

Cultural Peculiarities and Equivalents : A Perspective of French and Igbo Proverbs

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Abstract

Every culture has its mode of expression. This is true for its various aspects including social, material, political or religious aspects of culture. As culture varies with time and space, so its mode of expression varies too. One way culture is expressed is through the use of proverbs. The peculiarities of culture are seen in the form, style, imagery, metaphors, meaning, use and purpose of the proverbs. Proverbs are part of the social culture of different linguistic groups. Igbo and French cultural realities are embedded in their proverbs. Given the cultural and spatial distances and dissimilarities between the two languages and cultures, this paper intends to analyze and compare the cultural realities in equivalent Igbo and French proverbs. This would help the translator to arrive at an acceptable translation of the proverbs in the two languages and cultures. When cultural realities are properly analyzed and extricated from the proverbs, the meaning and purpose of the proverbs become obvious and clear to all. It can then be appropriately used in order to achieve its purpose in the culture concerned. Hence, the paper would examine what a proverb is and the roles it plays in a given culture. It would equally discuss translation as it relates to culture and some of the obstacles to translation of proverbs. This would be followed by an analysis of some Igbo proverbs and their French equivalents in order to establish their meanings. This would enhance their acceptability as equivalents in the two languages under study.

Keywords: culture, proverbs, translation, equivalence, language.

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Introduction

Culture is the people's way of life and it is expressed in different ways, one of which is through the use of proverbs. Sometimes, different proverbs have the same meaning, at other times, they have different meanings. The same proverb can even serve different purposes depending on the situation. Hence, the meaning of proverbs depends on the context or the circumstances. The proverbs of a language are formulated with familiar expressions and objects of the particular environment which make them easy to understand and appreciate. That is why different people may express the same or equivalent meaning in different ways, with different cultural realities. The two languages involved in this analysis are French and Igbo. They belong to different language families that are not related in any way. French belongs Indo-European family while Igbo belongs to the Kwa languages of the Niger-Congo phylum. Therefore translation of proverbs between the two can only be based on the meaning or the message they bear. These messages can be represented in different ways in the different environments of the two languages.

The objective of this paper is to identify equivalent or different cultural realities in French and Igbo proverbs that have similar meanings. This would help the appreciation and translation of the proverbs from one language to another. Hence, the paper discusses culture, proverbs and their equivalents in translation while analyzing the cultural content in them.

Culture

According to *Longman Dictionary of Language Teaching and Applied Linguistics*, culture is the set of practices, codes and values that mark a particular nation or group; the sum of a nation or group's most highly thought of literature, art, music etc. It explains that there is a difference between culture of the literature and arts, and culture of attitudes, values, beliefs and everyday lifestyle. This discussion is concerned with the latter. Culture has various aspects.

- Material culture includes local products, inventions, money, medicine, magic, food, drinks, clothing & accessories, ornaments, etc.

- Social culture includes names, greetings, family relationship (kinship), days & weeks, units of measurement, traditional & professional titles, rites, forms of politeness & respect, forms of exclamations, proverbs, music, musical instruments & dances, entertainment etc.

- Religious culture include divinities, religious beliefs, objects of worship, places of worship, religious symbols, myths, legends, etc.

- Political culture include political symbols (flags, coats of arms,) arms or levels of government, designations, administrative procedures, parties or groups, etc.

- Ecology includes geographical and environmental elements (climate, weather,), physical features (rivers, seas, valleys, and mountains), flora and fauna etc.

Thriveni states that different languages predispose their speakers to think differently, that is, they direct their attention to different areas of the environment. This is very true of proverbs of different languages because cultural realities are embedded in them. That is why a translator has to be aware of the cultures involved in his working languages, and take into consideration the sensibilities of the different cultures. The various aspects of culture as enumerated above vary from place to place. Proverbs which is our focus, are a reflection of the culture of the people. We therefore, need to examine their content in connection with the purposes they serve in order to find their equivalents in the other language.

Proverbs

The *Modern English Igbo Dictionary* defines a proverb as a short, pithy traditional saying in common use while *Webster's Lexicon Dictionary of English Language* (1987) says it is a brief familiar maxim of folk wisdom, usually compressed in form, often involving a bold image and frequently a jingle that catches the memory. The latter definition is more encompassing and explanatory. We can deduce from it that proverbs are short, brief and they paint a familiar picture to the people concerned. They are often in common use too. As Nwachukwu-Agbada (2002:4) says, in Igbo matrix, proverbs remain a documentation of the lives of the people at a particular time. It is an important oral formulation in Igbo culture in which there is a mature exchange of ideas with sparse and well-chosen words (2002:5). It has philosophical content and aesthetics, and is always used in a context.

Proverbs have a fixed form. They are poetic, precise and concise. They are largely used in Igboland by mature persons especially men. They are a unique form of communication. A judicious and apt use of proverbs, is a mark of intelligence or wisdom. An Igbo proverb says "*onye a turu ilu ma kowara ya ya, ego e jiri luo nne ya furu ohia*". Literally, this means that when a proverb is said to somebody and also explained to him, then the dowry paid on his mother is a waste. This simply emphasizes the fact that whoever is born of a woman should think and act with wisdom and understanding. That is the extent to which proverbs are important to the Igbo man.

Finnegan (1976:399) states that proverbs rely for their effect, on the aptness with which they are used in a particular situations. A proverb used out of context loses its meaning and serves no purpose.

Proverbs serve different purposes at different times. These purposes include advice, warning and reprimand. Proverbs can be used as commentary on a particular issue or as a mark of eloquence.

Cultural Realities in Proverbs

By cultural reality is meant that which constitutes a culture, which makes it up. Since culture is dynamic, cultural realities differ from culture to culture. There are however, cultural ideas which according to Jaja (2005:110), are mental images or conceptions a people or a society has of reality. He explains that cultural ideas are universal. They include history, language and knowledge etc.

Proverbs can take the form of images, metaphors, comparisons, philosophical sayings etc. Finnegan (1976:422) explains that "the images in proverbs are primarily from observation of human behavior, of the ways of animals, and any other thing in the natural environment". So the images in the proverbs of a particular people are about who they are, how they live, what they do, where they live and when. In other words, their culture. For example, people from the riverine area have a lot of proverbs about water, fish, fishing etc. Hence one finds in the proverbs of a particular people, their environment, their means of livelihood, their attitudes and behavior. They may be hospitable or hostile, brave or cowardly. You would find social-cultural values, like honesty, hard work, and family values. That is why a proverb can be identified as Igbo, Yoruba, English or French. Often proverbs are introduced with phrases like "the Igbo people say" or "the French say" or "a French proverb says..." This is because proverbs emanate from a particular place and culture. This also gives legitimacy or lends credence to the proverb. Sometimes, plants and animals are quoted as saying one thing or the other.

Here is a local Igbo proverb: *O bughì nani udara mutara nwa a na-apíwa onu.*

Udara is a tropical fruit. To access the seeds, the inner fleshy part and the milk, one has to press it hard towards its head. It is forced open like one forces open the mouth by pressing it hard. So literally speaking *udara* says she is not the only one who produced children whose mouths can be forcefully pressed open. This means that she should not be singled out, her case is not different from others. The ecology aspect of culture comes into play here because *Udara* does not grow everywhere, it is not eaten in every culture and where it is eaten, it may not be eaten the same way the Igbo people eat it.

Jaja (2005:112) supports the same view by saying that “proverbs are derived from a detailed observation of human beings, animals, plants and natural phenomena, from folklore, beliefs, values attitudes, perceptions emotions and the entire system of thoughts and feelings”. This corroborates the fact that in order to arrive at the exact meaning of a proverb, the cultural realities of the language of the proverb and its context have to be identified. It is only when the cultural realities in a proverb have been identified, that the meaning can be understood and the appropriate equivalent in another language can be offered and accepted. Translating a proverb involves a transfer by analogic substitution because most of the realities transcend cultures and so are found in every culture. Finnegan (1976:399) adds that a knowledge of the context or situation where proverbs are cited may also be an essential part of understanding their implications. She explains that if proverbs appear to have contradictory meanings, it is merely because there are many possible situations and different angles from which one can look at a problem.

Giving a local proverb (maybe Igbo) in another language (maybe French) is tantamount to translating culture because proverbs are part of social culture of a people. When giving a proverb in another language or looking for its equivalent in another language, Eke advises that one needs to consider a number of factors - from the ecology to the history and geography of the people and the symbols used. Translation of proverbs from one language to another would naturally involve translation techniques like equivalence (where two texts express the same situation while taking into consideration the different styles and structures), modulation (change of viewpoints and symbols) and adaptation (equivalence of situations especially where the situation involved does not exist in one of the cultures). In doing all these, one has to be mindful of the stylistic and structural differences in the two languages involved. (Vinay et Darbelnet, 242). In fact, these two experts added that proverbs are a perfect illustration of equivalence (1977:52). This would be seen in our analysis of the proverbs cited listed for that purpose.

Analyzing Equivalent Igbo and French Proverbs

In order to arrive at equivalent Igbo and French proverbs, we would give a proverb in Igbo language, analyze the content and identify the cultural realities in it, explain the literal meaning that paints the image which ultimately leads to the equivalent proverb in French language.

1. Ohia na-asọ nkata epula ero.

Mieux vaut prévenir que guérir.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The bush that hates baskets should not produce mushrooms.

Literal meaning of the French version: Prevention is better than cure.

Equivalence in meaning: In the Igbo setting, mushrooms are picked in the bush with baskets, a common recipient. If there are no mushrooms in the bush, nobody will go

there with baskets to pick them. So, entering the bush with baskets which the bush hates can be prevented by the bush not producing mushrooms. Then there will be no complaints. Hence prevention is better than cure.

2. *A ruo n'anwu, e rie na ndo.*

Qui sème en pleurs, recueille en heur (bonheur)

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: Work under the sun, eat under the shade.

Literal meaning of the French version: Sow in tears, reap in joy.

Equivalence in meaning: People farm under the heat of the sun. They rest and eat under the shade. Meaning that their hard work, under harsh conditions, pays off because they make good profits in the end. Hence those who sow in tears (under the heat of the sun), but they harvest in singing (under the cooling shade).

3. *Aku fesia, o daara awo.*

Les rivières retourne à la mer.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: After the flight, the insect falls down for the toad.

Literal meaning of the French version: Rivers return to the sea.

Equivalence in meaning: Small flying insects later they lose their wings and fall to the ground where the toad can eat them as food. So no matter how long they fly about, they will eventually fall the ground and be swallowed up just like the sea swallows up the river that flows into it after its (the river's) roundabout journey.

4. *Ihe agwo muru ahaghi ito ogologo.*

Tel père, tel fils/ Tel arbre, tel fruit.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The offspring of the snake must be long.

Literal meaning of the French version: Like father, like son/ Like tree, like fruit.

Equivalence in meaning: According to a biblical saying, "by their fruits we shall know them". Naturally, offspring normally resemble those who bear them. A snake gives birth to a snake, a pig to a pig and a tree will produce a fruit after its kind. The same goes for every plant or animal that is capable of reproduction. The two proverbs therefore have equivalent meanings and that is: creatures reproduce their kinds, whether plants or animals.

5. *Ebe onye dara ka chi ya kwaturu ya.*

Que sera sera.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: One falls where he was pushed down by his god.

Literal meaning of the French version: What will be will be.

Equivalence in meaning: In the Igbo culture, *chi* refers to a personal god. Udeh (2007:27) explains that "the Igbo hold that *chi* is that divine force directly involved with the affairs of men. Everyone has his own *chi*. The *chi* being a divine force is thought to be omniscient, can foresee danger and is concerned with the individual with whom it remains throughout his life time. Since the *chi* is in charge of the person's life and affairs, whatever befalls a person is his *chi*'s making and nothing can be done about it because that is his destiny. Hence, the equivalent 'what will be will be'.

6. *Anu nwere ndidi na-añu mmiri ma.*

Tout vient à point, qui sait attendre.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The patient animal drinks good water.

Literal meaning of the French version: Everything turns out well for those who exercise patience.

Equivalence in meaning: If the animal can wait patiently, the debris will eventually settle and then the water can be good for the animal to drink. The Igbo version paints a picture of an animal that ends up drinking good water because it exercised patience. The French version paints a picture of how things turn out well for whoever knows how to wait. Both versions stress the importance of the virtue of patience which pays off eventually.

7. *Isi anaghị anyigbu onye nwe ya.*
Les seins ne sont jamais trop lourds pour la poitrine.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The head is never too heavy for the owner.

Literal meaning of the French version: The breasts are never too heavy for the chest.

Equivalence in meaning: Both proverbs paint the picture of resilience, perseverance, strength, courage and understanding in situations one can do nothing about. In the Igbo version, the owner of the head is able to carry it no matter its weight. In the French version, the same applies to the chest that carries the breasts irrespective of the size. Both bear the weights and still keep going.

8. *Nkụ nọ na mba na-eghere mba nri.*
Ce qui est viande pour un, est poison pour l'autre.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The people's firewood cooks their food.

Literal meaning of the French version: One man's meat is another man's poison.

Equivalence in meaning: In the traditional Igbo society, food is cooked with firewood not cooking gas or kerosene. The firewood is fetched from nearby farms or bush. The firewood may vary from place to place because the flora and fauna vary from place to place too. So, people use the firewood available to them to cook their food. In the same vein, different people eat different kinds of food. What people eat as food also depends on what is available in their environment. A particular food in one environment may not be eaten by people in another environment. Due to differences in climate, vegetation, soil composition, topography or other geographical and environmental features, plants and animals that survive in them also differ. Even when the same plant exists in two different places, for example, one group may eat it as food while the other does not know it as food. Therefore, both proverbs express the point that what one has is what one uses, whether it is acceptable to others or not.

9. *Nwayọọ nwayọọ ka e ji aracha ofe dị ọkụ.*
Petit à petit, l'oiseau fait son nid.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: A hot soup is licked gradually.

Literal meaning of the French version: Little by little, the bird makes its nest.

Equivalence in meaning: Soup is licked (taken) either with the fingers or with spoon. When hot, one cannot rush over it. But if it is licked gradually, it gets licked up by the end of the day. In the same way, the bird builds its nest gradually and steadily until it gets the task done. Both proverbs express the need to take one's time while on a task instead of rushing through it and not achieving one's aim. It is said that slow and steady wins the race.

10. Ogologo abughị na nwa m etoola.
L'habit ne fait pas le moine/La barbe ne fait pas l'homme

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: Height does not mean that my child has grown.

Literal meaning of the French version: The hood does not make the monk.

Equivalence in meaning: The height of an individual has nothing to do with maturity. Many people do not act or live their age. Some adults may be childish while some children may behave in a mature way. The same goes for French proverb cited. The hood does not make the monk because anybody can put it on. The beard does not make the man because older children grow beards these days. So it is not about the outward appearance but about what one really is in maturity, in approach to issues, in attitude, in values and beliefs. The point made by the proverbs is that appearance can deceive.

11. Nwata gbakaa ute ya, o togboro n'ala nkịti.
Comme on fait son lit, on s'y couche

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: When a child tears his mat, he lies on bare floor.

Literal meaning of the French version: As you make your bed you lie on it.

Equivalence in meaning: For the Igbo, a child normally lie on a mat spread on the floor. But if he tears the mat out of carelessness or recklessness, he has to lie on bare floor. That means that the way he makes his bed is the way he lies on it. The meanings of the two proverbs are the same. One has to bear the consequences of one's actions.

12. Nwanyị choro igba osọ n'ebe di ya na-asị na aroro ya anya n'abali.
Qui veut noyer son chien l'accuse de rage.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: A woman who wants to run away from her husband's house says that she was looked at disdainfully at night.

Literal meaning of the French version: Give a dog a bad name to hang it.

Equivalence in meaning: In the olden days, it was a frequent occurrence for newly married wives to run back to their parents' homes after a few days. This may have been due to immaturity, nostalgia, fear or disappointment at what the marriage turns out to be for her. This normally took place very early in the morning before the neighbourhood woke up. Of course, she would have to explain. Not having a cogent reason, she has to look for an excuse even if it is ridiculous and she says she ran away from her matrimonial home because she was looked at disdainfully at night. Just like one can say that a dog is mad just because one wants the dog to be disposed of. People often look for ridiculous or flimsy reasons to do the inexcusable, looking for a way to justify the unjustifiable. Falsely accusing the dog of rage then justifies drowning it.

13. Ka onye kowe akpa ya ebe aka ya ruru. II
faut tailler son manteau selon son drap.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: Hang your bag where your hand can reach.

Literal meaning of the French version: Cut your coat according to your cloth.

Equivalence in meaning: If you want to hang your bag and you go to where your hand cannot reach, you will find it difficult if not impossible. The easiest and wise thing to do, is to hang it where your hand can reach. The French version gives a similar advice. If the coat is not cut according to the cloth, the cloth would not be enough and the coat cannot be made. Both proverbs advise that people should do the things they can do, things they can afford and avoid blind, inordinate or unhealthy ambition.

14. *Aka nri kwọọ aka ekpe, aka ekpe a kwọọ aka nri.*
Un couteau aiguisé l'autre.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The right hand washes the left and the left washes the right.

Literal meaning of the French version: Iron sharpens iron.

Equivalence in meaning: In both cultures, hands are washed together and one tool sharpens the other. This underlines interdependence, mutual help, reciprocity and our need one for another. The cultural content in both proverbs are the same.

15. *Ọ dighi ihe anya huru gbaa obara.*
La tempête ne déracine pas la forêt.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The eye can never shed blood no matter the circumstance.

Literal meaning of the French version: The tempest cannot uproot the forest.

Equivalence in meaning: Normally the eyes shed tears not blood. Tears, most of the times, are brought about by pain and suffering or even joy. Whatever the circumstance, it is never blood that comes out of the eyes. This is likened to the futility of the tempest wanting to uproot the forest. It is impossible. So both proverbs mean that difficult and painful situations are a part of life. They do occur but life still goes on.

16. *A chụwa aja ma ahughị udele, ihe ukwu mere n'ala ndị mmụọ.*
Là où il y a un os, c'est là qu'on trouve les chiens.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: If there are no vultures where a sacrifice is being offered, then something must have happened in the land of the spirits.

Literal meaning of the French version: Dogs are found where there are bones.

Equivalence in meaning: The picture in the Igbo proverb is that of vultures clustering wherever animals are being slaughtered either for sacrifice or for food. The slaughtering of animals naturally attracts vultures. If there are no vultures where animals are being slaughtered, then something must be wrong in the land of the spirits where vultures are believed to come from. Vultures are associated with spirits because of its attitude of scavenging on carcasses. The French proverb says that one would always find dogs where there are bones. This is because they love eating bones. Hence, there are natural expectations in every situation. If the expected in a situation does not happen, then something must be wrong somewhere.

17. *Onye ya na umuaka na-egwu egwuregwu na-ete unyi.*
Qui suit les poules, apprend à gratter.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: One who plays with children is normally soiled with soot.

Literal meaning of the French version: One who follows hens learns to scratch the ground.

Equivalence in meaning: Since children play with and in the sand, dust or even soot without minding the dirt, they would normally rub it on whoever plays with them because he or she has come down to their level to relate with them. In the same way, to follow a chicken is to learn how to scratch the ground. Hence, the company you keep influences what you are and how you behave, that is, your character and lifestyle. An English saying goes this way: show me your friend and I will show you who you are.

18. *Aka aja aja na-akpata onu mmanu mmanu.*
Nul pain sans peine.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: Dirty hands produces sumptuous food.

Literal meaning of the French version: No food without struggle.

Equivalence in meaning: When one eats, the lips becomes oily. The oily lips show that the person has eaten and that the food eaten was rich. To produce food, one need to dirty the hands by working hard. The picture is that of work - planting, nurturing and harvesting. It takes a lot of time, energy and resources. Without dirty hands, there cannot be food to eat. So the dirty hands lead to oily mouth. The French version expresses the same view by saying that there cannot be bread without pains. So there is no free lunch anywhere. One has to work in order to feed. The two proverbs are a caution against laziness or loafing about. He who does not work should not eat as well.

19. *Ikpe amaghi onye eze.*
La riche ne danse jamais mal.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: The king is never wrong.

Literal meaning of the French version: The rich always dances well.

Equivalence in meaning: Some people attribute infallibility to the highly placed in the society or people in authority. Some of these people even claim it by themselves. In the traditional Igbo setting, kings are always right and their instructions are carried out to the letter without question. The equivalent French proverb also defers to the rich because of their wealth. Both proverbs express the respect, honour and the high esteem wealth and position are held in the society to the extent that those who have them are believed to be right always. The same attitude is pictured by the king in one language and the rich in another.

20. *Onye kwe, chi ya ekwe.* *Vouloir,*
c'est pouvoir.

Literal meaning of the Igbo version: If you agree, your god agrees.

Literal meaning of the French version: Where there is the will, there is way.

Equivalence in meaning: Both proverbs agree that progress or success depends on determination. Once the mind is made up to get something done, or one believes or has the faith that something would be, even his *chi* (personal god, as earlier explained), would lend his support. The person would equally have the strength to go ahead and achieve his objective or desire.

Conclusion

From the analysis of the listed proverbs, one can see the cultural peculiarities in the two languages. Yet, there are equivalent situations which give the proverbs the same meaning, interpretation and application to serve the same purpose. Like proverb no.5 which is about *chi*, a belief that may be non-existent in the western culture. But there is an equivalent way of saying the same thing. So all in all, different proverbs in different languages and cultures play similar roles in the lives of their people. The pictures painted in the proverbs may vary, the messages they bear remain. This goes to show that people are the same everywhere, values and beliefs are not too far apart. Cultures are also related one way or the other because of the universality of cultural ideas. This makes translation of proverbs possible and acceptable when correctly done.

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