

THE IGBO VERBS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRANSLATION

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DOI: [10.55559/sjahss.v1i02.17](https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v1i02.17)

Received: 31.01.2022 | Accepted: 10.02.2021 | Published: 25.02.2022

Electronic reference (Cite this article):

C. NWANJOKU, A., LIVINUS, E., & ZAYYANU, Z. M. (2022). THE IGBO VERBS IN FOREIGN LANGUAGE TRANSLATION. Sprin Journal of Arts, Humanities and Social Sciences, 1(02), 10–16.

<https://doi.org/10.55559/sjahss.v1i02.17>

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Abstract

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

Keywords: *cultural affinity, domains, the Igbo language, intellectual exercise, the Igbo verbs.*

INTRODUCTION

It was Catford (1961:2) who rightly postulated that translation is:

an operation performed on language, a
process of submitting a text in one
language with a text in another.

This postulate summarizes the translating act as a question of finding equivalents. The process of substitution as postulated by Catford in this definition entails an overhaul of the entire linguistics of the message. The term ‘operation’ refers to the linguistic analysis to which the text is subjected. The Catfordian postulate, as this position is popularly called, betrays Catford

as a linguist. Catford, however, went further to assert that for there to be translated in the strict sense, there must be phonetic and morphological correspondence.

Susan Bassnet-McGuire (1980:13) seeming to give support to Catford, postulates that:

No two languages are ever sufficiently similar
to be considered as representing the same
social society reality.

This lends credence to our observation about languages without cultural affinity. We venture to assert further that if no two languages of the world could be said to be similar, then English and Igbo which have no lingua-cultural affinity can by no means be translated easily either way.

Linguistic and Cultural Affinity - What are they?

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

Durunze (1998:72) citing Bamgbose (1992) and Blench (1991)

Identifies two major linguistic groups (language families) in Nigeria: the Niger-Congo for the language spoken below 12° latitude North and the Afro Asiatic language group, North of this latitude.

He precludes the Nilo-Saharan family of languages e.g Kanuri. Durunze (op. cit) mentioned Ffulde or the Fula (the language of the Fulbe or the Fulani people which could be found above this latitude, and yet belongs to the Niger-Congo group ‘as the Igbos, Yoruba and Efik (Mduka 1998:72). This analysis shows that position above or below the equator should not be seen as a criterion for grouping of languages. On its side, English belongs to the Indo-European languages, with German and Dutch as co-group members. French belongs to the Latin languages of Europe. A casual observer might consider the factor of geographical proximity and group French and English together as cultural partners. A practical linguistic enterprise, like translation, will prove such a person wrong. If translation between English and French, neighbouring European languages, could prove so irksome, what then will be that fate of a translator working between any of them and Igbo, Yoruba or even Hausa languages. In this article, we are considering Igbo verbs in contact situations with Foreign languages, especially English.

The peculiarity of the Igbo Verb

It is a generally accepted idea that a verb is the action word in a sentence. Mecalfe and Astle (2003) contend that: “Verbs are the words that indicate action, a doing of something”.

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

Agglutination

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

- i. *Akìkaripìacharaakwàahụ*
(Termites ate completely the whole cloth).

The word in italics “*ripìachara*” is the agglutinated verb. An analysis of the verb shows;

iri : eat (the main verb)
pia : up (verb of manner)
cha : completely (adverb of manner)
ra : the past tense marker (rv)

- ii. *Oku repiachara ụlọ ya*
(Fire burnt down his house completely)

Repiachara – verbal group
ire : burnt (the main verb)
pia ; down (adverb in suffixal position)
cha : completely (adverb of manner)
Rra: past tense marker (rv)

- iii. *Nkita tachara anụ ahụ*
(A dog ate up the whole meat)
Ta: eat (the main verb root)
Cha: up (completely)
ra : past tense marker (rv)

- iv. Idè bupuchara àkwà ahù
(Flood carried away the bridge completely)
Bupuchara- the verbal group
ibu : carry (the main verb)
pu : away (adverb in suffixal position)
cha : completely (the suffixal adverb of manner)
ra : the past tense marker (rv)

Perhaps the analysis of this fifth verb will drive home the point of dissolving the agglutinated Igbo verbal, and according to each morpheme, a merited semantic change.

- v. Ozegidigidi kwatu chara ụlọ ya
(A caterpillar pushed down completely his house)
Kwatuchara : verb
kwa : push
tu : down (the suffixal morpheme)
cha : completely (the suffixal adverbial morpheme)
ra : the past tense marker (rv)

3.2 The Case of Igbo Verb with Inherent Complements

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

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

The inherent complement 'anya' is suppressed. A casual translator will have the natural tendency to translate the above structure as: He looked eye which is structurally acceptable, but culturally unacceptable in the English language.

- ii. Ichi ọchi: To laugh (-)
Ọ chiri ọchi: He/She laughed
(He/she laughed laugh)

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

- iii. a. O chiri ochi: ya yi dariya
- b. Ibe akwa: To weep (-)
- O bere akwa: WEPT (He wept weeping) (sic)
- Ya yi uukuka (He cried cry)

Akwa or weeping is the inherent complement. The inherent particle which serves as a verb complement (weeping) is suppressed, leaving the structure in English as “He wept”.

A real English translation of the Igbo structure will give us, “He wept”. The

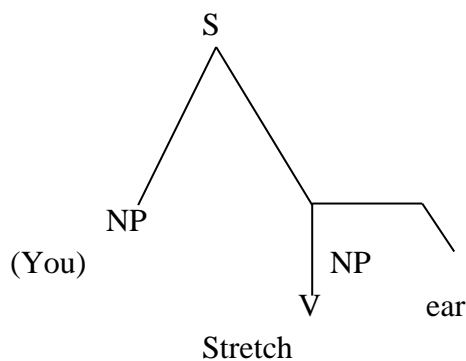
Fanatic adherent of Igbo structural linguistics will ask: “what did he weep” (O bere gini?)

- iv. Ikwa ukwara: To cough (-)
- This is another case where the question of an inherent verb complement, looking every inch the object of the sentence, introduces confusion into the Igbo/English translation.
- v. Gee nti (imperative): listen
- (Stretch ear).

This structure seems to possess a direct complement (ear) even though it is imperative. Structural analysis of the sentence gives you this.

Gee nti

(stretch ear (literally))

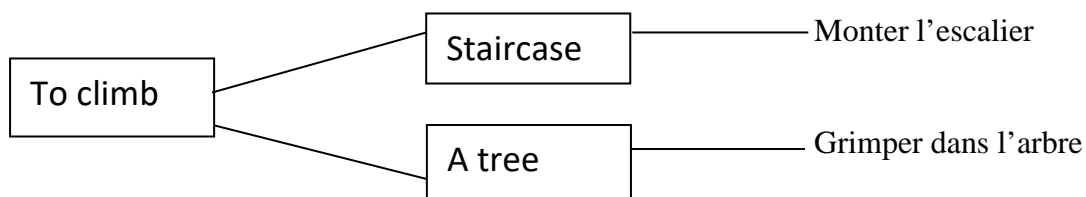


From the above analysis, there is no way listen alone could translate *Gee nti*, made up of three lexical items with one implied being the subject of the sentence.

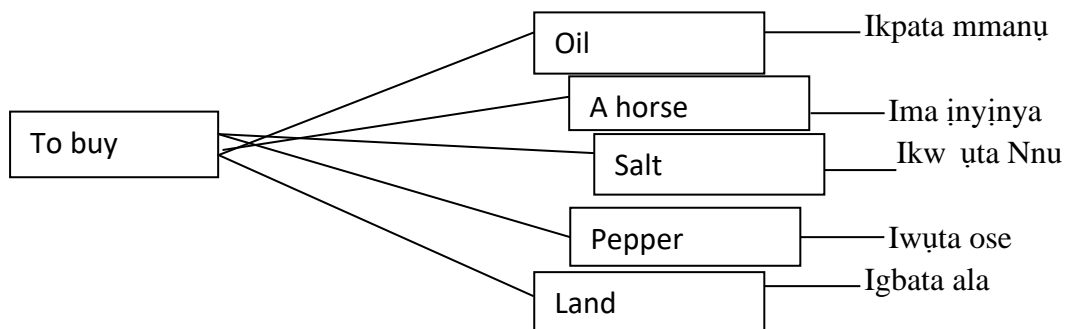
Terminology Tree:

It is common to find out in dictionaries words indicating the domain of each entry. The domain of each word in the dictionary determines its translation in a given document. Igbo verbs show this difference due to the domain where they belong. This is why the translator should not translate into English or French, words with commonly known Igbo verbs. He should first consider the domain in question before choosing the appropriate verb. The same phenomenon applies between English and French as demonstrated below.

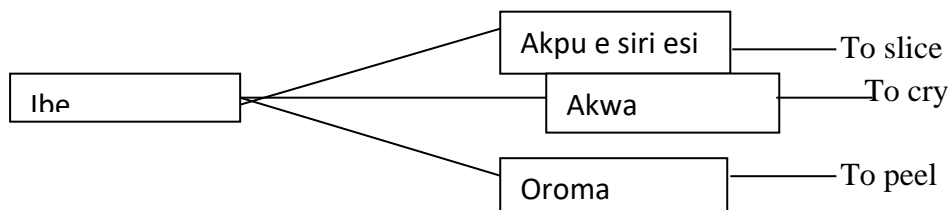
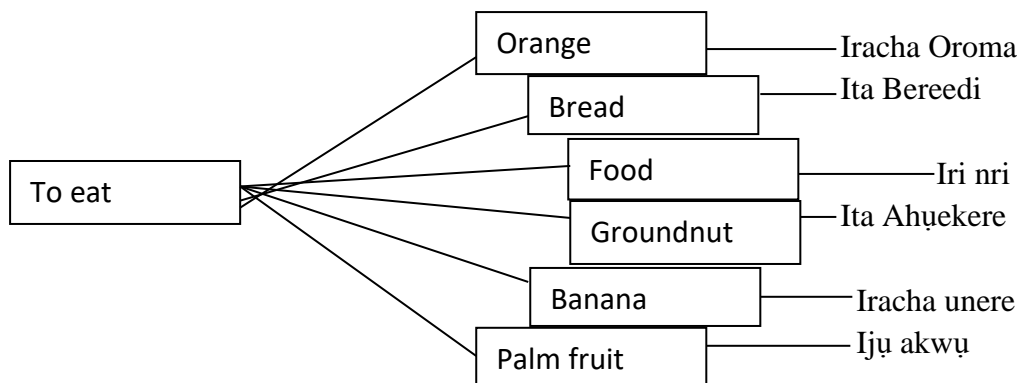
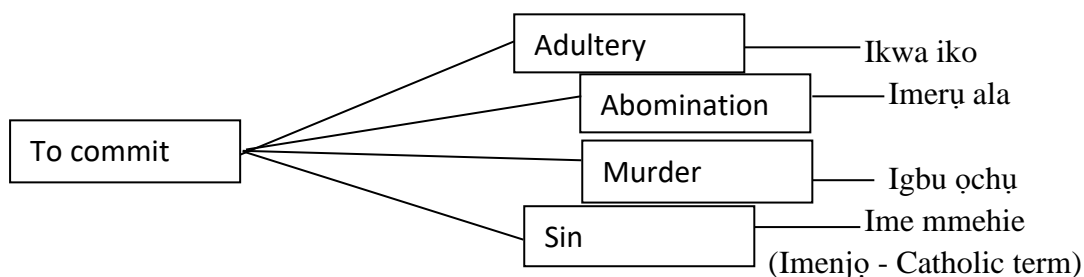
a. English – French



(b) English – Igbo



(Eke 2004)



4.0 CONCLUSION

In fact, translating verbs with natural complements is one thing that confuses the Igbo-English translator. This is why in the beginning part of this article, we talked of natural affinity in translation. It will be a serious mistake to think that because we were colonized by English, the translation between our language and the English language will always run literally. Ab initio, we have demonstrated that English belongs to a different linguistic culture from Igbo. Translation between them is a serpentine journey, never straight. The translation of verbs introduces a kind of linguistic circumnavigation. Areas where the verbs pose problems in Igbo English or English Igbo translation are many. We have dwelt on agglutination and structuralism in this paper. We hold no doubts that these verbal problems inherent in translating between English and Igbo, are equally present in any attempt to translate English and any other African language like Hausa, Yoruba, Efik, Ibibio, Fulfude, Ga, Ewe etc, especially among those languages in the coastal plains of the West African sub-region.

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