous endogenous knowledge, which can be very instrumental in the development of African languages, costumes and traditions and for this reason, the ultimate goal of African drama text translation should aim at providing versions that convey sociocultural specificities bearing in mind the following:

- i) The factors for measuring the degree of effectiveness of a drama text translation are essentially socio-cultural; they influence translatability and playability as they reflect attitudes, behaviour patterns and social norms.
- ii) Signs in the theatre assume a set of values and functions in their own right and become infinitely changeable and complex. That is, the stage bestows upon all bodies and objects a signifying power that they may lack in their normal social linguistics function,
- iii) All that is on the stage is a sign that needs to be contextually interpreted.

In the translation of ideology, one examines the extent of mediation supplied by a translator of sensitive texts. It could be argued that our findings boil down to a concept of cultural value recognition and endogenous knowledge preservation. Yet, if the purpose of communicating across cultures in the case of African drama text translation is to present all the meaning, beauty, and style contained in it, then, cross cultural communication is impossible. In our opinion, a good translation creates a possibility for the target language reader to get the same impressions in terms of the meaning, message and style. That is why we argue that appropriate procedures to translate culture-bound sentences, words, and expressions embedded in African culture into English or French should incorporate lexico-semantics variables and not merely linguistic connotations.

6 CONCLUSION

There is nothing upon which we cannot ground an argument for evolutionary socio-cultural communication in the translation of African drama texts as opposed to exactness and fidelity, since both express thought with an insight and neither of the approaches can be said to be more accurate than the other. There is equally no specific linguistics pathway open from the world of the source text to that of the target text there by constraining the issue of whether or not signified are purely arbitrary or partly grounded upon phenomena, to an issue of great consequence in cultural communication in general, and cross cultural theatre communication in particular. It is therefore worth stressing here that, the objective of across cultural

communication is to convey these unifying linguistics aspects in a way to maintain cultural specificities inherent in the use of language and hold the moving image and message of the original text in the second language context.

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