Journal of Modern European Languages and Literature (JMEL)

Vol. 5 January 2016 ISSN: 978-978-48450-4-5 (Online & Print)

Proverbs and Idioms: multilingual approach in language teaching, learning and documentation

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Abstract

In reality, when two interlocutors cannot understand each other especially in the use of proverbs, the cultural context of which proverbs are a part tends to set limits as to what a native speaker with limited competence in a language faces, especially when the native speaker and a foreigner are engaged in a conversation. This paper reviews the semantic barrier in the Igbo lexicon which hinders the users of some social dialects from access to "knowledge categories" of the idiomatic and/proverbial expressions in their oral and, perhaps in written language as well. Also, it compares the ability of Igbo learners of French in rendering proverbs and idioms in target language (French) from the source language (Igbo) and the implication on achieving communicative competence in foreign language: especially as it involves communication among an exolingual group. Selected texts written by Igbo speaking undergraduates at the University of Lagos were analyzed based on linear model of communication (Shannon & Weaver) to find out the extent to which such semantic barrier can affect achieving communicative competence. The findings contribute to a better understanding of functional didactics as it affects developing curriculum for French for specific or university purposes.

Résumé

C'est l'identification d'une vérité morale et ensuite l'histoire qu'imagine un locuteur étranger pour illustrer la maxime ou la thèse. Cette vérité morale est basée sur la culture source en s'appuyant à des situations qui lui sont familiers et particuliers. On comprend dès lors que chaque fable possède ou attire un goût culturel appartenant à sa localité. Traduire une fable implique le déplacement d'une culture à une autre parce qu'elle est truquée des effets culturels. Les problèmes se multiplient quant il existe une grande différence entre les deux cultures en question comme dans le cas du français et l'igbo.

Mots clés / Key words: *functional didactics, bi/plurilingualism, semantic barrier, social dialects, cultural barrier, communicative competence, proverbs, idioms.*

Vol. 5 January 2016 ISSN: 978-978-48450-4-5 (Online & Print)

> *"Language is no longer regarded as peripheral to our grasp of the world we live in, but as central to it. Words are not mere vocal labels or communicational adjuncts superimposed upon an already given order of things. They are collective products of social interaction, essential instruments through which human beings constitute and articulate their world. This typically twentieth-century view of language has profoundly influenced developments throughout the whole range of human sciences. It is particularly marked in linguistics, philosophy, psychology, sociology and anthropology.*[i]

1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Focus of the study

What this paper is trying to establish is pivotal to achieving functional bilingualism. Researchers (have discovered various reasons for reluctance to speak on the part of the learner to include: *fear of losing face, low proficiency in the target language, cultural beliefs* about appropriate behaviour in classroom contexts: showing respect to the teacher by being quiet or *introversion*. For the purposes of this paper, cultural belief seems to be the reason for the students' inability to express clearly what they were asked to do.

1.2 Context of the study

Given that the goal of second/foreign language teaching and learning is to achieve communicative competence, we have examined the existing researches on willingness to communicate (WTC) as seen by teachers of English as a second or foreign language. In the Nigerian context, her linguistic status is further enriched by proximity of French in the bordering Francophone countries. This study is anchored on two contexts:

- Peculiar teaching/learning situation of French Language in Nigeria
- The status of French in Nigeria.

The first context concerns the teaching/learning of French in tertiary institutions which is a doubly exolingual situation (where the learner and Teacher are both foreigners to the target language). The consequences of this exolingualism[ii] may result in diglossia. As in Fishman's definition which involves high and low varieties of unrelated languages (H,L). To this end,

achieving bilingualism is questioned: to produce perfectly or functionally bilingual language graduates?

The second already precludes French as an official language in Nigeria. It is a foreign language but one that is privileged amongst other foreign languages. To a Nigerian French teacher, this translates into imposing the language on Nigerian students. Why? How much does the child know of his mother tongue?

Applied psychology to education has underlined the irreplaceable role played by mother languages in assuring continuity in the child's psychomotor, affective and cognitive development. By denying the child the possibility of using his own language in order to provide him with an instrument of communication which is still totally unusable at the beginning of his school life, this puts him in a situation in which he has no means of exteriorising his feelings or expressing his interests. If a Nigerian child is allowed to receive academic instruction in mother tongue and English up till the age of 15years, this should in no way be seen as a handicap. After all, it is said that when a people reaches maturity, bilingualism is no longer seen as a defect rather it is a step up on the ladder of values. Most countries seem convinced of this truth, and have embraced reforms in their official instructions (Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Togo, China, etc). Countries like China have equally embraced machine translation or computer aided translation, is any African language included? What do we do now as language teachers?

For already bilingual(even trilingual) learners of French in Nigeria to achieve communicative competence, we decided to exploit use of metaphoric proverbs and idiomatic expressions fully aware that translating proverbs or idiomatic expressions means getting their paremiological meanings; getting the semantic equivalent because proverbs carry an existing reality peculiar to its culture of origin. It is therefore necessary to identify and list the areas of common usage and inter-comprehension (isoglossia) within any language group concerned, so as to be able to codify a standard language, usable pedagogically. From this point of view,

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a language with many dialectal variations like the Igbo language would appear to be a handicap for French language teachers in Nigeria compared with a more uniform language (English).

It can be argued that the existence of a single dominant dialectal form is a favourable factor, on two conditions: a) That it be enriched by variations found in other recognised forms and b) That it be acceptable, sociologically, to the speakers of the minority dialects. If the Igbo have a standardised proverb pattern, it is therefore imperative that the learners be encouraged to know and use them. Of course they cannot do this without being a bit curious. In other words, there will be enhanced communication with their parents as the need arises.

1.3 Review of Literature

Studies on this abound in cases of English as a Foreign/Second language (based on questionnaires and observation). So far, only three (3) qualitative researches have been carried out on situational willingness to communicate in a second language (Baker & MacIntyre 2000, MacDonald, Clement & MacIntyre 2003, Kang 2005). Little has been written on French as foreign language especially in a context where the target language is unrelated to the existing languages.

The Canadian example (Baker and Macintyre 2000) borders on immersion vs. non-immersion students. The first comprised of writing out the best situation when the students were willing to speak in the target language (MacDonald, Clement and McIntyre 2003), while the later (Kang 2005) observed that some learners felt unwilling to speak in the target language with speakers of their own language. On this note therefore, our students seem to share peculiarities with the participants in Kang's study. Though the above studies were exploratory- to find out what situational variables played a role in un/willingness of students learning English to speak, one thing was common: they were not all language majors. This brings us back to our own study where the participants are all French language majors, with primary goal to work with the language at the end of their Degree programme. Here, their poor performance in translating the texts from source to target language may be explained by

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cultural beliefs, and, where they made attempts, by lack of access to folk knowledge. This is quite in contrast to the studies of Kang, MacIntyre; the language anxiety or perfectionism thesis of Bailey (1983), Gregersen & Horwitz(2002), Toth (2007).

In comparison to the study of French as a foreign language, the recent studies of Cao & Philp (2009), Weaver (2010), and, Tong (2010) bordered on foreign students' willingness to communicate in English language (Japanese, Chinese students). Now this informs our study where it is not only concentrating on finding out through questionnaires, the un/willingness of the learners to participate in class, rather we seek to explore the capability/ies of our French language students in transferring their (acquired) paremiological skills, cultural knowledge and competence to French language.

1.4. Objectives of the study

This study is aimed at encouraging teachers to:

1. Prepare at experimental level, new contents for language courses designed to provide learners with an objective knowledge of the important elements in the daily life, culture, literature, folklore, customs and habits of the countries in which the languages concerned are spoken;
2. Integrate minority languages into plans for language planning within general guidelines appropriate to different situations existing in Nigeria;
3. Encourage the mastery of mother culture which can reinforce the mastery of foreign culture and language.

2. Semantic barriers in translation

It should be stressed that translation memory programs are designed to increase the quality and efficiency of the translation process, particularly with regard to specialised texts with non-figurative language and fixed grammatical constructions, but they are not designed to replace the human translator. With machine translation, however, initial optimism soon

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disappeared. Researchers began to think that the semantic barriers were insurmountable and no longer saw a solution on the near horizon to the problem of machine translation. Some linguists have advocated the use of corpora for training translators; Baker (1993a, 2010) has argued that theoretical research into the nature of translation will receive a powerful impetus from corpus-based studies.

The beginning of the 1990's saw vital developments in machine translation with a radical change in strategy from translation based on grammatical rules to that based on bodies of texts and examples (for example, the Reverso Program[iii]). Language was no longer perceived as a static entity governed by fixed rules, but as a dynamic corpus which changes according to use and users, evolving through time and adapting to social and cultural realities. Among the countries that have embraced machine translation or computer aided translation, we are not sure any African country or language is included. What do we do now as teachers, language experts? It is high time teachers realized the role of the cognitive process in human translation which cannot be replaced by a computer. It is necessary to understand the functioning of the human brain. The first stage in human translation is complete comprehension of the source language text. This comprehension operates on several levels:

- Semantic level: understanding words out of context, as in a dictionary.
- Syntactic level: understanding words in a sentence.
- Pragmatic level: understanding words in situations and context.

Furthermore, there are at least five types of knowledge used in the translation process:

- Knowledge of the source language, which allows us to understand the original text.
- Knowledge of the target language, which makes it possible to produce a coherent text in that language.
- Knowledge of equivalents between the source and target languages.
- Knowledge of the subject field as well as general knowledge, both of which aid comprehension of the source language text.

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- Knowledge of socio-cultural aspects that is, of the customs and conventions of the source and target cultures.

Among all these, the one that concerns this study is the pragmatic level, that is to say knowledge of equivalents between the source and target languages, which includes the knowledge of the socio-cultural aspects of the language.

3.Data and methodology 0

This study has been divided as equally as possible between the two authors. Both authors were involved in the data collection and the writing process involved discussions concerning individually written parts as well as the whole to create a unanimous research synthesis. Consequently, the rest of the paper consists of contributions from both authors.

Since the study involved the problem of acceptability in the contextual translation, three (3) different proverbs and idiomatic expressions were distributed to selected 200 level Igbo speaking learners of French language at the University of Lagos, natives of Anambra and Imo states. The students' average age was 22, the oldest being 25, the youngest being 19. Out of the 5 students who participated in this study, 3 were born and raised in their states of origin while 2 were born outside their parents' native home town, but are considered of the same ethnic origin as their parents. Though they speak, read and write Igbo language fluently, this study has proved that mastery of a language is beyond mere completion of questionnaire based on the responses supplied by the subject. In all, the students were trilingual (spoke Igbo, Yorùbá and English). The task was to translate the texts from Igbo to French. The 'Fiche pédagogique' comprised of the following final objectives:

i. Le Vocabulaire/vocabulary: finding synonyms of the new/difficult words or expressions in French

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ii. La traduction/translation: replacing the difficult words with 2 or more equivalents in the target language

iii. La grammaire/grammar: using the right verbs in translating from the source language to the target language (Igbo/English to French)

iv. La comprehension ecrite/written comprehension. For example-

Igbo	English	French
Nke e ji n'aka **ka udu ehi'/Nkemji ka**	A bird in hand **is worth** two in the bush'	Un tiens **vaut mieux** que deux tu l'auras'

Since not many proverbs follow the same pattern, the emphasis will be to test their competence in getting the appropriate equivalent while translating the proverbs or idiomatic expressions. What Saussure refers to as the 'value' of a sign depends on its relations with other signs within the system. A sign has no 'absolute' value independent of this context (Saussure, 1983).

This then means that a linguistic sign is linked to a referent which in turn is linked to another sign in the target language through adaptation of equivalents: "un signe linguistique dans une langue de départ est lié à un référent donné . Ce référent peut trouver un signe linguistique dans la langue cible à travers les adaptations » (Our translation).

Adaptation here interpreted as: the necessary process of expression of meaning which seeks to render in a given speech act the approriate or desired communicative equivalence, which otherwise would not have been possible in a direct translation.

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3.1 Results

A. Proverb

"Nwam agbaala aji adighi nma n'onu nna nwa".

This posed the greatest problem to the students for the following reasons-:

- They could not dare translate the text into French because socially this proverb can only be heard among the elders.
- The students considered us (their teachers) as elders hence the `fear` to even admit that they knew the meaning.

Imagine a real life situation where they will be confronted with simultaneous interpretation at an international gathering, or to translate such proverbs contained in a book, magazine or novel meant to be translated from Igbo to French. There will be misunderstanding of course.

For purpose of clarification, the proverb literarily means that-

English - *`It is not for a father to inform the public that the daughter has come of age`.*

Or French - *`un père ne devra pas voir la nudité de sa fille qui atteint la puberté`.*

But the appropriate translation is*: some truths are better left unsaid.*

By this, they extol the virtues of parenthood and marriage which is epitomised in childbearing. But for adolescents and children or even unmarried girls, the song is prohibited. They are regarded as a non-target audience. In other words, the Igbo culture has in turn affected the mastery of the Igbo language by youths with particular reference to socialization process. Thus in translation of these texts, NONE, among the 5 students who were asked to translate the texts, was able to do so. Their major reason was that the words in the texts were beyond their comprehension. Therefore they did not grasp the contextual meaning of the texts. In other words, this is a good example of semantic barrier.

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3.2 Discussion

A. Song

Igbo*: "Gbasaa okpu mbara*

Eeeee! Okpu mbara mbara."

Just like we anticipated, the students made a literal translation of the song without considering the pragmatic aspect of the song. This we partly attribute to their not being conversant with the source culture and language which denies them understanding of the connotative or the socio-cultural aspect of the song.

They did not see the need to translate this song since there is an equivalent of the song in English which serves the same purpose for the children of the same age bracket of the target audience.

English*: "Wider, wider, Wider!*

Form a circle, a big circle".

French: *Elargissons le cercle, Oui, elargissons-le*

Incidentally, we gave this Igbo song to a 45- year old Igbo man to translate. This is his rendition:

"Spread your legs wide, your husband is around'

From his own rendition, it is clear that he has the mastery of the language. This accounted for his understanding the pragmatic and socio-cultural undertone of the song. This text is a perfect example of mastery of mother tongue. Had it been translated by someone who does not have mastery of Igbo, the verb and the pronoun would have been difficult to translate to give a full contextual meaning.

4. Implications

One needs not be a sociolinguist to observe that there may be some insensitivity existing at the social level in language use. When an educationist seeks the right to use indigenous mother languages in primary school classes, his reasons are not necessarily political, ideological or even cultural. His choice is based on psycho-pedagogical requirements recently brought to the forefront by research into learning psychology.

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There is no longer any doubt that the use of national languages will, over the next few years, be at the very heart of all the great educational reforms already planned nearly everywhere south of the Sahara. Once again, this near-unanimity is not a matter of chance, nor is it only due to a certain convergence of cultural policies; rather is it the result of a new pedagogical awareness brought about by the appearance of the new, scientific basis to educational theory and the clear influence of psychology as applied to education which has underlined the irreplaceable role played by mother languages in assuring continuity in the child's psychomotor, affective and cognitive development.

Furthermore, the use of indigenous languages is not necessarily to the detriment of languages which provide access to national or international cultures, and it is undeniable that African school systems are today heading towards institutionalised bilingualism in schools. Most African officials seem convinced of this truth, as can be seen by looking at the official instructions that are in practice in the various countries that are open to linguistic reform (Rwanda, Burkina Faso, Togo etc). It can indeed be easily upheld that what is good for the promotion of national languages in schools is good for the promotion of foreign languages.

Psychologists have clearly shown that repressing the mother tongue in a child is extremely dangerous for the development of his cognitive faculties. Further normal developments of his capacities of expression in the target language are hindered in this way. By denying the young African the possibility of using his own language in order to provide him with an instrument of communication which is still totally unusable at the beginning of his school life, the school puts him in a situation in which he has no means of exteriorizing his feelings or expressing his interests.

By denying him his right to use his mother language, it neutralises him. Recent developments in Nigerian language policy have further encouraged the need to learn French and other languages like Chinese and Russian. To the ignorant, French is the "Second official language"; while to educationists and teachers French is the "2nd foreign language after English" and one of the major

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subjects in the primary and Junior secondary school curricula. Language policy is one thing, policy implementation is another. It is not enough to make French language a compulsory subject in Nigerian primary and Junior Secondary levels of education; rather we have to be more concerned over the communicative competence of graduates produced in this language. Need we look any further for the reasons for the decline in the standard of even the language of instruction, English, which teachers have noticed at all levels of education in Nigeria? This decline may partly be explained by, but not limited to the following factors:

- The priority given to the ambitious aim of providing schooling for everyone
- Having approached the teaching of the foreign language too soon, at a time when discrimination between concepts, which normally takes place with the support of the mother language, was being learnt
- Poor practical knowledge of Mother tongue, which represents a handicap to the development of mental operations (this third factor has been at the origin of a poor grasp of fundamentals in French language noticed in the undergraduate students who participated in this study).

The child thinks compares and evaluates, and he does it through his mother language because it represents his only possibility of actively verbalizing. By imposing an inappropriate means of communication on him, have we not quite simply tried to deprive him of the words and structures necessary for conceptualization? Of course, we know very well that verbal expression is not enough to provide the child with the corresponding concept because the structures defining the concept are rooted in activities and deeper *sensori-motor* mechanisms than language itself. If we encourage the use of the mother tongue in primary education, we could achieve the following:

- Simultaneously satisfy that initial condition and offer the child the stabilising possibility of expressing his interests, needs and thoughts at all times.
- His thinking will thus become better defined, clearer and richer and he can learn a foreign language better.

In this way, the mother language appears as a powerful ally, an excellent complement which may even speed up the learning of an international language of communication wherever functional

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bi/plurilingualism is installed in schools. This was indeed stated explicitly by the experts who met at the 9th International Symposium on Second Languages (Tunis, 24th - 27th April 1967) when they expressed the wish that:“ it should be recognized that, far from representing a brake, the study and understanding of African languages brings an irreplaceable positive contribution to the use of official languages”. This interdependence in the teaching process – for in no way must the linguistic elements of either language be violated - naturally benefits the mother language which the pupils can read and write and it benefits the foreign language which is acquired more easily, more quickly and more completely; it also benefits the teacher who can teach more in less time and it benefits the pupil who is doubly enriched by being able to move without difficulty from one language to another.

More than a decade after their pioneer works in second language acquisition(WTC), the eminent scholars, forerunners in the field of second language acquisition (Gregersen, MacIntyre, Komorowska) recently reviewed their stand on second language acquisition with a view to promoting positive psychology. By this we mean - "understanding, testing, discovering and promoting the factors that allow individuals and communities to thrive[iv]". So, in the case of Foreign language acquisition, French scholars concentrate on English as a second/Foreign language. This then makes this present study a pioneer work (at least for Africa). One B.A thesis worked on Teaching idioms (Jessica K. Rodiguez & Helena Winnberg 2013) and bordered on devising approaches to enhance learner’s comprehension of idioms.

5. Limitations of Study and Directions for further studies

The bilingualism we hoped to identify in the translated versions of texts/songs given to the 5 students who participated in this study was at threshold level of the CECR)[v]. For the concerned students to achieve Advanced level at the end of 4 years of their study in UNILAG, the lecturers will have to give extra hours of language classes for a period of 25hours each semester. However, we realised that this could be attributed to the following reasons:

1. Competence is not only manifested in ‘translation studies’ (Nwosu 2014) Of course this may well be applied in other fields, but we only depicted the scenario from

pedago-lingual[1] point of view.

2. As for knowledge categories, the students for this study should have been selected from among non-language major students, or even French language teachers at secondary level, but who are perfectly bilingual(English/French).

We are therefore inviting the stakeholders in education, policy analysts to sponsor further researches in foreign language acquisition with a view to incorporating multilingual and intercultural competence in the course content/curriculum of both the major Nigerian languages, English, French and other foreign languages currently studied at the secondary and tertiary levels.

Conclusion

We are of the opinion that the acquisition of competence in mother tongue is very important, although not all Foreign language (here we refer to French) teachers seem to consider it such a pressing problem. The analysis of the corpus for this study has shown that although the lack of mastery of the learners' mother tongue may not be such a serious obstacle, there are of course problems that can be attributed to this lack (see implications in page 11,12). It will therefore make sense to consider the possibilities of remedying the situation. For the researchers and experts in the field of computational linguistics, lexicographs, terminologues, etc., this study has opened the way for African languages to be considered in the bilingualism of any language graduate. As long as there are no policies to encourage the use of mother tongue in Primary education and no developments in this direction, it is most likely that, come what may, there will continue to be problems arising from semantic barrier especially for those foreign language learners of today who intend to become (global) translators/interpreters tomorrow.

[1] Author's word.

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Fiche pédagogique

Conter autrement- les idiomes et proverbes (Say it differently:Narrating with Idioms & proverbs)

Niveau/Level**:** **B1+**

Compétence visée : **Production et compréhension écrites**

Objectifs: 1. **Pragmatique** : rédiger un conte traditionnel nigérian en français. 2. **Linguistique Grammatical** : restituer en français les temps verbaux tels qu'ils ont été employés en langue de départ, tout en gardant le sens du thème. Par exemple :

Langue	**Proverbe**	**Idiome**	**Temps verbal/mode**	**Thème**
Igbo (Langue maternelle/ L1)	nkwu **rere ure** awunyere n'ikwe **furu efu** »	nlagburu ihe n'afọ agụ	infinitif	Lies/similarity/déjà vu
Anglais (langue de scolarisation- L2)	Like father, like son	Have a clear miss	infinitif	
Français (langue cible-L3)	Tel père, tel fils	Echapper belle	infinitif	Luck

Anglais	**Francais**	**Igbo**
To be ingenious	**Avoir** de suite dans les idées.	?????
Beat around the bush	**Tourner autour** du pot	ị gba ụka gbụrụgbụrụ/ Ikwu okwu ugha
Between the devil and the deep blue sea	**Entre** le marteau et l'enclume	agbalagha ajo mmadu, agbakwuru ajo mmuo
Come what may	Advienne que pourra	E mere elu, e mere ala/dulaka dulaka

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To make a mountain out of a molehill	S'en faire une montagne	Icho igwu n'isi akpuru akpu

Lexicaux : compréhension du thème des expressions idiomatiques ainsi que les proverbes, pouvoir rendre leurs équivalents dans la narration.

Déroulement :

1 ère étape: Demander aux étudiants de rédiger le conte- Pourquoi le lézard incline la tête

2ème étape: D'intégrer dans la narration les expressions idiomatiques dans la séquence d'actions (intrigue)

3ème étape: Noter tous les idiomes et proverbes présents dans les récits des étudiants. Puis, leur faire échanger les copies afin d'apprécier ce qu'ont écrit d'autres participants et voir si les proverbes et idiomes évoquent les mêmes sentiments ou excitent les mêmes souvenirs ou représentent les mêmes faits culturels.

Endnotes

[i] Harris, R. 1988. Language, Saussure and Wittgenstein. Routledge.Pix

[ii] Author's appelation

[iii] Translation software

[iv] (*Positive Psychology Manifesto*, Sheldon *et al.*, 2000). Its topics embrace the following areas of study and their applications: "flourishing, happiness & eudemonia, hope, gratitude, interest, joy, wellbeing, resiliency, hardiness, and the signature strengths of learners" (Gregersen, MacIntyre & Mercer 2014, unpublished).

[v] Cadre Europeen commun de reference pour les langues- Common European framework for languages