

The Translation of Humour in Chinua Achebe's Things Fall Apart

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Abstract

This paper is an in-depth evaluation of the translation of humour in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, a novel which has been translated into the French Language as *Le monde s'effondre* by Michel Ligny. Since humour is an interesting and important aspect of human life, this paper examines the cultural, linguistic and semantic challenges posed in the translation of humour in a novel originating from a culture different from that of the translator. For translation to be judged effective and faithful, the sentiments evoked in the readers of the original texts must also be felt by the readers of the target texts. Adopting the Interpretive Approach, the paper reveals that Michel Ligny has demonstrated great understanding of the culture of the source text. The paper concludes that the translator has been faithful in the translation of humour in *Things Fall Apart*.

Keywords: Humour, Translation, Interpretive Approach

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Introduction

Humour is an interesting aspect of human life and varies from culture to culture. Humour plays a very vital role in human society. Humour acts as the conveyor belt through which man's tension, frustrations, fears, apprehension, gloom and even grief, evaporate from his body. It must be stated here clearly that humour is not just an outlet for man's over-heated emotions and passions. It is also a medium through which people pass their time in excitement.

In contemporary societies, it is remarkable that men and women have taken humour to another level. We know of people both within the African societies as well as in the western world, who make a living out of humour. The Nigerian Television Programme "Night of a thousand laughs" is an apt example of humour that attracts income. The Afro-American comedian Bill Cosby achieved fame through a skilful handling of humour. We can say the same for programmes like "Mr. Bean", "Some Mothers do have them", "AY Live", "Mr. Bones", "Tom and Jerry" and the popular children series "Home Alone". Life would be gloomy without humour.

It is no gainsaying that humour does not only operate on the oral level. In written literature humour has continued to exist especially through comedies. Comedy is usually accentuated by laughter-inducing scenes, statements, and actions.

Things Fall Apart, which was published in 1958 was translated into French by Michel Ligny as *Le monde s'effondre* (1966). This novel, like Achebe's second novel *No Longer at Ease*, has been translated German, Italian, Spanish, Slovene, Russian, Hebrew, French, Czech and Hungarian. Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* cannot be classified as a comedy. Nevertheless, even in tragedies and tra-comedies, humour is thrown in from time to time in order to lift the fog of sadness a bit.

In deciding on what translation technique to use for a given text, it is crucial for the translator to distinguish between meanings while keeping the purpose of the translation in mind. The purpose of translation, as summarised by Peter Newmark, (1991:45), political and humanistic. Politics and humanism form an integral part of any culture. By extension, cultural exchange is one of the basic functions of translation seeing that language is an element of culture. Thus, translating any text is a gradual phenomenon ranging from literal translation, which is a purely productive activity and not a creative one (Károly, K. 2008). De Beaugrande and Dressler (1981:3) assert that in order to become communicative, texts must meet certain "standards of textuality". By "textuality" they mean the status of a linguistic entity or configuration of entities as a text of a natural language. Humour is very much present in *Things Fall Apart* and also helps in alleviating the heaviness of the tone of the story. Its adequate and acceptable translation into French should therefore be Michel Ligny's preoccupation as a translator.

Background to the study: Scope and Types of Humour

Humour is a multi-dimensional phenomenon. However, for this paper, we are going to limit ourselves to four kinds of humour, namely: *jokes*, *satires*, *scatology* and *accidental humour*. The Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English, Low –Priced Edition (1984), defines a joke as *anything said or done to cause laughter or amusement; a person, thing or event that is laughed at and not taken seriously*. Nilsen and Nilsen (2000) identify four basic types of jokes: (a) the concealing of knowledge later revealed, (b) the substitution of one concept for another, (c) an unexpected conclusion to a logical progression, and (d) the slipping-on-a-banana-peel.

Satire can be defined as a literary art of diminishing or derogating a subject by making it ridiculous and evoking towards it attitudes of amusement, contempt, scorn or indignation (Abrams, M.H. 2005:284).

Scatology is defined by the Longman Dictionary of Contemporary English as “great interest in human bowels, bodily waste” etc. It is actually a word of Greek origin with the root “scato” which means “faeces” or “excrement”. [Odebunmi, A. and Ogunleye, K. 2003:244]. In the context of humour, scatology refers to jokes about bodily functions and the parts of the body not usually talked about in polite societies (Nilsen & Nilsen 2000:261).

Again, Nilsen & Nilsen (ibid:175) identify the following types of accidental humour: (a) creating new names for already existing eponyms e.g. PhD – piled higher and deeper.

There are some popular examples in the Nigerian society like

- (a) * NEPA plc – Never Expect Power Always please light candle
 - * IBB – International beg beg
 - * ITT – International thief thief (these last two were coined by the deceased activist-juju musician, Fela Ransome Kuti).
 - * OYO – on your own
 - * IBO – I before others
 - * WWW.com – women with wings come onto me.
 - * OBAMA—ordinary black African managing America
- b. putting clipped forms or letters and numbers together and making them sound like words e.g. Alinco 4 u – Alinco for you.
With the advent of ICT, this form of accidental humour has become very popular. Text messages on the GSM are generally written in this makeshift shorthand manner e.g. dnt 4get 2c me – don’t forget to see me.
- c. short and easy-to-read messages. Some allude to sexual intercourse e.g. nurses do it with care...
- d. pattern based on the idea of wind-up dolls e.g.
The Elizabeth Taylor doll: wind it up and it wrecks two marriages.

The Frank Sinatra doll: wind it up and it chases another doll (Nilsen & Nilsen, Ibid:175).

It is interesting to note that all the four types of humour discussed can be found in *Things Fall Apart*.

The Translator as creator and reproducer

In a functional approach to translation, great emphasis is laid on target language production of text and on the fact that the text in the target language should meet the expectations of the target readers as well as the textual requirements of the target culture (Jakobson (1993), Neubert (1985:18), Neubert and Steeve (1992:7), Snell-Hornby, Honig, Kusmaul and Schmidt (1998:58-60), Vincze (2004:29). One of the qualities of a good translator is that of creator.

Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* is a historical novel depicting the advent of the Europeans into Ibo culture and society. As producer and creator, Ligny needs to be well versed in the Ibo culture and history because in Thriveni's opinion (2001):

Awareness of history is an essential requirement for the translator of a work coming from an alien culture.

This is because the translator, through his/her translation communicates to an audience the translated intention of the original author (Newmark, 1991:115). This tallies with Levy's (1989:38) opinion that the objective of translating is to impart the knowledge of the original to the foreign reader. This is why the translator must guarantee that his utterance is a faithful representation of the original: that is , resembles it in relevant respects(Wilson and Sperber, 1986:137). So Ligny, in order to produce a viable and useful work, must be well grounded in the cultural, social and political realities that add up to what we call the background of the novel (Ojo-Ade, 1989:160). It is against this backdrop that we are going to assess Michel Ligny as creator and producer of *Things fall Apart* as *Le monde s'effondre*.

Evaluation of Michel Ligny's Translation of Humour in *Things fall Apart*

In this section, we shall take Achebe's version of each incident first and immediately after will come Ligny's version. For better evaluation, we have subdivided the humour under the four types of humour earlier mentioned in 1.2.

Translation of Jokes

- a. *(i)The story was always told of a wealthy man who set before his guests a mound of foo-foo so high that those who sat on one side could not see what was happening on the other, and it was not until late in the evening that one of them saw for the first time his in-law who had arrived during the course of the meal and had fallen to on*

the opposite side. It was only then that they exchanged greetings and shook hands over what was left of the food (pg. 26).

On racontait toujours l'histoire d'un homme riche qui avait placé devant ses hôtes une si haute montagne de fofo que ceux qui étaient assis d'un côté ne pouvaient voir ce qui se passait de l'autre, et il fallut attendre jusque tard dans la soirée pour que l'un d'eux voie pour la première fois son frère par alliance qui était arrivé pendant le repas et s'était attablé du côté opposé. Ce fut alors seulement qu'ils échangèrent des congratulations et se serrèrent la main par-dessus ce qui restait de la nourriture (p. 50).

The main activity of the translation here is that of transmission of culture. The practice of many people eating from the same dish at the same time is purely cultural and truly African. Ligny has successfully translated this cultural practice plus the humour of the extra-ordinary foo-foo into the target language.

b. *"It is like the story of white men who, they say, are white like this piece of chalk" said Obierika. He held up a piece of chalk..." And these white men, they say, have no toes". "And have you never seen them?" asked Machi.*

"Have you?" asked Obierika

"One of them passes here frequently"... "His name is Amadi". Those who knew Amadi laughed. He was a leper, and the polite name for leprosy was "the white skin" (pg. 51-52).

"C'est comme l'histoire des hommes blancs qui, à ce qu'on dit, sont blancs comme ce morceau de craie", dit Obierika. Il tendait un morceau de craie... "Et ces hommes blancs, à ce qu'on dit, n'ont pas de doigts de pied".

- *Et tu n'en as jamais vu? Demanda Machi.*

- *Et toi? Demanda Obierika*

- *L'un d'eux passe souvent par ici, dit Machi. Son nom est Amadi. Ceux qui connaissaient Amadi éclatèrent de rire. C'était lépreux et le nom poli pour la lèpre était "la peau blanche" (p. 91).*

c. *You told us with your own mouth that there was only one god. Now you talk about his son. He must have a wife, then. (pg. 103).*

"Vous nous avez dit de votre propre bouche qu'il n'y avait qu'un seul dieu. Maintenant vous parlez de son fils. Il doit avoir une femme, alors" (pg. 177).

d. *It was said that he wore glasses on his eyes so that he could see and talk to evil spirits (pg. 106).*

On disait qu'il portait des verres sur les yeux de sorte qu'il pouvait voir les esprits du mal et leur parler (p. 180-181).

- e. *The white missionary was very proud of him and he was one of the first men in Umuofia to receive the sacrament of Holy Communion, or Holy Feast as it was called in Ibo. Ogbuefi Ugonna had thought of the feast in terms of eating and drinking... he had therefore put his drinking-horn into his goatskin bag for the occasion (pg. 123).*

Le missionnaire blanc était très fier de lui, et il fut un des premiers hommes d'Umuofia à recevoir le sacrement de la Sainte Communion, ou du Saint Repas comme on l'appelait en Ibo. Ogbuefi Ugonna avait cru que le Repas consistait à manger et à boire... il avait donc mis sa corne à boire dans son sac de peau de chèvre à cette occasion (p. 20).

- f. *There was once a man who went to sell a goat. He led it on a thick rope which he tied round his wrist. But as he walked through the market he realized that people were pointing at him as they do to a madman.*

He could not understand it until he looked back and saw that what he led at the end of the tether was not a goat but a heavy log of wood (pg. 79).

Un jour, un homme était allé vendre une chèvre. Il la menait au bout d'une solide corde qu'il avait enroulée autour de son poignet. Mais tandis qu'il déambulait à travers le marché, il se rendit compte que les gens le désignaient du doigt comme on le fait pour un fou. Il n'y comprit rien jusqu'à ce qu'il tourne la tête et voie que ce qu'il tenait en laisse n'était pas une chèvre, mais une lourde buche de bois (p. 139).

In text (b) Achebe uses hyperbole. The white man is not really as white as chalk but the speaker just wants to make jest of the mysterious white man. The reference to their toe-less legs and the allusion to leprosy adds colour to the humour.

The translation of “white like this piece of chalk”, “have no toes” “passes here frequently” and the surprising revelation “His name is Amadi” rendered into French respectively as “blancs comme ce morceau de craie”, “n’ont pas de doigts de pied”, “passe souvent par ici” and “son nom est Amadi” makes the target reader to be equally entertained as the source reader. The reader in the target language is also made to appreciate the ignorant exaggerations of the illiterate villagers of Umuofia in which is embedded the humour.

In (c) the phrases “with your own mouth” “now you talk about his son”, “a wife then” which make the white missionary look like a liar, and their translation into French as “de votre propre bouche”, “maintennt vous parlez de son fils” “une femme

alors” carries scintillating humour. The word “*own*” carries heavy ridicule and its inclusion in the translation by Ligny as “*propre*” carries this heavy ridicule across into the target language. The humour here is crowned by the insinuation that God has a wife and this is also properly translated. This joke, actually, has a satirical undertone.

In texts (d) and (e), which Ligny translates word for word, the humour here is not hidden at all. The naked jokes are well translated into the target language.

In text (f) the humour manifests in the tail end of the narrative “*he looked back and saw what he led at the end of the tether was not a goat but a heavy log of wood*”. The obvious but imagined consternation, shame and confusion of the man whose goat had been exchanged for a log of wood by a smart thief puts this joke along the line of “slipping-on-the-banana peel”. This humour has been adequately translated.

We can say, on the whole, that Ligny’s translation of jokes respects the concept of faithfulness in translation.

3.3 The Translation of Satire

The story of *Things Fall Apart*, like George Orwell’s *Animal Farm* can, to some extent, be said to be a satire depicting the futility and the foolishness of fighting against a more formidable foe. However, for the purpose of this research work we have only picked out isolated instances of humour that we consider to be satirical.

- a. *Each group there represents a debt to someone, and each stroke is one hundred cowries. You see, I owe that man a thousand cowries. But he has not come to wake me up in the morning for it. I shall pay you, but not today. Our elders say that the sun will shine on those who stand before it shines on those who kneel under them. I shall pay my big debts first (pg. 6).*

Chacun de ces groupes représente une dette envers quelqu’un, et chaque trait cent cauris. Vous voyez, je dois mille cauris à cet homme. Mais il n’est pas venu me réveiller le matin à leur sujet. Je vous paierai, mais pas aujourd’hui. Nos anciens disent que le soleil brillera sur ceux qui sont debout avant de briller sur ceux qui sont à genoux au dessous d’eux. Je paierai mes grosses dettes d’abord (p. 14).

We find this humour in the instance when Unoka’s friend, Okoye, came to ask for his debt from Unoka. Instead of pleading for more time to raise the money, Unoka burst into laughter. He laughed so much that tears stood in his eyes. Okoye, the creditor, was amazed. Then Unoka showed him some lines he had drawn on the wall of his hut

with chalk and addressed his creditor friend in the text we have just cited. In fact, Okoye's reaction to this effrontery is even more humorous:

- b. *Okoye rolled his goatskin and departed (pg 6).*
Okoye roula sa peau de chèvre et partit (p. 14)

In this text, we see how Unoka, the debtor, succeeds in ridiculing his creditor in an amusing way. The crown of the satire here is the quiet, resigned and calm acceptance of failure by Okoye as well as his silent departure. The term "goatskin" would seem to be untranslatable into a culture that has had no experience of goatskin mats. However, Jakobson (1971) is largely in favour of translatability because he sees translation as operating within languages as well as between them. Thus we see that Ligny has translated "goatskin" as "peau de chèvre" in the manner that makes the reader understand that the object is a kind of mat for sitting down. The satire in the source language has been adequately translated into the target language.

- c. *The Oracle said to him: "Your dead father wants you to sacrifice a goat to him".*
Do you know what he told the Oracle? He said, "Ask my dead father if he ever had a fowl when he was alive".

L'Oracle lui dit: "votre père défunt désire que vous lui sacrifiez une chèvre". Savez-vous ce qu'il répondit à l'Oracle? Il lui dit: "Demandez à mon père défunt s'il a jamais eu un poulet à lui quand il était en vie".

The satire here is knee-deep. Obiako, the subject of the discussion here, has not just ridiculed his dead father who was poor. He has also ridiculed the Oracle by talking back to the Oracle, a feat no mortal in Umuofia had ever attempted. Ligny has translated the humour here including the derisive undertone into the target language.

- d. *On a moonlight night it would be different.*
The happy voices of children playing in open fields would then be heard. And perhaps those not so young would be playing in pairs in less open places... (pg. 7).

Par une nuit de clair de lune, c'aurait été différent. On entendait alors les voix heureuses d'enfants jouant en plein champ. Et peut-être les moins jeunes jouaient-ils deux par deux dans des lieux moins ouverts...

In 'd' Achebe is insinuating that even in the village setting, there is illicit romance. In fact, the phrases "those not so young", "playing in pairs", "in less open places" are

pregnant with satirical humour. Ligny has captured the spirit of this satire in rendering them as “*les moins jeunes*” “*jouaient-ils deux par deux*” and “*dans des lieux moins ouverts*” respectively. In fact, Ligny had the choice of translating “*in pairs*” as “*en paires*” but he opted for “*deux par deux*” which is more suggestive than “*en paires*”. It is the suggestiveness of Achebe’s context and choice of words that harbour the humour here.

- e. *If I hold her hand
She says, “Don’t touch”.
If I hold her foot
She says, “Don’t touch”.
But when I hold her waist beads*

She pretends not to know” (pg 83).

*Si je lui tiens la main
Elle dit: ne me touche pas.
Si je lui tiens le pied
Elle dit: ne me touche pas.
Mais quand je tiens sa ceinture de perles,
Elle feint de l’ignorer.*

Apart from the satire in the song, the musicality of repetitions in the song gives it aesthetic beauty which evokes excitement in the reader. Ligny displays his bilingual proficiency and bi-cultural competence in translating “*la main*”, “*le pied*” and “*ceinture de perles*” which makes the target reader to be inspired, touched and aesthetically entertained in the same manner as the source language reader. Ligny’s translation of linguistic items “*if I hold...*”, “*if I hold...*” as “*si je tiens...*”, “*si je tiens*” is an indication of his high literary insight and aesthetic sensitivity of Achebe’s oral poetry. The caricature of women’s pretence when it comes to romantic situations is where the satire lies. This caricature, the derision as well as the aesthetic quality of the song have been properly translated into the target language.

- f. *“They want a piece of land to build their shrine”; said Uchendu to his peers...
“We shall give them a piece of land”. He paused and there was a murmur of surprise and disagreement. “Let us give them a portion of the Evil Forest. They boast about victory over death. Let us give them a real battlefield in which to show their victory”.
They laughed and agreed, and sent for the missionaries. They offered them as much of the Evil Forest as they cared to take. And to their amazement the missionaries thanked them and burst into song (pg. 105).*

- *“Ils désirent une pièce de terre pour bâtir leur sanctuaire, dit Uchendu à ses pairs... Nous allons leur donner une pièce de terre”. Il fit une pause et il y eut un murmure de surprise et de désaccord. “Donnons leur un morceau de la Forêt Maudite. Ils se vantent de remporter la victoire sur la mort. Donnons-leur un vrai champ de bataille où ils puissent montrer leur victoire”. Ils rirent et acquiescèrent et envoyèrent chercher les missionnaires... ils leur offrirent une aussi grande portion de la Forêt Maudite qu’ils voulurent en prendre. Et à leur plus grande consternation les missionnaires les remercièrent et entonnèrent une cantique (p. 180).*

The satire in this exchange is deep. The suggestion of offering the dreaded and eerie Evil Forest to the missionaries evokes laughter but it is aimed primarily at deriding the white missionaries who are ignorant of the significance of the Evil Forest. On the other hand, the villagers are on the receiving end of this satire because they, too, are ignorant of the powers of the white man’s God. Although, Ligny has translated the satire we are of the opinion, as we remarked earlier, that *“la Forêt du Mal”* would have been a better equivalent for *“Evil Forest”*. *“Mal”* carries more weight than *“maudite”* which could mean *“damned”* or *“cursed”*. *“Mal”*, which literally means *“Evil”* evokes fear, the macabre, and even death, which is more in line with the context of the scene.

The Translation of Scatology

a. *“Who will drink the dregs?” He asked.
“Whoever has a job in hand”, said
Idigo, looking at Nwakibie’s elder
son, Igwelo, with a mischievous twinkle
in his eye (pg. 15).*

*“Qui boira la lie?” demanda-t-il
“Quiconque a une affaire en train” dit
Idigo en faisant Igwelo, le fils aîné de
Nwakibie, un clin d’oeil malicieux (p. 30).*

In ‘a’, Igwelo, the victim of this humour, has just married a new wife. The thick dregs of palm-wine, according to Achebe in the story, is believed to increase a man’s libido. What the speaker implies here is that Igwelo needs to impress his new wife with his sexual prowess.

In polite African societies, sexual intercourse is generally not talked about openly yet it is humorously discussed here among the drinking men. Ligny in his translation carries this humour into the target language.

- b. *“If, on the other hand, Uzowulu should recover from his madness and come in the proper way to beg his wife to return she will do so on the understanding that if he ever beats her again we shall cut off his genitals for him”. The crowd roared with laughter (pg. 65).*

“Si, d’autre part, Uzowulu devait guérir de sa folie et venir selon les règles supplier sa femme de revenir, elle le ferait, étant bien entendu que, si jamais il la battait de nouveau, nous lui couperions les parties génitales”. Un énorme éclat de rire monta de la foule.

We see scatology at work here again. Except in the classroom environment, genitals are generally a topic reserved for adults. Women and young people, if they must discuss these parts of the body, do so in hushed voices. The scene here is the village square where the masquerades are judging cases with the whole village agog with excitement.

Nevertheless, we see Odukwe, whose sister married Uzowulu and who receives beatings all the time from the husband, shouting this threat, in anger, about his inlaw’s genitals in the village square, with women and children present, ridiculing Uzowulu’s manhood to the general amusement of the crowd.

We need to commend Ligny’s translation of certain meanings here. By translating *“in the proper way”* as *“selon les règles”* he applies the technique called *“modulation”*. Modulation, according to Vinay and Darbelnet (1958), is a variation in the message whose purpose is to make the message clearer in the target language. *“Selon les règles”* aptly translates the meaning embedded in *“in the proper way”*, which suggests that there are laid down rules according to the customs and tradition of Umuofia to settle such matrimonial matters.

- c. *“We had meant to set out from my house before cock-crow”, said Obierika. But Nweke did not appear until it was quite light. Never make an early morning appointment with a man who has just married a new wife”. They all laughed (pg 99)*

*-“Nous avons décidé de quitter la maison avant le chant du coq”, dit Obierika.
“Mais Nweke n’est pas apparu avant qu’il ne fasse complètement jour. Il ne*

*faut jamais donner de rendezvous à l'aube
à un homme qui vient juste d'épouser
une nouvelle femme". Tous rirent (p. 171).*

Here, Obierika and two others, came to visit Okonkwo in exile. We see how they joke about sexual intercourse freely and openly here. Michel Ligny rendered this scatology into French adequately.

The Translation of Accidental Humour

- a. *These court messengers were greatly hated in Umuofia because they were foreigners and also arrogant and high-handed. They were called 'kotma', and because of their ash-coloured shorts they earned the additional name of Ashy-Buttocks (pg. 123).*

Ces messagers de la cour étaient profondément hais à Umuofia parce qu'ils étaient étrangers en même temps qu'arrogants et brutaux. On les appelait 'kotma', et à cause de leurs short couleur de cendre, ils méritèrent le nom supplémentaire de Fesses-Cendrées (p. 211).

'Kotma' is an accidental humour derived from the wrong pronunciation of the words 'court messenger' by the illiterate villagers. "Ashy-Buttocks", as Achebe himself has already explained, stems from the colour of the shorts worn by these court messengers.

- b. *Many people laughed at his dialect and the way he used words strangely. Instead of saying 'myself' he always said 'my buttocks' (pg 102).*

Beaucoup riaient de son dialecte et de la façon bizarre dont il utilisait les mots. Au lieu de dire 'moi-même' il disait toujours 'mes fesses' (p 174).

The humour here is purely accidental because if the man's (the interpreter's) dialect had been the same as that spoken by the villagers of Umuofia, there would not have been anything humorous in the context. The fact that what he said in his strange dialect meant 'my buttocks' also puts this humour under scatology. Ligny, again, has translated the text literally, thus keeping the target reader aesthetically entertained in the same manner and to the same degree as the reader of the original text.

Conclusion

It can be seen that the translator, Michel Ligny, has been able to translate many elements of the African culture in *Things Fall Apart* but has failed in some instances.

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