

Intentional Manipulations? A Further Analysis of Selected English-Yoruba Humorous Translations

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Abstract

Translation is aimed at reproducing a given text from one source language to another. In view of the importance of the concept of translation, various theories and strategies have been developed in literature to facilitate the activities involved in the translation of texts, either interlingual or intralingual. However, there are cases when the translation of a text is either intentionally or unintentionally manipulated to achieve certain intended or unintended purposes. This essay examines cases of manipulated translations of texts within a language and from one language to the other. The data for the study were some selected humorous translations obtained from the social media (WhatsApp and Twitter precisely). The posts, eleven in number, were tagged with the title 'Translation 101' and contained sentences in English language which were humorously translated some into the standard Yorubá language and others into the Ibadan dialect of the Yorubá language. The humorous translations could be said to be a play on words which is based on the pronunciation similarities of the normal translations in the Yorubá language and some words, phrases and names in English and other languages. The theory of choice for the study is the Manipulation Theory adopted by a group of scholars known as the 'Manipulation School' (Hermans, 1985). The analysis of the data revealed cases where the translations of the texts were intentionally manipulated to elicit humor for the audience. It concludes that humorous translations are often used

by comedians who intentionally manipulate the translations of certain texts for the purpose of comedy.

Keywords: Translation, Humor, Manipulation Theory, Comedy.

Introduction

The diversity of human languages, and yet the need to communicate with one another, brings to the fore the prime place that translation holds in language studies. Translators try as much as possible to express what is said in a language in another language with a great deal of textual accuracy. However, there are cases of intentional manipulations of translation efforts with the aim of achieving certain ends of creating humor. This study therefore seeks to examine cases of humorous translations whereby comedians deliberately manipulate given texts to elicit laughter and humor in the audience.

Translation and its importance

No man is an island, as individuals do not exist alone. The need for social interaction makes individuals attach themselves to different social groups which could be social, professional, ethnic, or religious. Certain languages are tied to certain social groups and in fact, such languages oftentimes become the markers of such identities. However, the diverse interlingual nature of human languages and yet the need for social interaction and interlingua communication makes translation strategies an important concept.

A broad definition of translation is that of Richards et al (1985) who defined translation as ‘the process of changing speech or writing from one language (the defined language) into another (the target language).’ Bell (1991) also defines translation as ‘the expression in another language of what has been expressed in another source language, preserving semantic and stylistic equivalences.’ Another similar definition given by Meetham and Hudson (1972) is ‘the replacement of a text in one language by a replacement of an equivalent text in a second language.’

It is obvious from the above definitions that the goal of translation is to relay what is said or written in a source language in another target language. In fact, Nida and Taber (1982:4) affirm that anything that can be said in one language can be said in another, unless the form is an essential element of the message. However, while translating, conscious effort is made to ensure a proper preservation of the meaning as conveyed in the source language. In other words, translation efforts would fail and would not achieve the intended purpose if the conveyed meaning is distorted.

Translators try as much as possible to give an equivalent replacement of the text to be translated in both source and target languages. Translation strategies

are therefore geared towards ensuring that the target language maintains semantic accuracy, grammatical correctness, stylistically effectiveness and textual coherence as the source language (As-Safi, 2011). Translation types can be classified either based on 'code' or on 'mode.' Based on 'mode,' translation could be according to written mode or oral mode. With respect to 'code', translation could be classified as intralingual or interlingual (As-Safi, 2011). Intralingual translation is translation which takes place within the same code or language. In other words, this takes place when a speaker tries to explain a difficult text in the form of paraphrase within the same language, to enhance proper understanding of the text being interpreted or translated. On the other hand, interlingual translation is when a given text in a source language is reproduced in a language completely different from the source language. This is the common translation type which is usually occasioned by the need for interlingual communication, especially in multilingual societies.

Humor and Comedy

Humor and comedy are a very essential part of social interactions and relationships. While comedy is seen as a formalized and scripted version of comic discourse, humor is broader and entails social behavior in everyday life which serves as a catalyst for amusements, jokes, or elicitation of laughter (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008). A slight distinction between humor and comedy is made here. Humor is a natural phenomenon as peoples' voluntary and involuntary actions elicit laughter from time to time. On the other hand, comedy is often deliberate and in fact scripted purposefully to achieve the intended goal of making the audience laugh.

While some hold the view that comedy should not be taken seriously as a subject of study with respect to its appropriateness or otherwise, as it often-times results in mockery and ridicule, others view comedy as a positive social concept which is aimed at distracting or diverting people's attention from the social problems of life (Lockyer and Pickering, 2008). In line with the saying that it is better to laugh than to cry, comedy aims at making people see the better side of life rather than the ugly situations that life offers. Meyer (2000) affirms the view that humor is a medium through which individuals seek to obtain relief from the tensions and fears of life. Paul and Ekele (2020) also highlights the positive side of humor noting that humorous posts and comments convey diverse needs of people such as relaxation, safety, sympathy, communication, etc.

To achieve the goal of comedy, which is to elicit humor, several strategies are employed including exaggeration, ridicule, and distortion (Muller and Oczan, 2007). One strategy which comedians employ as identified in this

study, is the intentional manipulations of language use in a stylistic manner to elicit humor, as will be much discussed later.

Manipulation Theory of Translation

The theory of choice for this study is the Manipulation theory of translation. The theory is associated with a group of scholars referred to as ‘Manipulation School’ (Hermans 1985: 217). The theory believes that translation often utilizes some level of degree of manipulation for a certain purpose. Scholars of the Manipulation School assume that translation is inherently manipulative.

Distinct reasons have been adduced for the use of manipulation in translation. Farahzad and Allameh (1999:156) cited in Kramina (2004) distinguish between two types of manipulations as follows:

The conscious process leads to conscious manipulation intentionally carried out by the translator because of various social, political, and other factors. Unconscious manipulation is mostly a psychological phenomenon and occurs under the influence of psychological factors.

The conscious process of manipulation in translation involves a deliberate action based on several factors which the translator carries out to achieve an intended goal. Often, comedians deliberately and intentionally manipulate the translation of texts with a view to eliciting laughter in the audience. On the other hand, the unconscious process of manipulation in translation takes place as a psychological action which is usually unintentional on the part of the translator.

Data Presentation and Analysis

The data for this study is a set of humorous translations obtained from the social media with the caption ‘Translation 101’ hereby reproduced below:

1. English: Tina is a witch
Yoruba: Argentina
2. English: Enemies exist
Yoruba: Ottawa
3. English: The king has the Corona virus
Yoruba: Obanikoro
4. English: We are dead, we insulted Barca
Yoruba: Atiku Abubakar
5. English: I will turn a monkey into a nation
Yoruba: Insubordination
6. English: She is twerking at us

- Ibadan: In judicial
7. English: I do not have a chair
Ibadan: Initial
 8. English: I will hang the net
Ibadan: Internet
 9. English: I have not seen you
Ibadan: Interior
 10. English: I will jump
Ibadan: Info
 11. English: I am not sure
Ibadan: Insure

**Datum 1. English: Tina is a witch
Yoruba: Argentina**

The above is clearly a case of manipulated translation. The proper translation of the English text, devoid of any manipulation would be:

Àjé ni Tina

Clearly, ‘Argentina’ is not a Yorùbá word but a country in the South American continent. It is obvious that the manipulation of the translation is because of the pronunciation similarity between *Àjé ni Tina* and ‘Argentina’. This is a case of tonal elimination which is the opposite of contour tone exaggeration discussed in Adeniyi and Bamigbade (2017: 4, 9). The high and low tone in the Yorùbá word *ájé* is eliminated and the entire sentence is made to sound like *Argentina*. In order to achieve pronunciation similarities. The translation is a play on words or sounds and it is purely meant to elicit humor.

**Datum 2. English: Enemies exist
Yoruba: Ottawa**

In datum 2, the proper translation of the English text to Yorùbá would be:

(Àwọn) òtá wà

Yorùbá is not an inflectional language and therefore does not mark grammatical categories such as gender, number, tense, etc., with inflectional morphemes. The plural form of ‘enemy’ which is ‘enemies’ could be translated as *òtá* and it could also take an optional pronominal *àwọn* performing the function of a quantifier. If the optional quantifier is clipped off, the translation of ‘enemies exist’ would be *Òtá wà*.

Again, this is remarkably similar in pronunciation to *Ottawa*, a city in Canada, in the North American continent.

Datum 3. English: The king has corona virus
Yoruba: Obanikoro

Again, the above is another form of manipulation. The translation of the English text in datum 3 to Yorubá is:

Ọbá ní (àrun) kòrónà

Corona virus is a pandemic currently ravaging the globe since 2019. The virus was renamed COVID-19 by the World Health Organization (WHO). In Nigeria, especially among Yorubá speakers, the virus is popularly known as *àrun kòró* or simply *kòró*. The translation of *the king has corona virus* would therefore be:

Ọbá ní kòró

To use elicit humor, the Yorubá sentence is deliberately reduced to a single word ‘òbaníkòró’, which is the name of a person. There is a popular former Nigerian Senator Musiliu Obanikoro who popularized the name Obanikoro. Since the advent of COVID-19, his name Obanikoro is usually interpreted humorously as:

‘The king has corona virus’

The name Obanikoro however has an entirely different translation and has nothing to do with corona virus.

Datum 4. English: We are dead, we insulted Barca
Yoruba: Atiku Abubakar

The above is a combination of two sentences each of which can stand alone. The first sentence ‘We are dead’ has the proper translation to Yorubá as:

A ti kú

In the second sentence, *Barca* is the short form of Barcelona, a Spanish city, made popular by Barcelona football club, a prominent football club in the Spanish and European leagues. Although the actual pronunciation of *Barca* is /básà/, the usual pronunciation among Nigerian sports fans is /bákà/. ‘We insulted Barca’ will normally be translated as:

A bú bákà

The combination of the two sentences would therefore be:

A ti kú, a bú bákà

The Yorùbá translation above clearly sounds like the name of a prominent Nigerian politician who was a former Vice-President of Nigeria, Atiku Abubakar. The similarity in the segmental materials of the normal Yorùbá translation and the name of the politician is what the author in datum 4 explored to deliberately manipulate the translation of the English text for comic purposes. To achieve this, the author ignores the tonal configuration of the correct Yorùbá translation.

Datum 5. English: I will turn a monkey into a nation Ibadan: Insubordination

In (5) above, the Ibadan dialect of Yorùbá is chosen as the target language to which the translation of the English text is made. The above text would normally be translated in the standard Yorùbá as:

N ó sọ ọ̀bọ̀ di orílẹ̀-èdè

The word ‘nation’ is translated as *orílẹ̀-èdè*. In translation strategies, the linguistic concept of borrowing from the source language to the target language is sometimes utilized when the translator cannot, for instance, find an appropriate equivalent of a word or text, or due to linguistic incompetence on the part of the translator. ‘Nation’ could therefore be borrowed into Yorùbá as ‘*nésàn*’. In the case of borrowing as can be observed from the Yorùbá case, the borrowed word is adjusted to conform to the phonological and orthographic patterns of the target language.

Furthermore, code switching or code mixing also takes place in translation strategies. Bilinguals often switch from one language to the other or mix two codes or languages when speaking. ‘I will turn a monkey into a nation’ could therefore be translated as:

N ó sọ ọ̀bọ̀ di nésàn (here, ‘nation’ is borrowed into Yorùbá as ‘nésàn’)

Or

N ó sọ ọ̀bọ̀ di nation (here, ‘nation’ is code mixed with Yorùbá)

Some phonological processes could take place to reduce the code-mixed form above to

Nń sòbọ di nation

In the above, assimilation takes place as the future tense marker *ó* takes on the nasal feature of the preceding first-person pronoun *N*; also, the vowel *o* in the verb *sọ* is deleted and the verb is contracted with the noun *òbọ*. Rather than pronouncing the first-person nominative pronoun used with the future tense marker as *Nń*, the Ibadan dialect uses *Inń*, as in:

In ń sòbọ di nation

The Ibadan dialectal form above is obviously similar in pronunciation with the English word *insubordination*; hence the comical translation as what we find in datum 5.

**Datum 6: English: She is twerking at us
Ibadan: in judicial**

The normal translation of the English statement into Yorùbá would be:

Ó ń ju ìdí sí wa

With some phonological processes of vowel and consonant elision taking place, we would have

Ó ń jùdí sía

Here, the initial vowel /i/ in /ìdí/ is deleted, while the low tone on it is transferred to the preceding vowel /u/ of the verb *jù* which is then contracted with the noun *ìdí* to become *jùdí*. Also, the consonant /w/ in *wa* is deleted and the remnant is contracted with the preposition *sí* to become *sía*. (See Bamgbose 1990) for an elaborate discussion of consonant deletion in Yorùbá.)

In the Ibadan dialect, the second person nominative pronoun *Ó* used with the progressive aspect marker *ń* is pronounced as *Ínn*, hence the Ibadan translation as:

Ín ń jùdí sía

This clearly sounds like the English phrase *In judicial* as humorously translated in datum 6.

**Datum 7. English: I do not have a chair
Ibadan: Initial**

The normal translation of the English text in standard Yorùbá is:

N ò ní àga

Although, the first-person pronoun could also be *mi* as in *Mi ò ní àga*. As explained in datum 5, one strategy in translation is either borrowing or code switching and code mixing. The word *chair* if borrowed in Yorùbá becomes *sià*. The English text in datum 7 could therefore be translated as:

N ò ní sià

A phonological process of vowel assimilation could take place, with the negative marker *ò* taking on the nasal feature of the preceding first-person nominative pronoun *N*, to become

N ò ní sià

The Ibadan dialectal form will be:

In ò ní sià

The Ibadan translation is phonetically similar with the English word *initial*.

**Datum 8. English: I'll hang the net
Yoruba: Internet**

The translation of the English text above is:

N ó ta nẹ̀tì.

Here, the English word *net* is borrowed into Yorùbá and made to conform to the phonological pattern of Yorùbá which for instance, does not permit consonant-final words, but would rather introduce a vowel at the final position of the syllable, hence we have /nẹ̀tì/. If code mixing is employed, the translation would be:

N ó ta net.

As explained earlier in datum 5, assimilation takes place and the first-person nominative pronoun used with the future tense marker becomes *Nń*, as in:

N ń ta net

But the Ibadan dialect uses *In ń* as in:

In ń ta net

Again, this has a phonetic similarity with the English word *internet*.

Datum 9. English: I haven't seen you

Ibadan: Interior

The normal translation of the English text above in the standard Yorùbá is:

N ò tî rí ọ

This would also become:

N ò tî rí ọ

As explained in datum 7, Ibadan dialect speakers would translate the text as:

In ò tî rí ọ

Again, the phonetic similarity between the Ibadan translation and the English word *interior* is the basis for the manipulation of the translation as presented in this datum.

Datum 10. English: I will jump

Ibadan: Info

The translation of the above English text in standard Yorùbá is:

Màá fò or N ó fò

If the second option is to be used, assimilation usually takes place and what is often said out is:

N ñ fò

The Ibadan dialectal form of the translation would be:

In ñ fò

Which is obviously similar in pronunciation to *info*, the abbreviated form of the English word information.

Datum 11. English: I'm not sure

Ibadan: Insure

The English text "I am not sure" could be translated in Yorùbá as:

N ò mọ́ dájú

However, another translation strategy is to simply code mix, hence we would have:

N ò sure

With assimilation taking place, we would have:

N ñ sure

The Ibadan dialectal form would be:

In ñ sure

The code-mixed form in the Ibadan dialect clearly has a phonetic similarity with the English word *insure*.

Summary of findings and conclusion

The human language is flexible and can be manipulated to achieve certain intended or unintended purposes. Aitchison (1996) aptly captures this view by comparing human language to spiders who exploit their webs but sometimes they themselves even get caught in the sticky strands of the webs. One strategy which comedians employ to elicit humor and laughter is the manipulation of language. Adeniyi and Bamigbade (2017) study on customized Ibadan Yorùbá identify the abundant use of consonant deletion and contour tone exaggeration as the stylistic variation employed by a preacher in Ibadan, popularly known as *Paitowa* to elicit humor in his preaching style.

Translation is normally aimed at reproducing a given text in a source language to another target language by looking out for an equivalent which has similar interpretation in the target language. However, our data presents cases where the very essence of translation is intentionally distorted for the purpose of making them hilarious and comical. The major technique employed to achieve this is tonal elimination. Yorùbá is a tonal language, hence the translations into Yorùbá should normally bear tones. In these cases, however, the tones are excluded and then manipulated to be similar in pronunciation to words, phrases, and sentences in other languages.

In data 1-4, the English sentences are said to have been translated into the standard Yorùbá. A critical look at the Yorùbá forms of the translations as presented in the data reveal that the forms are based on deliberate manipulation and play on words or sounds. While data 1 and 2 are the names of a South American country and a Canadian city respectively, the pronunciations of the names sound like the normal Yorùbá translations when tone is excluded. Data

3 and 4 are names of popular personalities in Nigeria. Their names however sound like the Yorubá normal translations of the English texts in the data.

For data 5 to 11, the Ibadan dialect is intentionally adopted as the target language. This is deliberate and intentional in order to achieve the intended goal of eliciting humor. From the data, the Ibadan dialectal translations all have pronunciation similarities with the various English words and phrases adopted as the comical translations. Again, Adeniyi and Bamigbade (2017) reported that Ibadan dialect is usually adopted for humorous purposes in Yorubaland.

Furthermore, the study observes the intentional use of borrowing, which is one of the morphological processes in language, rather than using the equivalent of such words in Yorubá. Code mixing is another sociolinguistic feature used in the intentional manipulation of the translations. In code mixing, a word in a language is lifted and inserted into another language. In the data, there are several cases of code mixing in the translations to arrive at the intended comical translations. Although some of the words lifted from the English text into Yorubá have their equivalents and other interpretations in Yorubá, the author of the data intentionally excluded the Yorubá equivalents and chose the code-mixed pattern, all in a bid to achieve phonetic similarities between the normal Yorubá translations and the comical translations which are English words and phrases.

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Online Source of data

<https://twitter.com/basamta/status/1375485726234718223/photo/1>

