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THE ROLE OF LANGUAGE IN CATHOLIC LITURGY

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Abstract

Language is a quintessential element in human existence, without which life may lose its essence. It is at the forefront of every human activity - social, political, economic, spiritual, etc. Language is one of the main characteristic features that distinguish man from other lower animals. It takes on a transcendent dimension when interwoven with liturgy. Recently, the Catholic Church of the Igbo community has made a retranslation of the Igbo liturgy with modifications to some of its sections. This paper sets out to look at some of the areas and compare them with the Latin and French equivalents for proper justification or not of this linguistic modification. Liturgy refers to the prescribed forms of public worship, rituals, and ceremonies practiced by a religious group. This paper centres on the Catholic liturgy encompassing the order of Mass. Language serves as a conduit for theological expression, communal worship, and spiritual engagements. The aim of the present communication is to explore the role of language within the context of Catholic worship and to justify the retranslation of certain sections of the Igbo liturgy.

Introduction

The term, liturgy, is derived from the Greek word *leitourgia* which is composed of two parts *leitōs* meaning public and *ergon* meaning work or service. . In ancient Greece, *leitourgia* referred to a public duty or service performed by a citizen for the great good of the community. Liturgy means the work of man, it is an activity, action of Christ the high priest, His mystical body, and the Church, for the sanctification of man and His mystical body. The church renders praise and adoration to God the Father, and in turn, man receives sanctification. Liturgy has to do with God and man. When we talk about liturgy, we talk about the action of man towards God, that is, adoration and praise for God, and then the sanctification of man. The liturgy is the centre and the summit of Christian worship; the act of the liturgy is the power; therefore, it is very necessary for liturgy to be understood. Before the Vatican II, the liturgy was somehow *clericalised*, but with Vatican 2, there is this interest in the anthropological man who is rendering his praise to Christ, to God. The liturgy is the assembly of Christians. Vatican 2 was so much interested in the active participation of the assembly, the faithful, because, by the virtue of our baptism, we are priests, kings, and prophets and share in the common priesthood. After Vatican 2, the Church opened its doors to responses at Mass, through responses at readings, and prayers of the faithful, and this was with the introduction of the saying of Mass in vernacular. For active participation, each committee was allowed to use a language that the people would understand. From the layman's perspective, this communication, this paper seeks to present the role language plays in this communication between God and man. It analyses some of the linguistic changes made in recent times in the retranslation of the Igbo version of the Order of Mass and criticizes the translation, comparing it with the French and Latin equivalents.



Language in Human Existence

Language is at the centre of humanity's existence. It is a major part of communication that distinguishes man from other animals. It is a means by which human beings express their thoughts, emotions, and actions. Without language, life may not have essence. It permeates every part of human existence. It is a means of expression, understanding, and connection in the human mind through both verbal and non-verbal communication. Through language, individuals convey their thoughts, emotions, and intentions. It is a vehicle for transmitting and preserving the culture, values, and traditions of a people. Language is acquired in infancy, and according to Noam Chomsky, language is innate to humans.

The concept of Chomsky's **LAD (Language Acquisition Device) theory** falls into a linguistic theory known as nativism. In terms of language acquisition, nativists believe that children are born with an innate ability to organise and comprehend the fundamental laws and structures of a language. Nativists believe this is why children can learn a native language so quickly. Language serves as a marker of group membership, reflecting shared values, beliefs, and traditions within a community.

The Role of Language in Catholic Liturgy

Latin is known to be the language of the Catholic Church. Through the millennia, the Catholic Church has navigated a dynamic relationship with language in its worship practices. From its earliest period, it was the Latin language that was adopted as the universal language of prayer and worship. At the present time, vernacular language has been adopted. This calls for the active participation of the faithful.

Tracing the history of the Church, Cardinal Arinze, in his keynote address at the Gateway Liturgical Conference, in St. Louis, Missouri, on November 11, 2006, noted that the Church in Rome used Greek from the beginning. Only gradually was Latin introduced until the fourth century, when the Church in Rome was definitely *latinised* (cf. A.G. Martimort: *The Dialogue between God and His People*, in A.G. Martimort ed.: *The Church at Prayer*, Collegeville, 1992, I, p. 161–165).

Liturgy as an activity needs a human language for proper understanding and expression. Even the communicated realities - God's revelation - are done using human terms - the message of the prophets. Human language, signs, symbols, symbols and gestures have become very necessary for this communication. Cardinal Arinze remarked that language is not everything. But it is one of the most important elements that need attention for good and faith-filled liturgical celebrations. <https://adoremus.org/2007/12/language-in-the-roman-rite-liturgy/>

In the highlights of the liturgical renewal featured in 2003, Cardinal Arinze said liturgical translations into the mother tongue pose the demanding challenge of producing translations that are faithful to the Latin original, which are excellent literary productions, that can be set to music, which will stand the test of time, and which will nourish the piety and spiritual sensitivity of the people. Dangers and abuses arise from *ex-tempore* translations, hurried works, and illegitimate translations not approved by the Conference of Bishops and ratified by the Apostolic See (<https://adoremus.org/2003/11/highlights-of-the-liturgical-renewal/>).



The Historical Role of Language in Liturgy

The Second Vatican Council, also known as Vatican II, which took place from 1962 to 1965, was one of the most important councils in Church's history, and it profoundly changed the structures and practices of the Church (<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism/The-church-since-Vatican-II>). It is no longer news that the commencement of the use of the new translation of the Roman Missal in Igbo, which provides the New Order of Mass, effectively started on June 9, 2019, Pentecost Sunday (Emmanuel Chinedu Anagwo 40).

More importantly, this translation is on a restoration mission, to return more to the original Latin, using the principle of formal correspondence. The shortcoming of the previous translation was the levity of using a more dynamic equivalence principle of translation, one that was free with the structure and content of the Latin sentences. The result is that some texts in the original Latin were sacrificed in order to bring out the idiomatic expressions. The guiding principle of the new translation is a closer adherence to the words in the Latin. The new translation expresses more grandly what the Latin says in the texts of the Mass through a more direct, literal, and faithful translation of the original through an analysis of specific words and syntax.

Vatican II also made profound changes in the liturgical practices of the Roman rite. It approved the translation of the liturgy into vernacular languages to permit greater participation in the worship service and to make the sacraments more intelligible to the vast majority of the laity. The change, a sharp break with the older tradition of using Latin in worship, caused discomfort for some but allowed for adaptation of the liturgy according to the needs and desires of many throughout the world. [<https://www.britannica.com/topic/Roman-Catholicism/The-church-since-Vatican-II>] Deacon Frank Agnoli posits in the Catholic Messenger in his article, "A History of Liturgical Languages":

Of course, Latin remains the official language of the Roman Catholic Church. It gives us a common language that we can use across boundaries (important when we are celebrating the liturgy with representatives from a number of different language groups) and roots us in our tradition. Our liturgical books are first written in Latin, which means that they have to be translated.

Theological Significance of Language in Catholic Liturgy

Language is very significant in Catholic liturgy as it serves as a tool for expressing the core beliefs and mysteries of the Catholic faith. Language allows believers to communicate with God through prayer, hymns, and liturgical texts. The words spoken and sung during Mass and other liturgical celebrations express adoration, thanksgiving, supplication, and contribution, facilitating dialogue between the worshipper and the divine. It is through language that the faithful are in communion with God.

Language is integral to the celebration of the sacraments, which are central to Catholic liturgy. The words spoken by the priest during the Eucharistic prayer convey the transformative power of Christ's presence in the bread and wine, affecting the sacramental reality of transubstantiation. Spoken words (language) in other sacraments like baptism, confirmation, and others convey the grace offered by God.

Language is also at the forefront of the proclamation of the word of God. Language is used in reading the scriptures, which are God's words revealed and communicated to man. This nourishes the faith of the church. Language fosters unity among the people of God.

Latin remains the unifying language of the church in international gatherings of the faithful. Moreso, with the adoption of vernacular following the second Vatican Council, the in-depth meaning of the liturgy is established among believers with different cultures. Despite linguistic diversities, the liturgy unites Catholics around the world in common prayer and worship.

Having seen the theological significance of language in liturgy, let us critically look at some excerpts from the Igbo retranslated liturgy. We selected only five sections, as follows:

An analysis of some of the retranslated portions of the Igbo version was critically studied. The changes were equally compared with the French and Latin equivalents.

French	Latin
A1/Le seigneur soit avec vous -et avec votre esprit	B1/ <i>Dóminus vobíscum Et cum spíritu tuo.</i>
A2/La grâce de Jésus notre Seigneur, l'amour de Dieu le Père et la communion de l'Esprit-Saint soient toujours avec vous.	B2/ <i>Grátia Dómini nostri Iesu Christi, et cáritas Dei, et comunicátio Sancti Spíritus sit cum ómnibus vobis.</i>
A3/ Préparons-nous à la célébration de l'Eucharistie en reconnaissant que nous sommes pécheurs.	B3/ <i>Fratres, agnoscámus peccáta nostra, ut apti simus ad sacra mystéria celebrándá.</i>
A4/Nous proclamons ta mort, Seigneur Jésus, nous célébrons ta résurrection, nous attendons ta venue dans la gloire.	<i>Mortem tuam annuntiámus, Dómine, et tuam resurrectionem confitémur, donec vénias.</i>
Seigneur, je ne suis pas digne de te recevoir mais dis seulement une parole et je serai guéri.	B4/ <i>Domine non sum dignus ut intres sub tectum meum sed tantum dic verbo et sanabitur puer meus</i>

Igbo former translation	Igbo current translation
C1 / <i>Onyenweanyi nonyereunu – Nonyerekwa gi</i>	D1/ <i>Onyenweanyi nonyereunu – Nonyekwara mmuo gi</i>
C2/ <i>Ka Ngozi nke Onyenweanyi, Jesu Kristi, na ihunanya nke Chukwu Nna, na idikon'otu nke Muo Nso na-enye, diiri unu nile.</i>	D2/ <i>Ka amara nke Onyenweanyi, Jesu Kristi, na ihunanya nke Chukwu Nna, na mmekorita nke Mmuo Nso, diiri unu niile.</i>
C3/ <i>Umunna, ka anyi kwado onweanyi nke oma, maka nnukwu emume nke Eucharistia site n'ikwuputa njo anyi.</i>	D3/ <i>Umunne m, ijikwado onweanyi nkeoma, maka emume ihe omimi ndi a di nso, ka anyi kwetena anyi emehiela, site n' ikwuputa njo anyiga.</i>
C4/ <i>Anyi na-ekwuputa onwugi, na-egosikwa mbilite n'onwu gi O Christi, wee rue mgbe I ga-abia ozo.</i>	D4/ <i>Anyi na-ekwusa onwu gi na –ekwuputa mbilite n'onwu gi O Dinwenu, wee ruo mgbe I ga-abia.</i>
C5/ <i>Dinwenu, etosighi m ka ibata n'ime obim kwuraa so okwu na mkpulobi m ga adiri</i>	D5/ <i>we can say that D4 and D5 are not justified. Dinwenu, etosighi m ka I batan'ulo m, *ma kwuo so okwu, a ga-agwo mkpuruobi m</i>

The response to *Onyenweanyi nonyere unu* in the current Igbo retranslation gives a more semantic rendering that corresponds to the Latin and French version. Both have the term “spirit”:

A1/*Et avec votre esprit* (A1) FR/ *Et cum spíritu tuo*.(B1) LAT.

The benediction in A2/B2 French and Latin used the term *grace* while the former Igbo translation employed *Ngozi* (blessing). It is in the current version that this has been changed to *amara* (grace) in line with the French and Latin versions:

A2/La **grâce** de Jésus notre Seigneur, l'amour de Dieu le Père et la communion de l'Esprit-Saint soient toujours avec vous.

B2/**Grátia** Dómini nostri Iesu Christi, et caritas Dei, et comunicatio Sancti Spíritus sit cum omnibus vobis

D2/Ka **amara** nke Onyenweanyi, Jesu Kristi, na ihunanya nke Chukwu Nna, na mmekorita nke Mmuo Nso, diiri unu niile

The third extract is in the liturgy of the Eucharist. The main change in the Igbo translation is from *umunna* to *umunne*, and the move from injunctive to subjunctive mood.

The French version has no appellation, of either *Umunna* or *umunne*.. It is simply an imperative sentence that invites us (nouns) to acknowledge our sins in order to be worthy to celebrate the Eucharist.

The Latin version uses the term, *fratres* (brothers), and the imperative mood is also used:

Fratres, agnoscámus -Brothers, let us acknowledge...

The three languages render the invitation thus:

A3/*Préparons-nous à la célébration de l'Eucharistie en reconnaissant que nous sommes pécheurs.*

B3/ *Fratres, agnoscámus peccáta nostra, ut apti simus ad sacra mystéria celebránda.*

D3/*Umunne m, iji kwadoo onwe anyi nke oma, maka emume iheomimi ndi a di nso, ka anyi kwete na anyi emehiela, site n' ikwuputa njo anyi ga.*

Extract 4 proclamation of faith, the adverb “again” modifying the verb “come” is absent in the French and Latin versions:

A4/*Nous proclamons ta mort, Seigneur Jésus, nous célébrons ta résurrection, nous attendons ta venue dans la gloire.*

B4/*Mortem tuam annuntiámus, Dómine, et tuam resurrectionem confitémur, donec vénias.*

It is observed that the former Igbo translation incorporated the act of coming again, *ozo*, which is now expunged in the new version to align with the Latin and French translations.

The last is the response during the Eucharistic rite. The French and Latin responses contain the verb, *to heal*; *guérir* in French means to heal, and *sanabitur* which is a Latin word that translates to *it will be healed* or *it will be cured*. It is a future passive indicative form of the verb, *sanare* to heal or to cure. Semantically, in the former Igbo translation, the act of healing is implied. The verb, *gaadiri*, is to recover. There is a close relationship between *to heal* and *to recover*. The two have shared association with the improvement of one's health.

Conclusion

The paper explored the concept of liturgy in the Catholic Church and the significance of language within the liturgical context. The work delineated the diverse functions of language as a complex phenomenon. Above all, language cannot be detached from liturgy. The paper has also examined certain retranslated sections of the liturgy and juxtaposed them with the original Latin counterpart and the French version. This is an attempt to validate the re-translation. At the end of the analysis, it was concluded that the majority of the retranslated sections highlighted were adequately justified.

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