Ogun Abibiman: A Creative Translation of Yoruba Verse

Mabel Osakwe

Volume 43, numéro 3, septembre 1998

Résumé de l’article
L’auteur discute des différentes stratégies adoptées par Wole Soyinka pour traduire sa poésie du yoruba vers l’anglais en examinant chacune des quatre catégories stylistiques du yoruba.

Citer cet article
Résumé
L'auteur discute des différentes stratégies adoptées par Wole Soyinka pour traduire sa poésie du yoruba vers l’anglais en examinant chacune des quatre catégories stylistiques du yoruba.

Abstract
This paper discusses the strategies adopted by Wole Soyinka in translating his poetry from Yoruba to English. Each of the four Yoruba stylistic categories is examined.

The process of substituting a text in one language for a text in another is often confronted with the problem of finding Target Language (TL) translation equivalents for Source Language (SL) (Catford 1964). A writer of African Literature in English in using his second language (EL2) faces this problem as he attempts to explicate one culture in the language of a non-cognate culture. As a locus of contact of two languages, he is naturally faced with the problems and prospects of translation since he has two grammars available to him. His level of bilingualism shows in the manner he manipulates these grammars (Lado 1957; Weinreich 1953; Banjo 1976; Osundare 1979).

The manner of tackling the bilingual and bicultural problems at the conceptual and composition stage is one of such instances that reveals the level of bilingualism. Hence one bilingual may have to create the idea in his L1 before translating while another who spends most of his time using the L2 and listening to it being spoken and therefore stands the chance of thinking in his L2 may not experience so wide a gap between thought and linguistic action.

Wole Soyinka's bilingual competence falls within the latter range. But even with a competent bilingual, it is still not easy to discover textual equivalents the reason being that bilingual competence is just one of the factors that constrain a writer's choice of language; others being message and audience/addressee. African writers of L2 expression have therefore, evolved some strategies to solve the problem of cultural and linguistic translatability.

These strategies include literal and creative translations. The former refers to a verbatim translation of L1 to L2 while the latter is a more intricate intermesh of the conceptual, perceptual and semantic levels.

Where there is a serious problem of arriving at an adequate Translation Equivalent (TE), the untranslatable item is transferred and its intelligibility ensured as the writer cushions the new item into a new surrounding; a method referred to as cushioning (Young 1970; Osundare 1979).

The strategies adopted by Wole Soyinka in translating his message in his third volume of poetry (Ogun Abibiman) is the focus of this paper. His attempt at substituting his L1 text with an L2 text is of special interest in this volume where the poet though seeking (if possible) to speak to Africans in an African language, is constrained by the linguistically heterogeneous nature of their societies to adopt a borrowed tongue. Four Yoruba stylistic categories: Owe, Ofo, Alo Apama and Oriki (Olatunji 1971) are identified and their translation method examined to reveal the poet's manner of reconciling his linguistic worlds.

This short volume published in 1976 is an extollment of the Black World — a panegyric acclaiming the war against Apartheid. His adopted L2 medium here exhibits obvious signals of an expressive compromise in a number of ways. The title is one of such compromises; being a blend of Yoruba (Ogun = god of war and creativity) and Akan (Abibiman = the land of the black peoples) to arrive at the acronym meaning "Ogun of the black peoples."

The rather copious use of untranslated Yoruba usages is also another. But more important is the manner in which Yoruba stylistics is translated to give this poem of English expression a striking flavour of the African language.

According to Olatunji (1971) the eight stylistic features shared by all Yoruba poetic types are: repetition, lexical matching, parallelism, tonal counterpart, word play, rhythm, non causal language, and figurative language. His detailed description of these features reveals a high percentage of overlap between EL, stylistic strategies and those of YL1. English poetry employs all Yoruba stylistic features listed above except the tonal effect; a very high percentage (87.5%) similarity which suggests that at the level of stylistic translation the Yoruba bilingual poet does not have much translation problems.

But this is not really the case. Apart from the tonal features which are untranslatable, the manner of textual organisation of the other features sets YL1 poetry distinctly apart from EL1 poetry. How then does this poet effectively translate these forms?
**ORIKI / THIS IS YORUBA PANEGYRIC POETRY**

In the poet's native tradition it is the most utilitarian in function since it is used as part of daily life; quite often beside the neonate's cradle in form of praise names and to refer to the mystical world of their pantheon to extoll heroic deeds of divinities. There are five main discourse features: fluidity of structure and content, high incidence of nominalisation, preponderance of phrases or the subject of oriki (prefix and nominal and multiplicity of references for comprehension, the commonest being prefix + clause and prefix + nominal and multiplicity of references to the subject of oriki.

The following are some examples of Soyinka's Oriki of EL3 expression (the integrated structural analysis is mine):

1. Ar/Sc ((c) Lost (A) in dreams of Noliwe) (s) 1 (P) read (C) His savage beauty (A) on black brows...

2. In time of flight, (S) the egret (P) mocks (C) alone (A) In time of hunt, (S) the lion's grace (P) is (C) the duiker's

The structural analysis of the examples shows how heavily clustered their NP structures are; comprising phrases and clauses with nominal functions and multiple embedding. These complex structures arise because of the use of multiple references to the same subject of Oriki: Shaka is referred to as as dread..., voice..., trumpet..., etc. in 1 while Ogun is referred to as duiker, elephant, lion, egret, him of seven paths in 2. Oblique references employed include Bayette's blood, and mist of Idanre in 1 and emptied reservoirs of blood in heaven, and raged with thirst in 2. These Oriki usages are adulatory and inspirational in function. The sentential naming structure (see seventh line of example 1) is also a translation of Oriki stylistic features.

The effect of the chanted Oriki in 2 is sustained by the repetition of the inverted qualifying adverbial string In time of; a rhetorical style that is typically Yoruba especially in its African fable characters which add proverbial and evocative functions to the chant; enabling the poet to build up to the climax of Ogun's amoral act.

**OWE**

Aphorisms, idioms, proverbs and related usages comprise this poetic form. Four stylistic features typify Owe. First is the function of the prescriptive function of the sentences which serve as social charters to recommend and condemn practices. These statements can be negative, positive or conditional. Negative maxims are either of the ki-type (which express who does not), or the ko-type (what does not take place). Second is the sentence form: the use of parallel sentences is higher in proverbs than in any other poetic type. For example:

- *Idin ni iku ighin*
- *Ori ni iku awun*

The bottom is the death of the snail
The head is the death of the tortoise (cf. Olatunji 1970: 254)

The parallel ki-type (of simple sentence) and bi-type (of complex) is used more often. Ki is the negative habitual tense marker and bi the conditional as in this example:

- *Bi a logun eru*
- *Bi a logun iwafa*
- *Omo eni lere eni*

If one has twenty slaves
If one has thirty pawns
One's children are one's gains (Olatunji 1970: 255)
Third, lexical repetition and contrast; lexical items some of which contrast in meaning are repeated in the same or different clauses; for example:

\[ \text{Omi boye ko won} \]
\[ \text{Awon gogo bi atunase} \]

TE Those that spoil are not scarce
What is scarce is those that improve (Olatunji 1970: 257)

Fourth is the terseness of the text, arising from condensation of pithy ideas with all their nuances within a small space. The following usages by the poet are Owe translations. We shall group our selected examples into three, based on what characteristic features of Owe are utilized. The first group is based on the use of the first and fourth features:

3. The termites that would eat the kingdom
First built their nest
In the loin-cloth of the king (p. 13)

4. The gods that show remorse lay claims to man’s
Forgiveness — a founder-king shall dare no less (p. 14)

5. Bid all beware the scorpion in the thatch —
His cunning lacks all shame
Make note of the dealer in death
A stink of the hyena, gorged in carrion. (p. 15)

6. I know — who more than I? the trade
death (which evokes Ogun) as well as the anthropo-
loin-cloth, scorpion in the thatch, hyena, dealer in
dying the earth about to be undone

At this upheaval of our giant roots.
9. Others build and others conquer; the jackal’s
Laughter turns him leader by default.
When the guard is empty, the tapster staggers
Laughter turns him leader by default.
Vecindr, drunk with self-acclaiming. (p. 16)

The maxim in 7 is unconditional, terse and pithy.
It is the poet’s expression of hope; an expected end, a
solution to the black struggle against racism. The
effect of the statement derives partly from the force of
the simple parallel structural Owe types in the last two
sentences. Eight and nine function like instances of bi
complex (that is conditional) parallel types. The lexical
repition of roots is a third feature exhibited in the
usage. Although, only roots is repeated, the repetition
makes the rather intricate expression more lucid,
revealing the vivid proverbial description of the anticip-
pated effects of the united forces of the black people
across the continent. These rhetorics are employed
with the African audience in mind, and are instances of
the comitative aspects of Soyinka’s style.

Our last group of examples of Owe includes
usages that combine three or all the features of the
form:

10. The termite is no match
For the black soldier ant, yet termites gnawed
The housepost of our Kraals even while
We made the stranger welcome (p. 12)

11. The task must gain completion, our fount
of being cleansed from termites’ spittle —
In this alone. I seek my own completion. (p. 13)

12. Kind knows kind, but only as the wholman
Knows his pus-filled finger, In what I did
Was Shaka, but Shaka was not always I. (p. 15)

13. Beware the life-usurpers masked in skins
Flayed from the living forms of amaZulu
Beware the jester masks with grinning teeth
Of the corroded panga. I have spoken. (p. 17)

Eleven is the only example that combines the first,
second and fourth features. All of 10, 12 and 13 com-
bine all four and even additional Yoruba stylistic fea-
tures. This makes them the best examples of Owe
translation employed by the poet in this anthology.

In addition to the positive maxims employed,
there is also the use of structural parallelism, (SPCA)
in 10, SPC in 12 and PC in 13. Lexical repetition is
equally exploited in all. The repetition of termite in 10
with the colour contrast has the white racist import in
the second usage especially as it is matched with
stranger in the the company of the transferred lexical
item kraals — a very terse and pithy proverbial
expression of regret and multiple — edged satire on
the white racist racists.

Kind, know and Shaka are repeated in 12 with the
ironic import of the second usages of know and Shaka
contrasting with the first; a proverbibhat debunks the
level of dishonesty and subsequent distrust among the
black peoples. A similar lexical contrast by preposition
is also employed in 13 where beware is repeated as a
warning for two seemingly contrasting but equally dangerous situations. The use of the panga, a choice necessitated also by the content, is deliberately a transferred element aimed at leaving the African thumb print on the Owe translated text. Within the Owe context, the last three-word sentence is a literal Yoruba translation. It is not a simple assertion declaring that the speaker has done some speaking as a mere activity but rather a literal rendition of the poet's L₁ manner of (an elder in particular) communicating with some amount of annoyance or resentment, the fact that he has exercised utmost patience in giving advice, and warnings that have remained hitherto unheeded. He is then giving his final advice or opinion on the matter: "I am speaking my final word on this, if you like, heed my warning." This meaning of the expression then is found within its social semiotics.

**OFO**

This is Yoruba incantatory poetry, the basis of which is magic. Ofo is believed to work by sympathies through an impersonal dynamic vital force which is present in all things: objects, plants, human, or supra-human. An object, it is believed, can transmit some aspects of its nature to other bodies: sweet potatoes or honey for example can by its sweetness make life more abundant if its vital force is tapped — a case of homopathic sympathy. The other sympathy is contagious; sympathies which are transferred through physical contact or relationship.

The belief in the magic of names is related to Ofo usages — all this have secret names and evoking such names enables the enchanter to control them and the power or vital force in them. Hence Ofo or Oro mean word. Four distinguishing features of Ofo are its characteristic structure (invocation, statement of problem, assertion of truths), symbolic word-play, repetition, and the personal nature of the poetic form. Assertions could be negative or conditional but it is usually positive. The truth of some of the assertions is held to be mythologically defined. The following example of this type is given by Olatunji (1970: 224):

\[\begin{align*}
\text{Ile o gba ona o gbua nii seve a a ragba} \\
\text{Ojo tomode ba ja we olo yin aye} \\
\text{Ojo nai nii foja bewe oloyon orun}
\end{align*}\]

TE There is no room at home there is no room outside is the fate of the a a ragba leaf

It is on the day that a child plucks the earthly Oloyin leaf

It is on that day that he will come face to face with the heavenly olo yin leaf.

The word-play in the example is on sound, while the assertion is based on incontrovertible observations of the world of nature. The second feature is the symbolic word-play on homophonous YL₁ usages where the noun and verb forms are related. Repetition in Ofo is marked by its magical significance.

Incidents of lexico-structural repetition in Ofo is higher than any other poetic form.

Ofo stylistics is skillfully employed in Ogun Abibiman. Consider the following examples:

14. Sigidi Baba! Bayete!

Our histories meet, the forests merge
With the savannah. Let rockhill drink with lion
At my waterholes. Oh brother spirits
Did my dying words raise echoes in your hills
When kinsmen matched broad blades
With Shaka's shoulders? (p. 11).

15. Bayete Baba! Bayete!

Reclaim my seeds. Restore my manhood.
Their cries are trumpeted in the dead abode...
... O silent one, my tap-roots
Wait your filling draught to swell
To buttress. Restore my seeds. Reclaim
The manhood of a founder - king
Rogbodiyan! Rogbodiyan!
Ogun re le e Shaka
Rogbodiyan
Ogun gbo wo Shaka
O di rogbodyian.

16. Sigidi! And on the brink, a pause, a hope
Before the seal against retraction-infekane!
For who shall say of processes that strip
Millenial trees of grandeur, ingenuities
Beamed to atomised the creative palm of man -
Whose song shall claim - that war is for desire
Or love, or ease, or craving?
A cherished courtesan at labour's end?
We shall not vie in sickness with that world
Whose rhetoric is sightless violence
But press the purity of claims that dwell inward in our being... (p. 19)

These three examples of Ofo poetry maintain a near exact Ofo structure, the invocation in all instances is of the ancestral essence called forth in the African language. A number of other usages help to establish a strong sense of the African region: the flora and fauna as well as their aspirations. The meaning of the transferred, African lexical items Sigidi and Mfekane (16) intensify each other since the former is a dreaded ritual emissary of destruction who will inevitably fight in the crushing and total war (mfekane).

Still on the Ofo structure, the problem element is overtly defined in all three examples following the usual question type. The assertion in 15 and 16 produce their effects differently. In 16 it is negative and asserted in modern British English with no traits to show that the usage is from the African region, yet the preceding part of the text as well as the context enable it to produce effectively the psychological effect often associated with Ofo assertions. Example 15 is the most colourful. The assertion which is rendered in YL₁ is an instance of spontaneous code.
switching as the poet makes his outburst in the performance form of his native culture. The songs, the dance and the near audible African drums all combine to compensate for the poet's non-use of the most appropriate medium; (YL1) for this special discourse about the black peoples.

**ALO APAMO**

This is YL1 poetry as riddles. It mainly serves an entertainment function. Five distinguishing features are: the question and answer pattern, recondite metaphor, incongruity of statements, sentence form and the sparing use of connectives. Although the riddles are interrogative, they are usually not propounded in that form; only a few are. An example of this poetic form is 17:

17. The boughs are broken, an earthquake
   Rides upon the sway of chants...
18. Ogun is the tale that wags the dog
   All dogs, and all have had their day. (p. 6)

This verse form is not as overtly employed in this volume as in others. Our examples are absurd usages which derive their full meaning within the cultural context of Alo Apamo.

The total outcome of all four stylistic strategies employed in the translation of Soyinka's message in this text is a creative rendition of a melodious Yoruba verse in English — a rendition in which his African and YL1 reader can hear the African voice distinctly behind the terse, adulatory and pungent message. The poet's translation principle is more of a heuristic device because it is based not really on translation equivalence but on synonymy; a meaning relationship that is highly context (including cultural context) sensitive.

**REFERENCES**


