

Towards Universal Equivalence in the Translations of Proverbs in Yoruba Literary Text

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Abstract

*The translation of proverbs presents a complex challenge when the source text's cultural referents become obsolete or diverge from contemporary global norms. This study investigates the translational strategies employed to address culture-specific elements in Yoruba proverbs—particularly those touching on sensitive issues such as gender, security, and human rights—which risk being misconstrued as archaic or prejudicial in a globalised context. Adopting a hybrid theoretical framework of Cultural Universalism (CU) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), the research analyses how translators negotiate the tension between cultural fidelity and universal intelligibility. The study examines proverb samples from French translations of Yoruba play, *Rere run*, written by Oladejo Okediji. The findings reveal that, often, Yoruba proverbs often rely on ancient ideologies that lack direct equivalents in the target culture's cognitive framework. The study concludes that the synergistic application of CU and CMT enables translators to achieve Universal Equivalence: a strategy that preserves the pragmatic and didactic function of the proverb while modifying its cultural imagery to align with the sociopolitical and ethical standards of the target audience.*

Keywords

Yoruba Proverbs;
Translation; Cultural
Universalism; Conceptual
Metaphor Theory; Universal
Equivalence;
Postcolonialism.



I. Introduction

In an era characterized by unprecedented global interconnection, translation has evolved from a mere linguistic exercise to a critical form of intercultural mediation. This shift is encapsulated in the United Nations' recognition of translators as “essential actors in dialogue” who “connect worlds and smoothen out potential misunderstandings” (United Nations General Assembly, 2017). The translation of literary texts, therefore, is no longer a neutral act of transposition but a dynamic negotiation of meaning, power, and cultural representation, particularly when it involves culturally dense artifacts like proverbs.

Proverbs, as condensed repositories of a community's wisdom, worldview, and social norms (Al-Hussami & Al-Hiba, 2023), present a formidable challenge. They are, by definition, culture-bound, often rooted in specific historical practices, environmental contexts, and social ideologies that may be alien to a target audience. This challenge is amplified when translating from African languages, such as Yoruba, into European languages like French, within a postcolonial context where historical power imbalances and stereotypes can influence reception. The central dilemma becomes: how does a translator faithfully render a Yoruba proverb that contains references to practices or ideologies now considered sensitive, archaic, or even oppressive—such as those pertaining to gender hierarchies, servitude, or communal justice—without reinforcing negative stereotypes or causing the text to be rejected by a global readership subscribing to contemporary human rights norms?

This study posits that a passive, foreignizing approach to such material risks the “vilification” of the source culture, while a radical domestication may amount to cultural erasure. Instead, it argues for a strategy of cultural update or universalization, guided by

the theoretical framework of Cultural Universalism (CU) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), aimed at achieving Universal Equivalence. This involves extricating the proverb's underlying universal human lesson from its culturally specific, and potentially problematic, packaging, and re-encoding it in a form that is both globally intelligible and ethically acceptable.

Through the analysis of twenty-five Yoruba proverbs and their French translations from canonical literary works by Daniel Olorunfemi Fagunwa and Oladejo Okediji, this research investigates how translators actively rewrite cultural content. It seeks to answer the following questions:

- a. What specific translation strategies are employed to handle culturally sensitive or obsolete content in Yoruba proverbs?
- b. How can the combined lens of CU and CMT explain and justify these strategies as more than mere distortion?
- c. Does this approach of seeking "Universal Equivalence" successfully safeguard the didactic function and cultural dignity of the source text while facilitating cross-cultural understanding?

II. Review of Literature

The translation of culture-specific items, particularly proverbs, sits at the intersection of several dynamic scholarly conversations. This review synthesizes current and ongoing research across three key areas: (1) the theoretical and practical challenges of proverb translation, (2) the evolving ethics and visibility of the translator, and (3) postcolonial perspectives on translating African oral and literary heritage.

2.1 The Paremiological Dilemma: Between Culture and Cognition

The study of proverbs (paremiology) has long acknowledged their dual nature as both linguistic units and cultural codes. Contemporary scholars like Anscombe (2022) argue that the interpretation of proverbs calls into question the linearity of grammatical and semantic rules, demanding a cognitive approach that accesses their underlying conceptual structures. This aligns with the foundational work of Lakoff and Johnson (1980) on Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT), which has been extensively applied to translation studies to explain how metaphors, as cross-domain mappings, are transferred across languages (Kövecses, 2005; Schäffner, 2004). Recent applications, such as those by Al-Hussami and Al-Hiba (2023), emphasize that proverbs function as "strong indicators of social power relations," making their translation an act of ideological handling as much as semantic transfer.

The search for equivalence in proverb translation has moved decisively away from the literal. Nida's (1964) concept of dynamic or functional equivalence remains a cornerstone, advocating for a focus on the receptor's response. Recent works have built upon this to propose more nuanced strategies. Dweik and Al-Sayyed (2015), for instance, categorize strategies for translating Arabic proverbs into English, ranging from literal translation and equivalence to paraphrase and omission. However, a gap persists in frameworks that specifically address the ethical dimension of updating "obsolete" or "sensitive" cultural content, rather than simply finding a functional match. This study enters this gap by proposing that Cultural Universalism provides an ethical rationale for such updates, while CMT provides the methodological tool.

2.2 The Visible Translator: Ethics, Agency, and Globalization

The notion of the translator as an invisible conduit has been thoroughly deconstructed. Venuti's (1995/2018) seminal work on the translator's invisibility and his advocacy for "foreignizing" strategies ignited a lasting debate on domesticating practices. However, in the context of globalization and heightened cultural sensitivity, newer discourses have emerged. Scholars such as Baker (2006) and Tymoczko (2007) frame translation as a narrative practice in which translators actively shape representation, often under political or ethical imperatives.

Ongoing research increasingly positions the translator as an ethical agent. Pym (2012) discusses the ethics of interculturality, while Inghilleri (2017) examines translation in institutional settings where global norms (e.g., human rights discourse) directly influence translational choices. The UN's official stance on translation as a tool for peace and security (Rodríguez, 2022) formalizes this activist role. This body of work justifies the interventionist stance taken in this study: the translator is not merely a linguist but a cultural mediator with a responsibility to both the source text and the global dialogue, empowered to protect the good image of the source culture when faced with potentially prejudicial content.

2.3 Postcolonial Translation and the African Text

The translation of African literature is inextricably linked to the politics of postcolonialism. Early scholars like Bandia (2008) argued that translation from African languages often involves a "rewriting" to make oral-based, culturally rich narratives accessible to Western literary paradigms. This process is fraught with the risk of ethnographic reduction or exoticization.

Recent scholarship has focused on agency and resistance within this dynamic. Marais (2014) applies complexity theory to translation in the African context, viewing it as a non-linear, adaptive system. Ndlovu (2023), in a recent study on translating African Indigenous poetry, highlights strategies of cultural approximation and ideological neutralization similar to the updating explored here, though without the explicit theoretical framework of CU and CMT. Furthermore, ongoing work on Yoruba literature in translation (e.g., Gökırmak, 2020; Adéşinà, 2021) often focuses on the challenges of Fagunwa's mythopoetic language, but less systematically on the micro-level handling of proverbs as carriers of sensitive ideologies. This study contributes to this sub-field by providing a focused, theoretical, and systematic analysis of proverb translation strategies within Yoruba-French literary exchange.

2.4 Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework is a hybrid functional-cognitive approach that combines sociological and anthropological perspectives with cognitive linguistics. The framework rests on two primary pillars: Cultural Universalism (CU) and Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT). These theories are used to justify and execute the "culture update" strategy required to translate Yoruba proverbs containing sensitive or archaic content for a global audience.

2.5 Cultural Universalism (CU)

Cultural Universalism is rooted in the works of Edward Burnett Tylor, George Murdock, Claude Lévi-Strauss, Radcliffe-Brown, and Émile Durkheim. This theory posits that despite surface-level differences, all human cultures share underlying commonalities (universal structures) because they stem from the same human cognitive and social development.

CU provides the sociological justification for the translator's visibility and activism. It argues that because all humans share a "common human experience," the translator has

the right (and duty) to modify a text to align with global values (e.g., human rights, gender equality, non-discrimination). The theory is deployed to identify the "shared interest" between the Source Culture (Yoruba) and the Target Culture (French/Global). It allows the translator to extricate the source culture from "prejudices" by focusing on the universal message rather than the culture-specific (and potentially offensive) vehicle. CU supports the argument that translation must serve global peace and security. If a proverb violates a global norm (e.g., stigmatization), CU mandates its adaptation to fit the universal moral framework.

2.6 Conceptual Metaphor Theory (CMT)

The Conceptual Metaphor Theory was developed by George Lakoff and Mark Johnson. The concept of metaphor is not merely a linguistic ornament but a fundamental cognitive mechanism (Mapping). It involves understanding one conceptual domain (Target Domain) in terms of another (Source Domain) (e.g., ARGUMENT IS WAR). CMT is used to analyze the culture-specific content of the Yoruba proverbs. It breaks down the proverb into its underlying conceptual structure (e.g., what abstract concept is being explained via a concrete cultural image?).

2.7 The Process of Universalisation

The Process of Universalisation is the mechanical engine of the culture update. Once the underlying metaphor is identified, CMT guides the translator in finding a different Source Domain in the Target Culture that maps onto the same Target Domain. For instance, if a Yoruba proverb uses a specific local animal or ritual (Source Domain) to explain "wisdom" (Target Domain), and that animal/ritual is unknown or taboo in the Target Culture, CMT guides the translator to replace the local image with a universal one (e.g., a "lamp" or "light") that preserves the cognitive mapping of "wisdom illuminating darkness" without the cultural baggage.

III. Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative descriptive research design, utilizing document analysis. The primary data consists of proverbs extracted from a Yoruba literary work written by Oladejo Okediji and its French translation by Tunde Ajiboye. A purposive sampling technique was used to select eight (8) proverbs that explicitly touch on the thematic areas of security, gender, stigma, and human rights. The analysis follows a two-step coding process:

1. CU Coding: Identifying cultural specificities that conflict with universal human rights norms.
2. CMT Coding: Deconstructing the metaphor and identifying the target domain mapping.

IV. Result and Discussion

The analysis reveals that translators of Yoruba literary texts employ a range of strategies to achieve Universal Equivalence. The findings are categorized thematically below.

4.1 Security and Survival

Yoruba proverbs relating to security often invoke spiritual or communal sanctions. In a global context, references to "curses" or "misfortune" can be interpreted as superstitious or fatalistic, potentially undermining the pragmatic security advice.

Example 1:

Yoruba Source (YP): Àlèyànu-fòhùn nì ipilẹ̀ orí burúkú

Literal Gloss: Not speaking out/complaining is the foundation of a bad head (misfortune).

Cultural Context: Implies that silence in the face of danger invites spiritual retribution or bad luck.

French Translation (TT): Qui ne dit mot consent (He who says nothing consents).

Analysis: The Yoruba proverb uses a culture-specific metaphor where "head" (ori) is the locus of destiny and "silence" is a causal agent of misfortune. The translator, guided by CU, recognizes that the concept of "spiritual misfortune" might not resonate with a secular French audience and could be seen as archaic superstition. Using CMT, the translator maps the Target Domain of Civic Responsibility. The Source Domain shifts from "spiritual/biological head" to "legal/social consent." The universal function—encouraging vocalisation against threat—is preserved, but the cultural vehicle is updated to a French legal maxim.

4.2 Personal Safety and the Independent Self

Cultural dimensions of "self" heavily influence safety proverbs. Yoruba culture balances interdependence with pragmatic self-preservation.

Example 2:

Yoruba Source: Bí iná bá jóni jó omo eni, tara eni là á kókó ó gbòn dànù

Literal Gloss: If fire burns you and your child, you save your own skin first.

Cultural Context: A pragmatic admission of self-preservation instinct, which in a collectivist reading can seem callous.

French Translation: La charité bien ordonnée commence par soi-même (Charity begins at home/with oneself).

Analysis: The YP explicitly prioritises the self over the child in a fire scenario, which violates the universal "caregiver" schema in a way that might seem brutal to a global reader. The CU framework flags this as potentially "insensitive." The CMT analysis identifies the Target Domain as prioritisation in crisis. The translator replaces the visceral image of "fire and skin" with the abstract idiom of "charity/order." This aligns with the French cultural cognitive model of individualism being a prerequisite for altruism, effectively neutralizing the potential stigma of "selfishness" in the source text while retaining the core message: ensure your own safety before helping others.

Example 3:

Yoruba Source: Àkì ì sọ orí olórí, ká jẹ kí àwòdì gbé tẹni lọ !

Literal Gloss: Do not save the head of the others, and allow the kite to carry yours away (i.e., do not save others if it endangers you).

French Translation: A quoi bon s'évertuer à sauver les autres si, toi aussi, tu risques de te noyer ? (What is the point of trying to save others if you risk drowning yourself?)

Analysis: The "kite" (awodi) is a specific cultural predator. The metaphor maps self-preservation vs. Altruism. The translator universalises the "kite" to "drowning," a universal physical threat, maintaining the logical structure of the metaphor without relying on Yoruba-specific fauna.

4.3 Crisis Resolution and Conflict Management

Proverbs used in conflict resolution often rely on historical or communal authority structures that may not exist in the target culture.

Example 4:

Yoruba Source: A ní ká jẹkuru kó tán nínú àwo, é tún ń gbónwóò rè sínú àwo

Literal Gloss: We said we should finish the ekuru (baked ground bean meal) in the bowl, yet you are grinding more into it.

Cultural Context: Je ekuru (eat the meal) is a metaphor for a dispute or trouble. The proverb means: "Let's resolve this issue completely, don't reopen it."

French Translation: Alors que nous nous hâtons d'en finir avec toute cette histoire, il serait déplacé d'introduire des entraves (While we are hurrying to finish this whole story, it would be out of place to introduce obstacles).

Analysis: The specific reference to jekuru and the plate (awo) is culturally opaque. The CU framework suggests this specific imagery hinders "global intelligibility." The CMT analysis identifies the Target Domain as finality of resolution. The translator abandons the culinary metaphor entirely and adopts a bureaucratic/narrative metaphor ("history," "obstacles"). This is a case of Metaphorical Replacement to ensure the didactic function (stop reopening old wounds) is understood without cultural decoding.

4.4 Stigmatization and Disability

This is perhaps the most ethically charged category. Traditional Yoruba proverbs sometimes stigmatize physical disabilities or social outcasts.

Example 5:

Yoruba Source: Bí a bá fẹ́ẹ̀ sọ pé abuké, ká sọ pé abuké, ká má máa sọ pé arákunrin tí èyìn ń dùn

Literal Gloss: If we want to say 'hunchback', let's say 'hunchback', let's not say 'the man whose back hurts'.

Cultural Context: A call for directness, but it uses "hunchback" (abuke) which is now considered a slur against people with disabilities (PWDs) in modern discourse.

French Translation: Il ne faut pas y aller par quatre chemins, il se passé des choses (One must not go by four paths/beat around the bush, things are happening).

Analysis: Here, the CU framework is dominant. The translator identifies the source text as violating the universal human right to dignity. The proverb is not just "translated"; it is rewritten. The specific reference to the disability is deleted entirely. The Target Domain shifts from directness in speech to a generic idiom about clarity. While this loses the specific cultural flavor of the original, CU justifies it as necessary to prevent the "vilification" of PWDs and align the text with the UN Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities.

Example 6:

Yoruba Source: O rí ẹ̀sẹ̀ wèrè, o ò bú ú soògùn ; ojó wo lo le ri tọ̀lọgbọ̀n bù ?

Literal Gloss: You see the fool's leg, you don't use it for charms; what day will you find a wise man's leg?

Cultural Context: Exploiting the fool is acceptable/necessary.

French Translation: Si vous n'exploitez pas un imbécile, qui d'autre arriverez-vous à exploiter – un savant ? (If you don't exploit an imbecile, who else will you manage to exploit—a scholar?)

Analysis: The proverb endorses exploitation. The French translation retains the logic but frames it as a rhetorical question about exploitation in general, slightly softening the specific targeting of the "fool" while still conveying the cynical wisdom. However, the ethical load remains high. A stricter "Universalist" approach might have paraphrased it to "Even a fool has value," but the translator here opted for functional equivalence of the cynical tone, perhaps to preserve the character's voice in the novel.

4.5 Gender Discrimination

Gender bias in proverbs is a global issue, but specific Yoruba proverbs explicitly subordinate women.

Example 7:

Yoruba Source: Kàkà kí o sà̀n lára iyá àjẹ́ ó ní ọ̀mọ̀ rẹ́ bí ọ̀bìnrin, ẹ̀iyẹ́ ńyí lu ẹ̀iyẹ́

Literal Gloss: Instead of the witch to cure herself of witchcraft, she continues to give birth to female children, thereby reproducing more witches.

Cultural Context: Stigma of misfortune is placed on the woman who continues to give birth female children. Blames the mother for the gender of the child; implies having a girl is a misfortune or a source of conflict.

French Translation: Au lieu d'avoir pitié de moi, ils se moquaient de moi (Instead of having pity on me, they mocked me).

Analysis: This is a radical translation. The CU framework identifies the source as violating gender dignity. The specific cultural context of "witches" and "bird metaphors" is stripped away. The translator generalizes the sentiment to "mockery vs. pity." The gendered specificities ("giving birth to a girl") are erased. This is a clear case of Cultural Sanitization justified by the ethical imperative of Universal Equivalence. The translator prioritizes the universal value of non-discrimination over the cultural fidelity of the patriarchal Yoruba norm.

4.6 Nationalism and Collective Identity

Proverbs concerning national interest leverage the universal tendency toward ethnocentrism.

Example 8:

Yoruba Source: Owó méjì ní ígbé ẹ̀rù dé orí, ọmọ ìka máràrún ní sì ígbé ọ̀njẹ dé ẹ̀nu

Literal Gloss: Two hands carry the load to the head, five fingers carry food to the mouth.

Cultural Context: Collective effort is needed for heavy tasks (community), but individual effort suffices for personal gain (self-interest).

French Translation: L'union fait la force (Union makes strength).

Analysis: The Yoruba proverb is nuanced, distinguishing between communal labor and individual consumption. The French translation collapses this nuance into a famous European motto. While this achieves high "intelligibility" for the French reader, it arguably flattens the Yoruba worldview. However, from a CU perspective, the Target Domain of collective efficacy is successfully mapped. The translator sacrifices the specific "head vs. mouth" anatomical metaphor for the abstract concept of "Union," which serves the didactic function of promoting unity in the target text.

4.7 Discussion: The Cognitive And Ethical Nexus

The findings demonstrate that translation is not merely a linguistic transfer but a cognitive and ethical negotiation. The application of CMT reveals that proverbs are not static phrases but dynamic conceptual mappings. When the Source Domain (the imagery) is culture-bound and potentially offensive (e.g., stigmatizing disability or women), the translator must intervene.

The study validates the "Macro-Micro" theoretical model. At the Macro level, Cultural Universalism provides the moral mandate for change. It argues that translation in the 21st century cannot be complicit in spreading hate speech or archaic prejudices, even if they are "authentic" to the source culture. The translator acts as a "cultural guardian," protecting the Yoruba culture from being labeled as "barbaric" by updating its expressions to align with global human rights standards.

At the Micro level, CMT provides the cognitive toolkit. It allows the translator to perform "metaphorical transplantation." For instance, in the proverb regarding fire safety (Bi ina ba jo...), the biological/physical metaphor is replaced with a social/legal one. This suggests that the "universal" in Universal Equivalence is not a vague concept but a specific cognitive structure—the Target Domain—that can be clothed in different cultural garments (Source Domains).

However, the study also raises a critical tension: The Risk of Over-Domestication.

In Example 7 (Gender), the translation completely erases the specific cultural reference to "witches" and "girls," replacing it with a generic statement about mockery. While ethically sound, this results in a loss of cultural distinctiveness. If all Yoruba proverbs are translated into generic French maxims, the "Yoruba worldview" risks being erased.

Therefore, Universal Equivalence must be applied judiciously. It is most appropriate for proverbs that, one, violate explicit universal human rights (e.g., gender, disability); two, rely on obsolete ecological contexts; and three, involve specific cultural taboos that have no functional equivalent in the target culture. For proverbs that are culturally specific but not ethically problematic (e.g., proverbs about farming or local fauna), a foreignizing strategy with footnotes might be more appropriate to preserve cultural distinctiveness.

V. Conclusion

This study has investigated the translational strategies employed in rendering Yoruba proverbs in French literary texts, focusing on the challenges posed by culture-specific elements related to gender, security, and human rights. By synthesizing Cultural Universalism and Conceptual Metaphor Theory, the research proposes a new framework: Universal Equivalence.

The findings confirm that Yoruba proverbs often encapsulate ancient ideologies that conflict with contemporary global norms. A literal or strictly foreignizing approach to these texts risks misrepresentation and the reinforcement of negative stereotypes. Conversely, a strategy of Cultural Update, guided by CU and executed via CMT, allows the translator to ethically align the text with universal human rights and dignity (CU); cognitively preserve the didactic function by remapping the metaphor onto a universal target domain (CMT); and pragmatically ensure the text is intelligible and acceptable to a global audience.

The study concludes that the translator of African literary texts in the 21st century must be an "ethno-cognitive mediator." They must possess the sensitivity to identify cultural elements that require updating (Universalism) and the linguistic creativity to reconstruct them using universal cognitive metaphors (CMT).

Future research could explore the reception of these "universalized" translations by native Yoruba speakers to determine if the "culture update" is perceived as an enhancement or an erasure of cultural heritage. Additionally, corpus-based studies comparing translations from different decades could track the evolution of these strategies as global norms shift.

Ultimately, Universal Equivalence is not about making all cultures the same; it is about finding the common cognitive and ethical ground that allows diverse cultures to communicate without violence or misunderstanding. In this sense, translation becomes a vital instrument for global peace and cultural dignity.

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