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The Translation Problems of Cultural Elements of African Postcolonial Literature

The Case of *Things Fall Apart* by Chinua Achebe

Hassan OU-HSSATA

Sultan Moulay Slimane University,

Faculty of Arts and Humanities,

Beni Mellal, Morocco

Tel: +212667893104.

Email: ouhssatahassan@hotmail.com

Abstract

There is a tendency among some theorists to define translation not only as a passage from one language to another but also as a passage from one culture to another. Literary works, for the most part, cover different aspects of the culture in question. The present work, therefore, is an attempt to examine the problems of translating cultural elements in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. To carry out this research, the translation of Igbo cultural elements in the French version of the work has been analyzed. During this project, it was discovered that the translator had a lot of problems translating the Igbo cultural elements into French. Therefore, to facilitate the understanding of the translated text, the translator should add a footnote or glossary to explain certain cultural elements.

Keywords: postcolonial literature; translation; cultural elements; problems

Introduction

Postcolonial literature is an important discipline of study in the field of letters and humanities, especially with regards to a translation carried out about this type of literature. Within the scope of postcolonial English literature, the translation of African literature into French presents a



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series of specific characteristics and problems not only at the linguistic level but also at the cultural level. This paper is an essay to tackle this problem following a number of steps. First, we begin by establishing the importance of the choice of English and its varieties in African post-colonial literature, offering an overview of the different options and the relevance of the choice of English. Second, we analyze the most frequent translation problems not only for the translators but also for the authors themselves, who in most cases have to write in a language that is not their mother tongue language, which implies that they have to perform the first task of translation, whose choices must be kept in mind when translating works into other languages. Finally, we take as a representative example of the novel *Things Fall Apart*, by the African author Chinua Achebe, and we analyze some of the most characteristic translation problems that it highlights. In this way, we review the most frequent linguistic and cultural problems in African postcolonial literature with which the literary translator must be familiar to carry out his work successfully.

1. The Importance of Language in African Postcolonial Texts

English postcolonial theory is based mainly on the literary productions of countries that were former colonies of England. One of the most important aspects of this type of literature and that must be taken into account in the language. In the case of Africa, the separation into regions of the continent was carried out without taking into account the diversity of dialects and tribes, with which on many occasions the tribes were separated in different regions, and in turn, the same language separated in regions was mixed with other languages that have nothing in common with it (Middleton, 67). Along with this diversity, British English prevailed as an official language in most areas and became part of the curriculum of schools that adopted the English education system, teaching English literature as a transmitter of universal values. In turn, English became



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the means of communication between people from different tribes and with different dialects, which in some way happened to unify communication between peoples that would otherwise have been more complicated.

For a long time, African authors who wanted to publish and be recognized in the literary field had no choice but to imitate the English literature, which was taught in schools and universities, thus following the patterns of established literature and writing "correct" English (Wa Thiong'o 29). Thanks to the works of authors belonging to countries that were former English colonies, such as Chinua Achebe, other variations of English pop up in literary works, mainly in novels; other "Englishes" (Mair 277) that are accepted and in turn criticized from the Western sphere.

This use of Englishes produces a lack of privilege of Standard English, offering a new debate between Standard English and varieties, which have been used for decades in Africa as a method of subverting this use of English as something canonical (Lee 2017). This is clear in Juneja when he states that "[it] has resulted in the concentration of the English language in the novel of colonial consciousness" (136). This Africanized English is the result of a process that Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin (6) call "appropriation" of English, so that at the end of the process English (the official language of England, which is written in capitals as English), passes to become english (in lower case. It would be equivalent to English used by some authors who modify English to adapt it and thus appropriate it) (Ashcroft, et al 220).

In Africa, the language used is the Pidgin language. It is a variant of English that possibly emerged as a jargon to facilitate communication between Europeans and Africans during the period of colonization (Mair 280), mainly in Nigeria. At present, it is a mainly African phenomenon although it is not used as a literary language since it is not the mother tongue of practically none. Instead, it is used by various authors such as Achebe to represent the oral



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language, mainly in conversations, while Standard English is chosen for the rest of the narrative, thus offering realism in the novel by introducing fragments of English that is used in real life as a means of communication between people (Whittaker & Msiska 41).

Along with English and Pidgin, we find other regional languages such as Yoruba in Nigeria among others (Danladi 15). The problem that arises here has to do with the consequent dilemma of the authors about which language to use in their literary production. The authors find themselves with various possibilities as Blake (191) states. First, there is the possibility of using Standard English with the occasional introduction of some local words. The second possibility has to do with using Standard English in the narratives and the vernacular or Pidgin languages in dialogues. Last but not least, one can use a modified form of the vernacular (which is understandable to the reader) throughout his work. Along with these strategies, there is, of course, the option of writing the entire work in a vernacular language, aimed at a native audience, and that is subsequently translated into English to reach a larger audience. The strategy adopted by most authors is the second, because "it allows the writer to place people in their local environment without cutting them off entirely from the wide audience which the use of English allows" (Blake 191). This choice must be taken into account from the point of view of translation since the translator must know what type of author he is dealing with.

Depending on the attitude of the writers regarding the use of English, they can be divided into three different groups (as established by Okara in his 1990 article «Towards the Evolution of an African Language for African Literature»): Neometropolitan, detractors, and evolutionists or experimenters.

Following the classification of Okara (14), the Neometropolitans oppose the evolutionists or experimenters with their slogan "a leopard cannot change its spots." Supporters of this trend



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believed that Africans should not waste time worrying since the Africanity of their writing would be demonstrated in their works whether they wanted it or not. Therefore, there is nothing to do in the metropolitan language that Africans use to express their ideas. Thus, according to this trend, they should write in faultless English, trying to be better than the native English authors.

In the case of detractors, they totally reject the use of all metropolitan languages as languages of African literature. For them, these languages must be rejected as a means for African literary expression. Thus, authors like Ngũgĩ Wa Thiong'o consider that they approach cultural freedom by moving away from cultural imperialism imposed by language.

The third group described by Okara are the evolutionists or experimenters. The writers of this group are positioned between the two extremes discussed above since they believe that although they use English as a means of expression, it must be used so that creative writing is African in concept and execution (Okara 16). Thus, the common point of writers belonging to this third group is to use English in order to convey the message of African culture in their works.

One of the authors who write in English introducing the Pidgin is Chinua Achebe. He has been criticized by both English and Nigerian critics for mixing English with Pidgin. In his own words, Achebe states: «Why, why, why are people so frightened of letting things that happen in real life happen in literature? Pidgin exists. Pidgin English is there. » (Jussawalla and Dasenbrock 73). In order to establish an African context, Achebe uses the Pidgin in his dialogues, and thus brings colour to his narrative. This African context and the subversion of the traditional conception of the novel is also carried out by introducing characteristics of what we can call oral tradition, such as the use of abundant proverbs in his novel *Things Fall Apart*. This oral tradition is characteristic of African cultures, as opposed to the writing tradition of the colonizer, by means of which when narrating the past, experience and knowledge are transmitted, thus preserving



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them for the future (Blake 90). Achebe, therefore, uses English as a narrative medium but mixing it with the Pidgin and with characteristics of the African tradition, such as the oral tradition. By writing mostly in English, you can reach a wider audience despite not following the traditional concept of what a novel should be.

2. Translation in the Context of Postcolonial Literature

Malena (437) comments on the interest of postcolonial scholars in the field of translation after the cultural turn that took place in the translation studies in the 1980s. The success of the colonizers depended in part on the ability of the translators and interpreters that facilitated the advance of the conquered territories, the establishment of trading posts, and the conversion of the natives to Christianity. Therefore, postcolonial critics are interested in the translation and interpretation of certain historical contexts, also using translation as a metaphor by which to explain the processes of colonization and decolonization. It is in this type of colonial contexts when translation can be used, both as a colonizing method and a form of resistance by the colonized, so that the translation metaphor is used to better understand colonial power relations, limitations of cultural transfers and the problem of differences and otherness.

One of the first people to analyze translation as an instrument of colonization is Tejaswini Niranjana in her book *Siting Translation* (1992), who links postcolonial studies with translation studies, establishing the use of translation as a postcolonial liberation weapon. Thus, power relations are the common point between translation studies and postcolonial theory. Niranjana (165) states that the translation "is thus brought into being in the colonial context in a complex field structured by law, violence, and subjectification, as well as by determinate concepts of representation, reality, and knowledge." In this way, this need for change participates in what Edward Said calls "guilt politics", a policy of lamentation over a lost pre-colonial past combined



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with a denunciation of the colonizers. However, the tendency is to forget that the creation of culture in the colonized space normally includes techniques and languages borrowed from the colonizers (Niranjana 166), as we have explained previously in the case of the appropriation of English.

Frank (23) reminds us of this influence of the colonial period in postcolonial literature by establishing that in the population colonies, it is not possible to prevent the language and literature from presenting the influence of the language and literature of the former colonizing country. Niranjana (170) states that the postcolonial translator must know the existence of essentialist anticolonialist narratives and that in fact, he must try to deconstruct them. The translator, Niranjana (173) continues, must participate in a complete questioning of the colonial situation, which includes the re-examination of liberal nationalism as well as nostalgia for lost origins.

The importance of history in the colonial context, then, is related to translation. Niranjana (172) states that the postcolonial desire to re-translate is related to the desire to rewrite history. Rewriting is based on an act of reading; so the translation in the postcolonial context is based on citation and not forgetting. Thus, there is no rupture with the past but a rewriting of this past. Reading the existing translations is also reading the colonial historiography from a postcolonial point of view in order to discover the history of postcolonial resistance.

This relationship between the two fields (translation and postcolonial theory) is extended with cultural studies, as Robinson states in *Translation and Empire* (1997), where he states that translation scholars have taken a long time to become interested in postcolonial theories. Thus, Robinson asserts that the real value of research in the field of post-colonial translation is to explain both sides of the colonial cultural encounter and to show varying degrees of



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appropriation or misappropriation, of understanding or misunderstanding from both parts of the colonial encounter.

When translating a text, two or more cultures come into play. So, culture is a variable that the translator must always take into account. According to Aixelá (53), each community has its own provision of a series of habits, value judgments, classification systems, etc. that are sometimes clearly different, and that sometimes mix. The cultural difference between communities is reflected in the discourses produced by their members. For the target cultural system, these discourses may be opaque and unacceptable. For Aixelá (54), the translation provides the receiving society with a wide range of strategies, from conservation (accepting differences through the reproduction of the cultural symbols of the source text) to substitution (turning the other into a cultural replica). The choice between these options depends on the degree of tolerance of the receiving society and its strength. In the western world, Aixelá (54) continues, there is a marked tendency towards maximum acceptability, that is, towards reading the text as if it were an original. Thus, as Venuti (*Rethinking Translation* 5) would say, what is produced is a work of acculturation that tames the foreign text, making it familiar to the reader of the translation, giving him the opportunity to recognize himself in his other cultures.

Due to the importance of language in postcolonial contexts, translation is a primary interest within this field. In his introduction to the special edition of *The Translator* magazine, Venuti (*The Translator* 6) establishes that minorities call attention to an elementary factor of language: it is never just an instrument of self-expression or communication but is a collective force, a union of forms that build a semiotic regime. These forms not only have expressive or communicative functions but also carry social orders and obligations, have varying amounts of power. Again, remember that there have always been relations of power and domination between languages, as



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Venuti (136) recalls, so that a minority language is also one that is heterogeneous, does not follow standards.

Venuti (136) reminds us in this introduction that for many minorities the translation has been somewhat compulsive, first imposed by colonial domination over vernacular languages and later by the need to maintain free languages after decolonization in order to preserve political autonomy and promote economic growth. Thus, in the case of Africa, English novels are characterized by a striking translanguaging, where English is influenced by lexical and syntactic characteristics of indigenous languages, and in some cases, such as the one in this article, by the introduction of words in African languages (in our case in Igbo) in the text.

Tymoczko (20-23) comments on the differences between literary translation and postcolonial literature and states that the main difference between the two literary productions is that while the literary translator has a text to transpose, the postcolonial writer is not transposing only one text, but he is transposing a culture, a social system. Another difference is that the literary translator has a text to translate, in which there are linguistic and cultural elements that can be problematic for the receiving audience. On the other hand, in the case of the postcolonial writer, he is the one who chooses which cultural elements he wishes to transmit to the receiving audience. Therefore, the common point of both types of writing is the cultural interface, the key element of postcolonial literature.

3. Translation as a Significant Element in African Literature

We have commented previously that African writers make use of translation in their novels since the mere fact of writing in English is an exercise in translating their mother tongue languages. Adejare (19) takes up this characteristic of some African authors, among which is Achebe, to discuss the importance of these translations and identify some characteristics of this African



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literary production in English. Thus, Adejare (20) recalls that translation is not simply the transfer of textual material from a source language to a target language, but it is the transfer of the message from a text or textual unit of a source language to the same message in the target language.

Adejare (25) states that translation is a distinctive feature of African literature in English, which can be used for different purposes, such as to create humor, make satires, characterize characters or create new idiomatic expressions by translating idiomatic expressions from the source language. So, translation has an aesthetic role in some African texts.

As we have seen before, culture appears in the texts through language and through the translation of the authors themselves. Ariole (3) establishes some problems that arise in Europe when translating postcolonial authors, analyzing the case of African authors. Thus, Ariole (4) explains that in the case of novels in English, the recipient in Africa does not interpret the same text in the same way as the recipient in Europe since cultural concepts are different. This has to be taken into account when translating this type of African novels in English into other European languages, and in our case in particular in French, since the original English novel is already a translation of the Igbo by the same author, with translations of proverbs and the inclusion of Igbo words. So, when translating you have to keep in mind the cultural problems that may appear in the text.

This new perspective opens the way for research in the area of intercultural negotiation and contributes to the understanding of how the difference is maintained even in situations of cultural hybridity. Translators are also becoming aware of the problems associated with the cultural transfer. Many translated texts are being analyzed from a postcolonial perspective, and research is being carried out in previously ignored fields such as publication policy. Both translation



studies and postcolonial studies have much to gain from this association between the two fields (Malena 437-439).

4. Translation Analysis of Cultural Elements in *Things Fall Apart*

Having examined the concept of culture, we could at this moment say that the novel, *Things Fall Apart*, is a reflection of the Igbo culture. Through the hero, Okonkwo, Chinua Achebe was able to trace the social, economic, political and judicial life of the Igbo people. The mythology of the people will also be found in the book. Given the fact that we cannot say everything in a work of the type we have undertaken, we will give some examples to illustrate that the translator, Michel Ligny who is not of Igbo origin, had encountered a lot of problems during his work of translating some elements of the Igbo culture.

Anthroponyms are the names of people. In other words, these are the first names of individuals in a community. In *Things Fall Apart*, there are seventy-one names, including two English first names, one other name that is not of Igbo origin, and sixty-eight Igbo first names. None of these names was translated into French and it is not at all surprising. Due to the cultural difference, most first names are neither translatable nor adaptable. The borrowing that the translator has made of all the first names found in the original text is therefore justifiable.

Toponyms are the names of places. In the original text, we have the place names like *Umuofia*, *Mbaino*, *Isiuzo*, *Obodoani*, *Ezimili*, *Abame*, *Aninta*, *Imunso*, *Umueru*, *Umuachi*, *Umuike*, *Mbanta*, *Umuazu*, *Ikeocha*, and *Elumelu*. All these names are kept in the French version, which shows that place names, such as anthroponyms, are often difficult to translate, especially when dealing with two elite cultures, such as Igbo culture and French culture. There are also local phenomena that the translator did not understand during his work. Consider the following two sentences:



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Source Text: His happiest moments were the two or three *moons* after the harvest (Achebe 4)

Target Text: Ses moments les plus heureux étaient les deux ou trois *lunes* qui suivaient la récolte (Achebe 11).

Translating the word '*the moon*' with the French word '*lune*', the translator simply managed to restore the English word by its French equivalent, but the work was not well done by focusing on the word without worrying about the meaning that is more important. For Europeans, this word "moon" is just a star. It is a satellite of the earth, receiving its sunlight. This is what the word means for French and English. For Igbo from Nigeria, the word means the same thing. It should also be noted that this word has another meaning in the Igbo language. For the Igbo, this word means not only a "star" but also "the month" because the distance between one moon and another is twenty-eight days to a month. There is a shift of twenty-eight days between the appearance of the moon in Igbo. It is therefore the moon that gives the concept of the month in the traditional Igbo society. It is in this latter sense that the word 'moon' was used in the context in question. And the question is, how does a Frenchman who knows the word 'moon' as a star can establish a relationship between '*the moon*' and '*the month*'. We are of the opinion that the word '*lune*' should be replaced by '*mois*' in the French version of the sentence. The following sentences should also be considered:

Source Text: The drought continued for *eight market weeks* and the yams were killed. (Achebe 22)

Target Text: La secheresse se prolongea pendant *huit semaines de marché*, et les ignames moururent. (Achebe 29).



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The translator was able to translate the English sentence into French but he failed to communicate. If the purpose of any translation is to communicate, it looks like the translator has failed to communicate. *Huit semaines de marché* are French words but this group of words has a meaning that would not be well understood by the French reader. Whoever uses these expressions (*les jours de la semaine Igbo*) when addressing a Frenchman will not succeed in facilitating the understanding of the translated text.

In the Igbo culture, a week of market is eight days. The translator did not care about the meaning of the phrase. That's why he opted for literal translation. The result is that we have a French sentence that the French will understand only with additional explanations. If a market week is eight days, eight weeks of market would be sixty four days or two months. So, we would have preferred that the expression, *soixante quatre jours* or *deux mois* replaces *huit semaines de marché*. Finally, we will analyze the following two sentences.

Source Text: Those were days when men were men (Achebe 141).

Target Text: C'était un temps où les hommes étaient des hommes (Achebe 243).

As usual, the translator used the literal translation when working on this sentence. He did the translation well but, again, there would be the same problem of understanding. It should be noted that the expression "*Mgbe nwoke bu nwoke*" is a very old expression in the Igbo society. It means "When the man was brave and worthy of faith". The question is, will a French reader easily understand "*où les hommes étaient des hommes*" as the native Igbo would?

A French reader would never be at the same level of comprehension as his Igbo counterpart when it comes to this expression in question. That's why we believe we need to add an explanatory note to help these readers understand better. The note that must be added at the bottom of the page or in a glossary at the end of the book is. "Le temps où les hommes étaient



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des hommes” veut dire “le temps où les hommes étaient courageux et dignes de foi”. ("The time when men were men" means "the time when men were brave and trustworthy").

Igbo words in metropolitan languages: It is surprising that there are too many Igbo words in the source text which are written in English. However, Chinua Achebe who is the author of the source text has decided, despite his advanced level in English, to include a lot of Igbo words in his novel, *Things Fall Apart*. In the source text, we have the words like ... *egwugwu* (Achebe 4), *nso-ani* (Achebe 22), *inyanga* (Achebe 31), *Iba* (Achebe 80), *Ochu* (Achebe 91).

In doing his job, the translator strove to respect not only the intention of the author of the source text but also his style. As a result, the same Igbo words found in the source text are found in the target text. The following words, however, have French equivalents.

Igbo items French equivalents

inyanga	Orgueil
iba	Paludisme
nne	Maman
ochu	Homicide
Egwugwu	Mascarade

If the borrowing of these words was on purpose, perhaps to popularize some aspects of the Igbo culture, it would have been necessary to add an explanatory note to facilitate the readers' understanding of the text. It is quite obvious that in the field of literary translation, fidelity to the intention of the author of the source text is well recommended but to be faithful to the source text does not mean to translate to the detriment of the readers of the target text.



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We also found that the difference between the worldview of the two given communities could be a source of conflict. It is often said that what is gallant in Paris can be ridiculous in Rome, which means that there is a big difference between the way two different communities see things. In other words, each of them has their own vision of the world. The problem the translator encounters could be one that emerges from the difference between the world view of the two cultures in question. In this study, we encountered such a problem. Let's examine these two sentences.

Source Text: Yam, *the king of crops*, was a very exacting king (Achebe 24).

Target Text: L'igname, *La reine des plantes*, était une reine très exigeante. (Achebe 46).

The two sentences above have to do with the plant, the yam. It is also about the two cultures - the Igbo culture that is involved in the source text and the French culture, that is involved in the target text. For the Igbo, the yam is the king, which means that it belongs to the masculine gender whereas for the French, it is the queen belonging to the feminine gender. This is a real source of conflict during a translating activity. What should the translator do? When a translator faces such a problem, should he obey the grammatical rule of the source language or that of the target language? In this sentence, we found that the translator respected the grammatical rule of the target language. That's why he described yam as the queen. Whoever understands what yam is in Igbo society would have to say that this translation is a very serious violation of the Igbo culture where the yam is not only a male but also a king among other plants. We are convinced that if the translator knew, he would have translated this sentence differently. A conflict emanating from the difference of vision of the world is the most difficult to solve during a translation because at that moment, the translator is at a crossroads where he does not know which way to take.



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We believe that the translator has two things to do when faced with such a problem. He should avoid the violation of the rules of the two cultures in contact. To do this, it is so necessary to add an explanatory note after the translation. If he promotes the culture of the source text in his translation, he should explain what the author says in an explanatory note. For example:

Target text: L'igname, la reine des plantes, était une reine très exigeante. (Achebe 29)

Explanatory Note: Il faut noter que dans la société Igbo, l'igname est le roi des plantes et il appartient au genre masculin. (Achebe 29) (It should be noted that in Igbo society, yam is the king of plants and belongs to the male gender.)

Conclusion

In this work, we examined the problem of the translation of cultural elements in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*. We have raised the cultural elements that hinder translation. We also discovered that the translator of the text of our choice was bothered by anthroponyms, toponyms, as well as local phenomena that he encountered during his work. We proposed solutions to identify problems that would certainly contribute to the improvement of the French version of the book in the future. Translations are done for the readers. Therefore, the translator should do everything to make each text accessible to potential readers.



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