NATIVIZATION OF ENGLISH IN NIGERIAN LITERARY TEXTS: A LEXICO-SEMANTIC STUDY OF TRANSLITERATION IN GABRIEL OKARA'S THE VOICE

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Abstract

As a result of the bilingual nature of Nigerian, nay, African nations due to the historical accident of colonialism, the problem of which language (i.e. Indigenous or colonial language) to adopt for literary expression, has lingered on. This has precipitated to the use of various devices by African writers to contextualize aspects of indigenous meaning in the L2 text. Against this background, the present study examines lexico-semantic aspects of transliteration in Gabriel Okara's The Voice (1964), using the parameters of Robert Lado's contrastive analysis. The study explores the various sociolinguistic constraints which determine appropriate lexical choices in the text. The main aim is to enhance understanding and appreciation of the language of Okara's The Voice in particular and African literature in general. The study also highlights the importance of lexis and meaning, as distinctive levels of language, to the construction of any literary discourse.

Introduction

Every Literary text is constructed with language. Therefore, it is imperative to determine how a particular writer has utilized the potentials of language to negotiate meaning(s) for his text. This thesis is anchored on the premise that, as Brumfit and Carter (1986) put it, we need to show "how what is said is said and how meanings are made" within the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic ambience of the text.

As a bilingual and bicultural text, the structure of language use in Okara's The Voice "calls attention to itself" (Murakarovsky, 1964:58), in the sense that the author manipulates and adapts the rhythm, register, syntax and semantics of the English Language to the linguistic and cultural nuances of his native ijaw Language. Specifically, the peculiarity of Okara's linguistic style in the text under study is a product of, or direct response to, the lingering problem of language in African literature. This problem borders on whether or not the colonial linguistic media (i.e. Portuguese, English, French etc), would be able to adequately and authentically express the socio-cultural and linguistic realities of the African continent. Scott (1990) refers to it as the long-standing debate among critics of African literature over the relation between African authors and the colonial linguistic legacy.

This debate which has dominated Africa literature in the past fifty years (Osundare, 2004), stems from a recognition among African scholars/writers of the centrality of language to literature, and the close connection between political independence and cultural emancipation. As literary works are cultural artifacts, the basic thinking is that, the use of colonial languages in African literature is a willing perpetuation of imperialism.

Significantly, there has been a sustained polarity of opinion about the appropriate attitude the African writer should adopt to this phenomenon. These range from the fervidly nationalist to the stridently compromising. Osundare (2004) identified three "attitudes" viz: (i) accommodationist, (ii) gradualist, and (iii) radicalist. According to this scholar, the first group (i.e. accommodationist), which has as its chief promoter, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, favours an outright use of imperialist languages; while the "gradualists" are "the dwellers of the middle of the road", prominent among whom is Ali Mazrui who advocates a de-Anglicization and re-Africanization of the English language, to authentically convey Africa's literary sensibilities. The third group, on the other hand, is the "radicalist" composed of writers who call for an immediate adoption of indigenous African languages as the media of literary expression. Obi Wall and Ngugi Wa Thiongo are proponents and exponents of this attitude.
It is important to note that African scholars who advocate the use of indigenous languages are goaded on by nationalist sentiments, while their counterparts who favour colonial languages place a high premium on the global intelligibility and outreach of a work of art. Instructively, majority of African writers belong to the "gradualist" group identified above (i.e. indigenizing the colonial language). Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Elechi Amadi, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Kofi Awoonor, etc. all fall into this category. In the main, this linguistic constraint would have informed the device of "transliteration" adopted in Okara's The Voice.

Situating the Text

It is imperative to establish the socio-cultural context of Okara's text. This is because the emphasis of a linguistic study of a bilingual text, is on the functional or pragmatic use of language which must reflect the socio-cultural typology in which it grows. In other words, the study is a survey of situated speech, with the context serving as a significant background.

Okara's The Voice is set in the socio-political context of post independent Africa. Specifically, it highlights the moral corruption in high places, as represented by Chief Izongo and his Cohorts. Okolo, on the other hand, represents the handful of genuine moralists and social crusaders who fight for the restoration of sanity and rectitude. The fact that the epidemic of corruption and moral decay spreads to everywhere in the text (i.e. both Amatu and Sologa), underscores its pervasiveness and persistence. The conflict of the text is thus, that between LIGHT and DARKNESS. Essentially, it is against the background of this grim struggle between forces of light and darkness, that linguistic choices in the text are patterned.

Bilingualism and African Literature

We have established Gabriel Okara's text as a bilingual text. It is, therefore, pertinent to shed some light on the term “bilingualism”, in relation to African literature. Bloomfield (1933) defined the term as “the native-like control of two languages”. Lambert (1977) saw it as “the existence of two languages in the repertoire of an individual or a speech community”. The significant thread that runs through both definitions is that the term reflects a situation where two languages are used side by side, whether by an individual or a given society.

Bilingualism is a product of language contact. Appel and (1987:1) confirmed inter alia: “Language contact inevitably leads to bilingualism.” The inference of this is that, at least, two different languages with distinctive features (i.e. lexical, semantic, phonological and syntactic) must come into contact for bilingualism to occur or manifest. Akindele and Adegbite (1992) identified factors such as colonialism, commerce, conquest, annexation and war, etc, as having the potentials to precipitate such language contacts.

The bilingual situation in Africa is traceable to the historical accident of colonialism, which was a by-product of the Berlin conference of 1885, where African nations were balkanized among imperial powers (i.e. Britain, France, Portugal), for administrative purposes. The corollary is that African countries are either Anglophone or Francophone, etc. in addition to the sundry local languages spoken by the compatriots. As literature is an expressive art, the consequent complex linguistic situation is reflected in the literature of these African countries, as explored above.

Alo (1998) has outlined some devices used by African writers to reflect local or indigenous nuances in their styles viz:

i. Coinages, borrowing, etc.
ii. The use of native similes and metaphors
iii. The transfer of rhetorical devices from native languages
iv. The translation of native proverbs, idioms, etc.
v. The use of culturally dependent speech styles
vi. The use of syntactic devices and deviation
vii. Code-switching and code-mixing
viii. Transliteration
It is important to note that, the foregoing devices are adopted, in varying degrees, by different writers to reflect aspects of indigenous meaning. This gives a distinctive African cultural identity to the texts.

**Brief Conceptual Study: Contrastive Analysis, Transliteration and Translation**

According to McAthur (1992), contrastive linguistics is a branch of applied linguistics that "describes similarities and differences between two (or more) languages at such levels as phonology, lexis, grammar and semantics". This concept is relevant to the present study because it enables us to compare and contrast the two languages in question i.e. Ijaw and English.

Based on behaviourist and structuralist theories of the 1950's, Lado's (1957) contrastive analysis operates on two broad principles. The first is that both languages are described separately. Secondly, only patterns form the basis for comparison and not whole languages, for, as Olabode (2001) observed that each language is a complex of a large number of patterns at different levels and at different degrees of delicacy. Therefore, there can be no single general statement accounting for all of these patterns.

On the other hand, Alo (1998) defined “transliteration” as the “process whereby the units of one language, e.g. words, structures, are replaced by those in another language e.g. from a Nigerian language into English ...” The Oxford Advanced Learners’ Dictionary (2000) says it is “to write words or letters using letters of a different alphabet or language”. These definitions imply that the term involves the replacement of each source language word or other units with the units of the target language. Thus, words or structures in the Ijaw language could be converted to the English Language, as is the case in Okara's *The Voice*.

Translation is a related concept. It refers to the neutral term used for all tasks where the meaning of expressions in one language is turned into the meaning of another language, whether the medium is spoken or written (Catford, 1965), without recourse to the structures or rules of the source language. In ranking translation, Catford identified three levels of the term:

(i) Word-for-word translation; i.e. every word in the source language is replaced by the equivalent in the target language.
(ii) Literal translation i.e. the structure of the source language is adapted to the rules of the target language.
(iii) Free translation i.e. the translator has nothing to do with the linguistic structures of the source language.

(see Olabode, 2001)

From the foregoing ranking, it is clear that "transliteration" is an aspect of “translation”.

**Lexico-Semantic Aspects of Transliteration in the Text**

With the foregoing preliminary insights, we shall now examine aspects of lexical and semantic transliteration in Okara's text. The focus on lexico-semantics is, itself, significant. Apart from delineating both concepts as distinctive levels of language, the point is that words are only functional in semantic contexts. This much is echoed by McCarthy and Carter (1988) when they posited that much of what has been written concerning lexis over the years has assumed that the proper place for discussion of the subject is within semantics.

However, in this discourse, we shall restrict our exploration to verbal forms which are culled from the L1 of the author for the expression and contextualization of indigenous meaning, under the following sub-headings:

i. Lexical transliteration i.e. coinages or neologism
ii. Collocational transliteration
iii. Linguistic borrowing
iv. Semantic extension/shift
v. Contextual meaning of Lexical transliteration
Lexical Transliteration: Coinage/Neologisms

In Okara’s *The Voice*, we find a preponderance of lexical coinages that reflect the linguistic milieu of the source language. Apparently, this is a product of the author’s strategy of transliteration. This strategy precipitates a phenomenon of multi-word units or compound neologisms, which abound in the text. With the L2 + L2 structure of these compound neologisms, we observe that meaning is traceable to the source language, though the constituent lexical choices are English. Below are some illustrative examples from the text:

i. You know-nothing people (p. 121)
ii. The caring-nothing feet of the world
iii. We are know-God people (p. 32)
iv. Wrong-doing filled their insides (p. 31)
v. These happening-things (p. 48)
vi. Man-killing medicine (p. 37)
vii. Black-coat-wearing man (p. 37)
ix. Surface-water things (p. 34)
ix. Surface-water laugh (p. 36)
x. Questioning-word (p. 53)
x. Teaching-word (p. 37)
xii. Meeting-place (p. 48)
xiii. Know-nothing footsteps (p. 34)

We may not bother to explain the lexical items underlined above, since their textual meanings are very clear. However, we need to emphasize that, although compounding itself is a lexico-semantic device deployed by writers to encode or foreground textual meaning, they are discussed under neologisms because their inference and usage is unusual and novel, even though the author has used the English code. They are clearly a product of word-for-word translation from the source language (ie. Ijaw), to the target language (ie. English) (see Catford’s 1965) ranking of translation above). Hence Alo (1998) contended that word coinage or neologism occurs ”when a new word is made up or created in order to express a cultural concept, object or institution”. This scholar explains the nature and purpose of innovations in language use inter alia there is the natural human tendency to innovate in language, either for the sake of being creative and original or as a result of the need to express new objects, things or ideas. People are always creating new expressions or altering old ones to fit new ones. Innovations in language are chiefly controlled by the necessities of communication…Innovations in non-native English occur as a result of new cultural identities.

Collocation Transliteration

Collocation is a type of syntagmatic lexical relation which refers to the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. Halliday (1964) sees it as “the company lexical items keep … their propensity for particular neighbours and environments”. In Okara’s *The Voice*, we find this ”co-occurrence” of words as a result of transliteration from the author’s native Ijaw to English. Importantly, these collocations are deliberately and systematically reiterated to establish the cumulative meaning of the text. Collocations such as ”straight things”, “good bottom” and “open inside”, for instance, etch the theme of truth and integrity as championed by Okolo; while “turned world”, stinking things” and “spoil it world” purvey corruption and moral decadence, as orchestrated by Chief Izongo and his aides. The critical point here is that these collocations can only be decoded or interpreted according to the mode of signification in the author’s native Ijaw language.

Linguistic Borrowing

As the term indicates, this phenomenon is basically concerned with the borrowing of linguistic devices from the LI in order to transmit the intended indigenous meaning in the target language or L2. Bloomfield (1933:44) saw it as: “The adoption of features which differ from those of the main tradition”. The implication of this definition is that, linguistic borrowing is essentially engendered by the non-availability of a lexical equivalent(s) of a native concept in the L2. This seems to be informed by Yule’s (1944) hypothesis in his *The Statistical Study of Literary Vocabulary*.
that"... the colour and flavour of a text... are determined by the common words used by the author ...". However, in this text, Okara appears to have used the device indiscriminately (i.e. even where there are lexical equivalents in the L2). Quite apparently, this is in keeping with the technique of transliteration, which is the hallmark of the work. In our exemplification, therefore, we shall show

i. L1 borrowings which have no S.B.E. equivalents and
ii. L1 borrowings which have ready S.B.E. equivalents.

For the latter, we shall bolster our hypothesis by providing the S.B.E. equivalents.

**Borrowings without S.B.E. Equivalents**

a. Things of the soil (p. 61)
b. Things that follow me (p. 62)
c. Things of the ground (p. 65)
d. One with black face (p. 63)

The meaning of all the lexical constructs presented above can only be decoded in the LI sense. This is because they are not available in the L2 code. Specifically, they concern the African belief in ancestors and gods. This religious philosophy is directly opposed to the monotheism of the west. While (a) and (c) above, for instance, refer to the ancestors and gods of the land, (b) refers to guardian gods/spirits and (d) refers specifically to the sea god known as “Benikurukuru” whose face is always being referred to as being charcoal-black.
Borrowings with L2 or S.B.E. Equivalents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>S/N</th>
<th>Source Language (L1)</th>
<th>S.B.E. Equivalent (L2)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>One whose head is not correct (p. 22)</td>
<td>A lunatic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Search with all his inside (p. 23)</td>
<td>Zealously; committedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Fall from our jobs (p. 25)</td>
<td>Lose our jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Search with all his shadow (p. 23)</td>
<td>Spiritedly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>His eyes were not right (p. 23)</td>
<td>Insane</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Okolo has no chest (p. 23)</td>
<td>Lacks courage</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Day's eye (p. 61)</td>
<td>Weather</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>8</td>
<td>Take the canoe to the ground (p. 53)</td>
<td>Ashore</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>9</td>
<td>Hunger held him (p. 52)</td>
<td>He was hungry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>10</td>
<td>Tell me the bottom of it (p. 40)</td>
<td>Meaning; reason; rationale</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11</td>
<td>Entered our ears (p. 51)</td>
<td>Heard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>12</td>
<td>Put a law (p. 51)</td>
<td>Make or enact a law</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>13</td>
<td>Bad head (p. 68)</td>
<td>Unlucky; ill-fated</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
<td>When Okolo came to know himself (p.80)</td>
<td>Regained consciousness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>15</td>
<td>From this standing moment (p. 53)</td>
<td>From this moment</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As earlier stated, the linguistic items in the foregoing table have L2 (SBE) equivalents, which are shown on the right-hand side. The critical point is that, the author ignores the S.B.E form, and uses the source language (L1) form, in line with the technique of transliteration adopted in the text.

 Semantic Shift/Extension

In this situation, the meaning of standard English words are extended to accommodate local sentiments or concepts. It is pertinent to observe that, in Okara’s *The Voice*, semantic extension is a product of transliteration. Let us illustrate this phenomenon with the following two examples:

i. What I do with my money does not touch you (p.92)
   
ii. Did he no part of your body touch? (p. 65)

In S.B.E., "to touch" suggests physical contact. *The Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary* (2000) defines it as "to be or come so close together that there is no space between". In the context of (i) above, Okara has extended it to mean "concern" i.e. "what I do with my money is not your business". In the context of (ii) above, on the other hand, the term has been extended to mean "a deliberate, sensual or lustful contact". In the LI of the author, the term could also suggest copulation or sexual intercourse i.e. "have you touched her?" The major point here is that, the term carries semantic properties of the LI of the author which extend beyond their native English uses.

 Contextual meaning of Lexical Transliteration

Having delineated aspects of lexical transliteration in the text, our next task is to show that these lexical items are only meaningful within the context of the author's native cultural values and environment. The contextual theory of meaning is associated with systemic linguists and constructs can only be decoded against the background of the pattern of signification in the source language. According to Brumfit and Carter (1986:145):
The fact is that, apart from culture-bound lexical constructs such as "spoil world" (which means corrupt world); 'surface-water things' (hypocrisy) "search with all his inside" (spiritedly); "had no chest" (lacks courage); "day's eye" (weather), etc, Okara's transliteration in his *The Voice* is foregrounded by his use of forms for which options are readily available. For illustration, let us examine the table below:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SIN</th>
<th>L1</th>
<th>Transliteration Options in the L2</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I</td>
<td>Teme</td>
<td>(i) Spirit (ii) Shadow</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>li</td>
<td>Gomu iye</td>
<td>Straight thing\true, honest, genuine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lii</td>
<td>Gesi iye</td>
<td>True \ honest thing</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The table above shows that (i) *teme* which is the L1 form, is an ambiguous word. The two meanings are shown in the L2 code. The point is that Okara deliberately opts for "shadow" when, in the actual sense, "spirit" is closer to the L2 code in the following context, for instance:

*He was in search of it with all... his shadow* (p. 23)

The inference is that Okara could have used "... with all his spirit", which is actually more contextually appropriate.

For (ii) and (iii) on the table above, let us examine the following context:

*I could have been a rich man be ... if the straight thing I had not done.* (p. 105).

Though the line between "straight" and "honest/true" is very thin, quite obviously, "true" or "honest" thing would have been closer to the S.B.E. or L2 code.

In a similar vein, the use of "standing moment" (p. 53), which we have earlier identified among borrowings with L2 or SBE equivalent in section 6.3.2, is too ambitious i.e. done without regard to the constraints of transliteration. In the original Ijaw form, it is "tie kiri" i.e. "Standing ground". Obviously, Okara reckoned that the latter (i.e. "standing ground") would be meaningless in the L2 code. Our contention is that, faced with this transliteration constraint, he should have left it at the SBE or L2 form i.e. "from this moment", instead of opting for a form that makes no sense in both codes.

**Conclusion**

In this study, we have shown how a Nigerian writer has nativized the English language to interpret his native sociolinguistic environment. Specifically, we have established that Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* is a bilingual text in the sense that it renders the sociolinguistic features of the writer's L1, in the target language or L2, by exploring the various lexico-semantic resources that reflect its hybrid character.

Importantly, we have also shown that the author's linguistic experiment of "transliteration" is a valid and relevant response to the persistent problem of language in African literature. The implication of this phenomenon is that a lot of socio-cultural and even historical variables come into play in the construction of an African literary text for, as Adekunle (1987:1) put it, for effective communication of textual meaning to take place, there must be "additional knowledge of the socio-cultural variables present in the context of situation." Thus, our finding in this study is that, to fully appreciate the use of words and their meanings in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*, other Nigerian, nay African literary texts, there is the need to situate them in the proper sociolinguistic context.
References


