

ELUCIDATING THE PROBLEM OF TRANSLATION IN AFRICAN PHILOSOPHY

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Abstract

The world today is marked by linguistic diversity. It has nonetheless been described as a global village. Consequently, there is a growing interest in understanding issues across cultures and languages. This has necessitated the translation of texts and thoughts into languages that can reach out to a greater number of people. The challenge, however, has been to retain the originally intended meaning in the new language into which a text is translated. The concern of this paper is to elucidate the concept of translation and the views of philosophers on the concept, with a view to understanding the problem of translation, especially as it relates to African Philosophy. Ultimately, this research establishes that the problem of translating

African philosophical thought can be addressed through (a) improved capacity building of African translators, (b) better access to resources and increased collaboration between African and non-African scholars, and (c) use of a “third language” as a medium of communication, which can help bridge cultural and linguistic gaps between African and non-African philosophical thoughts.

Key Words: Philosophy, African Philosophy, Original, Meaning, Text, Language, Translation, African Translators

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to investigate the issue of translation in African philosophy. First and foremost, this paper clarifies the meaning of translation. It progresses by discussing some theories of translation (Philological, Linguistic, Communicative and Socio-economic Theories of translation, respectively). Particularly, this paper x-rays W.V.O and Benjamin Lee Whorf’s notions of translation. Thereafter, this paper succinctly elucidates the problem of translation, taking into consideration the challenges and problems it poses. It goes on to identify a range of language and cultural factors that impede effective translation and communication of African philosophical thoughts. Finally, this paper proposes (a) improved capacity building of African translators, (b) better access to resources and increased collaboration between African

and non-African scholars, and (c) use of a “third language” as a medium of communication as possible solutions to the problem of translation in African philosophy.

Understanding the Meaning of Translation

To understand the problem of translation, it is apt that one first understands the meaning and nature of translation. As a concept, translation is open to many determinations depending on the person who defines it. Etymologically, the term ‘translation’ is derived from the Latin word *translatio*, which is itself a fusion of two Latin words, *trans* and *latum* (Sowndarya and Lavanya, 2021). When taken together, *translation* means ‘carrying across’ or more fittingly, ‘bringing across.’ The underlying idea here is that translation is an attempt to convey something; in this case, a meaning. The conveyance of meaning has remained one of the major paradigms for defining translation. J. C. Catford succinctly expresses this point when he avers that, “it is generally agreed that *meaning* is important in translation [...] indeed translation has often been defined with reference to meaning; a translation is said to ‘have the same meaning’ as the original” (Catford, 1965, 35).

Following the above line of thought, Kirsten Malmkjaer defines translation as an activity that aims at conveying meaning or meanings of a given linguistic discourse from one language to another (Malmkjaer, 2011, 86). Similarly, Amira Osman conceives translation as a “mental activity in which a meaning of

given linguistic discourse is rendered from one language to another” (Osman, 2017). Both definitions capture the fact that in every translation process, there is a source and there is a target. Generally, the language to be translated is called the source language (SL), while the language to be translated into is called the target language (TL). These terms have become common among scholars in the field of translation. It follows then that the process of translation involves a triadic relation between two languages, or more precisely, two expressions in different languages, and a common meaning they share (Haas, 1962, 208-228).

According to Catford, “translation is an operation performed on language: a process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another” (Catford, 1965, 1). He also defines translation as “the replacement of textual material in one language (SL) by equivalent textual material in another language (TL)” (Catford, 1965, 20). Catford’s stance, as with the aforementioned definitions, provides us sufficient grounds for conceiving translation as both a process and a product. It is a process because it is an activity that people engage in to render meaning from one language into another. However, beyond being a process, translation is also a product because it makes available to us the thoughts and ideas that are embedded in other cultures and worldviews.

Another idea that runs through the above definitions of translation is the idea of equivalence in

meaning. Catford's definition, for instance, presupposes that when meanings are equivalent in the source language and the target language, the translation is made possible. The question that looms here is: does equivalence equate sameness? This question has for long preoccupied scholars in the field of translation and philosophers alike. In my own view, it is at this point that the language question in African philosophy arises.

Theories of Translation

Broadly speaking, there is no consensus about what should consist a theory of translation. In fact, some scholars pride themselves in denying that they have any theory of translation (Nida, 1991, 19-32). This problem is premised on the ground that most scholars emphasize certain aspects of the concept of translation in putting forward their position, and this is allied by the dearth of systematic investigation into the views expressed by scholars so as to give a unified theory of translation (Nida, 1991, 20).

In an attempt to provide a compass for navigating the intellectual terrains of the discourse on the theories of translation, Eugene Nida offers a workable definition of what a theory should be. According to Nida:

A theory should be a coherent and integrated set of propositions used for explaining a class of phenomena. But a fully satisfying theory of translating should be more than a list of rules-of-thumb by which translators have generally succeeded in reproducing reasonably adequate

rendering of source texts. A satisfactory theory should help in the recognition of elements which have not been recognized before... A theory should provide a measure of predictability about the degree of success to be expected for the use of certain principles, given the particular expectations of an audience, the nature of the content, the amount of information carried by the form of the discourse, and the circumstance of use (Nida, 1991, 20).

The above characterization of what a theory should be provides a framework upon which Nida makes a classification of the views expressed by scholars. For Nida, the theories of translation can be broadly categorized into four, namely, the philological theories or perspective, the linguistic theories, the communicative theories and the socio-semiotic theories. The foregoing categorization takes into account certain factors that come into play in the process of translation and each of the theories, or more precisely approaches/perspective, of translation emphasize one factor over another. The factors here include the following:

- I. The source text, including its production, transmission and history of interpretation.
- II. The languages involved in restructuring the source language message into the receptor (or target) language.

- III. The communication events which constitute the setting of the source message and the translated text.
- IV. The variety of codes involved in the respective communication events (Nida, 1991, 21).

These four factors correspond with the areas of the aforementioned theories of, or approaches to translation. What we can deduce from the foregoing is that while each approach to translation emphasizes one factor over the other, it does not mean that the theories or approaches are mutually exclusive or competitive. Rather, the various approaches are complementary in the search for an adequately sufficient account of translation. We shall now briefly discuss the theories below.

Philological Theories of Translation

These theories evolved prior to the Second World War (Shaheen, 1991, 12). The views that have been classified as philological are usually concerned with faithfulness to the content of a text to be translated. Thus, the views of scholars here tend to focus more on the problem of equivalence of literary text by comparing and contrasting the SL and TL (Shaheen, 1991, 12). Some prominent scholars here are: John Dryden, Arthur Schopenhauer, and Friedrich Nietzsche among others.

Linguistic Theories of Translation

Linguistic theories of translation are, according to Nida, “based on a comparison of linguistic structures of

source and receptor text rather than on a comparison of literary genres and stylistic features” (Nida, 1976, 69). In other words, the linguistic theories focus more on the structure of the languages involved in the process of translation than on any other factor. Some scholars consider this to be the most faithful form of translation because it pays close attention to linguistic equivalence of expressions in SL and TL. Scholars who subscribe to this view include: Ludwig Wittgenstein and W.V.O Quine.

Communicative Theories of Translation

The central focus of the communicative theories is to understand the principles of translating which focus upon various processes in communication. According to Nida, “any approach to translating based on communication theory must give considerable attention to the paralinguistic and extralinguistic features of oral and written messages” (Nida, 1976, 25). Some of such paralinguistic features of communication include pitch, volume, intonation, and so on, which have the capacity to give nuanced meaning and convey emotions, or modify meaning entirely. Simply put, the communicative theories of translation combine the form and content of an expression in a bid to understand the meaning of such an expression. Frontline advocates of this view include George Mounin and Katharina Reiss.

Socio-semiotic Theories of Translation

The socio-semiotic theories of translation evolved as a result of the dissatisfaction with the linguistic

theories of translation. There are certain codes in a communication process that words alone cannot exhaust. These codes include among others the speaker's sincerity, commitment to truth, breath of learning and so on which come into play in both oral and written communication (Nida, 1976, 27).

The above theories of translation, no doubt, aid our understanding of the process of translation from diverse perspectives. However, for the purpose of this research, we shall focus on the linguistic theories of translation, especially as it is expressed in the works of W.V.O Quine and Benjamin Whorf.

W.V.O Quine's Notion of Translation

Quine's postulation on the concept of translation was first propounded in 1960 (Hallen, 1995, 377-393). It was at this time that he developed his Indeterminacy Thesis (IT), which has elicited several and divergent responses from scholars. Commenting on the difficulty that arises in translation, Quine notes that:

Manuals for translating one language into another can be set up in divergent ways, all compatible with the totality of speech dispositions, yet incompatible with one another. In countless places they will diverge in giving, as their respective translations of a sentence of the one language, sentences of the other language which stand to each other in no plausible sort of equivalence however loose. The firmer the direct link of a sentence with

non-verbal stimulation, of course, the less drastically its translations can diverge from one another from manual to manual (Quine, 1960, 27).

The above points to the problematic that lies in translating a text or a language. It raises the question as to whether a translator is able to wade through the conceptual network embedded in alien languages. For instance, the Yoruba word *Orimay* be translated in diverse ways, depending on context of usage, but no matter the language into which it is translated, the full meaning of the word *Ori* is hardly ever captured. This raises the doubts about the claims to accurate translation. Godwin Sogolo, affirming Quine's postulation, explains that "in translating our language into an alien one [,] or an alien one into ours, we must not pretend that the original meanings are conveyed" (Sogolo, 1993, 28).

Essentially, the Indeterminacy thesis, or the principle of indeterminacy of translation, as it is also called, is undergirded by a skeptical attitude as to whether we can arrive at exact meaning of words or concepts that are translated without some form of conceptual and ontological imposition. From Quine's perspective, when a translator is saddled with the task of translating a foreign language into, for instance, English, such a translator begins by making observation of the "language game" of the foreign language and proceeds to establish a correlation between 'observation sentences' in the foreign language and in the English

language (Bolton, 1979, 329-346). What this implies is that Quine's notion of translation is tied to verificationism of the logical positivist and psychological behaviourism. This is so because, the linguist studies the language and behavior of native speakers of a language before he makes translations.

Beyond the linguistic limitation on which Quine based his argument, he also posits that from an ontological viewpoint, the idea of accurate or exact translation is equally very difficult. This is hinged on his idea of ontological relativity. Central to the idea of ontological relativism is the view that there is no objective means or mode of translation that can be universalized. As such, since different languages have different means of carrying out the dissection of reality, linguists would need to immerse themselves in the culture from which they are to translate a text (Egbunu, 2014, 368).

In sum, Quine's notion of translation can be best understood from the standpoint of empiricism, so that upon observation of behavior and verificationism, which are tied to the process of translation, in Quine's view, one can conclude that "the totality of all possible empirical evidence cannot always determine whether a given translation - to the exclusion of other contrary translations - is right or wrong, even though the translation in question is incompatible and perhaps even contradictory" (Ranganathan, 2007, 4). This further buttresses the argument that meaning as a guiding

principle for translation lacks objectivity. This being the case, it leaves room for conceptual imposition by the translator.

Benjamin Lee Whorf's Notion of Translation

The Whorfian approach to translation can be deduced from Whorf's analysis of language. Broadly speaking, Whorf is of the view that language provides the concepts for representing, determining and making sense of our experience of reality. In other words, the structure of a people's language shapes their world. Whorf built on the ideas of his teacher Edward Sapir in developing his position which centers on linguistic relativity. Whorf argues that a person who speaks one language will experience the world in a radically different manner from the speakers of another language. Whorf arrived at this conclusion based on his extensive study of the Native American language called Hopi (Baha, 2001, 19).

The underlying thought in Whorf's postulation, or the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, as it is described in linguistic discourse, is that every language is colored by certain metaphysical nuances that cannot be overlooked. Olusegun Oladipo explains that Whorf's desire in analyzing language was to show that "ordinary languages are loaded with worldviews and metaphysics and more significantly, a person's language determines, at least, in part the way he perceives and conceives the world" (Oladipo, 2006, 44). The implication this has for translation is that when a translator tries to translate a

text from one language into another, the translator is very likely to distort the meaning in the source language because of the way and manner in which his own language has shaped his view of the world.

Whorf's view, as with that of Quine, brings to the fore the problem faced in the process of translation. The views of both scholars call into question the dominant belief that meanings can be transferred adequately from one language to another. It is, however, important to note that these views do not negate or disparage the importance of translation, but they more significantly draw our attention to the 'epistemic deficit' that is embedded in the translation process.

Elucidating the Problem of Translation in African Philosophy

From the foregoing exposition, we can conceptualise the problem of translation as the challenge of retaining the originally intended meaning of an expression in one language (SL) in an equivalent expression in another language (TL). The question of semantic equivalence, as we have seen in Quine and Whorf, is one that poses a problem in the process of translation. This problem finds further expression in the view of Herbert P. Philips. Philips argues that complete semantic equivalence is illusory and fleeting. He notes, from an anthropological viewpoint, that:

... the field worker should be frank to admit that no matter how much care he devotes to the translation process, it is in absolute terms an

unsolvable problem, and the best he can hope for are *good approximations* between the meanings of the two languages. Complete semantic equivalence is a statistical fiction. The reasons for this are clear: Almost any utterance in any language carries with it a set of assumptions, feelings, and values which the speaker may or may not be aware of, but which the field worker, as an outsider, usually is not... (Philips, 1959, 184-192).

The lacuna between the field worker or translator and the assumption and values which undergird a language creates a leeway for conceptual impositions and distortion of the originally intended meaning. Barry Hallen opines that the process of translation is fraught with distortions owing to bias. For example, as a result of imposing English meanings upon other languages in the process of translation, there is bound to be bias. He attributes this bias to the fact that each natural language is a unique human creation that has its own conceptual network(s), ontologically, epistemologically, aesthetically *etcetera* with distinctive semantic disposition (Egbunu, 2014, 368).

Language and Cultural Factors that Impede Effective Translation and Communication of African Philosophical Thoughts

It should be noted that there are a number of language and cultural factors that impede effective

translation and communication of African philosophical thoughts. These include:

1. Lack of a standard language that is generally used across the entire African continent.
2. Limited resources available to translators, cultural differences between African and non-African thoughts.
3. The need to adapt philosophical concepts to African contexts.

These problems lead to lack of clarity and accuracy in translation of African philosophical thoughts, thus challenging the possibility of reaching a true understanding of African philosophy.

Addressing the Problem of Translation in African Philosophy

In our opinion, the problem of translating African philosophical thoughts can be addressed in the following ways:

1. Improved capacity building of African translators

Those who are involved in translation of African philosophical thoughts should endeavor to commit themselves to constant capacity-building and improvement by always seeking to develop their skill set. In other words, African translators should never cease to seek more knowledge about a language they are involved with. In order to attain appreciable expertise in any African language, a translator should endlessly strive to understand the dynamics of that language. Undoubtedly, if translators are versed in the

dynamics of African languages, they will be greatly disposed to come up with translations that properly convey the actual and intended meanings of African philosophical thoughts.

2. Better access to resources and increased collaboration between African and non-African scholars

Those who are involved in translation of African philosophical thoughts will do better if they have better access to resources. One of the resources a translator should have unlimited access to is the original version of what he/she wants to translate. Usually, when an idea or a thought is translated directly from the original language in which it was written, there is a greater chance that the idea or thought will not be adulterated. Conversely, if an idea or a thought is not translated directly from the original language in which it was written, there is a greater chance that the idea or thought will be adulterated. Consequently, it is important that translators be able to access original versions of African philosophical thoughts.

In addition, increased collaboration between African and non-African scholars will also help address the problem of adequately translating African philosophical thoughts from African languages into other languages. When non-African scholars want to get involved in translation of texts written in African languages, they should do well to seek guidance of African scholars who are versed in the languages

involved. This will foster correct translation of African ideas and thoughts.

3. Use of a “third language” as a medium of communication

It is undeniable that African scholars have their own cultures and languages. So also do non-African scholars. Thus, there will always be cultural and linguistic gaps between African and non-African philosophical thoughts. To bridge these gaps, scholars from African and non-African climes should adopt another (a third) language that is understood by them equally. By so doing, both parties will be able to communicate and understand their respective philosophical thoughts. This will go a long way to foster comprehensive understanding and fuller appreciation of African and non-African philosophical thoughts.

These solutions, if implemented, will, to a large extent, help facilitate accurate and precise communication of African philosophical thoughts, thereby allowing for its true appreciation and understanding by members of both African and non-African communities.

Summary and Conclusion

The problem of translation, which this paper elucidates, is essentially the problem of retaining the originally intended meaning of a text or an expression when translating from one language into another. This problem was highlighted in the works of scholars like

W.V.O Quine and Benjamin Lee Whorf, whose views we have espoused in this paper. Both Quine and Whorf's postulation point to the fact that there is an irreconcilable epistemic deficit embedded in the process of translation, which gives room for conceptual distortions. However, the problem of translation can be addressed by employing the measures recommended in this paper, or by considering some other workable ones.

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