

Semantic and Rhetorical Shift as Stylistic Devices in Soyinka's Dramatic Works

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Received 4 September 2012; accepted 18 November 2012

Abstract

One of the major attributes of language is its creativity. Every natural language is capable of expressing a vast range of experiences both real and imaginary. Alongside this non controversial claim is the uncertainty concerning the exact nature of the creative attribute of language within the scope of translation, especially of proverbs. Since creative writers, for instance, have at some point, used the creative opportunities available in language as tools for encoding an already tangible proverbial text, the assumption is that the translator of such proverbial texts need not seek creativity but act as a faithful duplicator of the Source Text (ST). This paper challenges this assumption based on the premise that literary translation, as an instance of language use, will no doubt demand the translator's creative input. In fact, translators often have to be highly innovative, stretching languages beyond their seemingly rigid borders to achieve their purposes.

K. B. C. Ashipu (2012). Semantic and Rhetorical Shift as Stylistic Devices in Soyinka's Dramatic Works. *Studies in Literature and Language*, 5(3), 55-61. Available from: <http://www.cscanada.net/index.php/sll/article/view/j.sll.1923156320120503.780>
DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.3968/j.sll.1923156320120503.780>

INTRODUCTION

The dominant authorial tendency in African use of English is to remain as close as possible to the structural, formal and denotative character of indigenous discourse devices that the writer transposes into his works. Such devices include proverbs, aphorisms and pithy sayings

Osundare (1980) has noted proverbs, for example, are essentially context-bound, communally conceived, ageless, economically structured, terse, epigrammatic and frozen. For Achebe (1965) they are, like riddles, cast in a rigid mould and cannot be altered at will. Sinclair as quoted by Ashipu (2005) notes that the structures and constituents of proverbs are rigid and cannot be varied the same way as ordinary utterances. In Africa in particular, traditional usages continue to exercise a fascination for the indigenous population. The structures and forms of proverbs are held more or less sacrosanct by members of the community who often resist even intra-lingual deviations. Usages that are wrong or inappropriate, or those that alter the rhetorical orientation of the original forms, are spontaneously corrected by listeners. Even when the semantic or pragmatic value of the original rendition is not altered, traditional aesthetes and purists would insist still on the original rhetorical rendition of the proverbs. Apart from this cultural attitude on the part of the receiving populace, African authors are themselves motivated by a desire to maintain or to closely approximate the local flavour, the aesthetic value and ultimate pragmatic significance of the indigenous proverbs that they translate. Their desire to maintain translational fidelity to the indigenous proverbs often in fact leads ironically to translation infelicities.

However, in the case of Wole Soyinka, a conscious stylistic tendency is to alter the semantic and rhetorical quality of "fixed" or "fossilized" indigenous expressions which he transposes into his works. The task of this paper is to show some examples of this stylistic tendency in Soyinka's dramatic works. It will be demonstrated in this paper that the semantic shifts in Soyinka's dramatic works are not constrained by translation difficulties. Rather, they are motivated sometimes by the author's desire to fit the proverbs with relevant aspects of the discourse, and sometimes by rhetorical and stylistic considerations. They become therefore another significant device in the

vast stylistic domain that is peculiar to only *Soyinka*, another feature of Soyinka's stylistic idiosyncrasy and genius, a further mark of singularity in Soyinka. Whatever the motivation, the shifts in Soyinka's translations have semantic, rhetorical and pragmatic implications that a casual appreciation might not readily reveal. It is the intention of this paper to look also into these implications.

SEMANTIC SHIFT AND TRANSLATION SHIFT

We must distinguish here between what we have called "semantic shift" and what is known in Translation Theory as "translation shift". According to Translation Theory, translation shifts are "departures from formal correspondences in the process of going from source language to target language" (Catford, 1965). Translation shift is therefore an inevitable consequence of interlingual translation occasioned by the difference between the forms and structures of source language and target language. Consider the following formal differences between the structures of Yoruba and English (1) & (2), and Gaelic and English (3):

- (1) (a) Yoruba: *llefufun* = H + M
(house white) (Head + Modifier)
(b) English: *White house* = M + H
(Modifier + Head)
- (2) (a) Yoruba: *Omo (O) kunrin* = two morphemes
(child male)
(b) English: *boy m* = One morpheme
- (3) (a) English: *John loves Mary* = SPC
(Subject-Predicator-Complement)
(b) Gaelic: *Tha gradth aig = PSCA*
lain air mair (Pred.-Subj.- Compl.- Adjunct)

In (1) above examples, the modification structure changes in translation; in (2), the morpheme structure changes, while in (3), provided by Catford (1965), the entire sentence structure changes. However, the meaning or denotation of the sequences does not change in any of the examples. A semantic shift, on the other hand, alters the situation features, the denotative meaning and perhaps the connotative meaning of the translated item. Both translation shift and semantic shift can combine in a single incidence of translation. Thus, in a pair like:

- (4) (a) Yoruba: *Aburo mi it de*
(brother mine has arrived)
(b) English: "My brother has arrived"

formal differences made obvious from the transliteration of (a) above combine with differences in the situation and semantic features of *aburo* and *brother* as shown in the componential analysis below:

- "brother": "Male son of one's parents"
+ gender specification (i.e. male)
+ actual familial relationship
- relative age

- "aburo" "younger sibling"
- gender specification
- actual familial relationship (i.e. not restricted to nuclear family)
+ relative age (i.e. younger)

In other words, both translation and semantic shifts occur in the pair of texts above. The question that must guide our analysis in this paper is: When can one say a change has occurred in the denotative character or semantic features of a translated items?

DENOTATIVE SIGNIFIED, DIFFERENCE IN MEANING AND CONNOTATIVE SIGNIFIED

In semiotic terms, denotation belongs to the "first-order" signification system, while connotation belongs to the second (Barthes, 1968; Silverman, 1983). By denotation is meant the primary referent or literal meaning or general sense of a word or sentence. For instance, in English, the term "woman" has the distinctive features + human + adult + female at the level of denotation (Kempson, 1977; Leech, 1981). At the sentence level, denotation in our context is best explained through the truth-conditional theory of semantics according to which the meaning of a sentence corresponds to the truth of the sentence in terms of its structural and semantic components. A sentence like "The woman walked to the market" is true, if and only if a certain female human adult known to both speaker and listener made a journey on foot (some time in the past) to a certain place where buying and selling takes place.

It will be noticed that even minor denotative alterations will alter the truth of the statement above. For instance, to change the items "the woman" to "a woman" or "the market" to "a market" would mean something totally different. Also, to say "The woman went to the market" would not convey the same meaning as "walked (made a journey on foot) to the market". By the same token, to say "The woman walked to the market to buy some things" would not represent the truth of the original sentence. Even if it may be assumed that the woman's purpose for going to the market would be to make a purchase, the original sentence does not say so. Accordingly, translations that do not adhere strictly to the literal or denotative "truth" of their originals cannot be said to be the same as those originals. In strict denotative terms, such alternative sentences have meanings that are different from the original sentences.

The issue here is encapsulated in Semantics within the "synonymy debate". The question is whether sameness of meaning or true synonymy does exist. Dr. Johnson's remark (Ullmann, 1972) has been axiomatic in this regard: Change the structure of the sentence, substitute one synonym for another, and the whole effect is changed. For Bloomfield (1933):

If the words are phonemically different, we suppose that their

meanings are also different We suppose in short that there are no actual synonyms (p. 53).

When strict parameters are applied, many so called "translation equivalents" are absolutely different in meaning from the source texts. James (1981) in fact avers that to regard equivalence as sameness of meaning is to adopt a layman's view of synonymy. One parameter is that there must be deep structure identity between "equivalent" units. Using the deep-structure construct, Krzeszowski (1971), cited in James (1981) draws the conclusion that "equivalent constructions have identical deep structures, even if on the surface they are markedly different". However, contrary contentions have been generated by this interpretation of equivalence. According to James (1981), deep structure is concerned with only "ideational" meaning, whereas utterances do also have "interpersonal" and "textual" meanings. Ideational meaning is one conveyed by isolated sentences; interpersonal meaning determines the speech act performed, while textual meaning indicates the contribution of this act to the message (Halliday, 1970). Since deep structure concerns only ideational meaning, it can hardly represent a true equivalent. James (1981) concludes therefore that for effective contrastive analysis, sameness of meaning must be interpreted as semantic as well as pragmatic equivalence.

Although the above argument is not to dismiss the possibility of similarity in meaning between texts, it is useful to reiterate the fact that denotative alterations in discourse elements do amount to meaning change or semantic shift. Lyons (1968) has pointed out that even slight changes in lexical items are to be regarded as suspect in this regard.

At the level of connotation, the term "woman" whose denotation or primary reference is described above could, through a system of meaning transfer, refer to a man, as in a sentence like: "He is a woman pure and simple". What "woman" means or connotes at this "second-order" level of appreciation is "weakling", etc.. The distinction between denotation and connotation is important for our purpose here because the ultimate meaning of fossilised forms such as proverbs is usually accounted for within second-order signification, that is, at the level of connotation. The question is whether an alteration in the denotative features of a proverb during translation would significantly affect the connotation of the proverb, which is often the important element of the proverb.

A tentative answer here is that an alteration in denotative substance might not alter the implication of a proverb or idiom. For instance, the idiom: "It rained cats and dogs" ultimately means "It rained heavily". If a translator should rephrase the idiom as: "It rained elephants and gorillas" or even "It rained white cat and black dogs" the ultimate meaning may still be "It rained heavily". However, this ultimate meaning can no longer be guaranteed with the latter expressions. Even if the

encoder of the translation means to achieve the original implication, the decoder may read new meanings or new implications into the utterance. A pragmatic change may therefore occur.

If the issue above is sometimes speculative, that is, if it is not always clear whether a translation involving the alteration of situation features of a source text would lead to a connotative or pragmatic shift, the situation is not the same with the issue of the rhetorical and stylistic outlook of the source text. First of all, alteration in the denotative character of a proverb or idiom (particularly in Soyinka) is not induced by incompetence or by translation constraints, but by a willful inclination of the translator's. One of the objectives of such translation is to achieve an altered or enhanced rhetorical effect. It is to be considered axiomatic therefore that any such alteration would lead automatically to a different rhetorical and stylistic outlook. Where such alteration recurs in the works of a writer, it becomes a stylistically distinctive element, even if no semantic or pragmatic significance is imputed.

SOYINKA'S TRANSLATIONS

In the following section we compare eight translations in Soyinka's dramatic works with original renditions in the indigenous (Yoruba) language. The eight are drawn from a much longer list deriving from a survey of his dramatic works. The comparison shows a constant alteration of situation features of the original proverb and, ultimately, an alteration at the pragmatic, rhetorical and stylistic level of appreciation.

(1) **Target Text:** "Dada may be weak, but he has a younger sibling who is truly fearless" (*Death and the King's Horseman*, p. 40).

Source Text: *Dada o. le ja, sugbon o ni aburo to gboju.*

Unmarked Translation: "Dada cannot fight, but he has a younger sibling who is fearless".

Comment on shift: Soyinka's translation here expresses an avoidable shift in *modality* and *intensity*. The original proverb states categorically that Dada *cannot fight* and that his younger sibling is *fearless*, but it is silent as to the degree of fearlessness. Neither the shift in modality ("May be weak" in place of "cannot fight") nor the intensification of degree ("truly fearless" in place of "fearless") is necessary to convey the sense meant by the original. They therefore amount to willful semantic alterations on the part of the playwright.

(2) **Target Text:** "The Monkey sweats, it is only the hair on its back that still deceives the world" (*The Lion and the Jewel*, p. 54).

Source Text: *Adiye n laagun, sugbon iye re ni ko jeki a mo.*

Unmarked Translation: "The fowl sweats, but it is its feathers that prevents people from knowing this".

Comment on shift: First, we have lexical changes from "fowl" to "monkey" and from "feather" to "hair" (the

latter change being conditioned by the former). We also have a change in situation substance. Soyinka's translation specifies the actual location of the concealing item (i.e. the monkey's back), while the original proverb is silent about this. Finally, there is a pragmatic shift. The interpretation of the covering as a deception or a smoke-screen belongs to Soyinka; the proverb merely states the natural reason for the people's ignorance, without insinuating deception. Once again, the shifts here are not necessitated by translation constraints.

(3) **Target Text:** "Do not pound the king's yam in a small mortar" (*Kongi's Harvest*, p. 62).

Source Text: *A kii ko 'yan Oba kere.*

Unmarked Translation: "We do not serve the King's pounded yam in small measure".

Comment on shift: Here, the source text pontificates the quantity of the food rather than the size of the instrument used to prepare it. As in (2) above where the playwright's choice of "monkey" constrains the choice of "hair", the choice of the culinary instrument here has also forced the playwright to choose the meal's main ingredient ("yam") rather than the finished product ("pounded yam") indicated in the original saying. This constraint is of course self-imposed.

(4) **Target Text:** "May we not walk when the road waits, famished" (*The Road*, p. 69).

Source Text: *Olorun ko ni jeki a rin jo n'ijo t'ebi np'ona.*

Unmarked Translation: "May God not let us walk when the road is hungry".

Comment on Shift: The source text here is also a prayer. It will be noticed however that in Soyinka's translation, the invoked entity ("God") is not specified. Also, the item "wait" in the translation conveys a greater imputation of malevolence, of a sinister ambush, that does the original. Similarly, the item "famished" (in place of "hungry") expresses a greater intensity of motivation than the original.

(5) **Target Text:** "Oro cried last night and Bashiru vanished from his bed. Do you still wonder what became of your friend"? (*A Dance of the Forest*, p. 35).

Source Text: *Aje ke lana, omo ku loni, tani ko sai mo pea je ana lo p'omo je?*

Unmarked Translation: "A witch cried yesterday; a child dies today; who does not know it is the witch of the day before that killed (and feasted on) the child"?

Comment on shift: Here we have changes in lexical items and situation features. The item *Oro* (a certain fetish) differs remarkably from the translation, *witch*, even in Yoruba cosmological consciousness. Again, the dead child is not named in the original. While a shift such as this may sometimes derive from a need for contextualization, it will be noticed that the name Bashiru has nothing to do with the discourse situation, as no character in the play, including the missing person, bears that name. Soyinka is here "playing" with the saying under reference, as the item "vanished from his bed" especially suggests.

(6) **Target Text:** "When the wind blows cold from outside, that is when the fowl knows his true friend" (*Horseman*, p. 9).

Source Text: *Afe fe ti fe, ati ridi adiye.*

Unmarked Translation: "The wind has blown; we have seen the rump of the fowl".

Comment on shift: There are denotative changes such as "blow cold" and "blow cold from outside", where the original statement is silent about the climatic nature of the wind and the direction of its onrush. The fowl's "realization" of who its "true friends are" is another alteration of the situation features of the original proverb. Most important here are the conceptual and pragmatic shifts occurring in the translation. The original proverb mocks the discomfiture of the "fowl", as the exposed villain, but in the translation, the "fowl" is the protagonist attracting sympathy.

(7) **Target Text:** "The boldest hunter knows when the gun must be unspiked. When a squirrel seeks sanctuary up the Iroko tree, the hunter's chase is ended" (*Harvest*, p. 109).

Source Text: *Okere gori iroko, oju ode da.*

Unmarked Translation: "The squirrel climbs the iroko; the hunter is nonplussed".

Comment on shift: Indication of the degree of the hunter's courage, explicit mention of the motivation for the squirrel's trip up the huge iroko (tree), indication of the weapon in use, etc. are Soyinkan additions that alter the situation features of the source text. There is also an obvious rhetorical expansion of the source text which will be commented on in the next section.

(8) **Target Text:** "The river that fills up before our eyes does not sweep us away in its flood".

Source Text: *Odo to ba toju emi kun ko le gbe ni lo.*

Unmarked Translation: "The river that fills up before one's eyes cannot sweep one away".

Comment on shift: This is one translation in which Soyinka stays fairly close to the situation substance and rhetorical structure of the original text. Even here, however, there is a participant or number shift (from "one's eyes"/"sweep one" to "our eyes"/"sweep us") as well as a shift in situation substance where Soyinka adds an explicit (perhaps appropriate) detail regarding "flooding". There is also a slight shift in modality, from "cannot sweep one away" to "does not". This leads to a shift in pragmatic import. Soyinka's translation seems to index a parasymphathetic identification between the river element and the potential victim, while the original lays emphasis on the ability of the persona to navigate (or avoid) the river, based on his knowledge of its depths.

STYLISTIC SIGNIFICANCE

What the data above makes immediately clear is the constant alteration of the situation features or the denotative character of indigenous proverbs in Soyinka's

translations. As noted above, several more examples of denotatively “deviant” translations could be elicited from his works, but the above would serve to illustrate the tendency. That the deviation is a stylistic tendency in Soyinka is further confirmed by the fact that of all the translations examined in this research, only one does not deviate in any way from the denotative quality of the original. All other translations we came across express one denotative change or another. In his “Translator’s Note” to his translation of Fagunwa’s *Ogboju Ode Ninu Igbo Irunmale*, a title he realizes as *The Forest of a Thousand Daemons*, Soyinka himself acknowledges this bent of his towards a re-analysis of source texts in his translations.

Two further types of shift, pragmatic and rhetorical, have been noted above as occurring in the translations. These shifts can be examined more closely within the overall context of the drama in which they occur. The examination lays bare Soyinka’s possible motivation in altering the situation features of some of the source texts and, correspondingly, the functions that the alterations tend to perform. Two functions appear conspicuous in this regard, a discourse function and a rhetorical function. The rest of the paper is devoted to a brief examination of these functions and of the pragmatic import of the style of Soyinka’s translations.

DISCOURSE FUNCTION

The demand of contextualization appears apposite in a number of Soyinka’s translation. Two examples will be cited here to illustrate this contextualization function. For instance, the overall context of discourse of the first proverb (“Dada may be weak, but he has a younger sibling who is truly fearless”) shows that the intensity provided by the item “truly” is matched by Iyaloja’s feeling of wonderment at her girls’ performance as they mock the colonial official at the market. Coupled with this idea of mere girls confronting the representative of colonial authority is the fact that they are doing it using the English language, which the older women cannot. The shift in modality (“Dada *may be weak*” instead of “Dada cannot fight”) may be a pragmatic avoidance of the derogatoriness implicit in “cannot fight”. In short, the fact that the older women cannot speak English like their siblings does not mean that they are really like the “Dada” in the proverb.

Another example of the discourse (contextualization) function performed by Soyinka’s alteration of the source texts is seen in the fourth translation above: “May we not walk when the road waits, famished”. As noted earlier, the item, “famished” may be seen as underscoring the intensity of the road’s motivation. This aligns thematically with the situation in the play where accidents and deaths occur all the time and the community lives under constant dread of the road’s mythical malevolence. The item “wait” in Soyinka’s translation accentuates this idea

of malevolence. It gives the impression of a predator squatting in ambush, waiting for its prey to chance along. The metaphysical significance which is a major sub-text in the play is enhanced by such manipulation of source texts in Soyinka’s translations. What these examples show is that denotative shifts in Soyinka’s translations may sometimes be motivated by the playwright’s desire to “bend” the proverbs to suit relevant aspects of the discourse situation.

RHETORICAL FUNCTION

Attractive as the contextualization “reading” above may be, it can only at best be a matter of speculation whether it represents the conscious intention of the playwright or not. However, what can confidently be asserted is that the texts do manifest a rhetorical intention on the part of the playwright. It is not an accident but a deliberate scheme that every translation in the data (or virtually all) should express a rhetorical difference when compared with translations that are faithful to the denotative reference of the source texts. A rhetorical shift is fairly easy to index. The “rhetorical” is seen here in its simplest sense as the linguistic and aesthetic properties of a text, all the features of the text that give it a sense of art and elegance. As proverbs and sayings, the source texts examined here are primarily rhetorical and aesthetic forms, with the rhetorical form determining the aesthetic appreciation of particular texts.

Within the context of the data, a denotative shift involving lexical and structural changes is *ipso facto* a rhetorical shift. Since denotative changes occur almost always in Soyinka’s translations, the logical conclusion is that rhetorical shift is a constant element in the translations. However, rhetorical function in Soyinka’s translations is particularly foregrounded in those occurrences in which the contextualization function described above is either not indicated or is not conspicuous. Examples include the third, fifth, seventh and eighth translations in the data presented above.

The shift in rhetorical perspective in (3) has been noted. The literal ground of the metaphor changes from the quantity of the food item to the instrument used in preparing it. This change has no effect on the discourse situation; it is only effects are rhetorical and stylistic. In (v), the translation invests the proverb with a flippant, comic quality. This is precipitated by the substitution of the particular name, “Bashiru”, for the general term, “a child”. This change from the solemn to the comic constitutes a long slant in rhetorical perspective. Here again, the shift has no apparent discourse or contextualization function.

The shift in (vii) has already been described as an obvious rhetorical expansion – an increase in rhetorical volume, flow and rhythm. An original compound sentence expressing a simple statement expands into a

mellifluous verse with a poetic rhythm. If there is any discourse function or any slant in logical perspective in the translation, this is not apparent; what is foregrounded is the added rhetorical quality. The translation in (8): "The river that fills up..." adds a situationally congruent and pragmatically appropriate semantic detail. It is however the structure in which this detail is couched that is more important from a rhetorical point of view. The structure of the sentence changes with the inclusion of the adjunct, "in its flood". This structural shift, as well as the noted shift in modality, constitute a rhetorical shift and alters the aesthetic outlook of the source text.

PRAGMATIC IMPLICATION

Proverbs are not only semantic packages, they are also condensed aesthetic packages. Their aesthetic value, which is inevitably tied to their semantic and rhetorical value, is usually entrenched in communal sensibility. Thus, the slightest alteration in their semantic and rhetorical constitution results in a marked difference in aesthetic value. It is unlikely that an alternation in the semantic, rhetorical (and therefore aesthetic) value of the source texts would leave the ultimate pragmatic import of the texts unchanged (Ashipu, 2005). The idea that a change in the denotative quality of a proverb may not affect the ultimate meaning or significance of the proverb must therefore be reassessed against this logic.

A semiotic perspective enables us to view the changes more closely. Viewed from this perspective, any alteration at the level of signification would affect the decoding process and perhaps affect ultimate perception of the signified. Thus, although the connotations of proverbs are "fixed", a manner of encoding them different from the original denotations may alter their importance or significance somewhat – either by increasing it or by detracting from it. Silverman (1985) puts this semiotic point of view succinctly when he says: "A complex network of signification underlies even the smallest and least ostentatious of textual units". By this token, no alteration in signification units such as proverbs can be considered "slight" or insignificant.

A related and equally useful concept is the speech acts concept of illocutionary acts as well as perlocutionary effects (Austin, 1962). The illocutionary status of proverbs is usually that of a solemn declaration meant to be weighted, analyzed and related to a particular context. However, if a manner of encoding a particular proverb renders it flippant or comic (as in example (v) in our data), then the proverb acquires the illocutionary force of amusement and the perlocutionary effect of laughter or disregard. If also a rhetorical expansion in example (vii) defocuses the original content of the proverb, of a rhetorical shift slants its perspectives. Then the ultimate significance cannot remain the same. It can be concluded therefore that the alteration of the situation features

or denotative character of source texts in Soyinka's translations affects not only the semantic and rhetorical nature of the source texts, but also their pragmatic import.

CONCLUSION

The possible pragmatic implications of Soyinka's translations are secondary to the aim of this paper. Unlike the rhetorical and stylistic facts of a text, the pragmatic import of the text, and the pragmatic difference in alternative phrasings, can only be speculative. Further research may "validate" or invalidate such speculation, but it is the stylistic *facts* of the text that endure. The primary aim of this paper has been to identify those stylistic facts that emerge from Soyinka's translation of indigenous proverbs and related discourse types such as aphorisms and other pithy sayings. The constant stylistic fact elicited from the data is the alteration of situation features and therefore the semantic and rhetorical quality of the source texts. While some of these alterations may serve a discourse (contextualization) function, Soyinka's most important concern is apparently not contextual verisimilitude but enhancement of aesthetic quality. The pragmatic import of source texts is sometimes sacrificed in the translations for reasons apparently of artistic fulfillment, but the resultant texts do give a worthwhile aesthetic experience.

The stylistic tendency identified with Soyinka's translations in the foregoing begs comparison. It is interesting to validate or invalidate the assertion that, unlike Soyinka, most other African writers, and playwrights in particular, stay close to the semantic and rhetorical structure of indigenous discourse forms transposed into their works. The extent to which these other writers alter the structure of such discourses is also an interesting question that other researchers may wish to investigate.

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