



# Exploring the Totality of Knowledge in Drama Texts Translation: The Dilemma between Language and Culture

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## Abstract

The controversy over the extent to which language expresses action especially as a manifestation of arts is phenomenally complex especially when semantics intersects the discourse. Nevertheless, it remains clear that, action as a manifestation of arts has long been taken for granted in thinking that translation deals only with language. The cultural perspective is hardly ever brought into discussion. This can be seen in most of the definitions contained in [1-3] and in even more recent definitions of the late 20th century. The overriding conception is that, translation is the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language. In this popular definition, the most important thing is equivalent textual material. Yet, it is still vague in terms of the type of equivalence devoid of culture assumptions. Very much similar to these assumptions is the undercurrent that translation is made possible by an equivalent of thought that lies behind its different verbal expressions. Within this frame, [3] developed the explication that the process of translating entails reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, first in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style. However, according to, [4] this exclusion of cultural aspect from the discussion of translation theory is due to the view of the traditional approach in linguistics which draws a sharp dividing-line between language and "extra-linguistic reality" (culture, situation, etc.). The contemporary approach, according to her, sees language as an integral part of culture. This view can be seen in [5] and [6], where they consider the link between language and culture as inseparable. Culture as would be considered in this discussion should be seen in a broad sense, as in anthropological studies. That is, within the framework of this study, culture is not only understood as the advanced intellectual development of mankind as reflected in the arts, but all that refers to socially conditioned aspects of human life as [5] clearly affirms.

**Keywords:** Knowledge; Culture; Semantics; Textual material; Linguistics; Meaning; Equivalent

## Introduction

In most of the definitions geared at singularizing the term translation of the late 70s to 90s, some similarities have been found: (1) there is a change of expression from one language to the other, (2) the meaning and message are rendered in the target language (TL), and (3) the translator has an obligation to seek for the closest equivalent in the TL. Yet, there is no indication that culture is taken into account except in that of [3] though in reality, they do not mention this matter very explicitly. Following their explanation on "closest natural equivalent", however, we can infer that cultural

consideration is considered. They maintain that the equivalent sought after in every effort of translating is the one that is so close that the meaning/message can be transferred well. The concept of closest natural equivalent rooted in [3]'s concept of dynamic equivalent is taken from the Bible, which is the translation of Lamb of God into the Eskimo language. Here lamb symbolizes innocence, especially in the context of sacrifice. It is argued that, Eskimo culture does not know lamb thus; the word does not symbolize anything. That is why instead of Lamb of God, he prefers Seal of God to transfer the message. This can rightly be considered a cultural restitution. Further research does not reveal the inclusion of cultural perspective in other definitions of

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translation unfortunately and even later ones keep on not touching this matter as in the following definitions by [7]: Translation involves the rendering of a source language (SL) text into the target language (TL) so as to ensure that (1), the surface meaning of the two will be approximately similar and (2), the structure of the SL will be preserved as closely as possible; but not so closely that the TL structure will be seriously distorted. Of all the considerations above, only one takes cultural aspects into account, the one by [3]. This definition is actually a specific one, rooted from the practice of the Bible translation. By nature, it is understood that the translation should be done to every language. As the content addresses all works of life and culture plays an important role in human life, culture, therefore, should be considered. The other definitions, however, are meant to explain the experts' view on translation theory to be applied in the translation of all types of material, including scientific or technical texts which are not deeply embedded in any culture. Thus, it can be momentarily hypothesized that cultural consideration must be taken into consideration if the material to translate is related to culture as is the case with drama text translation, and for material that is not very much embedded into a specific culture, cultural consideration may not be necessary. But if a society's culture must be understood as the advanced intellectual development of mankind as reflected in the arts and all that refers to socially conditioned aspects of human life, then there is no refrain to the assertion that: "... a society's culture consists of whatever it is, one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members, and do so in any role that they accept for any one of themselves. Culture, being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end product of learning: knowledge, in a most general, if relative, sense of the term. By definition, we should note that culture is not material phenomenon; it does not consist of things, people, behavior, or emotions. It is rather an organization of these things. It is the forms of things that people have in mind, their models of perceiving and dealing with their circumstances. To one who knows their culture, these things and events are also signs signifying the cultural forms or models of which they are material representation." [5] It can be summarized that this definition suggests three things: (a) culture is seen as a totality of knowledge and model for perceiving things, (b) there is an immediate connection between culture, behavior and events, and (c) culture's dependence on norms. It should be noted also that some other definitions claim that both knowledge and material things are parts of culture as expressed by [8] and [9]. Relatedly, [4] thinks that the connection between language and culture was first formally formulated by Wilhelm Von Humboldt. For this German philosopher, language was something dynamic: it was an activity (*energia*) rather than a static inventory of items as the product of activity (*ergon*) and at the same time views language as

an expression of culture and individuality of the speakers, who perceive the world through language. Related to Hymes idea on culture as the totality of knowledge, this present idea may see language as the knowledge representation in the mind. In 1973, Humboldt's view was echoed by Edward Sapir and Benjamin Lee Whorf in their Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This principle states that thought does not "precede" language, but on the contrary thought is conditioned by it. The system of honorific style used in the "Bamelike" tradition in West Cameroon for example, affects the speakers' concepts of social status and reflects the concepts of [10] which states that, "there was the theory of context before the theory of text". In other words, context precedes text. Context here means context of situation and culture. This context is necessary for adequate understanding of the text, which becomes the first requirement in drama text translation. Thus, translating any dramatic action without understanding text is non-sense, and understanding text without understanding its culture is impossible. Hymes' idea, Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, and Snell-Hornby's opinion have a far-reaching implication for drama text translation. In its extreme, the notion that language conditions thought and that language and thought is bound up with the individual culture of the given community would mean that translation is impossible. We cannot translate one's thought which is affected by and stated in a language specific for a certain community to another different language because the system of thought in the two languages (cultures) must be different due to the fact that each language is unique. If it influences the thought and, therefore, the culture, it would mean that ultimate translation is impossible. Another point of view, however, asserts the opposite. Ironically this also goes back to Humboldt's idea about inner and outer forms of language that later developed into the concepts of deep structure and surface structure by Chomsky. Inner form and deep structure is what is generally known as idea. Following these concepts, all ideas are universal. What is different is only the surface structure, the outer form. If it is so, translation is only a change of surface structure to represent the universal deep structure. Accordingly, translation is therefore theoretically always possible. Whatever is the case, we are faced with two extremes and the answer lies not in choosing any of the two. If the extremes are put at the ends of a cline, the answer lies between the two in that, theoretically, the degree of probability for perfect translation depends on how far the source language text (SLT) is embedded in its culture and the greater the distance between the cultures of the SLT and target language text (TLT), the higher is the degree of impossibility; this cultural embeddedness is most experience in drama texts.

### **Analysing and Translating Culture-Bound Expressions**

From the preceding discussion, it can be remarked that perfect translation of culturally-bound text is impossible. A translation focusing on the purpose of the SL text writing is, however, always possible. This can be proven with the translation of so many literary works into other languages making it possible for both groups of SL and TL readers come up with the same opinion, meaning that the readers get the same impressions in terms of the meaning, message and style. Based on this assumption this work analyzed the appropriate procedures used to translate culture-bound sentences, words, or expressions embedded in African drama texts into English/French. The results reveal that to translate culture-bound words or expressions, the translator must resort to addition, componential analysis, cultural equivalent, descriptive equivalent, literal translation, modulation, recognized translation, reduction, synonymy, transference, deletion, and combination. Some, however, are typically appropriate for certain classification of cultural words as discussed by [11]. On the appropriateness of the procedures to translate culturally-bound words and expressions, these conclusions were arrived at: Recognized translation is best used to translate institutional terms whose translation is already recognized, such as currency, traditional dressing or titles. The use of new translation with whatever procedure will make the readers misinterpret, especially if they already have some degree of knowledge of the source language. The establishment of this recognized translation by academicians or the people themselves is subject to the process of creation and acceptance. That is, when something about language has been accepted, it means it is a convention and that is the heart of language or vocabulary. Professions are appropriately translated with cultural equivalents as they exist in both African and English/French cultures. Descriptive equivalents are appropriate to translate culturally-bound words or expressions that are not found in the English/French cultures but considered important enough in the text.

For example:

**Woman:** They have assumed the mantle of the colonizers. The people have drunk their cup of bitterness to the dregs! (Bate Besong)

**Femme:** Ils ont repris le linteau des colonisateurs et le peuple en souffre extrêmement (My translation) In the above example, the translator actually could have translated “The people have drunk their cup of bitterness to the dregs” (Requiem for the Last Kaiser) as:

« Le peuple a bu le vin de lamertume jusqu'au bas fond de la societe »

In this case, the translation would be more idiomatic. However, where the cultural word has not got a close synonym equivalent in the TL, a modulation can best be used and the context demands the translator to emphasize the economy and smoothness of the

sentence flow. This situation usually happens in a direct quotation where cultural notes are impossible. In addition, with this procedure, the translator can still recreate the smooth flow and beauty of the text. The example is the translation of petit trader into “Bayemsallam” (Act1 scene1) of The Incorruptible Judge.

**Ajala:**

My father is a carpenter and my mother is a petty trader.

(Olu Olagoke) Mon pere est charpentier et ma mere "buyamsellam". (My translation)

In the following example owing to the cultural variables, the translator has employed modulation and the combination of modulation and addition.

**Woman:** A false dawn! A realm where its youth grow prematurely grey as alcohol makes final idiots of those who have not yet been crazed by the local clergyman's stifling dogma on subservience... the people are without foot or hope. Choose the side of the long-suffering people of Agidigidi. (Bate Besong)

**Femme:** C'est un faux bout de tunnel. Dans une societe ou la jeunesse vieillie prématurément et ou l'alcool a réduit les diplomes en delinquants sociaux... ou le peuple na ni a manger, ni espoir; Il faut etre lessive par les dogmes du clerge pour pouvoir rester indifferent. Tu dois etre du cote d'Agidigidi, ce peuple qui souffre depuis longtemps. (My translation) What we notice is that, at times, some culturally-bound words are deleted or dropped during the translation process. The translator resorts to this strategy if the word's meaning is not found in the TL culture and the importance is minor. It is also worth noting that most of the translation concepts reviewed so far are process or production oriented; our reflection on ideological misrepresentations and conceptual realities has led us to delve into a new approach centered on the concept of language and cultural behaviors. It is concerned with the study of the relationship between language and cultural behavior that is, all aspects of language in terms of use and usage. Unlike the other approaches, socio-cultural communicative translation This new approach which I am tempted to coin as “the ethnopic approach”, conceives drama texts translation as being on the one hand usage bound with limits while corresponding to unique culture behavior and on the other hand, strictly determined in terms of context with a certain degree of formal predictability. For this reason, the ethnopic approach is not so much concerned with the exclusive choice or type of expression amongst others. It seeks to underline the interplay of options within a communicative range and thus the constant implicit relationship between selected and accepted usage with a language community. This ethnopic approach which displays a socio-cultural communicative tendency, provides a good compromise as an intersection of the literary, sociolinguistic, socio-semantic, ethnological, cultural, functional etc... approaches in that, it provides a more finely regulated representation of cross-cultural relationships. Instead of being

contingent on individual acts of creative adaptation, as in the relativist conception, or contractually negotiating through the neutralization of the cultural differences in the Universalist conception, the ethnotic approach provides a wide range of predictable cross-cultural configurations. These cultural configurations nevertheless do not in any way exclude creativity in translation nor do they insure the translator against erroneous translations. It rather enhances and motivates the choice of words and the communicative potential or the language culture and by implication, the cultural art. Consequently, the translator's subsequent choice of words is to be conceived as being framed within a range of systematically parametered options. This approach provides a range of possible translation alternatives that can be associated in the target language culture (TLC2), not only to the source text (ST), but to the full range of its re-constructible alternatives.

It is for this reason that reflecting on the issues of drama texts translation process is not only licit; it appears besides, as to some researchers like [12] that, "the act of translation is never completely dissociated from some theoretical conception". However, even if one takes for granted that the field of linguistics and especially the discipline of semantics could be ideally extended to account for the totality of meaningful features contained in any segment of communication, it is not certain that even then, the specific problems of translation would be correctly handled as acknowledge that the linguistic and semantic approaches, though central in the determination of meaning, must be reformulated in a cultural perspective with considerably less emphasis on structure and more on conditions of cultural variability and comparability between utterances. The present research, although different in its concept, must be considered as an initiative in expanding the notion of meaning within cultural frameworks and especially in the case of African drama text translations. Owing to the fact that translation approaches vary, overlap and will never converge on issues of drama texts translation, and conscious of the necessity to communicate efficiently and purposefully with respect to the range of semantic norms to which the texts belong, the concept of ethno-translation or the ethnotic approach is particularly suited to account for drama texts translation, since it can be seen as a combination of all fundamental formulations that can be associated with any given identifiable situation of any communicative act. Consequently, meaning is not recognized in terms of informational content or reference, it is produced and identified on the basis of language culture and cultural behavior in relation to all aspects of language and communication.

### **Revisiting the Sociology of African Drama Texts Translation**

As discussed in his earlier works, [13] opines that theatre translation necessitates the sociology of theatre; yet its conception is wrapped up with the society, which it portrays. As such, language patterns no longer represent the expression from the social perspective, but rather transcend to the level of societal acceptability in that domain. This implies that, the orientation given to theatre translation is governed to a considerable extent by the amount of social knowledge available to the translator. In general, the extent to which dramatic language can be used to mean is the extent to which the society can say something in that language. This meaning and saying are indispensable ingredients to the translator, and dependent primarily on the culture or subculture and the language being an inherent part of that culture. At any given point in the file of a translator, he may have a choice dictated by his experience on his own culture, of various forms of behavior – verbal and non-verbal. One area of such choices is, for instance that where, in endeavoring to unravel a cultural meaning, one has to decide on appropriate strategies to do it. In the case of kola, the cultural form of behaviors would enable the translator to select beer, wine, money, or maintain the word kola, as the case may be. Owing to the fact that every word is socialized into its culture, primarily by its spectrum of usage and largely by its limitations and acceptability, and given that other related choices represent the range of meaning potentials for the situational context of controlling usage, it should be pointed out that the choice for particular items or mood of expression in a situation is also a question involving psychological factors, that can to some extent be determined by the translator; sometimes against the norms of his culture. However, this can only be possible if he/she has access to other items from the total knowledge potentials available, if he/she wishes to go against, as it were the dictates of a constraining culture.

At this point, it is relatively easy to establish the sociology of theatre in relation to translation but with the prevailing complexity in both cultural and potential meaning, it is less easy to unravel the connections. Nevertheless, it remains clear that, there is a controversy over the extent to which language expresses action especially action as a manifestation of arts. Whether language merely determines such realities or reflects them, the forms and functions of language have to match most of the time, but this match is neither static nor identical for all works of arts. As drama texts are wrapped up in a network of culture, so too must the language used in their translations arise out of the same social and cultural circumstances. The principal concern in the semantic aspects of cultural differentiation in theatre translation is to assert that cultural meaning is conveyed in the process of translation. This is with the understanding that language and culture are so inseparable that any effective activity on the former must entail a good knowledge of the latter. It is certainly for this same reason that



[10] argues that many translation procedures are linguistics oriented than cultural and thus fall short of bringing out cultural meaning, as it is purely a negotiation within the cultural patterns of communication and their situational paradigms. Consequently, we need to subject into the communicative function of an utterance within a speech community since language has culture taboos within its social manifestation and socio-cultural knowledge that cannot be translated without semantic repercussions. Taking into account the fact that observed behavior is now being recognized as a manifestation of deeper set of codes and rules in sociolinguistics, the task of the translator is seen in the discovery and unraveling of the semantic limits contextually appropriated for effective transfer of signs and symbols within a community or groups of people. In other words, cultural meaning is what the translator needs to know in order to carry out functional translation. My argument here is that, patterning occurs at all levels of communication (societal, group and individual) and the translator must be aware of this. At the societal level, communication is usually patterned in terms of its functions, categories of talk, attitudes and conceptions about language and speakers. Communication is also patterned according to particular roles and groups within a society, such as sex, age, social status and occupation, but most of all communication patterns are expressive at the individual level, at the level of expression and at the level of code interpretation. However, to an extent, emotional factors such as nervousness have a physiological effect on the vocal mechanism, though not regarded as part of communication, they are part of patterned communication that have semantic bearings especially in drama texts. An increased volume naturally means anger, perceptions of individuals as voluble or taciturn, respectful or disrespectful, are also in terms of cultural norms just as expressions of feelings are culturally patterned. Similarly, class social behavior as teenagers in Cameroon shake hands as often as they meet is a sign of fraternity but that is not the case in Europe or America where such practices are not encouraged. Though these levels of patterns have been listed separately, there is an individual web of interrelationship and connectedness among all patterns of world cultures that make possible the ethnopic approach in cross-cultural communication transfer as in the case of drama texts translation.

### **Cultural Patterns and Drama Text Translation: Analyses of the Translation of the Lion and the Jewel**

In the theory of drama texts translation, the problem of theatrical qualities of dialogue is highlighted in relation to the translation of African works. Though scholars like Lefevere of the semiotic approach have referred to theatricality as a relationship between dramatic text and performance, there is still an implicit indefinable

quality of a drama text within the process of conceptualization making theatrical communication a more complex activity. The ethnopic approach is an attempt to provide a model for a general operation involved in the transliteration process of theatrical performance. This is demonstrated through commenting on the translation of *The Lion and the Jewel*. This concept of socio-cultural communicative translation can be considered an attempt to the problems raise by theories of both theatre and of dramatic translation which have seldom been extended beyond a generalized discussion on the notion of deictic dimensions in dialogue. Concretely, the researcher intends to link a concept procedure with contemporary semiotic and semantic theories by applying contexts, conception myth, and virtual relation between verbal and non-verbal signs inherent in performance, cultural, religion and presuppositions as knowledge aspects to construct an approach which will better address the problems related to drama texts translation. Worth of note is that, the main problem faced by translators of African works especially African drama texts is the very wide range of aesthetic norms to which the texts belong. This makes it difficult to posit a set of characteristics of dramatic texts and also to determine the level of systematic, normative or structural analysis. This relative entanglement emanates from the fact that, in a dramatic text, the semiotic relation is already to some extent present as a concept through given theatrical codes and norms, although the performance does not need to follow it. Apparently, theatrical codes and norms need to be understood and investigated as a particular historical based system for creating meaning. Whereas translating drama text is synonymous to creating inter-semiotic meaning. Strangely, in every drama text, there is a virtual relationship between the verbal and the non-verbal signs inherent in its performance. This relationship goes beyond certain literary or theatrical norms and codes which researchers like [14] have referred to as theatrical potential (TP) being the capacity of a dramatic text to generate and involve different theatrical signs in a meaningful way when it is staged. As such, the concept of cultural communicative translation also aims at clarifying the various socio-cultural characteristics which stimulate and regulate the integration of theatrical signs to create inter-linguistic meaning. Although this aims at the formulation of an approach in drama texts translation and the determination of socio-cultural theatricality in drama, the final result will be that of mapping socio-cultural meaning in the target language which can provide and evoke an integration of non-verbal theatrical signs in the interpretation of meaning in a performance art. To exemplify this concept, I shall analyze some excerpts of Chuto and Laburthe's translation of *The Lion and the Jewel* by Wole Soyinka.

Sidi: [widely excited] I know. Let us dance the dance of the lost traveler [Shouts]: Yes let's.

Sidi: Who will dance the devil- horse? French version:

Sidi: [Follement excitée] J'ai une idee: Dansons la danse du voyageur egare Le groupe [cris]: Oui d'accord.

Sidi: Qui dansera le cheval du diable?

The devil horse can refer here to two nonverbal signs with a distinct cultural significance. Thus, the word is able to evoke a double meaning as a command for the dance to be affected and as a request that somebody be chosen to play the role. Depending on which reference is chosen to be presented in the performance, the acting will differ. The remark referring to the general context calls for more action than the situational context of dancing alone evokes. In the entire situational context, the dance suggests a range of behavior such as nervousness, hopelessness, embarrassment or even concern. By asking that someone dances, Sidi makes the crowd aware of her discomfort. In another context, the expression "dance the devil-horse" can establish a different level of meaning referring to the background situation. The translation as "Qui dansera le cheval du diable" conveys only the literary meaning but not referring to the background context. The theatrical production can shift this meaning to another structure. The translator thus selects for the stage different theatrical signs and codes according to the actual or chosen theatrical norms. Obviously it is important for the dramatic text and its theatrical potential (TP) to offer and to retain the potential meaning and the potential ambiguity in translation. For this to happen, the expression "dance the devil-horse" must carry the same semantic value and semantic collocation in the target language. More often than not, this is not the case.

Let us consider the following excerpt:

The drums resume beating a different darker tone and rhythm, varying with the journey. Full use of "gangan" and "iya ilu". The "trees" perform a subdued and unobtrusive dance on the same spot.

French version

Les tam-tams se remettent à battre, sur un ton et un rythme différent. Plus sombre, qui varie en fonction des étapes du voyage. Plein usage de "gangan" et "iya ilu". Les "arbres" exécutent sur place une danse calme et discrète.

The choice the translator has made in using the word *gangan* (drums) and *iya ilu* (flute) affects the linguistic potential of the text and thwarts the local colour potential interpretation. By choosing to use "gangan" in the place of drum and "iya ilu" in the place of flute, the playwright creates a reference to the background context at the verbal level of the performance. The interpretative potential of the text is oriented towards a socio-cultural marked model whereby, the context is meaning bound. That is to say it provides the set of premises used in interpreting the utterance. In this case where drama text translation is particularly concerned with the effect of contexts, presuppositions and mythology, considering these several contexts of situations and character as well as the general and pragmatic contexts makes it possible to analyze

concrete semantic items in the text which suggest and allow a great dynamic contextualization. Words such as *gangan* and *iya ilu* are aesthetic dominants though culturally loaded. The problem faced by the translator at this point is not only to retain or translate them, but first of all to recognize them, then select the code that best interprets them in the target language. The various transformation of the text: -interpretative, inter-linguistics and inter-semiotics are based on these aesthetic dominants. These dominants may refer to a whole network of socio-cultural beliefs that may lead to multiple semantic references and thus different meanings. This multiple interpretative contextualization also occurs in narrative text or poetry. But what is specific to the dramatic texts is the permanent double reference of utterances to two communication systems: - internal and external, which theatre provides in addition to other multiple contexts. Consequently, it can be concluded that theoretically a text which is embedded in its culture is both possible and impossible to translate into other languages. If practicality is considered first, however, every translation is possible. The degree of closeness to the source text culture and the extent to which the meaning of the source text is to be retained is very much determined by the purpose of the translation. Nevertheless, it is suggested that the translator should consider the procedures explained above to translate culturally-bound words or expressions.

## Conclusion

The fact that the conception of the theatricality of a play is wrapped up with the society that it portrays makes it impossible for language patterns alone to represent the expression from a solely linguistic perspective thus causing meaning to overlap with the sociology of the community. In this light, the dramatic arena becomes the sum total of significant codes that necessitate interpretation, and this interpretation largely depends on access to the amount of knowledge in the cultural frames and lenses as applied by the playwright. Knowledge of these codes and interpretation of usage is culture-bound. Equally, subjecting into the intentionality of the playwright has a cultural bearing that contributes to the enhancement of the totality of knowledge in drama texts translation.

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