

**Semantic and pragmatic interplay: the translation of Igbo proverbs in Achebe's  
*Things Fall Apart* into English and French.**

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**Abstract**

Language is a product of culture. Linguistic codes do not exist in isolation but are born out of socio-cultural values. The representation of these socio-cultural values may pose problems to the one writing African literature in a foreign language. Meanings of expressions, proverbs, myths and tales cannot be decoded semantically unless in their socio-cultural contexts. This study borders on the style of language employed in the creation of African literature. It analyzes the use of foreign language in depicting an aspect of African culture- proverbs. The study examines the semantic presentation of twenty Igbo proverbs into two foreign languages, alongside their pragmatic interpretations. These proverbs were selected from the English and French versions of Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. The examination is done through comparing the English and French versions of the proverbs with their original Igbo meanings. The presentation of the proverbs in English may be considered a translation because the language employed often takes the linguistic pattern of the Igbo language. This in turn affects its translation into French. The result shows that the pragmatic meanings of proverbs are often lost through word for word translation.

**Key Words:** Language, Proverbs, Translation, Literary translation, Culture, Pragmatics, Semantics.

**Résumé**

La langue est un produit de la culture. Les codes linguistiques n'existent pas en isolément mais ils sont nés de valeurs socioculturelles. La représentation de ces valeurs socioculturelles peut poser des problèmes à celui qui écrit la littérature africaine dans une langue étrangère. Les significations d'expressions, de proverbes, de mythes et de contes ne peuvent être décodées sémantiquement que dans leurs contextes socioculturels donnés. Cette étude vise à examiner le style de langage employé dans la création de la littérature africaine. Il analyse l'utilisation de la langue étrangère dans la présentation d'un aspect de la culture africaine - les proverbes. Cet article examine la compréhension sémantique de vingt proverbes igbo en même temps que leurs interprétations pragmatiques en deux langues étrangères. Ces proverbes ont été choisis parmi les versions anglaise et française de *Things Fall Apart* d'Achebe. Cette évaluation s'effectue en comparant les versions anglaise et française des proverbes avec les significations originales en langue Igbo. La présentation des proverbes en anglais peut être considérée comme une traduction parce que la structure employée prend souvent le modèle linguistique de la langue igbo. Ceci à son tour affecte la traduction en français. Le résultat montre que les significations pragmatiques des proverbes sont souvent perdues par la traduction mot à mot.

**Mots clés:** Langage, proverbes, traduction, traduction littéraire, culture, pragmatique, sémantique.

## Introduction

African literature is literature created by Africans. It may equally be considered as authentic and aesthetic works of arts in which experiences originating in and about Africans are integral. African literature can also be seen as literary works created by Africans in any African indigenous language or in any of the inherited colonial languages like English. Pre-colonial African literature did not exist in written form but as oral literature. This was because the technology of printing and publishing was alien to Africa then until the arrival of the European colonialists. In the early 1900, the book *The Black Soul* written by W.E.B DuBois was published. It was an initiation of the black man, as it were, into the league of literary works publishing. In the years that followed, especially before and after the two world wars, many black authors published literary works like *Batouala* of René Maran, *Gouverneur de la Rosée* by René Maran and *Le cahier d'un retour au pays natal* by Aimé Césaire.

African literature in European languages may be considered a translation since the thought pattern of most of the first generation authors of African descent was in their mother tongue while expressing themselves in a foreign language. Chima and Akakuru (2). This phenomenon is still seen in many African literary works currently written in European languages. Good examples can be seen in Achebe in his early works as well as Ahmadou Kouroma in his novel *Les Soleils des Indépendance*. In Kouroma's novel, the French employed was constructed using the structure of his indigenous language just like Achebe did.

This article examines the structure of the English language used in Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* and how it reflects the introduction of the Igbo culture into English with particular reference to proverbs. Twenty proverbs of Igbo origin will be analyzed. The selected proverbs, though of Igbo origin, were written by Achebe in English and subsequently translated into French by Michel Liny.

This study is based on the translation of proverbs. They are often considered as wise sayings commonly understood by people in a given culture. They are popular, short and with economy of words of advice or warning. One can look at proverbs as feathery ornaments with which speech is decorated (1). On the other hand, proverbs are wise sayings based on culture and pregnant with meaning (2). In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Chinua Achebe defines proverbs as the palm oil with which words are eaten (6). Proverbs differ from one culture to another and from one region to another. *They are more generally comprehensible to people within a given socio-cultural milieu*. A good example is the definition that says: proverbs are feathery ornaments that decorate speech. This definition may be strange in a community where feathers are considered an abomination.

We will be considering twenty proverbs selected from Achebe's *Things fall apart*. The method employed to analyze them is in placing the original Igbo proverbs side by side with how Achebe rendered them in English and subsequently the French translations of Michel Ligny. The analysis of the proverbs was done through the use of the semio-pragmatic linguistic theory. The Theory examines the choice of words in a particular language in relation to the meaning they bear or reflect as a product of culture and environment. According to Halliday (307), one of the proponents of this theory:

The linguistic system is a set of environmental or contextual options with input constraints. The options are obligatory in the sense that a language user must choose from them under the social conditions imposed on the language system.

Thus, a literary translator is therefore faced with the task of transmitting not only language but also culture. That is why Hut Kova (2) considers standard literary translation as reflecting all cultural, social and linguistic specifications of source text. The objective is to look at their contextual local colour and see if the same was reproduced in the two European languages. Since language cannot be separated from culture, a proper mediation in literary translation is not only desired but required. It is therefore through this process that this article will project the interplay of the semantic presentation through the pragmatic meanings of the selected proverbs.

### **1. Relationship between language and culture**

Language has been viewed by many linguists as a form of socio-cultural activity. In recent times, the inseparable relationship that exists between language and culture cannot be overemphasized. Thus, the association between language on the one hand and culture on the other can only get stronger. This is because each of them defines the other. Neither language nor culture can exist without the other. Hence, the worldview of a people can obviously be appreciated in the way and manner they linguistically represent their experiences and realities. In most instances, the essence of a culture that defines a people can be measured by the content of the language component and its visibility amongst its native speakers. That is why from birth, through infancy and eventual adulthood, a person's perceptions and appreciation of the world around him/her are more or less associated to the linguistic medium of communication available. Language is therefore a medium to convey thought borne by social experiences. Mbah (306) sustains the position of Malinowski (1946) by defining Language as a vehicle through which the thought system or culture of a people is expressed. She states that:

Language is not an autonomous being but an entity, which entirely depends on the society that uses it to lay the background to systemic functional linguistics. The context sensitive nature of language exists in two planes; language change in relation to the demand of the society that uses it and the meaning derivable from its structure is context dependent.

This can be further explained in that from birth all children can be considered similar. From the moment the child starts understanding and appreciating its environment and existential realities through communication with those therein then the bonding process with the cultural milieu takes off. This means that the things that shape the child's future interactions are generally closely related to the contacts, the social norms and behaviors his environment condones or rejects. The belief system and general practice permitted will equally go a long way to form the personality and character of the child who at birth was devoid of any form of orientation or influence. This shows how culture is a system of acceptable patterns within a given society. It is communicated and transmitted through language. For this reason, a

people's worldview and acceptance of their immediate environment are products of the culture they imbibe as defined by the language they express.

This symbolic relationship between language and culture becomes more interesting if we consider the argument of Emmitt and Pollock (1997). They are of the opinion that even if different people are brought up within the same environment but don't speak the same language their worldview will certainly be a consequence of the difference in linguistic expression. The veracity of their assertion can be found in the intrinsic relationship between language and culture. This means that one is generally limited by the given medium of expression that nurtures ideas. This medium of expression either gives room for the creation and flourishing of ideas or the hindering of same. This is evidenced in those who may have the same cultural background but speak different languages. Therefore thought patterns are more associated with the medium through which they are expressed. This is why the languages we speak have their roots in different cultures and vice versa even as they are handed down from generation to generation.

## **2. Literality as a style of writing in Achebe's works**

Generally speaking, style has to do with the way a literary work is presented through the lens of the author. Its function is to create a particular effect on the target audience. Whereas, literality in this context means a direct transposition of the structure of language 'A' into language 'B' because of a possible linguistic constraint on the part of the author to freely convey his ideas from the language hosting his thoughts into the language he chooses to use. The reason for this constraint cannot be far from the fact that no two languages are sufficiently the same to carry the weight and share the same existential experiences and realities.

For Achebe and his works, the fusion of language and culture aided his style, especially his early works. This can be seen in the context, the situation and the period which defined these works. Taking the example of *Things Fall Apart*, it was written during a period that is generally referred to as transitional. It heralded the transition between the old (colonization) and the new (independence), though the plot was set in pre-colonial times. One therefore understands the effort Achebe's style of literality plays in conveying a message that had two specific audiences. On the one hand was the western audience to let them know that Africa, as represented in the narration, was well structured with functional institutions and distinct cultures that moderated life and the essence of living before the arrival of the Europeans with their alternative lifestyle. This was contrary to the notions of savagery peddled by people like Conrad in his *Heart of Darkness*. On the other hand, the message of Achebe, through his style, sought to rekindle the consciousness of his African brethren towards the glorious past of Africa, associated with self-worth and esteem. He projected those days when western styled administration and religion had not denigrated and disintegrated the once cohesive African society with its enviable socioeconomic, political and cultural ambiance. And that is why Anohu (411) thinks that:

Since language, world view or ideology share an intrinsic relationship, one can infer the peculiar problem of any writer faced with the task of creating literature in an alien language.

Achebe (160) further corroborated this when he said:

I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experiences. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communication with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surrounding.

To understand Achebe's choice of the style, one needs to go back to the basis. Let us take for instance the circumstance of a child who at birth can only appreciate the world around it through the events and those with whom it is associated. Achebe himself was born and raised in an environment where the old was giving way to the new. His thought pattern was thus entrenched therein. Therefore, in spite of the fact that he eventually came in contact with the English language in school, he had already had his thought deeply conceived and captured in his native Igbo language and culture. That was why he used the English language that was at home with its roots but adopted into a new environment to help express his thoughts. In his literary creations, one easily notices the sequence of his thoughts to be deeply attached to the structure of his mother tongue, while using English or the foreign linguistic medium, as it were then, to convey the weight of his words. This ultimately was the driving force of Achebe's style which makes to a large extent, his "Igboness" to bear on the world of his literary creation and the linguistic medium in which it is expressed. This equally permitted him to put across his ideas in a less constraining manner than if he had to do it the other way round, with the Queen's language. These had the advantage of allowing him a free flow of ideas as well as creating the required effect in his audiences. This was even more evident in his representation of proverbs which demands a peculiar use of language in conveying the existential experiences and realities of a people. One certainly realizes throughout the novel the strong presence of the language structure of Achebe's mother tongue through his style of literality.

### 3. List of selected proverbs

| <b>Igbo</b>   | <b>English</b>   | <b>French</b>  |
|---|--|--|
| Ilú bù mmánù ndị̀ Ìgbò jì èrì ókwú  | Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten.<br>(p6)  | Les proverbes sont l'huile de palme qui fait passer les mots avec les idées.(p13)  |
| Égbé bèrè ùgò bèrè òkè sirí ibè yá ebèlà òkù kwáá yá   | Let the kite perch and let the egret perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wings break.(p15) | Que le milan fasse son nid et que l'aigrette fasse aussi le sien. Si l'un dit non à l'autre, que son aile se brise.(p28) |
| Ónyé sòpùrú òkènyè é mécháá òkènyè è rúó yá áká   | A man who pays respect to the great, paves the way to his own greatness.<br>(p15)                      | Un homme qui paie ses respects aux grands prépare le chemin de sa propre grandeur.(p28)                                  |
| Áwò ánāghī̀ àgbá òsọ̀ èhíhìè n'éfù/<br>Nwá ònùnù nọ̀ n'úzọ̀ àgbá égwū<br>nwèrè ihé ná-ákúrú yá òkwá n'òhjá. | The toad does not run during the day time for nothing.<br>(p16)  | Un crapaud ne court pas en plein jour pour rien.<br>(p30)  |

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|---|--|---|
| Á tító ilú ñkíríkà ñkàtà, ónyé tára àhù à mára onweya.                                      | An old woman is always uneasy when dry bones are mentioned in a proverb. (p16)                                       | Une vieille femme est toujours gênée quand on parle d'os desséchés dans un proverbe.(p30)   |
| Ngwèrè sị ñ'élū dàá sị nà ó nwéghị ónyé tóró yá, yà ètòò onwé yá.                           | The lizard that jumped from the high iroko tree to the ground said he would praise himself if no one else did. (p17) | Le lézard qui bondit au sol du haut du grand arbre iroko disait qu'il chanterait ses propres louanges si personne d'autre ne le faisait.(p31) |
| Ñnùnù Ènékē sịrị nà ébé ùmù ñmádù à mụtalá ágbáwá éwēpū áká, nà yá gà-èbídó fēwé ébēghị èbè | Eneke the bird said that since men have learnt to shoot without missing, he has learnt to fly without perching.(p17) | L'oiseau Eneka dit que, depuis que les hommes ont appris à tirer sans manquer leur but, il a appris à voler sans se percher.(p31)             |
| Ányá kà èjì àmá òkà kára àkà  | I can tell a ripe corn by its look.(p17)   | On peut distinguer le maïs mûr à son aspect.(p32)   |
| É léwá ézè ányá ñ'òñū, à gághị èkwé nà ó jì yá ñūó árá ñnē yá.                              | Looking at a kings' mouth, said an old man, one would think he did not suck at his mother's breast.(p21)             | Quand on regarde la bouche d'un roi disait un vieillard, on croirait qu'il n'a jamais suce le sein de sa mère.(p37)                           |
| Ñdị chí há mèrèrè ihé òmá nà-àhú ñdị ózọ kà ñdị ná-áwị árá                                  | Those whose palm kernels were cracked by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble. (p21)                   | Ceux dont les cœurs de palmier étaient tout préparés pour eux par un esprit bienveillant ne devaient pas oublier d'être humbles. (p37)        |
| Ónyé kwé, chí yá èkwé.  | When a man says yes, his <i>chi</i> says yes.  | Quand un homme dit oui, son <i>chi</i> dit oui aussi.   |
| Òkúkò gá-ábú ókē nà-èsí ñ'ējù.  | A chicken that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches. (p52)                                   | Un poussin destiné à devenir un coq, on le remarque le jour même de son éclosion. (p82)   |
| Jinnegùnnyèrè nwátà ñ'áká á nágghị èrè yá oku.  | A child's fingers are not scalded by a piece of yam which its mother puts into its palm. (p53)                       | Les doigts d'un enfant ne sont pas brûlés par un morceau d'igname chaude que sa mère lui met dans la main.(p83)                               |
| Ñkítà sị nà égwùrégwū yá nà ñmádù bù ónyé dààrá íbè, íbè àdààrá ónyē.                       | The dog said; if I fall for you and you fall for me, then it is play. (p58)  | Comme disait le chien : Si je m'abaisse pour vous et que vous vous abaissez pour moi, c'est de jeu.(p90)                                      |

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| Nwátà á kwò ò'ázú ámāghī nà íjè dī ányá.  | A baby on its mother's back does not know that the way is long. (p81)   | Un bébé sur le dos de sa mère ne s'aperçoit pas de la longueur du chemin.(p124)   |
| Mmádù ánághī èbí nà mmírī wèré ásò ná-ákwò áká/ Mmádù ánághī á nò ná mmírī, nchá à bàá yá ányá. | I cannot live on the bank of a river and wash my hands with spittle..(p132)                                   | Je ne peux vivre sur le bord d'une rivière et me laver les mains avec des crachats. (p200)  |
| Ka onye si agba ka e si akuruyankwa.  | As a man danced, so the drums were beaten for him.(p148)  | Telle la danse, tels les battements du tambour.(p224)   |
| Anwugaachakatandikwuototupu o chawandi no n'okpuru ha.  | Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them.(p6) | Nos anciens disent que le soleil brillera sur ceux qui sont debout avant de briller sur ceux qui sont à genoux au-dessous d'eux.(p13) |
| Kedukwanundintorobiaga-anochi anya ndiokenyemgbe ha nwuru ?                                     | Where are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana tree dies?(p52)                                | Où sont les jeunes surgeons qui grandiront quand le vieux bananier mourra ?(p82)  |
| Nneewu n'ataagbanwaya ana eleya anya.   | When mother-cow is chewing grass, its young ones watch its mouth.   | Quand la mère vache rumine, ses petits observent sa bouche.   |

#### 4. Semantic and pragmatic interplay in the translation of Igbo proverbs

In doing a critical study of the twenty Igbo proverbs selected from *Things Fall Apart*, one can notice three styles of presentation.

The first style, which is obviously the most prominent, is literal translation. This implies a word for word translation from Igbo into English and further more into French. Achebe employs literal translation to present the local Igbo culture instead of the use of dynamic equivalents. The reason for this phenomenon is found in the intrinsic relationship between language and culture as presented by Fowler (26). He says that "linguistic codes do not reflect reality neutrally; they interpret, organise and classify the subjects of discourse. They embody theories of how the world is arranged: world views and ideologies.

The second approach Chinua Achebe employs in the presentation of proverbs is restructuring. By this Achebe speaks Igbo in English. He uses the linguistic pattern of the Igbo language to depict extra-linguistic nuances in English. This sometimes makes the semantic presentation of proverbs grammatically wrong. The third approach or style is the use of dynamic equivalents. This means that the author employs expressions that already exist in English language and culture.

## 5. Analysis of the proverbs

Having discussed the three methods employed in presenting proverbs in *Things Fall Apart*, this study will go ahead to examine the selected proverbs chronologically. The first proverb may be considered a definition of proverbs. This definition is deeply rooted in the Igbo culture. Igbo people eat and celebrate yams a lot. Yams may be eaten roasted, fried, boiled in water. Yam is often served with oil, the oil makes it tastier and it goes down easily. In the same manner, proverbs make a discussion richer and *tastier*. This pragmatic meaning was captured in the French translation but not in the English due to literal translation.

There are cases where the French translator attempts to recreate what was written in English. This is permissible in some cases such as the second proverb: *Let the kite perch and let the egret perch too. If one says no to the other, let his wings break.* - *Que le Milan fasse son nid et que l'aigrette fasse aussi le sien. Si l'un dit non à l'autre, que son aille se brise.* The pragmatic sense is not lost but rather serves to enhance the semantic meaning here.

Literal translation was employed from Igbo to English and from English into French in the translation of the third proverb. The pragmatic sense was equally not impaired in all three versions.

In the fourth proverb one observes the use of literal translation in place of an existing dynamic equivalent. The English proverb: *There is no smoke without fire* could have served. However, the author prefers to translate into English, an existing Igbo proverb: *Áwò ánághì àgbá ósọ èhíhìè ñ'éfù.* This is rendered semantically in English and French following the Igbo presentation. The pragmatic meaning- every unusual or uncommon action has a cause - is not lost in the French translation.

One notices the interplay between recreation and literal translation in the presentation of the fifth proverb. The Igbo version reads: *when worn out baskets are used in proverbs, slim people become uneasy.* When one is old and perhaps haggard, one may be referred to as *worn out basket* - in the Igbo context. The novelist attempts a recreation by depicting *old women* in neutral manner.

The agama lizard is a specie of lizard very commonly seen in eastern Nigeria where Igbo speakers dwell. This specie of lizards is generally known for nodding. The nodding of the lizard in Igbo culture is considered as a form of *self praise*. The connotative reason for this self-praise is presented through literal translation in the sixth proverb. Pragmatic sense was lost in French and English as the semantic presentation did not depict the cultural colour.

*Eneke* is a species of bird. The novelist did not employ its English name but chose an Igbo term – *Eneke*. The French translation retains this term as a proper noun. This choice did not change the pragmatic meaning.

Literal translation repeats itself in the eighth proverb, the expression *ripe corn* reoccurs in all three versions. The speaker means that he can recognize an enterprising youth; the semantic construction did not impair pragmatic sense.

Every big tree was once a seedling – this is the pragmatic sense borne by the ninth proverb. Achebe however chooses to employ description, a comparison between a grown king and a suckling child. He compares the mouth with which a king sucked at his mothers' breast and that with which he uses in giving orders. Literal translation from Igbo to English



and from English to French is presented.

Recreation created a conflict in meaning in the French translation of the tenth proverb: *Those whose palm kernels were cracked by a benevolent spirit should not forget to be humble* – *Ceux dont les cœurs de palmier étaient tout préparés pour eux par un esprit bienveillant ne devaient pas oublier d'être humbles*. The term *les cœurs de palmier* is inappropriate to depict palm kernels. A better rendition would be *les noix de palmier*. This shows that translation of proverbs can only be done with the knowledge of the proper contextual and cultural comprehension.

A study of the eleventh proverb shows that one can get divine help by helping one's self. An existing English proverb, *heaven helps those who help themselves* could have depicted this intent. It however pleases Achebe to present Igbo culture in English through literal translation. One notices the term *chi* is used in the French and English versions of the novel, the French translator did not attempt to recreate the work. This is because there is no dynamic equivalent for the term *chi* (personal god) in the French and English context.

The use of dynamic equivalent can be found in the twelfth proverb: *A chicken that will grow into a cock can be spotted the very day it hatches*. In this case, Achebe was not doing a literal translation from Igbo language. Literal translation is however employed from English into French and this did not impair the pragmatic meaning.

The thirteenth proverb is another cultural mirror presenting yams as a symbol in Igbo culture. The analogy drawn from comparing a mother to a deity showcases the Igbo tradition: a deity's instruction is as a mother's piece of hot yam. Literal translation is used in all three versions.

Grammatical restructuring impaired the pragmatic meaning borne by the fourteenth proverb. The expression "*it is play*" is not English-English but rather Nigerian English. Ligny also adopts literal translation which did not capture the cultural context of *dog play* in Igbo context.

There are many cases where pragmatic meaning is not lost through literal translation. One of such cases is the fifteenth proverb. The French translation presented an interplay between literal translation and recreation by explaining why a child on his mother's back will not feel pain. This is greatly appreciated by this study.

Literal translation continues to reappear in our analysis. The sixteenth proverb presents literal translation from Igbo to English. The semantic presentation of the French translation retains this literal translation. The term *spittle* is retained in all three languages.

An interplay between recreation and the use of dynamic equivalent is seen in the French presentation of the seventeenth proverb. Ligny presents a French expression that has almost the same semantic structure as the proverb presented by Achebe. Pragmatic sense is not lost in this case.

The semio-pragmatic linguistic theory states that culture and environment informs the use of language. This is seen in the image drawn with sun in the eighteenth proverb. Literal translation is again employed from Igbo to English and from English into French. These two foreign tongues do not have the environmental factor – sunny weather – to sustain the pragmatic meaning of the proverb.

The nineteenth proverb is another case where dynamic equivalent is employed: *Where*

*are the young suckers that will grow when the old banana trees die?* A study of the table presented shows that this is not a direct translation of an Igbo proverb. The French version however presents a direct translation from English.

One can notice restructuring being employed in the twentieth proverb presented in this study: *When mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth*. One can notice the absence of the article *the* in that sentence. It should have read: *When the mother-cow is chewing grass its young ones watch its mouth*. (The absence of the article is not repeated in the French translation as Michel Ligny presented a grammatically correct sentence which retains the pragmatic sense.)

### **Conclusion**

The study examined how style in literary creation can be a strong consideration in the comprehension of the message of the author. In the case of *Things Fall Apart*, the style of the author consists in forcefully bringing the Igbo language structure into English in his rendering of proverbs. This only goes to show the constraint the author had in freely expressing the semantic content of the proverbs into English as seen in the Igbo versions. Thus, Achebe resorts to literalism as a tool in order to freely express himself. This style is however unique in that it does not only bring the Igbo worldview into English but also showcases the richness of the Igbo culture in a foreign linguistic milieu. Though the semantic build-up of proverbs in the novel may be hindered in a way, it did not completely erode their comprehension taking the different contextual situations in which they are presented. The result is therefore a blend of semantic and pragmatic interplay.

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