Phonological and Sociolinguistic Challenges of Translating Yorùbá Play and Game Songs to Singable English for Children

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Abstract

Observation of available translated Yoruba oral literature for children reveals that compared to Yoruba folktales translated to English and published in diverse formats, Yoruba play and game songs do not appear to enjoy the same attention or visibility in the available resources for children. The relatively few existing ones lack the Yoruba 'flavor' and socio-cultural nuances. Furthermore, those existing song translations rarely consider singableness and suitability in terms of the choice of segmental features, onomatopoeic cultural differences, and age-appropriate lexical items. Consequently, the translations are "unperformable" as oral texts, thus, failing their aesthetic and functional purpose for children. To investigate the translation problems involved and proffer solutions, this essay analyses five randomly selected Yoruba songs and seven of their available English translations from online sources and an unpublished manuscript, using sociolinguistic translation theory considerations and the analytical framework of Franzon's song translation choices.

Keywords: song translation, Yoruba play, and game songs, Yoruba oral literature, children's literature

Introduction

This essay aims to proffer solutions to the relative lack of singable English translations of Yoruba play and game songs for children compared with the available translations of folktales. It seeks to achieve the objective by

first understanding the socio-cultural and linguistic conundrums present in existing translated play songs and game songs. Specifically, play songs refer to children's songs that involve play actions such as dancing and clapping, while game songs refer to children's songs that go with specific games. Ntši-hlele (2003:26) defines the latter more specifically as "a term only applicable to children. They are songs that merely accompany games but are subsidiary to the game while not affecting its structure, that is, of the game." The words "play" and "game" in the description of song types at once suggest recreation, fun, and casualness. In Yoruba culture (and most African cultures), however, game songs, are also didactic – they serve as conveyors of cultural values, norms, and beliefs to children, just as other forms of Yoruba oral literature. Scholars have investigated African children's game songs, play songs, and lullabies particularly in the fields of ethnomusicology (Ntšihlele, 2003), oral literature (Finnegan, 2012; Gbadamosi and Beier 1959, and Finnegan 2012), and in particular, education (Majasan, 1969; Adeyinka, 2008; Malobola-Nd-lovu, 2018). However, the emphasis of these works and others like them is on the forms and functions of the songs and games. Therefore, any attempt to translate the songs to English or any other language must first consider the cultural background and essence of the lyrics of each song. This essay empha-sizes culture and language because of their interconnectedness. Culture and language intricately intertwine, to the extent that it is impossible to understand a language without understanding its culture; neither is it possible to under-stand culture completely without understanding its language.

Although highly contested, some scholars have even gone as far as assert-ing that the language we speak controls the way that we observe events in our environment, carry out actions, and make social categorisations. This outlook is the theory of linguistic determinism, also known as the Whorfian hypoth-esis, which states that language structure and language behavior determine worldview. In as much as linguists, anthropologists, and psychologists have scientifically proven the determinism stand of the Whorfian School as being extreme, there is mutual agreement that language and culture are inseparable. This inseparability has implications for language translation, the focus of this essay; hence the need to expatiate on both concepts.

Language and Culture

Language can be verbal (spoken) or non-verbal (written, gestured, tactile, e.g. braille, signed, and in the African context of tone languages, sounded using percussion, woodwind, and brass instruments). In whatever form it oper-ates, the purpose of language is to communicate; and what it "communicates"

is multidimensional and far-reaching. As explained succinctly by Rubdy (2008:34)

> Languages are far more than just media of communication. They embody subjective features such as values, ideals, and attitudes that imbue them with particular symbolic qualities and functions. They are then seen as emblems of nationhood, cultural identity, progress, modernity, democracy, freedom, equality, pluralism, socialism, and many such 'values'.

Culture, on the other hand, is "the basic 'know-how' we draw on in everyday life" (Holmes, 2013: 360). Details of the term, culture are outlined in Ting-Toomey's (1999:10 cited in Holmes 2013) definition – "a learned meaning system that consists of the patterns of traditions, beliefs, values, norms, and symbols that are passed on from one generation to the next and are shared to varying degrees by interacting members of a community." The intergenerational and intra-community sharing that Ting-Toomey's definition highlights can only take place through language, using any of the mediums explained earlier.

Translating African Culture through the English Language

Due to Africa's colonial history and the strong influence of Westernisation on its entire fabric, post-Independence life in many African countries is characterized by a struggle for identity. Overtime, Nigerians like other Africans across the continent, began to infuse the traditions of their ancestors into Western fashion, music, the names given to new born babies, lifestyle, mode of religious worship, and so on. For instance, Nigerian Christians introduced dancing and drumming in the church, as opposed to solely hymnbook and solemn organ/piano music allowed by the Western clergy (Ekwueme, 1973; Fadipe, 2012). For African writers and artists, however, one hurdle of great concern was how to convey abstract African creativity and intellectual African language-bound oratory using the English language medium. Direct quotes from the mouth of some notable Nigerian song and literary artists, who have also won global recognition for the very Africans of their artistry, reveal how they solved the problem. The presented quotations are not in any hierarchical order, and they each speak for themselves:

(i) My poetry is influenced by Yoruba poetics (Osundare 2005:55).

(ii) It occurred to me early in my composition career (in the mid-60s) that African composers might, look to African poets for the texts of their songs…I wanted to write African songs in English. Because that language is such a signifier of English traditions, it was not immediately clear to me how my English-language songs infused with an African identity. I decided that one solution to this problem was to reject British poets for Africans writing in the English language (Euba 2002, cited in Dosumu, 2005:55).

(iii)   I feel that the English language will be able to carry the weight of my African experience. But it will have to be a new English, still in full communion with its ancestral home but altered to suit its new African surroundings (Achebe 1975: 62).

The above quotes imply that a successful Yoruba song translation to English must be faithful to the socio-cultural context and the linguistic structure of the Yoruba language in its choice of words and expressions. Secondly, the version of "new English" used must be Nigerian English, the authentic code that can truly carry the weight of the Nigerian worldview in the English medium. As Adegbija (1998:6) succinctly expresses, Nigerian English has a "...distinct identity bound to the Nigerian soul and mind; its own unique life and internal consistency and an autonomy…" To use Nigerian English for translation does not suggest the acceptance of sub-standard or aberrant forms (this, of course, excludes employment of style as deviations). For instance, Izevbaye (1997 cited in Dosumu 2005:54) describes Soyinka's adroitness in the conversion of a Yoruba ancient story to an English drama, saying though he employed "the structure and lexis of Queen's English, one of the highly prized benefits of the colonial education system," Soyinka successfully implanted the Nigerian identity and speech forms in the translation.

To surmise this section on translating Africanness in traditional Yoruba songs for children, and indeed, all indigenous language songs, Irele's comment (1971:15 cited in Dosumu, 2005: 99) is most apposite:

Our writers [including song translators] are recognizably African only in the sense in which they give an African character to their works and conversely, we who are Africans, will only accept them as speaking [translating songs] about us in so far as they take our voice and speak with our accent.

Song Translation Choices

Franzon (2008:376) postulates a list of five-song translation principles, which he calls "choices" namely,

1. Leaving the song untranslated.
2. Translating the lyrics but not considering the music.
3. Writing new lyrics to the original music with no overt relation to the original lyrics.
4. Translating the lyrics and adapting the music accordingly – sometimes to the extent that a brand new composition is necessary.
5. Adapting the translation to the original music.

His approach "accounts for a greater diversity of musical genres," which he goes on to exemplify using five different song genres. He posits that options three to five in the list above will produce singable lyrics. In his view, singability means a "musico-verbal fit of a text to music," comprising the following three modifiable or optional layers of the match between music and translated lyrics– (i) prosodic (observation of melody), (ii) poetic (observation of structure), and (iii) semantic-reflexive (observation of expression) (p 373).

A prosodic match occurs when the translation results in "music as notated, producing lyrics that are comprehensible and sound natural when sung." In other words, the song translation observes the music's *melody* in terms of linguistic features such as "syllable count; rhythm; intonation, stress; sounds for easy singing" (Franzon:390). A poetic match, on the other hand, achieves performable lyrics by observing the *structure* of the music, which in turn appears in texts in the form of "rhyme; segmentation of phrases/lines/stanzas; parallelism and contrast; location of keywords" (390). The third layer is the semantic-reflexive match between lyrics and the *expression* of the music; that is, "music perceived as meaningful, producing lyrics that reflect or explain what the music 'says'." Such *expression* will appear in the translated text as "the story told, mood conveyed, character(s) expressed; description (word-painting); metaphor" (390). Of the three levels, Franzon states that for singability, "A prosodic match would be the most basic requirement, since in its absence it may technically be impossible to sing the lyrics" (391). In this essay, therefore, the linguistic analysis, as demonstrated in the next section, primarily focuses on phonological features relating to syllable count, rhythm, intonation, stress/tone, and sound segments, where each is applicable.

Data Presentation and Discussion

The data here comprise five Yoruba game songs and the seven available English translations obtained from *Di Èyí Mú,* an unpublished compilation of translated games and songs for children. Where more than one English translation was publicly available, all versions analyzed and compared. In song translation terminology, the original version of a text is called the Source Text (ST), and the translated version is called the Target Text (TT). Both terms used in the data presented below. The English versions of Datum 2 and Datum 3 are popular with children on school playgrounds and home settings (as well as in church settings for Datum 3), in Nigeria today. Both are also the only singable TTs in the data; therefore, they hold probable translation clues to successful singable Yoruba to English song translations for children.

Datum 1: *Ẹkùn mẹ́ran mẹ̀ẹ́ẹ̀* (The leopard stalks the goat)

There are a few socio-cultural inaccuracies as well as problems with the choice of age-appropriate vocabulary in both translations of this game circle and song. The maximalist translation represents the sound of the goat as *b*àáà, but Yoruba goats and sheep do not sound like that. It is in the native English culture and the children's rhymes like "Baa baa black sheep have you any wool" that goats and sheep make the "baa" sound; Yoruba goats bleat with *mẹ̀ẹ́ẹ̀*; therefore, the Mamalisa translation slightly distorts Yoruba cultural expression and language. The *Di Èyí Mú* English translation appropriately retains the *mẹ̀ẹ́ẹ̀* sound and thereby preserves the Yoruba flavor of the song.

In terms of lexical choices, the Mamalisa's translation of *mu* to mean "capture" is not a true reflection of the average Nigerian child's everyday English vocabulary; the word, "catches," as translated by the *Di Èyí Mú* version is a more accurate reflection. However, Mamalisa's translation of the phrase *Ojú ẹkùn pọ́n* to "The Leopard's eyes are red" is a much better choice than *Di Èyí Mú*'s translation as "fierce." Not only is the former a more age-appropriate reflection of use in Nigeria, but it is also more significantly, a graphic mirror of the exact metaphorical description of a type of anger in the Yoruba worldview.

In terms of singability, neither of the two English translations of this Yoruba circle game is performable. The syllable counts between the ST and the TT in both translations are not the same, which automatically indicates that the translation cannot be sung to the original Yoruba tune Going by Franzon's framework of choices in song translation Mamalisa and *Di Èyí Mú* have both followed Choice 2" translating the lyrics but not taking the music into account.

ST 1 (mamalisa)	TT (Mamalisa)	ST 2 (*Di* Èyí *Mú*)	TT (*Di* Èyí *Mú*)
Ẹ̀kùn mẹ́ran mèéè! Ó torí bo igbó mèéè! Ó torùn bo dàn mèéè! Ó fẹ́ mu un mèéè! Kò mà lè mu o mèéè! Ojú ẹkùn pọ́n mèéè! Ìrù ẹkùn ńle mèéè!	The leopard stalks the goat baa! It searches the forest baa! It searches the bush baa! It wants to capture it baa! No, you can't capture it baa! The leopard's eyes are red baa! The leopard's tail stands on end baa!	Ẹ̀kùn mẹ́ran mèéè Ó dorí kogbó mèéè Ó dorí Kodàn mèéè Ẹ̀kùn mẹ́ran mèéè Ó ṣe é mú o mèéè Óṣàì mú o mèéè Ojú ẹkùn ń pọ́n Ì rù ẹkù n ńle Ojú ẹkùn ń pọ́n Ìrù ẹkù n ńle Ó gbé e Kò ì gbé e Logolo Bẹ̀rẹ̀ gbé e.	The leopard catches a goat mèéè The leopard catches a goat mèéè It turns to the bush mèéè The leopard catches a goat mèéè It's able to catch it mèéè It's able to catch it mèéè The leopard looks fierce, Its tail tightens up The leopard looks fierce. Its tail tightens up It [the leopard] has caught it [the goat], It hasn't caught it, Logologo [The tall one] Bend down and catch it.

Datum 2:   *Ta ló wà nínú ogbà náà?* (Who is in the garden?)

This is also a circle game for children. Both the Yoruba and English versions on the Mamalisa site are slightly different from the version that children popularly sing on the playground today; therefore, both versions are presented and discussed here as (a) and (b). Compared to the singable popular English version, the Mamalisa translation is socio-culturally askew, has

no musico-linguistic fit, and is linguistically imbalanced as far as rhythm and rhyme are concerned. First, because of the British origin of the English spoken in Nigeria, it is not common to hear the American English term, "kid" in referring to children in the lexicon of the average Nigerian child. Secondly, the word. "Yard" in contemporary Nigerian English sounds archaic; it is more common to hear children say "compound" if not "garden" when referring to their premises, which is what *ọgbà* means in Yoruba. The syllable counts of the lines in the ST and TT do not match, which means the translation is unsingable. Whereas the translation of *Ẹkùn mẹ́ran* in Datum 1 had a measure of rhythm, the translation of the Datum 2 song lacks beat, grammatical coherence, and general cohesion. It also sounds foreign and natural. The TT of *Ta ló wà nínú ọgbà náà* is an example again of Franzon's choice 2 for song translation.

The popular singable version is an example of song translation choice 5 in Franzon's framework i.e. "adapting the translation to the original music." A linguistic analysis of the singable popular TT reveals clues about the features that make it possible to perform (sing) a song. The musico-linguistic features include the triple repetition of "no" in line 4, depicting actual child speech; the monosyllabic words that sound like drumbeats and points for placing tone marks; the expression "little fine girl" reminiscent of Nigerian English expression to mention but a few.

Concerning the last-mentioned feature, although "fine girl" is not a literal translation of *ọmọ kékeré kan ni*, it successfully captures an entire socio-cultural theme in the Yoruba worldview. It brings to mind, the concept of courtship and marriage in traditional Yoruba culture where relatives of a suitor visit the parents of a potential bride to say that they have seen a "beautiful flower in the *ọgbà*" of the family. Although the ST does not refer to any gender, the Yoruba cultural assumption and practice is that people only request permission so nicely, to "see" a beautiful female; no one in their right mind asks for permission to see a male in his father's house. The popular TT is not only singable, but it also perfectly exemplifies Franzon's third layer for a musico-verbal fit, which as explained earlier, includes "the story told, but mood also conveyed, character(s) expressed; description (word-painting); metaphor" (390).

(a) *Ta ló wà nínú ogbà náà?*

ST (mamalisa)	TT (mamalisa)
*Ta ló wà nínú ogbà náà***?**	Who is in the yard?
Ọmọ kékeré kan ni	One small kid.
Ṣée n wá **wò** *ó?*	Can I come to see her?
Má wàá **wò** *ó*	No don't come and look
Ó dára púpọ̀	Come here and follow me.
Alternate Ending:	
Ṣée n wá **wò** *ó?*	Come look
Ó dára púpọ̀	Very good!

(b) *Ta ló wà nínú ọgbà náà/who* is in the garden?

ST (popular)	TT (popular)
*Ta ló wà nínú ogbà náà***?**	Who is in the garden?
Ọmọ kékeré kan ni	A little fine girl
Ṣée n wá wò ó?	Can I come and see her?
Má wàá wò ó	No, no, no
Tèlé mi ká lo	Follow me

Datum 3: *Orí mi, èjìká* (My head, my shoulders)

Children usually perform this game song with hand motions. Like Datum 2b, the TT is singable to the original tune, and is, in a way, even more, exact than Datum 2b. The TT of Datum 3 has an equal number of syllable counts with the ST in each line. It thereby fulfils the prosodic condition stipulated in Franzon's first of the three modifiable layers required for a musico-verbal fit of a text to music. However, there is a strong possibility that English is the original form of Datum 3 while Yoruba is the translated version in contemporary use in Nigeria today. The TT of Datum 3, like Datum 2, follows Franzon's song translation choice 5 by its adaptation to the original music.

ST (popular song)	TT (YouTube)
My head	*Orí mi*
My shoulders	*Èjìká*
My knees	*Oókún*
My toes	*Ẹsẹ̀*
They all belong to Jesus.	*Tìrẹ ni Olúwa.*

Additional Examples

Other examples of traditional Yoruba game songs for children and their available translations include the following, numbered (I) and (II) below. Both examples prove the same points of lack of singability features highlighted above as missing in the analyses of Datum 1and 2, but present in Datum 3. The word choices in both translations also exemplify the facts of sociolinguistic inappropriateness raised in the discussion of Datum 1.

(I)   *Mo nínî, mo nìnî*

ST (*Di* Èyí *Mú*)	TT (*Di* Èyí *Mú*)
Mo nínî, mo nìnî	*Mo nínî mo nìnî*
Mo nìnî, mo nìnî	*Mo nìnî, mo nìnî*
Mo bárúgbó kan lódò	I saw an old woman at the riverside
Mo ní kó bùn mi lómi mu	I asked her to give me water to drink
Ó ní omi kò sí	She refused
Mo ní ó sapá walaja	I said she had long hands.
Mo ní ó şesè walaja	I said she had long legs.
Bíi ìrókò agẹmọ	Like the African teak or praying mantis.

(II) *Lábé igi òrònbó* (Under the orange tree)

ST (mamalisa)	TT (mamalisa)	ST (*Di* Èyí *Mú*)	TT (*Di* Èyí *Mú*)
L'abe igi oronbo *N'ibe l'agbe n sere* *wa* *Inu wa dun, ara* *wa ya* *L'abe igi oronbo* *Oronbo, oronbo* *Oronbo, oronbo.*	Under the orange tree Where we play our games We are happy, we are excited Under the orange tree... Orange, orange Orange, orange	*Lábé igi oronbo* *Níbè la gbé* *N şeré wa* *Inú wa dùn,* *Ara wá yá* *Lábé igi òrònbó*	Under the or- ange tree, There we always Have plenty of fun We are happy, We are healthy, Under the or- ange tree.

One yet to be mentioned linguistic aspect of game song translation with socio-cultural implications is observable in one of the examples. The TT of Example (I) removes the musical ideophonic sound effect of *Mo nínî, mo nìnî*; whereas, retaining it in the TT would have strongly enhanced its socio-cultural

and linguistic Africanness, and simultaneously laid a potential foundation for singability. Leaving onomatopoeic words untranslated in the TT is one of the ways of transferring the socio-cultural context of a song into the new language.

Conclusion

This study aimed to analyse existing English translations of Yoruba game songs for children as a means of appreciating the problem, to enable the proffering of solutions. Having identified and understood the problem as being both socio-cultural and linguistic, the study rounds off with the following solutions: Translators of Yoruba game songs for children should be more conscious of the different purposes of songs, which separates them from prose, drama, poetry, or any other written or oral creative work: songs meant for singing. Translators, therefore, ensure singability in their translated texts; if necessary, they should collaborate with a musicologist or ethnomusicologist before making their translation public. Secondly, translators should use the casual, everyday variety of English as spoken by the people, rather than formal textbook varieties, which have no place on the playground or in contexts of recreation. Also, the more culturally and metaphorically graphic the vocabulary of the TT, the better it is for conveying Africanness. Age-appropriate lexical items of the average Nigerian child should reflect in the translated texts. Since the songs are for children, the translations should convey the mood of cheerful gaiety, spontaneity, and fun as exemplified in Example (II): *Ori mi ejika.*

Concerning the singability of the TT in the original tune of the ST, the surest solution is to ensure an identical or near-identical number of syllable counts in both texts. Where this is not practicable, translators may consider settling for Franzon's song translation choice 4, that is, to translate the lyrics and adapt the music accordingly, even if it means composing an entirely new piece of music. Here again, the translators, would need the support of a musicologist or ethnomusicologist. The didactic function of Yoruba game songs may make it impractical for song translators to opt for choice 3 in Franzon's framework, because to "write new lyrics to the original music with no overt relation to the original lyrics," will mean losing the message entirely. Nonetheless, if a game song translator decides that choice 3 is the only solution, then he or she must be mindful and skilled enough to ensure that the essential teaching idea in the ST is not lost in the repackaged lyrics.

Finally, retaining original culture-bound onomatopoeic forms and ideophones nonsense ST expressions like *Mo nínĭ, mo nìnì* in the TT will successfully link the translation more closely to its African roots even in terms of the

prosody also. It is for that last reason that the bleating of goats or sheep in a Yoruba to English song translation must be *mẹ̀ẹ́ẹ̀* not *baa,* because using the latter will amount to socio-cultural and linguistic infidelity in the TT.

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