

## A REVIEW OF EMEKA IFESIEH'S "UNTRANSLATIABILITY FALLACY IN URHOBOKOLANUT PRESENTATION SYMBOLS"

BY

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### Abstract

*Emeka Ifesieh in his paper entitled "untranslatability Fallacy in Urhobo Kolanut Presentation Ritual Symbols" presented at CLAN 2015, states that the notion of untranslatability of Urhobo kolanut presentation ritual symbol is fallacious. He observes that the statement instinctively emerged out of appeal to tradition and patriotism which link to the prejudice of the Urhobo public consensus. He avers that in line with the Urhobo consensus, heterogeneous socio-cultural gatherings within the Urhobo homeland which involves Kola nut presentation often depict disregard for the multi-lingual and ethnic nature of the gatherings. Again, a literal interpretation to the expression "kola nut does not understand English" used by the Urhobo nation, the author feels, is a disregard of non-speakers of Urhobo, which excludes them from contributing and benefiting from the discourse. He also opines that this situation can generate social disharmony. As a native speaker versed in the Urhobo language and culture coupled with the information got from the ceremonies attended by the researcher, the present author finds Ifesieh's claims spurious. It is discovered that the author merely observed the proceedings in the gatherings where kolanut presentation was made among the Urhobo without interviewing informants and custodians of Urhobo culture. Based on the Hallidayan systemic functional grammar where context of situation is relevant and the monadist approach, informants which include Urhobo chiefs, seers and orators were interviewed with regards to the data used by Ifesieh. The findings show that the author merely gave literal interpretations to the data he used for his study without a consideration of their cultural, spiritual, and religious undertones which should actually form the frame for their explications.*

### Introduction

The problems of translating the expressions in a source language (SL) into a target language (TL) are generally well known. Every language carries with it the cultures, beliefs, and traditions of its native speakers. Generally, translators are faced with various challenges as a result of differences between a source language (SL) and a target language (TL) and the variation in cultures. Darah (2015) notes that among the problematic factors involved in translation are form, meaning, style, allusions, proverbs, and idioms. Citing Catford (1965), Darah (2015) observes that for cultural untranslatability, what appears to be a difficult problem, arises when a situational feature, functionally relevant for the SL text, is completely absent in the culture of which the TL is part. Most expressions which are culturally based do not only convey meaning but also contain the beliefs of a people. This is why one would be bold to say that the effects of such expressions are expected to create in the SL may not be the same when translated into another language.

The paper under review adopts a technique of translation which fails to take cognizance of the cultural ingredients of the data, and this has adversely affected the results and findings of the study. The purpose of this paper therefore is to dig deep into the culture of the Urhobo to see why it is impossible to present kolanut in English and particularly use English in offering prayers to the ancestors with kolanuts.

### **Theoretical Framework and Literature Review**

Translating every aspect of a text from an SL to a TL will invariably deal a big blow on the culture of the SL. This is why in African literature, one finds indigenous words and names superimposed on English sentences. The superimpositions on the seemingly English background are the authors' deliberate use of native names of objects, places, and institutions which might lose their semantic identities and usefulness if transformed or translated into English. Commenting on Achebe's language in his novels, Orisawayi (1989:52) notes that "we have English sentences or utterances carrying Igbo lexical items such as Obi, Ilo, Ulu, Ogene, Uli, Uri, Ofo, Alusi, Eke, Oye, Chi" etc. Orisawayi further observes that these sentences and utterances merge with wholesale rendition of Igbo greetings, addresses and songs juxtaposed and untranslated, which synchronize with the setting of the contact between the English-speaking white man and the Igbo-speaking African.

This revelation from Orisawayi's analysis of the language of Achebe's novels, gives credence to the fact that there are expressions in African language that are intentionally left untranslated irrespective of the context. Darah (2005) cited in Darah (2015) states that no translation into English can successfully represent all the aesthetic features in the original language. Ajunwa (2014:157) identifies the cultural and linguistic problems in translating oral poetry from the SL into the TL. Ajunwa notes that the separation of linguistic problems from cultural problems of translation is rather an artificial venture because language and culture are like two sides of the same coin. Cultural problems relate to the translation of proper nouns, geographical names, names of food, costumes and institutions, kinship terms, proverbs, idioms, and riddles, while linguistic problems are local dialects, word order, collocation, ambiguity, homonyms, homographs, and homophones. Others include language interference, idiomatic expressions, and figures of speech (Darah, 2015).

This present review is in tandem with the monadist approach to translation which suggests that each speech community interprets reality in its own peculiar way, which jeopardizes translatability. The monadists are of the view that equivalence is not achievable interlinguistically. Nida (1959), Newmark (1984), Koller (1983), Toury (1995), House (1973), Boase-Beier and Michael (1999) cited in Ifesieh (2015) are some traditional exponents whose translation definitions show that interlingual transfer of texts involves skewing or loss of meanings in pursuit of natural equivalence. Steiner (1975) is of the opinion that not everything can be translated. Steiner (1975) dismisses perfection in translation since according to him, "nothing fully expressive, nothing which the muses have touched can be carried over into another tongue without losing its savour and harmony". What translators resort to is to solve the problem of incomprehensibility by looking for an image of peculiar finality. When this happens, we may still be confronted with the lost of meaning which can mislead the target audience.

As was earlier mentioned, this present researcher is of the view that the best way to understand why people speak and generate certain utterances which are peculiar, is to attempt to

understand their culture and the context in which such utterances are made. This finds expression in Malinowski's idea of "context of situation", as Ativie (2014:81) notes that:

The first use of the term 'context of situation' is attributed to Malinkowski, who in his study of language behaviour among some native Indians concluded that language is a mode of action and as a social behaviour is closely tied to the relevant social situation in which it is used.

Thus, the meaning of words was not to be restricted to sounds of utterances or their grammatical structure but must include the pragmatic context in which they are uttered. Firth worked on Malinowski study and stresses that context is the basis of any linguistic endeavour and that since every utterance occurs within a culturally determined context of situation, meaning is tied to such context. N.A.K Halliday adopts Malinowski's conception of 'context of situation' to examine the relations between language use and social interaction and agrees with Malinowski's opinion that a foreigner living outside a given society cannot fully understand texts written by members of that society even when translated into their own language. The reason is that the meaning of texts is much more than that expressed in the words they contain.

### **What is Fallacy?**

The term fallacy is used to mean an error in reasoning or in argument, because, when an argument fails to be conclusively deduced, it becomes invalid and hence fallacious (Ataman, 2010). There are different classification of the term fallacy, but we shall consider two of them in this essay:

#### **i. Irrelevant appeal to authority**

##### **(Argumentum ad Verecundiam)**

When handling matters that are complicated, one may seek the counsel of a knowledgeable person in the field, but when an expert is appealed to for advice in issues outside the domain of that authority's special field, the appeal commits the fallacy of argumentum ad verecundiam. For instance, that Mikel Obi says maltina makes him keep fit therefore maltina is good for you, is not enough proof for people to keep fit when they drink maltina. This is because Mikel Obi is a soccer specialists, not a nutritionist.

#### **ii. Hasty Generalization**

Ataman (2010) asserts that hasty generalization is the error of drawing conclusion from insufficient particulars or evidences. For instance that some men in a particular community smoke does not mean that everyman in such a community smokes. Logic therefore demands that we exhaust all available particulars and evidences before making conclusion.

### **Urhobo World View**

Urhobo is the major ethnic group in Delta State and it spans across nine Local Government Areas in the state. Urhobo is used for the language and the people. Urhobo belongs to the Edoid cluster of the Kwa group of the Niger-Congo family of African languages. Although Urhobo has

about fifteen dialects, the Agbarho dialect is used in official and written communication. Urhobo people are bounded to the South-East by the Isoko, to the West by the Itsekiri, to the North by the Bini, to the South by the Ijaw and to the North-East by the Ukwani.

Among the Urhobo, apart from the belief on the existence of Almighty God (Oghene), there is the belief in ancestral spirit and other deities. There is a strong belief till date that the dead are capable of protecting the living. As a result, sacrifices are often made to attract blessings and favour from dead forefathers and mothers. Before the spread of Christianity in Urhobo land, newly married couple was often taken to the shrine of the ancestors (Uhurhe) for blessings, and when a woman is looking for the fruit of the womb, she is advised to offer sacrifices to the ancestors. She is also allowed to make vows to them. The woman could also cook rice for children who will in turn hit her back several times asking the ancestors to bless her with children.

Before farming season and during harvest, the eldest man in any family would offer sacrifices to the ancestors, and if the family was rich, festivals were organized for this purpose. Among the Avwraka people in the Urhobo nation, there is the “festival of Obo” popularly known as ‘ede a go bo’ (the day of worshipping hand). This is done few weeks before the ‘Ovwuwe festival’ among the Avwraka people. These festivals are still being practiced till today in some families.

Except an altar is made to carry the items of worship which include a wood cut to size with cowries tied around it, a native chalk and kolanut kept on a plate, the seers or the eldest man in the family is required to sit on the floor during worship in which case the aforementioned items are kept on the floor. There are also skulls of goats earlier used for sacrifices placed on the altar. It should be mentioned too that while the ancestors bless good people in the family, they punish evil and wicked ones.

Two important items used during worship and prayers to the ancestors are the cowries and kolanuts. These items are used by the seers or the eldest man in the family to consult oracles (epha ogba). Olumakinde Oni cited in Awhefeada (2014) notes that there are two common types of kolanut in Nigeria: *cola nitida* (Gbanja ‘Goro’) and *cola acuminata* (Obi abata). The latter also called ‘evwe re Urhobo’ with three lobes (kolanut of Urhobo), is the one used for sacrifices and oracles. The prominence of kolanut over cowry as an object of worship of the ancestors (erivwi) is demonstrated when an Urhobo who must be a man, holds the kolanut to offer prayer outside his shrine within any place in the world.

It is commonly said that the Yoruba produce kolanut, the Hausa chew it and the Igbo reverence it. The extension of this statement is that the Urhobo both chew and reverence it. Thus, among the Urhobo kolanut is not only a fruit, but a symbol of the ancestral spirit (erivwi). It is a metonymy of ‘erivwi’. According to Ndimele (2007), metonymy is a figure of speech in which a speaker replaces a word designating an entity or a phenomenon with another word designating another entity or phenomenon that is closely associated with it. Example is: The *kettle* is boiling. In this example, *kettle* is used to replace *water*. It is water that actually boils and not the kettle. In the same vein, when an Urhobo says ‘evwe nye oyibo’ (kolanut does not understand English), he/she is actually saying ‘erivwi nye oyibo’ (the ancestor does not understand English) because kolanut is closely linked with the ancestors (erivwi).

The expression ‘evwe nye oyibo’ is actually made when prayers are offered to the ancestors with kolanut and not during the presentation of kolanut as captured by Ifesieh.

### **Ifesieh’s Assumptions**

Some of the assumptions made in the essay are that:

- In line with the Urhobo public consensus, heterogenous socio-cultural gatherings within the Urhobo homeland, which involve kolanut presentation often depict disregard for the multi-lingual and ethnic nature of the get-together.
- The problematic of the disregard, which is apparent at the inception stage, is the exclusion of participants who have neither competence nor performance in the language from contributing and benefiting from the discourse, because the presentation must happen in Urhobo and this engenders social disharmony.
- There is a strong untranslatability though fallacious claim by the Urhobo public consensus that English is incapable of recapturing and retransmitting the meanings conceptualized in the Urhobo kolanut ritual prayer symbols.
- The isolation often leads to apathy and frustration on the people at the receiving end in contributing to mutuality, compromise, and hybridized discourse.
- Saquel to that, the author feels, not only that inter-socio-cultural suspicion is engendered; cross-fertilization of ideas is thereby fettered.
- The claims of untranslatability and its accompanying arguments remain inadequate to nullify the exquisite functionality of any product of a translatorial action that adequately resembles the ideational, interpersonal, and textual meanings of the source text irrespective of superficial divergence of the source and target text forms.
- The untranslatability claim of the Urhobo in the kolanut presentation ritual symbols is an appeal to tradition.
- The major idea here is that the language has been in existence since time immemorial within the geographical setting and has therefore become a tradition, which must not be tempered with; otherwise the primitive purity of the normative usage will be lost.
- But such an argument is inadequate to sustain the claim of untranslatability of the Urhobo kolanut presentation ritual symbols noticed in the clichés.
- The claim of untranslatability vis-à-vis the Urhobo kolanut presentation ritual symbols is tantamount to false dilemma, because it reflects a simplification of a complex problem.

These are some of the conclusions made by Ifesieh who dismisses the assertion “evwe nye Oyibo” as a fallacy.

### **Method**

The concern in this paper is to ascertain if English is suitable as a medium of communication in offering prayers to the ancestors with kolanut. The question is, at what point do

the Urhobo people insist that English should not be used in occasions involving the use of kolanut? Is it during kolanut presentation or when offering prayers to the ancestors with kolanut?

The present author being a native speaker of Urhobo, has attended many occasions such as marriage ceremonies, burial rites, and other get-togethers where kolanut is used. In some of the occasions attended, the researcher served as spokesman (Otota). For a proper re-assessment of the data used and analysed by Ifesieh, the researcher interviewed informants such as seers, chiefs, elders, and orators all in Urhobo polity.

One orator who was very handy is Chief (Dr.) Power Onojete, a one time Deputy Provost at the Delta State College of Physical Education Mosogar where the researcher is a lecturer. In his essay titled 'The Urhobo Orator and an occasion's experience', Ojaide (2007) avers that the Agbarho group of orators in Urhobo was formed at the behest of Power Onojete. Ojaide further posits that later Power Onojete and Ofua formed an Agbon association of orators with Ofua as chairman, Agbuna as Vice Charman and Onojete as secretary. For more information about Urhobo Orators and how vast and knowledgeable they are in Urhobo culture particularly with the philosophy of kolanut presentation see Ojaide (2007:137-150).

As a chief, orator and an academic, the researcher found Chief (Dr.) Power Onojete a very useful source of information on Urhobo tradition and culture having functioned as orator and otota in many occasions in and outside Urhobo land. During the Annual General Meeting (AGM) held on 30th March, 2016 by the Delta State College of Physical Education Senior Staff Co-operative society, Dr. Power Onojete who is a member and the only chief present, was given the kolanut to offer prayers. This was after the MC had presented it in English. Chief (Dr.) Power Onojete, regardless of the setting as an academic one, said the prayer in Urhobo. He prayed for the Provost (a Delta Igbo), the executive of the co-operative and the college community. Everybody, Urhobo and non Urhobo, were excited as his title name 'Ogwa' rented the air at the end of the prayer.

The data presented and analyzed in the paper under review were re-assessed and examined to see if they synchronize with the cliché 'evwe nye oyibo' as used by the Urhobo people.

### **Examination of Data Presented and Analyzed**

The data presented and analyzed include:

1. Urhobo cliché: Evwe nye Oyibo

Gloss: Kolanut understand English not

Translation: Kolanut does not understand English

The author gives a literal interpretation to the expression and asserts that kolanut commonsensically connotes cordially, good wishes and acceptance among the givers and receivers. Again, the author observes that kolanut as a type of fruit does not qualify as a rational being capable of cognitive events, yet it is given that attribute 'understand'.

From the information got from informants, the connotation of cordiality, good wishes and acceptance as adduced by the author is a secondary significance of kolanut. Kolanut as a symbolic fruit among the Urhobo is merely used as a metonymy of 'erivwi' (ancestors). It is believed among

Africans that the dead are in constant communion with the living. This is seen in the writings of Africans. An example is found in a Senegalese, Leopold Senda Senghor's poem 'In memoriam'. In Avwraaka community in Urhobo land for instance, the seers or eldest man in the family often commune with the ancestors (uhurhe) while offering sacrifices and prayers to bless women, children, bless the soil for a bumper harvest and for protection. These are done with the use of kolanuts. When a family member is sick as this researcher has observed, the eldest man in the family is approached to consult the ancestors to ascertain the cause of the illness. In most cases if it is found out that the sick person committed adultery, incest, atrocity or have spent money meant for the family without permission, the kolanut '*Kola acuminata*' (Obi abata or evwe ru Urhobo), is mostly used for the purpose. In such moments, the seers could say 'the kolanuts is not sitting well'. This means all is not well. The oracle continues until the kolanut 'sits well', indicating that there is solution to the problem or sacrificial items have been accepted by the ancestors. This may be done with some forms of incantations by the seers.

Other data presented by Ifesieh and analysed are utterances or expressions used when presenting and accepting kolanut. These do not have bearing with the Urhobo concept of 'evwe nye Oyibo' i.e. 'erivwi nye oyibo'. They are merely used when presenting and accepting kolanuts. As such they can be rendered in English. The last two data 'Eje erhuvwu nenu we dia, eje ohwo o tare neo diotioyee, uyovwi keoyen o vwo ya' (may goodness be with you, may the person who says it should not be so walk with his head), and 'Eje emo ve igho nenu we dia, eje otovwe ve Ufuoma ke oyen wo vwo ria ayen (may children and money be with you; may you enjoy them in peace and with longevity, are prayers made by the 'Otota' (spokesman), a chief or the eldest man in the occasion.

Each of them is expected to offer these prayers with kolanut in Urhobo. But if English must be used, the eldest man in the gathering or a chief, must first offer the prayers in Urhobo after collecting a little token which is considered as his fee for the labour of praying over the kola and breaking it. See Awhefeada (2014:183). After praying in Urhobo, the eldest man or chief breaks the kolanuts and put the lobes back on the plate. It is at this moment that the otota can distribute them to the guests and the hosts. He is free then to use English. The important thing is that the eldest man or chief has earlier prayed to the ancestors in Urhobo.

It is believed among the Urhobo that everyman carries his personal god wherever he goes. This is why a man can still commune with his ancestors even when he is not at home where his shrine is.

## Discussion

From the analysis, we observe that the bone of contention revolves around the expression 'evwe nye Oyibo'. All other data used by Ifesieh do not constitute controversy as they are used during kolanut presentation. The cliché 'evwe nye Oyibo' (Kolanut does not understand English) is actually rendered as 'erivwi nye Oyibo' (the ancestors do not understand English) by Urhobo people. Kolanut is an English word but with African world view. This world view is linked with the ancestors.

Among Africans, it is a symbolic fruit used as a metonymy of the ancestors. The expression is only applicable to the moment of offering prayers and communing with the ancestors and not during the presentation and acceptance of kolanut in a gathering involving Urhobo and non

Urhobo. The findings show that there are different types of ceremonies where kolanut is used. They include religious/traditional occasions, naming ceremonies, funeral, marriages and birth day parties etc.

It is observed too that a man does not have to be close to his shrine to commune with the ancestors. He can do so even in a distance as it is believed that the ancestors are with him wherever he goes. If we accept the fact that kolanut is 'sacred' in African cosmology as in the case of Igbo and Urhobo, and has some spiritual powers which it get from the ancestral spirit it represents, then it can be given the attributes of the same 'erivwi' (ancestral spirit) it represents.

The insistence on the use of the local language when offering prayer with kolanut, is therefore not out of place.

### **Conclusion**

While the present researcher applauds Ifesieh for his work on Urhobo culture, it should be mentioned that his claims are rather spurious. In an attempt to waive off 'evwe nye Oyibo' as a fallacy, Ifesieh ended up committing fallacy of hasty generalization and irrelevant appeal to authority. He did not show in his work that the educated Urhobo he used in gathering data are versed in the language and culture. He also failed to show if he interviewed informants who are custodians of Urhobo culture.

This study has shown that using Urhobo to pray to the ancestors with kolanut does not in anyway exclude a non Urhobo in the communication in an occasion, rather such practice should be seen as cultural. There is now a clarion call on all Africans to direct researches towards the promotion of African culture. A writer like Chinua Achebe had a good mastery of English but uses local words like 'Udala', 'Ndichie', 'egwugwu' in his works meant for a global audience. These are part of the packages Achebe fabricated in his variety of English to bear the weight of Igbo experience. The continuous use of Urhobo to pray with kolanut among the Urhobo people irrespective of the tribes that make up the audience, is therefore the people's way of promoting their culture and bearing the weight of their sensibility.

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