NATIVIZATION OF ENGLISH IN AFRICAN LITERARY TEXTS: A LEXICO-SEMANTIC STUDY OF TRANSLITERATION IN GABRIEL OKARA'S THE VOICE

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Abstract

As a result of the bilingual nature of African nations due to the historical accident of colonialism, the problem of which language (ie. Indigenous or colonial language) to adopt for literary expression, has lingered on. This has precipitated the use of various devices by African writers to contextualize aspects of indigenous meaning in the L_2 text. Against this background, the present study examines lexico-semantic aspects of transliteration in Gabriel Okara's The Voice (1964), using the parameters of Robert Lado's contrastive analysis. The study explores the various sociolinguistic constraints which determine appropriate lexical choices in the text. The main aim is to enhance understanding and appreciation of the language of Okara's The Voice in particular and African literature in general. The study also highlights the importance of lexis and meaning, as distinctive levels of language, to the construction of any literary discourse.

Keywords: Nativization, African literature, lexico-semantic, transliteration,Gabriel Okara,The *Voice*

Introduction

Every Literary text is constructed with language. Therefore, it is imperative to determine how a particular writer has utilized the potentials of language to negotiate meaning(s) for his text This thesis is anchored on the premise that, as Brumfit and Carter (1986) put it, we need to show "how what is said is said and how meanings are made" within the psycholinguistic and sociolinguistic ambience of the text. As a bilingual and bicultural text, the structure of language use in Okara's *The Voice* "calls attention to itself" (Murakarovsky, 1964:58), in the sense that the author manipulates and adapts the rhythm, register, syntax and semantics of the English Language to the linguistic and cultural nuances of his native ijaw Language. Specifically, the peculiarity of Okara's linguistic style in the text under study is a product of, or direct response to, the lingering problem of language in African literature. This problem borders on whether or not the colonial linguistic media (i.e. Portuguese, English, French etc), would be able to adequately and authentically express the socio-cultural and linguistic realities of the African continent. Scott (1990) refers to it as:

> ….*the long-standing debate among critics of African literature over the relation between African authors and the colonial linguistic legacy.*

This debate which has dominated Africa literature in the past fifty years (Osundare, 2004), stems from the recognition among African scholars/writers of the centrality of language to literature, and the close connection between political independence and cultural emancipation. As literary works are cultural artifacts, the basic thinking is that, the use of colonial languages in African literature is a willing perpetuation of imperialism. Significantly, there has been a sustained polarity of opinion about the appropriate attitude the African writer should adopt to this phenomenon. These range from the fervidly nationalist to the stridently compromising. Osundare (2004) identifies three "attitudes" viz: (i) accomodationist, (ii) gradualist, and (iii) radicalist.

According to this scholar, the first group (i.e. accommodationist), which has as its chief promoter, Leopold Sedar Senghor of Senegal, favours an outright use of imperialist languages; while the "gradualists" are "the dwellers of the middle of the road", prominent among whom is Ali Mazrui who advocates a de-Anglicization and re-Africanization of the English language, to authentically convey Africa's literary sensibilities. The third group, on the other hand, is the "radicalist" composed of writers who call for an immediate adoption of indigenous African languages as the media of literary expression. Obi Wali and Ngugi Wa Thiongo are proponents and exponents of this attitude. Instructively, majority of African writers belong to the "gradualist" group identified above (i.e. indigenizing the colonial language).

Gabriel Okara, Chinua Achebe, Amos Tutuola, Elechi Amadi, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, Kofi Awoonor, etc. all fall into this category. In the main, this linguistic constraint would have informed the device of "transliteration" adopted in Okara's *The Voice*.

On his part, Ushie (2001), summarizes some of the major positions canvassed by scholars on the problem of language in African literature as follows:

a) Those who, following Obi Wali, have continued to advocate the use of African indigenous languages, e.g. Ngugi Wa Thiongo and Immeh Ikiddeh.
b) Those who have followed the sophisticated formal English expression e.g. Okigbo, Soyinka, Dennis Brutus, J.P. Clark-Bekederemo, e.t.c.
c) Those who, following Janheiz Jahn, have suggested that European languages, for instance, English, be used in such a way that languages bear the African cultural experience while remaining intelligible internationally. Chinua Achebe's novels, especially *Things Fall Apart* and *Arrow of God*, and the poetry of Okot P 'Bitek and Kofi Awoonor illustrate this category.
d) Those who advocate transliteration as a way of keeping intact African cultural heritage while using foreign words, e.g. Gabriel Okara, AS illustrated in his novel, *The Voice*
e) Those who may be described as following a plural code e.g. Ken Saro Wiwa (whose literary oeuvre is a pot-pourri of linguistic codes with which he has experimented in his work. His novel, *Sozaboy,* for instance, comes in Nigerian pidgin English; his poetry collection *Songs in a Time of* war, is in both Nigerian "Standard" English and in Nigerian pidgin English; while several of his biographical works are in sophisticated Nigerian English, just as his posthumously published novel.

Generally, it is germane to note that African scholars who advocate the use of indigenous languages are goaded on by nationalist sentiments, while their counterparts who favour colonial languages place a high premium on the global intelligibility and outreach of a work of art.

Bilingualism and African Literature

We have established Gabriel Okara's text as a bilingual text. It is, therefore, pertinent to shed some light on the term "bilingualism", in relation to African literature. Bloomfield (1933) defines the term as "the native-like control of two languages". Lambert (1977) sees it as "the existence of two languages in the repertoire of an individual or a speech community". The significant thread that runs through both definitions is that the term reflects a situation where two languages are used side by side, whether by an individual or a given society.
Bilingualism is a product of language contact. Appel and Muystan (1987:1) confirm inter alia: "Language contact inevitably leads to bilingualism." The inference of this is that, at least, two different languages with distinctive features (i.e. lexical, semantic, phonological and syntactic) must come into contact for bilingualism to occur or manifest. Akindele and Adegbite (1992) identify factors such as colonialism, commerce, conquest, annexation and war, etc, as having the potentials to precipitate such language contacts.

The bilingual situation in Africa is traceable to the historical accident of colonialism, which was a by-product of the Berlin conference of 1885, where African nations were balkanized among imperial powers (i.e. Britain, France, Portugal), for administrative purposes. The corollary is that African countries are either Anglophone or Francophone, etc. in addition to the sundry local languages spoken by the compatriots. As literature is an expressive art, the consequent complex linguistic situation is reflected in the literature of these African countries, as explored above.

Alo (1998) has outlined some devices used by African writers to reflect local or indigenous nuances in their styles viz:

i. Coinages, borrowing, etc.
ii. The use of native similes and metaphors
iii. The transfer of rhetorical devices from native languages
iv. The translation of native proverbs, idioms, etc.
v. The use of culturally dependent speech styles
vi. The use of syntactic devices and deviation
vii. Code-switching and code-mixing
viii. Transliteration

It is important to note that, the foregoing devices are adopted, in varying degrees, by different writers to reflect aspects of indigenous meaning. This gives a distinctive African cultural identity to the texts.

Literature Review/Theoretical Foundation

According to McAthur (1992), contrastive linguistics is a branch of applied linguistics that "describes similarities and differences between two (or more) languages at such levels as phonology, lexis, grammar and semantics". This concept is relevant to the present study because it enables us to compare and contrast the two languages in question i.e. Ijaw and English.

Based on behaviourist and structuralist theories of the 1950's, Lado's (1957) contrastive analysis, which we adopted for the analysis, operates on two broad principles. The first is that both languages are described separately. Secondly, only patterns form the basis for comparison and not whole languages, for, as Olabode (2001) observed:

> ... each language is a complex of a large number of patterns at different levels and at different degrees of delicacy. Therefore, there can be no single general statement accounting for all of these patterns.

In his introduction to Okara's text, Ravenscroft (1969) remarks that, the text had a mixed reception and that some African reviewers found its unconventional use of the English language uncomfortable. The scholar adds that reviewers abroad were also partly nonplussed by the language and curious about its strange symbolism. This situation could have engendered the initial cold feet developed by critics, and the awful misunderstanding of the linguistic and cultural value and significance of *The Voice* in African literature (Iyasere, 1982). However, Duruoha (1992) observes that, "a growing volume of critique on this novel is emerging". Previous linguistic works on the text include: shiarella's (1970) "Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*: A Study in the Poetic Novel", Burness' (1972)" *The Voice*: Stylistic Innovation and the Rhythm of African Life", Okiwelu's (1987) " Gabriel Okara: *The Voice* and Transliteration", Scott's (1990) "Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*: The Non-Ijo Reader and the Pragmatics of Translingualism", and Duruoha's (1992) " Form as Metaphor in Gabriel Okara's *The Voice*". The Significant point is that none of these works focuses mainly on how lexis and meaning have been organized to help the author achieve the target of transliteration in the text, using the tools of contrastive analysis.

Transliteration and Translation

Alo (1998) defined "transliteration" as the "process whereby the units of one language, e.g. words, structures, are replaced by those in another language e.g. from a Nigerian language into English ..." Hornby (2000) says it is "to write words or letters using letters of a different alphabet or language". These definitions imply that the term involves the replacement of each source language word or other units with the units of the target language. Thus, words or structures in the Ijaw language could be converted to the English Language, as is the case in Okara's *The Voice*.

Translation is a related concept. It refers to the neutral term used for all tasks where the meaning of expressions in one language is turned into the meaning of another language, whether the medium is spoken or written (Catford, 1965), without recourse to the structures or rules of the source language. In ranking translation, Catford identified three levels of the term:

(i)   Word-for-word translation; i.e. every word in the source language is replaced by the equivalent in the target language.
(ii)   Literal translation i.e. the structure of the source language is adapted to the rules of the target language.
(iii)   Free translation i.e. the translator has nothing to do with the linguistic structures of the source language.

                                                                                                                (see Olabode, 2001)

From the foregoing ranking, it is clear that "transliteration" is an aspect of "translation".

A Brief Biography of the Author

To fully appreciate the significance of the linguistic experiment in Okara's *The Voice*, it is imperative to peep into the background of the author. This will expose us not only to the linguistic and socio-cultural or ancestral origins of the writer, but also to his distinct personality, interests, and place in modern African literature, which are crucially relevant to our understanding and appreciation of the linguistic experiment in the text. Born in 1921 in the Ijaw area of Bayelsa State of Nigeria, Gabriel Imomotimi Okara is one of the earliest exponents of African literature in English. After obtaining a Higher School Certificate (HSC) at Government College, Umuahia, he became a book-binder, autodidact, administrator, and Biafran nationalist. K.E. Senanu and T. Vincent (1976) comment that from this point in his life:

> …okara developed a remarkable personality by dint of personal tuition, reflection
> and deep interest in literature generally and in the language and culture of his people.

From the foregoing comment, we can observe that, though he later studied journalism at Northwestern University, USA, Okara had developed interest in literature generally and his linguistic and cultural roots in particular at a very early age. This interest must have motivated him to do extensive research into these two areas of study. There is no doubt that this would have equipped him with the intellectual resources to fashion out a new linguistic idiom to interpret his bilingual and bicultural environment. It is, therefore no coincidence that the most significant thing that marks out Okara in African literature is the experiment with language (i.e. transliteration) in his *The Voice*. Apart from this novel, the writer is also one of the earliest and foremost poet in Africa. His poetry has won major local and international awards, including the Commonwealth poetry prize (1979) and the Nigeria (NLNG) prize for literature (2005).

Socio-cultural Context of the Text

It is imperative to establish the socio-cultural context of Okara's text. This is because the emphasis of a linguistic study of a bilingual text is on the functional or pragmatic use of language which must reflect the socio-cultural typology in which it grows. In other words, the study is a survey of situated speech, with the context serving as a significant background. Okara's *The Voice* is set in the socio-political context of post independent Africa. Specifically, it highlights the moral corruption in high places, as represented by Chief Izongo and his Cohorts. Okolo, on the other hand, represents the handful of genuine moralists and social crusaders who fight for the restoration of sanity and rectitude. The fact that the epidemic of corruption and moral decay spreads to everywhere in the text (i.e. both Amatu and Sologa), underscores its pervasiveness and persistence. The conflict of the text is thus, that between LIGHT and DARKNESS. Essentially, it is against the background of this grim struggle between forces of light and darkness, that linguistic choices in the text are patterned.

Textual Analysis

With the foregoing preliminary insights, we shall now examine aspects of lexical and semantic transliteration in Okara's text. The focus on lexico-semantics is, itself, significant. Apart from delineating both concepts as distinctive levels of language, the point is that words are only functional in semantic contexts. This much is echoed by McCarthy and Carter (1988) when they posited that:

> *Much of what has been written concerning lexis over the years has assumed that*
> *the proper place for discussion of the subject is within semantics.*

However, in this discourse, we shall restrict our exploration to verbal forms which are culled from the L_1 of the author for the expression and contextualization of indigenous meaning, under the following sub-headings:

    i.   Coinage or neologism
    ii.   Collocation
    iii.   Linguistic borrowing
    iv.   Semantic extension/shift
    v.   Contextual meaning of Lexical transliteration

Coinage/Neologism

In Okara's *The Voice,* we find a preponderance of lexical coinages that reflect the linguistic milieu of the source language. Apparently, this is a product of the author's strategy of transliteration. This strategy precipitates a phenomenon of multi-word units or compound neologisms, which abound in the text With the L2 + L2 structure of these compound neologisms, we observe that meaning is traceable to the source language, though the constituent lexical choices are English. Below are some illustrative examples from the text:

    i.   You <u>know-nothing</u> people (p. 121)
    ii.   The <u>caring-nothing</u> feet of the world
    iii.   We are <u>know-God</u> people (p. 32)
    iv.   <u>Wrong-doing</u> filled their insides (p. 31)
    v.   These <u>happening-things</u> (p. 48)
    vi.   <u>Man-killing</u> medicine (p. 37)
    vii.   <u>Black-coat-wearing</u> man (p. 37)
    viii.   <u>Surface-water</u> things (p. 34)

ix.   <u>Surface-water</u> laugh (p. 36)
x.   <u>Questioning-word</u> (p. 53)
xi.   <u>Teaching-word</u> (p. 37)
xii.   <u>Meeting-place</u> (p. 48)
xiii.   <u>Know-nothing</u> footsteps (p. 34)

We may not bother to explain the lexical items underlined above, since their textual meanings are very clear. However, we need to emphasize that, although compounding itself is a lexico-semantic device deployed by writers to encode or foreground textual meaning, they are discussed under neologisms because their inference and usage is unusual and novel, even though the author has used the English code. They are clearly a product of word-for-word translation from the source language (ie. Ijaw), to the target language (ie. English) (see Catford's 1965) ranking of translation above). Hence Alo (1998) contended that word coinage or neologism occurs ""when a new word is made up or created in order to express a cultural concept, object or institution". This scholar explains the nature and purpose of innovations in language use inter alia:

> *There is the natural human tendency to innovate in language, either for the sake of being creative and original or as a result of the need to express new objects, things or ideas. People are always creating new expressions or altering old ones to fit new ones. Innovations in language are chiefly controlled by the necessities of communication…Innovations in non-native English occur as a result of new cultural identities*

Collocation

Collocation is a type of syntagmatic lexical relation which refers to the habitual co-occurrence of individual lexical items. Halliday (1964) sees it as "the company lexical items keep ... their propensity for particular neighbours and environments". In Okara's *The Voice,* we find this "co-occurrence" of words as a result of transliteration from the author's native Ijaw to English. Importantly, these collocations are deliberately and systematically reiterated to establish the cumulative meaning of the text. Collocations such as "straight things", "good bottom" and "open inside", for instance, etch the theme of truth and integrity as championed by Okolo; while "turned world", stinking things" and "spoilt world" purvey corruption and moral decadence, as orchestrated by Chief Izongo and his aides. The critical point here is that these collocations can only be decoded or interpreted according to the mode of signification in the author's native Ijaw language.

Linguistic Borrowing

As the term indicates, this phenomenon is basically concerned with the borrowing of linguistic devices from the LI in order to transmit the intended indigenous meaning in the target language or L2. Bloomfield (1933:44) saw it as: "*The adoption of features which differ from those of the main tradition".* The implication of this definition is that, linguistic borrowing is essentially engendered by the non-availability of a lexical equivalent(s) of a native concept in the L2. This seems to be informed by Yule's (1944) hypothesis in his *The Statistical Study of Literary Vocabulary* that"... the colour and flavour of a text... are determined by the common words used by the author ...". However, in this text, Okara appears to have used the device indiscriminately (i.e. even where there are lexical equivalents in the L2). Quite apparently, this is in keeping with the technique of transliteration, which is the hallmark of the work. In our exemplification, therefore, we shall show

i.   L1 borrowings which have no S.B.E. equivalents and
ii. L1 borrowings which have ready S.B.E. equivalents.

For the latter, we shall bolster our hypothesis by providing the S.B.E. equivalents.

Borrowings without S.B.E. Equivalents

a.   Things of the soil (p. 61)
b.   Things that follow me (p. 62)
c.   Things of the ground (p. 65)
d.   One with black face (p. 63)

The meaning of all the lexical constructs presented above can only be decoded in the LI sense. This is because they are not available in the L2 code. Specifically, they concern the African belief in ancestors and gods. This religious philosophy is directly opposed to the monotheism of the west. While (a) and (c) above, for instance, refer to the ancestors and gods of the land, (b) refers to guardian gods/spirits and (d) refers specifically to the sea god known as "*Benikurukuru"* whose face is always being referred to as being charcoal-black.

Borrowings with L2 or S.B.E. Equivalents

S/N	Source Language (LI)	S.B.E. Equivalent (L2)
1	One whose head is not correct (p. 22)	A lunatic
2	Search with all his inside (p. 23)	Zealously; committedly
3	Fall from our jobs (p. 25)	Lose our jobs
4	Search with all his shadow (p. 23)	Spiritedly
5	His eyes were not right (p. 23)	Insane
6	Okolo has no chest (p. 23)	Lacks courage
7	Day's eye (p. 61)	Weather
8	Take the canoe to the ground (p. 53)	Ashore
9	Hunger held him (p. 52)	He was hungry
10	Tell me the bottom of it (p. 40)	Meaning; reason; rationale
11	Entered our ears (p. 51)	Heard
12	Put a law (p. 51)	Make or enact a law
13	Bad head (p. 68)	Unlucky; ill-fated
14	When Okolo came to know himself (p.80)	Regained consciousness
15	From this standing moment (p. 53)	From this moment

As earlier stated, the linguistic items in the foregoing table have L2 (SBE) equivalents, which are shown on the right-hand side. The critical point is that, the author ignores the S.B.E form, and uses the source language (L1) form, in line with the technique of transliteration adopted in the text.

Semantic Shift/Extension

In this situation, the meaning of standard English words are extended to accommodate local sentiments or concepts. It is pertinent to observe that, in Okara's *The Voice,* semantic extension is a product of transliteration. Let us illustrate this phenomenon with the following two examples:

i.   What I do with my money does not touch you (p.92)
ii.   Did he no part of your body touch? (p. 65)

In S.B.E., "to touch" suggests physical contact. Hornby (2000) defines it as "to be or come so close together that there is no space between". In the context of (i) above, Okara has extended it to mean "concern" i.e. "what I do with my money is not your business". In the context of (ii) above, on the other hand, the term has been extended to mean "a deliberate, sensual or lustful contact". In the LI of the author, the term could also suggest copulation or sexual intercourse i.e. "have you touched her?" The major point here is that, the term carries semantic properties of the LI of the author which extend beyond their native English uses.

Contextual meaning of Lexical Transliteration

Having delineated aspects of lexical transliteration in the text, our next task is to show that these lexical items are only meaningful within the context of the author's native cultural values and environment. The contextual theory of meaning is associated with systemic linguists and constructs can only be decoded against the background of the pattern of signification in the source language. According to Brumfit and Carter (1986:145):

> *...the more culture-bound the style becomes, the more distance is created between the native varieties of English and the non-native varieties.*

The fact is that, apart from culture-bound lexical constructs such as "spoilt world" (which means corrupt world); 'surface-water things' (hypocrisy) "search with all his inside" (spiritedly); "had no chest" (lacks courage); "day's eye" (weather), etc, Okara's transliteration in his *The Voice* is foregrounded by his use of forms for which options are readily available. For illustration, let us examine the table below:

S\N	L1	Transliteration Options in the L2
I	T<u>e</u>m<u>e</u>	0) Spirit (ii) Shadow
Ii	G<u>o</u>m<u>u</u> iye	Straight thing\true, honest, genuine
Lii	Gesi iye	True \ honest thing

The table above shows that (i) t<u>e</u>m<u>e</u> which is the LI form, is an ambiguous word. The two meanings are shown in the L2 code.

The point is that Okara deliberately opts for "shadow" when, in the actual sense, "spirit" is closer to the L2 code in the following context, for instance:

> *He was in search of it with all... his shadow (p. 23)*

The inference is that okara could have used "... with all his spirit", which is actually more contextually appropriate. For (ii) and (iii) on the table above, let us examine the following context:

> *I could have been a rich man be ... if the straight*
> *thing I had not done. (p. 105).*

Though the line between "straight" and "honest/true" is very thin, quite obviously, "true" or "honest" thing would have bee closer to the S.B.E. or L2 code. In a similar vein, the use of "standing moment" (p. 53), which we have earlier identified among borrowings with L2 or SBE equivalent in section 6.3.2, is too ambitious i.e. done without regard to the constraints of transliteration. In the original Ijaw form, it is *"tie kiri"* i.e. 'Standing ground". Obviously, Okara reckoned that the latter (i.e. "standing ground") would be meaningless in the L2 code. Our contention is that, faced with this transliteration constraint, he should have left it at the SBE or L2 form i.e. "from this moment", instead of opting for a form that makes no sense in both codes.

Conclusion

In this study, we have shown how a an African writer has nativized the English language to interpret his native sociolinguistic environment. Specifically, we have established that Gabriel Okara's *The Voice* is a bilingual text in the sense that it renders the sociolinguistic features of the writer's L1, in the target language or L2, by exploring the various lexico-semantic resources that reflect its hybrid character. Importantly, we have also shown that the author's linguistic experiment of "transliteration" is a valid and relevant response to the persistent problem of language in African literature. The implication of this phenomenon is that a lot of socio-cultural and even historical variables come into play in the construction of an African literary text for, as Adekunle (1987:1) put it, for effective communication of textual meaning to take place, there must be "additional knowledge of the socio-cultural variables present in the context of situation." Thus, our finding in this study is that, to fully appreciate the use of words and their meanings in Gabriel Okara's The Voice, or other African literary texts, there is the need to situate them in the proper sociolinguistic context.

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