The problems of translating foreign concepts into the Igbo language

Romanus O. Ezeuko
Department of Linguistics
Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka
Anambra State, Nigeria

Abstract

No man is an island and no society exists in isolation. This accounts for inter-cultural movement of concepts. The task of handling the concepts in recipient societies has been a problem over time. This predicates on the pressing need to ensure adequate cross-dissemination of information. This paper is of the position that the only effective way of handling the task is translation. Unfortunately, when undeveloped or underdeveloped languages are involved, translation becomes cumbersome and most discouraging. This obviously is the case with African local languages, for instance, Igbo. Ways of handling the problems responsible for the situation are proffered.

1.0 Introduction

The arrival of English language with the British rule was not favourable to the development of Nigerian Languages. The colonialist took all possible steps to alienate the African from his world view; to look down on his language (Mother tongue) only to project the English language as a language without rivals. Even though every language has the resources to express all the terms and object relevant to his life and living conditions, most of the colonized African nations were deprived the opportunity to explore and harness their physical environment. In this vein, knowledge of appropriate vocabulary and communicative competence which would have been part of the expressive mode was not there. With colonization and the opening up of our nation to the outside world, foreign concepts, through cultural contacts continue zooming into our society. Sapir (1965:75) aptly describes vocabulary as "The complex inventory of all the ideas, interest and occupation which retain the attention of a given community."

For a language to refer to notions and given elements of the physical environment, the members of the group must indicate interest by involvement.

Nigeria indigenous languages, especially Igbo language, should not continue to suffer the set-back of the colonial era. Positive use of the colonial concepts should be made as long Igbo language is one of the developing languages that are yet to meet our scientific and technological needs.

2.0 Terminology and translation

It is words that make a language. We use words to talk about things. Words supply us with means of everyday talk about our surroundings and activities, about people, places and objects. We need them to communicate ideas and events. But, in specific areas that require specific language, we need terms, for instance, areas such as Law, Medicine, Banking and Finance, Geology, Agriculture and Advertising etc. Terminology is important for the development of specialized areas.

Bakar (2001:259), while differentiating between translation and terminology comments:

> Translation and terminology function on two different linguistic and cognitive planes and, as disciplines, focus on different areas of language study. Translating is arguably a fundamentally applied linguistic study, concerned with manipulation of texts. Terminology on the other hand is a discipline which straddles both theoretical and applied linguistic and use texts only as one of a range of source material in one of its many applications.

Terminology in the area of translation deals partly with the creation and classification of new terms, mostly in finding the right target language terms to express the idea and objects represented by the source language terms. The act of replacing or re-expressing these ideas and objects, found in the source language into the targets language has involved translation. A translator, in carrying out translation work, especially in the sci-tech (science and technology) domain, is faced with terminology problems. The translator is faced with the problem of appropriate selection and rendering of new terms.

Terminology work is important to the translator in a practical, rather than methodological or theoretical, way. The translator, in rendering a text from the source language into target language, especially where he is dealing with technical text, can never avoid making use of terminologist's work in rendering his message. This he does by making references to compiled terminological card, and on-line term banks, glossaries in specific areas, dictionaries in specific domains, etc.

Where the services of these items do not meet this demand, he could resort to borrowing or creating new terms to fill the gaps. It is expected that terms found in the source text must basically correspond with the target concepts in order to be accepted. Supporting the above view, Rotsslav (1985:85) remarks:

> Terms must be systematic; that is to say, distinct with a terminology system and adequately reflect the referent. They must be fixed by usage, their form and meaning known and accepted by users. They should be non-ambiguous when used in specialized texts; therefore, polysemy, homonymy and synonym are to be avoided.

Selected or created terms in translation work must be specific and transparent, so as not to add problem or mislead the reader or the target audience. That is, the purpose of translation in Nigerian languages, especially the Igbo language, is to remove such problem. The problem is usually associated with foreign concepts. Translation of the concepts from, say, English into Igbo should be done with utmost care since translation involves educating and informing the general public. This is implicit in Ekpenyong (1994:6):

> At this level, translation takes into consideration the fact that there are certain unilingual individuals worldwide who receive certain information upon which they have to act at certain points in time; otherwise they are cut off from the rest of the world. Such information may come in the form of research findings, existence of new products, invitation to a conference, instructions on the use of machinery or pharmaceutical products, cooking equipment, cars, certificates and diplomas. It can also come as a letter from a foreign correspondent whose language is different from that of his pal... in the circumstance, the services of a translator must be sought. Information dissemination is therefore one of the basic application of translation.

As observed in the above citation, the importance of translation as a means of giving out information makes it imperative. To make the Nigerian public a well informed public, the needed information which is embedded in some other languages that have advanced in science and technology must be translated into our indigenous Nigerian languages.

The foreign concepts that pose problems to translation when an attempt is made to render them into our indigenous language (Igbo) are not of Igbo culture background. These concepts are mainly of the western world and are expressed in western languages. From an investigation carried out in the area of meta-language development in the Nigerian languages, attention was restricted to the humanities – linguistics, culture, literature and methodology, Kwofie (2000:15). The area of terminology with the greatest vacuum is science and technology to which most of the foreign concepts belong.

The domineering influence of language was not experienced by the Africans alone. Traces of such influence, according to Igbonekwu (1997:4-8), were observed in these instances:

> i. France of the 16th century struggled with Latin which was the then dominant language. Latin occupied 90% of intellectual, administrative and religious activities while the vernacular language occupied 10%... But great minds of the period like Joachin Du Bellay, Clement Marist, Pierre de Ronsard, Francois Rebelais and Michel de Montaigae reversed the situation through churning out texts in their native language and by the 17th century, French took over Latin by 90%.
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> ii. England, originally the land of the Celts, was invaded and occupied by two German tribes, the Angels and Saxons. The language spoken then was what was known as Old English, a predominantly Germanic language with a small dose of Celtic. In 1066 AD, France conquered England and ruled it for 300 years, imposed French language together with Latin which was also the reigning language in France. The result was that old English was reduced to the status of a vernacular language which was neither used in educational institutions nor in administration. For a reversal of the situation, it required the boldness of such men as Geoffrey Chausar who said 'no' to French language domination in England and wrote his long series of stories called Canterbury Tales, which contained about 7,000 terms that marked the birth of middle English. The activities of this period were perfected in the 16th century by great authors like Ben Johnson, Christopher Marlow, John Dryden

and William Shakespeare. This period clearly marked the birth of modern English which reigns till date.

If the English language could suffer this fate in English soil, and the French language in France, and still they wriggled out of this language bondage, then Nigerian languages, which are also swallowed up by the English language, could see a way out of their own shackles.

3.1 The problems

The Problems of translating foreign concepts into Igbo language are summarized here as follows:

a) The colonialists suppressed the teaching of our indigenous languages in schools and thereby deprived our people the opportunity to explore and harness their physical and social environment.

b) There have been no documented glossaries, special Igbo monolingual dictionaries and term-banks that could serve as reference materials for solving terminological problems.

c) There has been scarcity of developed texts in special areas or domains in Igbo language that would have taken care of some of these terms.

d) The language owners themselves look down on Igbo language only to speak English as the language of prestige.

3.2 The ways of handling the problems

a) Some of these concepts that are not of Igbo cultural background could be borrowed or naturalized in order to fill the gaps in the target language. If possible, where the equivalent term is not in existence in the target language, neologism may be resorted to; (1) is illustrative of this, English being the source language and Igbo, the target language.

(1) motorcycle 'ọgbátùmtùm'
frying pan 'ìtéńghé'

May it be noted that (1) demonstrates the derivation of neologism by analogy of form and meaning. Other strategies are permissible, so long as they produce intelligible items.

b) To ensure the survival of our indigenous languages for the effective role they are expected to play in the modern Nigerian society, government should give top priority to language modernization. They should establish language Academies just like what France did to the French language in establishing a special ministry known as "International Council for French Language" that took charge of creating Sci-tech terms and their standardization.

c) The Nigerian linguists, translators and lexicographers should engage themselves in writing technical texts, development of term-banks, glossaries of terms in specialized areas, and standard monolingual dictionaries in our indigenous languages.

d) Language policy in education should be fully implemented, for the use of one's own mother tongue as a media of instruction in all fields of learning would make communication meaningful, transparent and above all economical.

4.0 Conclusion

This paper has tried to highlight the basic problems associated with the translating foreign concepts into local languages with special focus on the Igbo language. To handle the problems, some recommendations have been made.

In fact, it is worthy of note that a state which has not learnt to translate well encourages inadequate communication and inadvertently orchestrate social, political, economic, religious and most importantly scientific and technological underdevelopment.

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