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THE IGBO TRANSLATOR AND THE TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE

Olivia Ezeafulukwe

Abstract

This paper explores the pivotal role of the Igbo translator in the translation of the Bible, shedding light on the challenges, strategies, and cultural implications involved in this complex endeavor. Drawing upon linguistic theory, translation studies, and cultural anthropology, this paper examines the linguistic and cultural considerations that shape the translation process. The paper highlights the multifaceted role of the Igbo translator as a linguistic expert, cultural mediator, and custodian of indigenous knowledge. It explores the translator's ethical responsibilities in navigating linguistic challenges, preserving cultural authenticity, and maintaining theological fidelity to the original biblical texts. Furthermore, it examines the collaborative nature of Bible translation projects, while underscoring the importance of cultural sensitivity, linguistic proficiency, and theological insight in producing accurate, accessible, and culturally relevant translations of the Bible for Igbo-speaking audiences. It advocates for continued revision of Bible translations for a better dissemination of the Christian message in diverse cultural contexts.

Introduction

A translator is a linguistic barrier breaker. He decodes information that has been blocked by linguistic variation. He is a translation practitioner. While translation has been described by Newmark (1998, p.5) as “the rendering of the meaning of a text into another language in a way that the author intended the text,” Schulte conceives it as “transplantation of a text from one language into another.” It can therefore be deduced that translation is the process of rendering a text (oral, written or signed) from one language into another. In translating, meaning is of paramount importance so as to elicit the desired effect which should be congruent with the intended effect of the text originator. Translation is not a simple word-for-word substitution; rather, it requires understanding the nuances, cultural references, and context of the original text in order to accurately convey its intended message in the target language.

A good translator is one who remains faithful to the message of the original text. It is the translator who successfully finds the equivalents of the texts in the target text he produces. Though the meaning of equivalence has experienced heated up arguments in the translation circles as the need to pinpoint whether it is formal equivalents or contextual equivalents that should be emphasised or whether equivalents to style and language of the originator of the message should take preponderance. From the heated-up reflections and arguments have emerged schools of thoughts and theories of translation: whereas the linguistic theories try to evaluate translation using linguistic parameters, the semioticians prioritise meaning as the major concern in every translation while the scopos theorists deem the purpose of the translation a major reflection for translators.

For Ajunwa (2014) “four categories of translators are identifiable. These are: quack translator, apprentice translator, academic translator and translation practitioner” (p.5). These four categories of translators all try their hands in translation at one time or the other hence resulting sometimes to the distortion or loss of the message. Shastri (2012) reiterates



that “Though Translation is in itself a linguistic activity; linguistic knowledge is never enough for a translator. Extra linguistic knowledge is essential for the translator.” (p. 6)

Therefore, a good translator requires not only linguistic proficiency in the source and target languages but also cultural sensitivity, subject matter expertise, and creative problem-solving skills which are grouped together under the extra linguistic knowledge. It is the lack of this extra linguistic knowledge that has been the bane of machine translation since its inception as the extra linguistic knowledge is only a human attribute, which though technology has tried to replicate, remains a preserve of humans. O’Grady et al informs us that

Rather than attempting to build fully fledged translation systems that automatically convert one language to another, some projects are aiming towards machine assisted translation. In these projects, the computer is viewed as a tool to aid the translator., the computer makes the suggestions but the human translator makes final decisions.(2011, p.611)

Forms and Roles of Translation

Translation can take various forms depending on the context and purpose of the communication.

The considerations made by a translator can lead the translator to adopt any of the following in the translation process: Literal Translation which is word for word translation, dynamic or functional equivalence, Interpretation (which is the translation of spoken or signed languages), localisation which involves adapting translated content to suit the cultural, linguistic, and regional preferences of the target audience. Transcreation, which goes beyond literal translation to creatively adapt content, especially in marketing, advertising, or creative writing contexts.

On the roles of Translation, Ajunwa (2014, p.5) lists out the following:

Language barrier breaker, instrument for political consciousness and national unity, instrument for cross fertilization of languages, instrument for transmitting great thinking, instrument for dissemination of scientific information, instrument for facilitating international trade/commerce, a method of language teaching, instrument for globalization.

The necessity to translate is, therefore, enormous hence it is important that the act of translating be taken very seriously to ensure the production of faithful texts that transmit the message of the original text.

The Igbo Translator and the Bible

The Igbo translator is a person who uses Igbo as one of the languages of operation in the exercise of his profession. The aim of every translator is to unblock information which a receiver could not access due to linguistic variance that exists between the message and the one who desires to receive it. An Igbo translator either translates from one language into Igbo or vice versa. The Igbo translator can translate a text written in another language into Igbo or from Igbo to other languages with the inherent problem of each. He is that bilingual or multilingual who either interprets or simply translates what is in the Bible.

The Bible, considered the sacred text in Christianity, holds profound significance for millions of believers worldwide. It is a collection of religious writings that include diverse literary genres such as history, poetry, prophecy, letters, and wisdom literature.

The original texts of the Bible were written in three primary languages: Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Each language corresponds to different sections of the Bible, reflecting the historical and cultural contexts in which these texts were formulated.

The translation of the Bible into Igbo has been a significant endeavor with profound implications for Igbo-speaking communities, both within Nigeria and around the world. The Igbo translation project aims to make the sacred text accessible to Igbo speakers, allowing them to engage with the Bible in their native language and cultural context.

The translation of the Bible into Igbo began in the 19th century with the arrival of Christian missionaries in Igbo-speaking regions of Nigeria. Early translations were primarily conducted by European missionaries who were proficient in Igbo and other local languages. These translations laid the foundation for subsequent efforts to produce more accurate and linguistically faithful versions of the Bible in Igbo.

Over time, Igbo translators and linguists have played a crucial role in Bible translation projects, contributing their expertise in the Igbo language, culture, and oral traditions. They collaborate with international translation organisations, academic institutions, and religious denominations to produce high-quality translations of the Bible that resonate with Igbo speakers.

House illustrates this further that "Translating is not just a linguistic act but a cultural one; an act of communication across cultures. Translating always involves language and culture because the two cannot really be separated ((2016, p.11)

The Igbo language translator transcends the underlying cultures and languages of the Bible to arrive at the message which he communicates to the Igbo audience; he likewise transcends the Igbo culture to arrive at the language of the non-speaking Igbo audience for whom he might be translating the Bible, the Igbo Bible or even some Bible extracts.

The Bible is a sacred book. Sacred books are written in various languages, each holding significance within its respective religious tradition. Some languages are commonly associated with sacred texts: The Hebrew language for example is the sacred language of Judaism. The first five books of the Bible were first written in Hebrew. The Hebrew Bible is also known as the Old Testament in Christianity.

Classical Arabic is the language of the Quran, the central religious text of Islam. Muslims believe that the Quran was revealed to the Prophet Muhammad in Arabic, and it serves as the ultimate source of guidance and authority for Muslims worldwide. Sanskrit is the sacred language of Hinduism. Classical Chinese is used in the sacred texts of Taoism etc.

These are just a few examples of the languages in which sacred texts are written. Each language carries cultural, historical, and religious significance within its respective tradition, and the study and preservation of these languages are important aspects of religious scholarship and practice. The Bible, just like other religious texts often undergo translation into different languages to make them accessible to wider audiences.

The Igbo Bible translator is a translator at crossroads, having an identity crisis emanating from the indigenous Igbo religion which the introduction of the Christian religion brought upon his ancestors, thus eroding the very foundation of his existence. Nwafor rightly noted that:

...the foundation on which the missionaries would have built the Gospel was destroyed by them in ignorance, prejudice and misapprehension. The corner stone of this foundation is the African "positive" cultural values ((2016, p.369).

This cultural crisis sometimes finds an upsurge when the translator seeks to adapt some biblical texts into the remnants of the Igbo culture where he finds himself thus leading to either misinterpretation or loss of information.

But the Igbo translator of the Bible is united with the biblical cultures in certain world views and beliefs such as immortality: a belief that affirms that the soul does not die but lives forever (Matt. 10:28, Luke 23:43) and the sacredness of life. Such convergent worldviews place the Igbo person at a privileged position in rendering the meaning of the Bible.

Problems Encountered by the Igbo Translators of the Bible

The problems encountered by the Igbo translator in the translation of the Bible can be grouped into two: linguistic and extra-linguistic problems.

The Bible, as earlier indicated, was first written in Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek. These are languages very distant from the Igbo language and share not much in common with the Igbo language. The word orders, sentence structures, figures of speech, idiomatic expressions of these languages differ very much from those of the Igbo language.

The Igbo language, spoken primarily in South-eastern Nigeria by the Igbo ethnic group, has a rich linguistic and cultural heritage. It belongs to the Niger-Congo language family and is classified as part of the Volta-Niger branch, specifically within the Kwa subgroup. Igbo is characterised by its complex tonal system, extensive verbal morphology, and extensive use of proverbs and idioms which are very much at variance with the languages of the Bible. Some of the words and terms in the Bible do not have direct equivalents in Igbo language. Metaphors, allegories, or idiomatic expressions in the Bible are informed by the cultures that use the languages and may pose challenges to the translator, who now translates them from his Igbo background.

Igbo belongs to the Niger-Congo language family, specifically the Volta-Niger branch, while Hebrew and Aramaic are Semitic languages, and Greek is an Indo-European language. This linguistic diversity reflects the different historical and cultural contexts in which these languages developed. Igbo is written using the Latin script, which was introduced by European missionaries in the 19th century. In contrast, Hebrew and Aramaic are written using the Hebrew script, which is a distinctively Semitic writing system. Greek, on the other hand, uses the Greek alphabet, which is derived from the Phoenician alphabet. Also, Igbo grammar and syntax differ significantly from Semitic and Indo-European languages. Igbo is an agglutinative language with complex verbal morphology and a strict word order. Semitic languages like Hebrew and Aramaic are characterised by their triconsonantal root system and non-linear word order.

Another linguistic challenge which the Igbo translator contends with is the fact that the Bible they are translating have been translated to many languages before getting to them. The Bible had first been translated into Hebrew, Greek and Latin before being translated into the European Languages from which the Igbo translator translates. Even in the same language, there exist many multiple versions of translation.

Bible translations vary in several ways, including their approach to translating, the source texts used, and the target audience. The translation philosophy determines whether the translator uses formal equivalence, also known as word-for-word translation, or dynamic equivalence, also known as thought-for-thought translation, or a paraphrase in the course of the translation. Some translations are associated with specific theological traditions or

denominations, leading to differences in theological terminology, interpretive choices, and emphasis on certain doctrinal positions. In Nigeria we have the Roman Catholic Bible, Jehovah Witness Bible. Some denominations prefer specific versions due to their denominational adherences.

Some Bible translation committees may have different goals, biases, or theological perspectives that influence their translation choices, resulting in variations in style, tone, and interpretation. Each Bible translation offers unique insights into the biblical text and serves the needs of different readers and contexts. Noteworthy, every translator leaves a little of himself in his work and no translated work is free from information gain or loss which depend largely on the disposition, health, experience and knowledge of the translator.

The Igbo translator, is often made to work with the Bible in the European language that he understands, a language he learnt as a second or even third language and consequently not having the assumed proficiency necessary to undertake the task of translating. He is made to work with a text that has gone through a lot of mutations in the course of earlier translations to which he will intentionally or unintentionally add. The Bible has multiple versions or interpretations due to historical transmission, textual variations, and theological differences but the translator may only have one of the versions to work with. But the Igbo translator needs to consult multiple translations to gain a fuller understanding of the nuances and complexities of the Bible.

Language and religion are interwoven. Many religions have sacred texts written in specific languages. Even the practices of these religions are facilitated by language. The earlier languages in which the Bible was written are languages of different family and very far apart from the family of languages to which the Igbo language belongs. This explains the difference in structure, vocabulary and expressions of the two languages. An Igbo Bible translator needs to be well-grounded, not just in the Igbo language and the language of the Bible version which are the tools for his translation, but also in the culture of the languages in which the Bible is written. This is necessary for the Bible translator as it is only through this that the nuances of meaning are noticed and translated.

Language and religion are identity markers. In the South-east of Nigeria now, Christianity is the dominant religion. Igbo language, the language of the South-easterners has played a role in the propagation of this religion. Hence, others from other parts of Nigeria would always mistake every Igbo speaker as a Christian, the same way the South-easterners think that every Northerner who speaks Hausa is a Muslim. So, language plays a significant role in shaping religious identity. An Igbo non-Christian, who is a translator, could be called upon to translate a Bible text, believing that he is a Christian. Such a translator would not do the work as well as an Igbo Christian, whose religious affiliation has equipped him with the doctrines and teachings of the Bible from which he draws references that enhance his prowess in the Bible translation.

Apart from the problems posed by languages used in translation which come in diverse forms such as managing the different structures of the two languages as well as the complexity of finding a dynamic and contextual equivalents to terms, vocabulary, expressions which are common problems in translation, translating religious texts, has the extra challenges related to cultural nuances, theological interpretations, and maintaining the sacredness of the original text which involves taking the philosophical dimensions into account.

Among the non-linguistic challenges, cultural competence, theological insight, and ethical discernment pose a great deal of problems. The Bible is deeply embedded within specific cultural contexts, and Igbo translators need to be sensitive to cultural nuances and references that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. This includes understanding historical events, social customs, and practices of the Jews which shape the meaning of the Bible. This may mean researching into the anthropology, history and axioms of the underlying cultures of the Bible, which is not an easy thing to do.

Translating the Bible requires theological understanding and interpretation. Igbo Bible translators must grapple with theological concepts, doctrinal differences, and interpretive traditions within the religious community which might differ from the ones they are used to. The choice of words and phrasing can have significant theological implications and may reflect particular theological perspectives.

According to Ezuoke (2021), "Theological translation requires from the translator a deep theological and biblical knowledge firstly, for the translation of the text of Christian theology." (p. 85)

The Igbo translators face the challenge of preserving the sacredness and authenticity of the Bible in the course of their translation even while trying to make it accessible to their audience. This involves striking a balance between fidelity to the original text and clarity of expression in the target language. Translators may employ various strategies, such as literal translation, dynamic equivalence, or paraphrasing, depending on the intended audience and purpose of the translation.

Nwadiolor & Umeanolue (2012) in their study of the making of the modern Igbo person described Christianity as having:

...effected serious changes on indigenous Igbo societies because it was the instrument through which a lot of the younger generation of Igbo men were indoctrinated against the obnoxious practices inherent in the traditional Igbo societies and tended to withdraw them physically from participating in those celebrations and social process by which the values of the group were transmitted from generation to generation. So while time and death thinned down the ranks of the defenders of the old order, the ranks of the Christians were progressively being augmented. Therefore, slowly but steadily the new trend became observable, and gained dominance over the old. (p.113)

More than half of the present-day Igbo translators are versatile in Christianity and as such does not even perceive the need to localise the Bible and adapt it to their own cultural area and, therefore, neglect subtle adaptations that would have made the Bible more practical and adaptable to the Igbo people.

Technological advancement is one area that the Igbo linguists have not fared very well. An attempt to translate into Igbo using any translation application would reveal an Igbo language bereft of technological advancement in font, lexicology, lexicography and morphology. These have made the application of translation tools to Igbo language very difficult as incorrect renditions of texts characterise such texts. Not much has been achieved at digitalising the Igbo language.

Igbo Bible Translation Updates

The Igbo Bible, like many translations of the Bible, undergoes periodic revisions to ensure accuracy, clarity, and relevance for Igbo-speaking communities. Revisions may be

prompted by advancements in linguistic scholarship, changes in language usage, feedback from readers, or evolving theological perspectives.

Languages evolve over time, and certain words, phrases, or expressions in older translations may become outdated or less commonly understood. Consequently, it becomes necessary Updating language to reflect contemporary usage while maintaining fidelity to the original biblical text then becomes necessary. This may include revising vocabulary, grammar, and syntax to ensure clarity and accessibility for modern readers. With the current works of the Igbo linguists towards the harmonisation, standardisation and the advancement in Igbo orthography, texts written in old Igbo surely need to be revised.

Revisions aim to enhance the accuracy and consistency of the Igbo Bible by addressing discrepancies, errors, or inconsistencies that may have arisen in previous editions. This may involve consulting multiple sources, comparing translations, and conducting thorough linguistic analysis to ensure faithful rendering of the original biblical manuscripts.

Revisions may clarify theological concepts, doctrines, or interpretations that may have been ambiguous or open to misinterpretation in earlier translations. This may involve consulting theological scholars, church leaders, and theologians to ensure that the translation accurately reflects doctrinal teachings and theological principles within the context of Igbo Christianity.

Revisions may involve adapting the Igbo Bible to the cultural context of Igbo-speaking communities, including incorporating indigenous cultural references, proverbs, idioms, and expressions that resonate with Igbo cultural heritage and oral traditions.

Bodies and Groups Responsible for the Translation of the Igbo Bible

The translation of Igbo bible started from the missionaries and transcended to the current phase where the translation is undertaken by Igbo indigenous translators. Bishop Ajayi Crowther was the first to translate the Bible into Igbo language in the 19th century with the help of Simon Jonas, a slave from Freetown.

Several organisations and groups are today involved in the revision and publication of the Igbo Bible, ensuring its accuracy, clarity, and relevance for Igbo-speaking Christians. These organisations often collaborate with linguistic experts, theologians, translators, and community members to undertake the revision process. Some of the organisations are:

The Bible Society of Nigeria: This society has undertaken the translation of the Bible into spoken languages and also into audio format. It is currently translating the Bible into Sign Language. It is an offshoot of Bible Societies which by the 1970s had issued 1,000,000 bibles annually, in over 1,000 languages. In general, these societies publish the biblical texts without commentaries, but they have also issued amended texts of existing translations and editions.

Wycliffe Bible Translators: This is a non-profit translation based in Orlando Florida. It aims at making sure all peoples of the world read the Bible in their native languages. (<https://www.wycliffe.net/organisation/nbtt-nigeria>)

Also many denominations and church bodies have their publishing houses or departments dedicated to producing and distributing religious literature, including Bible translations. These organisations may oversee the revision process of the Igbo Bible within

their respective denominational contexts. They often collaborate with translation teams, theological scholars, and church leaders to ensure theological fidelity and doctrinal consistency. Examples of denominational publishing houses involved in Bible translation include: the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria (such as the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria) who produce the Roman Catholic Bible and the various Protestant denominations with Igbo-speaking congregations (such as the Anglican Communion, the Assemblies of God, the Pentecostal Fellowship of Nigeria, etc.) who help in translating and revising the Bible translations are handled by this group.

Igbo professional translators, linguists and theologians all play their roles. These teams often work under the auspices of Bible translation organizations or denominational authorities and are responsible for conducting linguistic analysis, translating biblical texts, reviewing drafts, and incorporating feedback from community members. Local translation teams ensure that the revised Igbo Bible reflects the linguistic nuances, cultural sensitivities, and theological perspectives of Igbo-speaking communities. Feed backs from pastors, church leaders, educators, and community members point out areas of the Bible that need revision.

Academic and research institutions, particularly those with expertise in linguistics, biblical studies, and African languages, may contribute to the revision of the Igbo Bible through scholarly research, linguistic analysis, and consultation with translation teams. These institutions provide academic rigor and expertise in biblical languages and textual criticism, enhancing the accuracy and quality of the revised Igbo Bible. In 1962, the University of Nigeria signed a cooperative agreement with Wycliffe's partner, SIL International (formerly known as the Summer Institute of Linguistics), to carry out language development work.

Conclusion

Languages evolve over time, hence the need to review past translations to reflect contemporary usage and linguistic trends so as to remain relevant and accessible to modern Igbo speakers. The Igbo translator needs to brace up to this reality.

Igbo Bible translation evolved from the translations undertaken by the colonial masters, to those undertaken by Europeans, to the translations by Igbo translators to its present digital translation and machine aided translations.

Achieving a better Igbo translation of the Bible requires a concerted effort involving linguistic expertise, cultural sensitivity, theological insight, and community engagement.

Translators, apart from having a command of the language, should have a deep understanding of biblical Hebrew and Greek (for the Old and New Testaments, respectively) as well as proficiency in Igbo language and its dialects. Knowledge of the Igbo cultural context is a *sine qua non* towards translating biblical texts as they help for a good rendition of indigenous cultural practices, worldview, and idiomatic expressions that may not have direct equivalents in biblical languages. Cultural sensitivity ensures that the translation resonates with Igbo readers and reflects their lived experiences.

The need for Igbo translators to ensure theological accuracy and fidelity to the original biblical texts while translating theological concepts, doctrines, and teachings into Igbo cannot be overemphasized. Consequently, collaboration with theologians, pastors, and church leaders can help ensure that the translation aligns with doctrinal beliefs and theological principles within the Igbo Christian tradition.

Engaging with Igbo-speaking communities throughout the translation process is crucial for ensuring that the translation meets their needs and preferences. Community feedback can help identify linguistic nuances, cultural references, and theological concerns that may impact the translation. Community consultation also fosters ownership and acceptance of the translated Bible among Igbo readers.

Implementing rigorous quality assurance processes, including thorough proofreading, linguistic review, and field testing, helps identify and address errors, inconsistencies, and ambiguities in the translation. Quality assurance ensures that the final version of the Igbo Bible meets high standards of accuracy, clarity, and readability.

The Igbo Bible is now available in digital formats, including online platforms, mobile apps, and audio recordings, thus enhancing accessibility and reach among Igbo-speaking communities and beyond, especially younger generations who may prefer digital media.

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