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TRANSEMIC APPROACH TO TRANSLATION AND NATION BUILDING

by

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Abstract

It has been observed that translation, as an academic discipline, is one of the least esteemed by the public, compared with other disciplines such as law, medicine, engineering, literary and linguistic studies, sociology, mass communication, economics, etc. Paradoxically, the transfer in writing from one language into another of message(s), information or idea(s) necessary for quality control, policy implementation and nation building will not be possible at all, without translation. Consequent upon this maxim, many scholars in this area have been working with relentless determination to formulate theories, which could not only help to explain the nature and mechanism of translation, but also facilitate its practice. Hence, this paper is designed to explore the theory of transeme as well as its practical application in facilitating translating.

Key Words: nation building, translation, transeme, transemic theory, chunk

Introduction

Although translation practice presumably dates back to the era of the invention of writing, translation studies, as an academic discipline, is regarded as a newcomer, having been introduced only in the fifties. However, one wonders why translation studies, as an academic discipline, has escaped public consciousness for so many years, in spite of the indispensible role, which translation practice plays in the grand scheme of things worldwide. In other words, translation has always played and will continue to play a landmark and pivotal role in human development at all levels, including quality control, policy implementation, and nation building in particular. By moving information, ideas, or messages from one language into another through translation, translators have consequently been facilitating human development at individual, group, local, national and international levels. Taken for granted by many of those who engage in it, translation is scarcely esteemed by the public, let alone being regarded as a professional activity. One can say, without fear

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of contradiction, that it has been relegated to the background for a long time, because many of the people, who engage in it today are often self-improvised, having little or no knowledge of the relevant theoretical information on as well as practical skills in translation. Hence, it is heartwarming and encouraging to note that, in recent times, many scholars are getting interested and involved in this area and have been working with relentless determination to formulate theories designed to explain the nature and mechanism of translation, as well as develop techniques and tools to facilitate its practice. In the same vein, this paper will discuss the role of translation as an instrument for nation building, as well as explore the *transemic* theory and its practical applications in translating. However, before proceeding, I would like to define some key terms pivotal to my discussions.

Definition of Terms

The definition of some of the key terms here is designed to provide a theoretical framework on which my translations, analysis and discussions will be based.

Translation

Whereas Flamand defines translation as *rendre le message du texte de départ avec exactitude (fidelité à l'auteur) en une langue d'arrivée correcte, authentique et adaptée au sujet de la destination (fidelité au destinataire)* (50) (rendering the message of the source language text with exactitude (faithful to the author) into a correct and authentic target language, which is adapted to the target language public (faithful to the public), Mounin perceives it as "*le passage d'un monde culturel à l'autre"* (61) (the passage from one cultural world into another). For Nida, "translation is the production in the target language of the closest natural equivalent to the message of the source language, first to meaning and then to style" (qtd. in Horgulin and Bernard 30). Whereas Malinowski argues that it is "the unification of cultural contexts" (qtd. in Robins 27), Newmark opines that translation "is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text" (5). Schulte considers translation as the "transplantation of a text from one language into another" (6). As for Seleskovitch and Lederer, translation is seen as, "*Restituer le sens dans une autre langue, c'est le rendre intelligible sur deux plans; c'est le faire comprendre sans rendre brumeux ce qui était clair, ni ridicule ce qui était digne*" (62). (Restoring meaning in another language is to render it intelligible at two levels: to make it comprehensible without rendering obscure that which is clear, nor ridiculous that which is worthy (translation mine)). Henri

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Van Hoof postulates thus, *«La traduction est un acte de communication bilingue»* (74). (Translation is an act of bilingual communication (translation mine)). To translate means *"…faire que ce qui était énoncé dans une langue le soit dans une autre, en tendant à l'équivalence sémantique et expressive de deux énoncés"* (Paul Robert 1810). (…to ensure that what is said in one language is reproduced in another, based on semantic and expressive equivalents of both utterances (translation mine)). Catford views translation as "the replacement of textual material in one language by equivalent textual material in another language" (20). *Wikipedia, free Encyclopedia* perceives translation as "the communication of the meaning of a source-language text by means of an equivalent target-language text."

Each of the above definitions from different experts highlights a different insight into the nature and mechanism of translation. Therefore, considering the various insights, one may define translation as "the rendering in writing of a source language text into a target language, with a view to preserving, as much as possible, the source language message and style" (Ajunwa 3). Also, translation could also be considered as a language barrier breaker, carrying along with it the author's message and style of writing. Furthermore, translation could also be viewed as a linguistic bridge, linking speakers of different languages and enabling them to move from one language to another.

Chunk

A chunk is a part, piece, or segment of something that does not have an even shape. Also, chunks of something do not always have the same size. In this context, a chunk is the smallest translatable unit of a source language text, technically known as *transeme*.

Transeme

The word *transeme* is modeled on such linguistic concepts as *phoneme* and *morpheme*, which mean the smallest units of sound and meaning respectively. In other words, *transeme* is coined from two morphemes: (i) /trans-/ a prefix or a free morpheme, which denotes between (two languages) in this context, and (ii) /-eme/ a suffix or bound morpheme, denoting the smallest (translatable chunk). In other words, a *transeme* is a neologism denoting the minimum translatable chunk of the source language text, which must be rendered en bloc. A *transeme* is determined by its semantic and syntactic role in a text. *Transemes* are to a text, what cement blocks are to a wall. Characteristically, each *transeme* cannot be further broken down into smaller chunks, without destroying the lexical

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and/or syntactic cohesion of the target language text. For instance, a *transeme* could be a word, phrase, or even a complete sentence such as a proverb, which must be translated en bloc.

Transemic Theory of Translation

Theoretically, a source language text is composed of a chain of *transemes* (minimum translatable chunks), each of which must be rendered as a whole. This means that the *transemic* approach takes into consideration both the linguistic and interpretative approaches to translation. Whereas the linguistic approach deals with translation based on techniques such as loan, calque, transposition, modulation, equivalence, adaptation (Vinay and Darbelnet), the interpretative approach deals with the subject on meaning-for-meaning basis (Seleskovitch and Lederer). Therefore, one can infer without fear of contradiction that the *transemic* approach to translation tends to unify both the linguistic and the interpretative approaches to translation.

What is Nation Building?

Nation building in this context refers to the process of infrastructural and superstructral development of a nation, through the role of translation. By infrastructural development, I mean those physical structures, buildings and systems, which must be put in place in a nation so that it can operate normally. These include good network of roads, functional communication systems, electricity, school buildings, banks, industries, etc. By superstructural development, I mean those systems, beliefs, philosophies, ideas, ideologies, etc., which are designed to regulate human behavior in a nation. These include legal systems, education, religious beliefs, etc. For instance, any nation built on the foundation of lawlessness, illiteracy, and ignorance will surely crumble.

ROLE OF TRANSLATION IN NATION BUILDING

One can state without fear of contradiction that translation inextricably interweaves with every conceivable human activity instrumental to nation building and development at both the infrastructural and superstructural levels. Again, it is pertinent to state at this juncture that no modern nation can survive without interacting with other nations at economic, industrial, political, cultural, military, religious, etc. levels. For instance, despite its political, economic and military might, the United States of America cannot survive economically without other nations of the world. It needs to purchase raw materials from as well as sell its manufactured goods to other countries of the world in order to stay afloat. In fact, this situation is also applicable to all nations of

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the world. Unfortunately, there exist significant linguistic and cultural barriers between different speech communities, which tend to raise the level of mutual unintelligibility, mistrust, and suspicion. For these nations to interact with one another, therefore, there is need to engage the services of translators for the translation of the relevant business documents from one language into another. For instance, at the economic and commercial levels, Japanese businesspersons do not necessarily need to learn to speak and/or write English before they could market their cars, electronics and other goods and services in the United States of America, Britain, France, Germany or African countries. Hence, translation, as a language barrier breaker, helps in reducing significantly the level of international mutual unintelligibility. In other words, translation invariably enhances mutual understanding, respect, and trust at local, national, and international levels. Ultimately, the translation of business documents into the relevant target languages will no doubt facilitate the business transactions. In the same vein, a Nigerian consumer is not expected to learn Chinese language before he could understand technical information about Chinese-made goods. One expects that information on such goods should be translated into languages, which the consumer will understand. Thus, translation greatly facilitates international trade and commerce.

Another important role of translation in nation building, especially in a multilingual nation such as Nigeria, is that the national constitution, government official documents, newspapers, political manifestos, business documents, etc. are translated into local languages and dialects of the different tribes and ethnic groups. This measure will bring more awareness of government policies to the people at the grassroots. Thus, through translation, the Federal, State and Local Governments make their policies and programmes accessible to the numerous linguistic groups scattered all over the country, thereby ultimately leading to national unity and identity. In 1989, for example, the Federal Military Government of Nigeria directed the State Governments to set up a committee each for the translation of the relevant sections of the Third Republic Constitution as well as party manifestoes into the local languages. This measure aimed at facilitating government's efforts in its political enlightenment campaign in teaching the masses their constitutional rights and obligations, and at establishing grassroots democracy in the country. This phenomenon usually promotes socio-political gap-closing, harmony and stability of the nation. It equally leads to national unity and identity, public awareness and enlightenment as well as mutual intelligibility among Nigerians. In other words, a translator is invariably a nation builder par excellence.

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In the same vein, translation functions as a vehicle for the spreading of cultures. A century or so ago, some countries and even regions of the world seemed to be in a kind of oblivion, until information about them started to circulate through the instrument of translation. For example, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* could be said to be a kind of literary socio-anthropological documentation of the pre-colonial Igbo society, which has been made accessible to many people all over the world, through the instrument of translation.

A comparative study of human civilizations would never have been possible, without the instrument of translation. In this context, translation makes the corpus of data in different civilizations accessible to researchers in different parts of the world. In the words of Malinowski (qtd. in Robins p. 27), translation is the "unification of cultural contexts" between the source language and the target language. Hence, one can aver without fear of contradiction that translation facilitates the comparative study of human civilizations. "According to modern historians of civilizations, it is impossible to write a fully intelligible history of any nation without taking into consideration the type of culture to which it belongs." (Microsoft Encarta 2009). Hence, the understanding of such culture in most cases can only be accessed through the translation of writings on such cultures.

Translating from one language into another greatly enhances the linguistic and cultural cross-fertilization of languages in general. In other terms, translation has resulted in the neological and syntactic enrichment of many languages. Through the process of loaning, calquing, coining, derivation, composition, etc. many languages have acquired a lot of new functional vocabulary relevant for nation building.

The rate of scientific and technological advancement in the world today owes so much to the dissemination of scientific and technical information through translation. For instance, scientific research reports and findings articulated in, say, Russian or French are made accessible to the Anglophone science and technology community through translation. Thus translating from one language into another of these research reports and findings in all branches of science and technology has immensely assisted the scientific communities to be abreast of the latest developments in the areas of scientific and technological discoveries, inventions, and advancements. In other words, translation has helped in no small measure in facilitating the transfer of technology worldwide, which in turn, leads to nation building.

Pedagogically, translation plays a very vital role, especially in the teaching of foreign languages. For instance, some abstract concepts or notions in a foreign language cannot possibly be

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explained by means of pictures or demonstration alone. Hence, the teacher translates them into the language, which the learner understands. Also, the teacher cannot but translate some difficult foreign language expressions such as idioms, proverbs and other figures of speech. However, I am not suggesting that translation is the most effective method of foreign language teaching; neither should it replace other methods such as the audio-visual method, communicative approach, activity-based methods, etc.

It is widely believed that the first person to conceive the idea of globalization was an American entrepreneur, Charles Taze Russell, when he coined the word "corporate giants" in 1897, according to Internet sources (*Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia*). About the mid twentieth century, economists and other intellectuals began to view the concept from different perspectives, by interpreting it in different ways and giving it all kinds of definitions. Today, the United Nations perceive globalization as an economic concept meaning the "reduction and removal of barriers between national borders in order to facilitate the flow of goods, capital, services and labour… " (*Wikipedia*). *Dictionary.com* defines it as the process of making something "global or worldwide in scope or application." *Wikipedia, the free Encyclopedia* describes globalization as "an ongoing process by which regional economies, societies, and cultures have become integrated through a globe-spanning network of communication and trade." In a more explicit way, Gadsby explains globalization as "the process of making something such as a business operate in a lot of different countries all around the world, or the result of this" (686).

A major ingredient or component of nation building is job creation. It has been observed that the highest rate of poverty, sickness, socio-political crises and crimes are manifest in countries, where people, especially the youths roam the streets without jobs. In terms of job creation therefore, translation provides one of the most lucrative language jobs in the areas of literary translation, pragmatic translation, scientific and technical translation. In other words, translation, as a language job, is available in academics, the civil service, the military, the mass media, diplomatic service and foreign affairs, tourism, export and import business, private firms such as publishing, banking, etc.

Having considered the role of translation in nation building, let me now explain the *transemic* theory and its practical application to translation.

PRACTICAL APPLICATION OF THE *TRANSEMIC* THEORY IN TRANSLATING

As I have established above, a source language text is theoretically composed of a chain of *transemes*. Therefore, a practical application of this theory consists, first and foremost, in identifying

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the *transemes*. Secondly, the translator now breaks up or segments the source language text into *transemes* in relation to the target language genius. Note that any segmentation of the source language text must always be based on the genius of the target language. Then the source language *transemes* are systematically matched up with their "natural equivalents" (Nida) in the target language. Consider the examples one to four below lifted from my latest publication: *A Textbook of Translation: Theory and Practice.*

Example One:

Eng	A / book / is / on / the / table.
Fre	Un / livre / est / sur / la / table.

Example Two:

Eng	A book / is / on / the / table.
Igb	Akwụkwọ /dị/ n'elu/ tebụlụ/ ahụ

Analysis

In example one above, the source language text is broken up into six *transemes* (minimum translatable chunks), in relation to the genius of the target language (French in this case). Word-for-word or literal translation is even possible here. In example two, the source language text is broken up into five *transemes* (minimum translatable chunks), in relation to the genius of the target language (Igbo in this case). Note that "A book" is considered as one *transeme* in relation to the genius of the Igbo language, because the indefinite article "A" does not exist in Igbo. This is why I say that the transemic approach tends to unify both the linguistic and interpretative approaches to translation.

Example Three:

Eng	Our / Head of State / kicked the bucket / yesterday./
Fre	Notre / Chef d'État /a cassé sa pipe / hier. /
Igb	Onye isi ala / anyị / jụrụ nri / ụnyaahụ. /
Hsa	Shugaban qasar / mu / ya rasu / jiya. /
Yor	Olórí orílẹ̀ ẹ̀dè / wa / ti wàjà / lánà. /

Analysis

In the above example, the source language text is broken up into four *transemes*, comprising two words and two phrases, one of which is an idiomatic expression. Any attempt to break up the phrases further into smaller *transemes* could lead to mistranslation or misinterpretation in the versions. However, in rendering the phrases, the translator should ensure that only natural

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equivalents are used as matches in the versions. For example, the phrase *kicked the bucket*, an idiomatic expression signifying *died*, is rendered by natural equivalent phrases *a cassé sa pipe*, *jụrụ nri* and *ti wàjà* all of which are idioms that equally mean *died* in the French, Igbo and Yoruba versions respectively. Note, however, that the Hausa version *ya mutu* is less idiomatic than the theme.

Example Four:

Eng	/ Prevention is better than cure. /
Fre	/ Il vaut mieux aller au boulanger qu'au médecin. /
Hau	/ Riga-kafi ya fi magani. /
Yor	/ Ìjàkùmọ kí í rìsán. / / Ìgbọnràn sàn ju ẹbọ rírú./
Igb	/ Ngbochi ọrịa ka mma karịa ọgwụgwọ ya. /

Analysis

In example four above, the theme or source language expression presents only one transeme (minimum translatable chunk), a complete sentence. In this case, the *transeme* is a proverb. Let us consider more examples.

Example Five

Source Language Text (Igbo)	**Target Language Text (English)**	**Target Language Text (French)**
Ụbọchị[1]/ ahụ[2]/ bụ[3]/ satọdee[4]./ Nne[5]/ m[6]/ ejeghị[7]/ ahịa[8]./ Kama[9],/ ọ[10]/ chọrọ[11]/ ije[12]/ ugbo[13]./ Nihi nke a[14],/ o[15]/ kuliri[16]/ n'isi ụtụtụ[18]/ ịkwado[19]/ ihe[20]/ anyị[21]/ ga-eri[22]/ n'ugbo[23]./ Mụ onwe m[24]/ kulikwara[25]/ ịnyere ya aka[26]. / Esuuru m ya ose[28],/ kpachakwara[29]/ ya[30]/ akwụkwọ nrị[31]./ Mgbe na-adghị anya[32],/ nne[33]/ m[34]/ tesịrị[35]/ ọmarịcha[36]/ ofe-egwusi[37]/ ma[38]/ sụkwaa[39]/ akpụ[40]/ anyị[41]/ ga-elo[42]/ n'ugbo[43]./	That[1]/ day[2]/ was[3]/ Saturday[4]/. My[6]/ mother[5]/ did not go to[7]/ the market.[8]/ Rather[9],/ she[10]/ wanted to[11]/ go to[12]/ the farm[13]./ Therefore[14],/ she[15]/ woke up[16]/ early in the morning[18]/ to prepare[19]/ what[20]/ we[21]/ shall eat[22]/ in the farm. [23]/ I too[24]/ woke up[25]/ to assist her. [26]/ I ground pepper[28]/ and sliced[29]/ vegetable[31]/ for her[30]./ Before long[32],/ my[34]/ mother[33]/ prepared[35]/ a delicious[36]/ egwusi-soup[37]/ as well as[38]/ pounded[30]/ fufu, [40]/ *which* we[41]/ would eat[42]/ in the farm. [43]/	Ce[2]/ jour là[1]/ était[3]/ samedi[4]./ Ma[6]/ mère[5]/ n'est pas allée[7]/ au marché.[8]/ Mais,[9]/ elle[10]/ voulait[11]/ aller à[12]/ la ferme[13]./ Par conséquent,[14]/ elle[15]/ s'est levée[16]/ très tôt le matin[18]/ pour préparer[19]/ ce que[20]/ nous[21]/ mangerions[22]/ à la ferme[23]./ Moi aussi[24],/ je me suis levée[25]/ pour l'aider[26]./ J'ai moulu du piment[28]/ et ai haché[29]/ des légumes[31]/ pour elle[30]./ Peu après,[32]/ ma[34]/ mère[33]/ a préparé[35]/ de la sauce d'*egwusi*[37]/ et a pilonné[39]/ du foufou de manioc[40]/ *que* nous[41]/ mangerions[42]/ dans la ferme./

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Analysis

Apparently, the above Igbo source language text belongs to the literary style, which is subjective and connotative. The text was first *transemically* segmented, that is, broken up into minimum translatable chunks, technically known as *transmes*. Then the *transemes* were indexed, using superscripts aimed at facilitating translating. For instance, whereas *transeme* 5, *nne*, a noun precceeds transeme 6, *m*, an adjective, it is the other way round syntactically in English and French. The Igbo syntagm "*n'isi ụtụtụ*" is idiomatic and, therefore, regarded as one *transeme*. We have retained the loan "egwusi" as in "ofe egwusi" (egwusi soup) because, culturally, the concept of melon among the English, is that of a large round fruit with sweet juicy flesh usually eaten raw. A look at transeme 42 shows that *ga-elo* in Igbo is a concrete verb rendered into English and French by the generic verb *eat* and *mangerions* respectively.

Example Six

Eng	**Fre**	**Igb**
Put[1]/ some[2]/ sodium chloride solution[3]/ in[4]/ a[5] /conical[6] /flask[7]/. Fill[8] / a[9] / small[10] / test-tube[11] /with silver trioxonitrate (V) solution[12] /. By means of[13]/ two[14]/ pieces of string[15]/suspend[16]/ it[17]/ in[18]/ the[19]/ conical[20] /flask[21] /as shown[22] /in[23] /the[24]/ diagramme.[25]/ (Osei Yaw Ababio 2001)	Mettez[1] / de la[2] / solution du chlorure de sodium[3] / dans[4] / un[5] / ballon[7] /conique[6] /. Remplissez[8] / un[9] / petit[10] / tube à essaie[11] / avec de la solution de la trioxonitrate (V) d'argent[12]./ A l'aide de[13]/ deux[14] / petits bouts de ficelle[15] / suspendez[16]/-le[17] / dans[18] / le[19] / ballon[21]/ conique[20] / comme indiqué[22]/ dans[23]/ le[24]/ schéma[25]./	Tinye[1] / obere[2] / mmiri nnu *sodium kloraịdị*[3] / n'ime[4] /akarama[7]/okoso[6]/. /Gbaje[8] / miri *trioxonitrate* na-acha ọla-ọcha (V)[12]/ n' obere[10]/ iko-nchọpụta[11]. / Were[13]/ ntakịrị eriri[15]/ abụọ[14]/ kwụba[16]/ iko-nchọpụta ahụ[17]/ nime[18]/ akarama[21]/ okoso[20]/ ahụ[19]/ dịka esi gosi ya[22]/ n'esemese[25]/ dị n'akwụkwụ a[24]./

Analysis:

The source language text in example six above is purely scientific and technical. The text was first *transemically* segmented, that is, broken up into minimum translatable chunks, technically known as *transmes*. Then the *transemes* were indexed, using superscripts designed to facilitate translating. For example, transeme 13 (*By means of*) is an idiomatic adverbial phrase transposed into an Igbo verb (*Were*). Now, "conical flask" is rendered as "akarama okoso". In my opinion, "flask", which is a kind of bottle, is rendered by "akarama", which is its closest natural equivalent. Then "conical", which is an adjective describing its shape, is transposed into "okoso", which has a conical

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shape. The term "test-tube" was deverbalized and re-expressed in Igbo as "iko-nchọpụta". However, we retained the term "trioxonitrate" because it is a chemical name.

Conclusion

In conclusion, we have seen that the important role played by translation in nation building cannot be overemphasized, and, therefore, should not be taken for granted. Although generally taken for granted, translation is an indispensible means of communication in virtually all areas of human endeavour: business, religion, diplomacy, law, agriculture, tourism, manufacture, import and export, education, military, science and technology, etc. It equally plays unifying and reconciliatory roles in some contexts, by breaking language barriers, reducing mutual unintelligibility, eliminating ignorance and mistrust, etc. In other words, translation has helped in increasing mutual intelligibility, trust, and unity at all levels: local, national and international. We have also seen that theoretically, every text is composed of *transemes* (minimun translatable chunks), which must be translated integrally. The ability of the translator to identify the *transemes* and match them with their natural equivalents in the source language often elevates the level of fidelity achieved in a translation.

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