

From one Language into Another: Aspect of Ideology in the  
Translation of the Holy Bible into Yoruba

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## ABSTRACT

The difficulty in translating the Bible into Yoruba supports the question posed by Sachea M.T. (2003:30) on whether a language can translate society, that is, the Judeo-Graeco-Roman society. This paper discusses aspects of ideology in the translation of the Bible into Yoruba and concludes that ideology as a concept in the translation of the Bible is a both a process and a product that finds its way into the Source Text while the translator looks for a strategy to reflect it or avoid its confrontation in the Target Language.

## KEYWORDS:

Biblical Ideology, Literary Translation, Yoruba Bible, Language, Society

## 1.0 INTRODUCTION

Translating, an activity and translation, the result of this activity are inseparable from the concept of culture. The most peculiar difficulty in the task of translating the Bible into Yoruba has traditionally been the dilemma between the historical and synchronic approaches in the analysis, description and translation of the Source Language culture into the receiving culture. Most importantly, the Bible in its original untranslated form is a collection of ancient writings spanning many cultures and many decades. The sixty-six books into which the Bible is divided represent “a greater variety of literary styles that can be derived from other piece of literature in the history of mankind. (Snell-Hornby et al (1998:275).

Since no two languages are the same linguistically and culturally, translating the Bible into Yoruba, which does not have a long literary tradition presents some knotty problems to the translator. It is a well known fact that Bible scholars are still researching into the ancient Israel and the near East in order to have deeper historical and cultural context out of which the Bible emerged. Many years ago in Nigeria, the understanding of the biblical cultural value has grown deeper, especially in respect to the importance of Yoruba translation of the Bible to the identity of the receiving culture.

This paper therefore discusses some aspects of ideology in the translation of the Bible into the Target Language and concludes that ideology as a concept in the Yoruba translation of the Bible is both a process and a product that finds its way into the Source Text while the translator looks for a strategy to reflect it or avoid its confrontation in the Target Language

## 2.0 THE YORUBA LANGUAGE AND PEOPLE

The Yoruba language belongs to the Kwara-sub-group of African Niger-Congo family of languages which is centered around

the Niger-Benue confluence to which the Edo, the Igbos, Idoma, Epira, Igala and Nupe belong. Until the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there was no single word for the group, but were known by their different sub-ethnic names such as Awori and Ijebu who lived close to the Coast, the Egba, Ijesha and Ekiti in the forest zones and the Oyo and the Igbomina in the Savanah (Ojo and Nwachukwa 2005:77). Today, the Yoruba live in the State of Lagos, Osun, Oyo, Ogun, Ekiti and Ondo. They are also found in Kwara and Kogi State and the Republic of Benin. The Christian missionaries staged a prominent role in the development of Yoruba language most especially in the area of Yoruba written literature. Reverend Samuel Ajayi Crowther, being the first African Reverend in the early Church Missionary Society, played a leading role in the development of Yoruba language. He published the first Yoruba Grammar in 1843 and in 1875, an acceptable Yoruba orthography was produced.

Some of these master-pieces include: *Aribilogo* (1886), *Arofo Orin Sobo Arobiodun* (1902), *Arofo Aloyin Tohun Apa Kinni ati Apa Keji* (1950), *Ewi Iwoyi* (1969) (Ogunsina B. (2006:6). Some published literary drama works include: *Pasan Sina* (1946), *Enia Soro ati Tan'tolorun* (1921), *Ogboju Ode ninu Igbo Irunmale* (1938). Fagunwa's literary achievement influenced many Yoruba novelists to adopt Fagunwa so much that all Yoruba novels written between (1938) and (1957) were novels of Fagunwa's tradition (Ogunsina B. (1992:108). The Yoruba language plays a significant role in the political, economic, social, educational and religious life of the people. It is on this note that the translation of the Holy Bible into Yoruba claims pre-eminence. The translation of the Bible into Yoruba language is a reflection of the socio-political economic and spiritual life of the people.

### 3.0 The Concept of Culture in the Translation of the Holy Bible into Yoruba

The translation of the Holy Bible evolves as the most successful book in human history. There are several reasons for the prominence of the Holy Bible among several world religious literature. First, the content of the Holy Bible touches the core of man's origin, existence and essence. The Bible provides answers to man's essence on earth, where man goes after death. The Bible is so unique in that the available copies are translated versions from the original. However, there is a proof that the Hebrew text of the old testament Bible was in use at the end of the first century A.D. The Greek version, called the Septuagint emerged in the third century. The Latin version called the Vulgate was translated by Saint Jerome and coincidentally, who was the first translator to translate the entire Bible into Latin language. This is basically the main objective of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in translating the Bible into Yoruba from the King James version into Yoruba.

### 4.0 The Yoruba Bible Project

The Yoruba Bible was translated from King James Version (1611) by Bishop Ajayi Crowther in 1848. His goal was to make the Bible accessible to mankind in the language they understand apart from Greek and Latin languages. (Asobele, S.J (1999). The Yoruba

Bible translation project emerged in 1848 under the leadership of Bishop Samuel Ajayi Crowther in collaboration with the foreign missionaries. In 1959, the New Testament Bible was reviewed in order to integrate new changes into it. This project was sponsored by the United Bible Society of Nigeria. The first translation produced by Reverend Ajayi Crowther has since been subject to modification. Some words have been replaced with new ones and new interpretations have been given to these words. Let us consider the following instances:

a. And he said unto them, when I sent you without purse, and scrip, lacked ye nothing? and they said *nothing*. (Luke 22:35). (King James Version).

O si wi fun pe, Nigbati mo ran yin lo laini asuwon, ati apo, ati bata, oda ohun kan da nyin bi? Nwon si wipe, *Rara*. (Luku 22: 35) (Bibeli Mimo)

b. Wither shall we go up? Our brethren have *Discouraged our heart*, saying, the people is greater and taller than we(...) (Deuternomy 1:28). (King James Version).

Nibo li a wa o gbe goke lo? Awon arakunrin wa ti *daiyaja* wa, wipe awon enia na sigbonle ju wa lo ....(Deuteronomi 1:28).

c. And on the *east side* toward the rising of the sun shall they of the standard of the camp of Judah pitch throughout their armies(...) Number 2:3).

Ki awon ti ise opagun ibudo Juda ki o do ni iha *ila-orun* si iha *ila-orun*, gege, bi ogun won. Numeri 2:3.

From the above translations, “nothing” was initially translated by Crowther as “ndao”, “discouraged our heart” rendered as “daiya fo” “east side” translated as “abgasi”. These words have experienced new changes representing good improvement in the Yoruba version of the Bible translation. It is to be noted here that the Yoruba version of the Bible produced by Bishop Ajayi Crowther represents a place where two dialogues take place; dialogue between culture and ideology. Quoting De Michael (1999:695). It is a dia-logic place where at least two different logics meet in it, that is, those of two different languages. Thus, even if Bishop Ajayi Crowther knows the cultural setting of the Bible era, it may be very difficult for him to render all the cultural specificity implied in the Source Text in which the first writings in Greek, Hebrew and Aramaic took place since there

are sheer ideological, linguistic and cultural differences between these languages and Yoruba language.

### 5.0 Aspect of Ideology in the Yoruba Translation of the Holy Bible

Despite the several meaning of the word ideology, the term can be discussed either from the point of view of the Marxist or non-Marxist perspective. From the Marxist point of view, it is regarded as a false consciousness resulting from the belief in the autonomy and determine power of presentation, which renders it ultimately a term of abuse (Terry Eagleton 1991:130). The second level usage of the term is seen as a set of ideas that are characteristic of a certain social group which help legitimate its dominant political power within the society (Benneth, A. and Nicholas (1995:131). These positions of the term ideology draws a line between the “intrinsic and extrinsic” aspects of a text. By intrinsic aspect, on the one hand, we refer to the ideological aspect of translation which can be determined within the text itself, both at the lexical and grammatical levels as reflected, for example, in the deliberate choice or avoidance of a particular word by the translator. On the other hand, by extrinsic aspect, we mean the extra-linguistic aspect of the text which involves the culture of the Source Language Text that constitutes an integral part of the text. Extrinsic aspect of translation places culture as a key concept in decision making. This is because text production in the Target Culture and Language requires reformulation according to a set of parameters to be specified in the individual scenario. The text needs to be understood before it is translated which requires world knowledge by the translator. Roman (2002:311) affirms that since writers only write within a system of language in which particularized authors are born and shaped, texts cannot be thought of in terms of their author’s intentions, but only in relationship with other texts. In the absence of the author, the translator translates the text while setting it against the backdrop of known words, familiar conventions, anterior texts and general knowledge which is ideological. Non-Marxists critics tend to use “ideology loosely to refer to ideas, values, conceptions and assumptions whether cultural or political that are related to power and authority of persons or institution in a given community (Abdullah A.K (1999:2). Ideology is both a process and product of translation which are, however, closely interdependent. Translation is not just a process that goes on in the translator’s head. It is rather a process that involves rival ideologies Lefevere (1990:14). The translation process can be adopted as a means to support or object an ideological stance.

The Target Reader can choose to accept or reject such translation. However, translator should repress their personal, ideological interpretation of the Source Text in order to remain faithful to the clues, the Source Author has provided in the original text. Bassnett (1996:22) stresses the need for reassessing the role of the translator by analyzing his intervention in the process of linguistic transfer, when she argues that once one considered subservient, transparent filter through which a text could and should pass without adulteration, the translation can now be seen as a process in which intervention is crucial. Awareness of the simplistic view of regarding translation as mere process of transferring words from one text to

another results in realizing the ideology underlying such a translation D'Ivarez and Vidal (1996). They argue that behind every translator's selections, as what to add, what to leave out, which words to choose and how to place them, there is a voluntary act that reveals his history and the socio-political milieu that surrounds him; in other words, his own culture (ibid.:5). Translation is conceived as a process of intercultural communication, whose end product is the text. This process is not a simple process of linguistic transcoding, but as a form of human action which has its own purpose purely controlled by the translator. Fawcett (1998:106) affirms that throughout the centuries, individual and institutions applied their particular beliefs to the production of certain effect in translation. This reaffirms that all translations are products of ideological encounter. This is because the ideology of translation resides simply not in the translated text, but in the stance of the translator.

Ideology in relation to the Yoruba translation of the Bible is both a conscious and unconscious process. It is a conscious process while referring to those modes of feeling, perceiving and believing which hold people together and which has a kind of relation to the maintenance and reproduction of social religious power. It is an unconscious process when seen as a system of grasping and interpreting concepts that are seen, heard, read and written in the Bible. Bible language cannot be regarded as a value free language, rather, it is shaped by cultural and ideological assumptions, that are hinged on Judeo-political beliefs and societal practices as applicable to the Jews and the Gentile nations. Linguistic meanings are inseparable from ideology. This provides an avenue to criticize the choice of language of Reverend Ajayi Crowther in his Yoruba translation of the Bible. Let us consider the translator's choice of language in the following texts:

- a. Behold, a *virgin* shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us. (Mathew 1:23)

Kiyesii, *wundia* kan yio loyun, yio si bi omokunrin kan, nwon o ma pe oruko re ni Emmanueli, itumo eyi ti ise, Olorun wa pelu wa. (Matheu 1:23).

The above translation of the word "virgin" is adequate. The target reader will not lose the intention of the original if Reverend Crowther had rendered it as "omobinrin kan". Actually, "omobinrin kan" may not necessarily be referring to a virgin in the Yoruba concept. There is no objection that could be leveled against Crowther's translation procedure in the above text. His strategy is quite a novelty for the Yoruba readers of King James version and hence carries an avant-garde impression of the Source-Text in the Target Text. In literary translation, there is no meta-linguistic reality whereby its meaning may be verified. This is why literary translation demands high level of proficiency on the part of the translator to

understand the linguistic and cultural registers of the original texts in order to produce same in the Target Text.

One of the Biblical ideology is reflected in the translation of male dominance to represent all mankind. Let us consider the following texts:

- (a) And behold I come quickly, and my reward is with me, to give *every man* according as his work shall be. (Revelation 22:1)

Kiyesii, emi mbo kankan; ere mi si mbe pelu mi lati san an fun *olukuluku* gege bi ise re ti ri. (Ifihan 22:12)

- (b) Therefore thou art inexcusable, *O man*, whosoever thou art that judgest: for when thou judgest another, thou condemnest thyself; for thou that judgest doest the same things. Romans 2:1)

Nitorina alairiwi ni iwo *okunrin na*, enikeni ti o wu ki o je ti ndajo: nitori ninun ohun ti iwo nse idajo elomiran, iwo nda ara re lesi: nitori iwo ti ndajo nse ohun kanna (Romu 2:1)

From texts (a) and (b) the translation of the word “man” as “olukuluku” is adequate and denotes “everybody” as against “male dominated community”. In (b) text, the translation of “man” as “gbogbo enia” is adequate and denotes “all human race” as against “male dominated community”. In (b) text, the translation of “man” as “okunrin na” is male specific. This however, refers to all mankind in Bible language, tradition and ideology.

The above texts, that is, text (a) and (b) single out man from attempts of collectivization and generic reference to men and women. Bishop Ajayi Crowther, though a male translator, overcomes the temptation of replacing the value attached to “man” whether negative or positive, in his Yoruba translation of the Bible. There are a lot of male dominance in the Bible which justify the point of interaction between ideological contingences and the reality of the Bible tradition in which male dominated views are equally imposed on women. Thus, women’s view and perceptions are of little value but are not completely brushed aside. Instead of translating “man” as “okunrin ati obinrin” in (a) and (b) texts in the Target Language, Crowther obliterates the distinction in the Yoruba version into “generic” terms “olukuluku”, “gbogbo enia” as Target Language equivalence. The translator’s choice would have been completely innocuous had it not been for the fact that the word man as it appears in the King James Version of the Bible is prominently foregrounded, emphasizing the male dominated biblical ideology. To reverse the order as used in the context, would result to serious translation failure which may run contrary to the ideology of the Source Text message. The standard

usage is attested to by many verses in the Bible as revealed in the following:

(a). Will a *man* rob God? (...) in tithes and offering. (Malachi 3:8).

*Enia* yo ha ja Olorun li ole? (...) Nipa idemewa ati ore. (Malaki 3:8).

(b). Blessed is the *man* that walketh not in the counsel of the ungodly nor standeth in the way of sinner nor sitteth in the seat of the scornful. (Psalm 1:1).

Ibukun ni fun *okunrin*, na ti ko sin ri ni imo Awon enia buburu, ti ko duro li ona awon elese Ati ti ko si joko ni ibujoko awon elegan. (Orin 1:1).

(c). Love not the world, neither the things that Are in the world, if any *man* love the world, the

Love of the father is not in him. (1 Thessalonians 2:15).

Ema se feran aiye, tabi ohun ti mbe ninun aiye. Bi *eniken*i ba feran aiye, ife ti baba ko si ninu re (Johanu Kini 2:15).

The translator's proper contextual interpretation readily comes in as a necessary tool for proper transfer of the word in bold into the Target Language in order to enhance the Yoruba reader's interaction with the same intention and situation of the text's universe of discourse. Another case of Bible ideology can be seen in the translation of the Book of Ecclesiastes. It is a book whose basic submission manifests either as essentially pessimistic or optimistic. Let us consider the translation of a few verses of the book:

(d.) Vanity of vanities, saith the Preacher, vanity of vanities; all is vanity Ecclesiastes 1: p.2

Asan ninu asan, oniwasu na wipe, asan ninu asan; gbogbo re asan ni! Oniwasu 1: p.2

(e.). (...) for childhood and youth are vanity Ecclesiastes 11: 10.

(...) notoripe asan ni igba-ewe ati omode. Oniwasu 11:10.

Solomon wrote the book of Ecclesiastes and has become a book of comparison between the life of a person without God and one without

a God centered focus. The translation of the Hebrew word “hebel” rendered as “vanity”, translated as “asan ninu asan” in the Yoruba version carries the sense of something insubstantial, empty and valueless. This is also the preferred translation found in the Yoruba translation. It is also the preferred translation found in most translators. Graham (1997: 216) reinforces this when he claims that the nature of the material in the book of Ecclesiastes is admittedly one of the challenges confronting the exegete, but we can certainly say that if the translator does not examine the contextual use of the word “vanity” and prefers simply to adopt the traditional rendering, then there is danger that the translation produced will make the contents of the entire book seem pessimistic. The word “vanity” appears 37 times in the book. The number of occurrences of the term “vanity” and its wide distribution in the book mean that if it is viewed negatively, it is almost impossible to escape giving a negative cast to the entire book of Solomon. We are not too far from the Webster’s definition, if we suggest that by regarding the term “vanity” as “meaningless” and consciously apply that value to the translation, then we are indulging in an ideological translation (Ibid.:216).

A reflection on the question of ideology is also revealed in the translation of the “refugee creed” in the book of Deuteronomy, which is followed by instruction about teaching subsequent generations the importance of Israel’s experience in the wilderness:

(f). And these words, which I command thee this day, shall be in thine heart. And thou shalt teach them diligently unto thy children, and shall talk of them when thou sittest in thine house, and when thou walkest by the way, and when thou liest down, and when thou risest up. Deuteronomy (6:6-7).

Ati oro wonyi, ti mo palase fun o li oni, kio o ma wa ki aiya re, ki iwo kio si ma fi won ko awon omo re gidigidi, ki iwo ki o si ma fi won se oro iso nigbati iwo ba joko ninu ile re, ati nigbati iwo banrin li ona ati nigbati iwo ba dubule, ati nigbati iwo ba dide. Deuteronomi 6:6-7.

The translator treats this text to reflect this exegesis in the Target Text. The translation of “the sons of God” in the book of Genesis 6:1-4, reflects the issue of ideology in the translation of the Holy Bible into Yoruba. The “sons of God” are believed to be lesser members of the ancient pagan pantheon who are retained in latter monotheistic theology as angels. It also refers to pious men. Ideologically, “sons of God” are beings who share God-like qualities or who belong to the category of “gods”. In the later Greco-Roman world, stoic philosophy emphasized the unity of mankind on the ground that all people are by nature “children of God”. This appears in Paul’s quotation of the famous verse in Aratus in the Areopagus in Athens:



(g). Forasmuch then as we are the offspring of God  
(...) Acts of the Apostles 17:29.

Nje bi awa ba se omo Olorun (...). Ise awon  
Aposteli 17:29.

The translator should ask that, if “the sons of God” translated as “omo Olorun” are men, what type of men are they? It should be noted that people are called by this name under a particular consideration, that is, on the ground of being just and faithful people who worship God on earth. The translator treats this text to reflect this exegesis in the Target Language. Bible translation is a kind of social work, which serves different people. The implication is that the role of translation can only be achieved and the effects of translation embodied when it is transmitted and accepted by the Target Reader. Analysing the above translation from the perspective of Target Language reader’s response, the translation respond well to the actual communication process because it conveys the Source Text’s ideology to the Target Reader. Crowther’s translation chooses a translation channel which the Yoruba audience can easily decode. Choosing the medium for communication which is compatible with what people are presently using will ensure that their attention is drawn to the truth of the message rather than to the strangeness of the medium used.

## 6.0 Conclusion

The translator’s role in the translation of the Holy Bible into Yoruba is not an easy task. The difficulty in translating the Holy Bible, that has been written several decades ago in three ancient languages reminds me of the question posed by Sanchez M.T. (2003: 30) on whether a language can really translate society, that is, the Judeo-Graeco-Roman society, as applicable to the Holy Bible. He equally supplies the answer: “It will depend on the Source Language and the Target Language, on the specific text on the familiarity of the translator with both languages and on the kind of social connotations the original text wants to transmit (ibid:30). Bishop Ajayi Crowther’s language in his Yoruba translation of the Bible is beyond suspicion. His transfer of the text’s linguistic luxury and musicality is quite successful. Ideology as a concept in his Yoruba translation of Bible is both a process and a product. What this implies is that, in Holy Bible translation, there are no value free or neutral rendition. Ideology finds its way into the text and the translator looks for a way to reflect it or avoid its confrontation.

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