International Journal of Advanced Multidisciplinary Research and Studies

The Challenges Inherent in the Translation of Proverbs, Semantic, Semiotic, and Sociocultural Challenges

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Abstract
The word "proverb" is made up of the Greek prefix "pro" that means "forth", "forward", "before", or "ahead" and the Latin nominal stem **"verbum"** referring to "speech'', "spoken word'', **''word of mouth''**, and is conceived to suggest its semantic affiliation or close kinship with "oral" in "oral literature". "Oral" itself derives from the Latin "os", "oris" and means "mouth". In the light of this cursory etymological breakdown, it can be inferred that the lexeme "proverb" designates "a word that is going forth, forward", or just "running away" because its meaning is highly sophisticated and, accordingly, it exponentially and surreptitiously escapes. It follows that the proverb is a prestigious genre inherent in oral literature whose meaning is eminently complex because it can structurally subsume several other layers of meanings. It can thus be inferred that to successfully translate a proverb is equated with decrypting this escaping meaning. To reach such a goal, the translator or paremiologist must solve two major problems: the semantic indirection and the cultural code because each proverb usually abides by these two principles. The goal of our study is to analyze these principles to figure out how the translator or paremiologist can use them to decrypt the meaning of proverbs and translate them successfully.

Introduction

The word "proverb" is composed of the Greek prefix "pro" that means "forth", "forward", "before", or "ahead" and the Latin stem **"verbum"** referring to "speech'', "spoken word'', **''word of mouth''**, and is conceived to suggest its semantic affiliation or close kinship with "oral" in "oral literature". "Oral" itself derives from the Latin "os", "oris" and means "mouth". In the light of this cursory etymological breakdown, it turns out that the lexeme "proverb" designates "a word that is going forth, forward", or just "running away" because its meaning is highly sophisticated and, accordingly, exponentially, and surreptitiously escapes as if it were constantly generated-motu proprio - through an ontogenetic process. It follows that the proverb is a prestigious genre inherent in oral literature whose meaning is eminently complex because it can structurally subsume several other layers or sub-layers of meanings. In the book *Le Proverbe en Afrique, Forme, Fonction et Sens*, Ursula Baumgardt and Abdellah Bounfour elaborate on this prestige and sophistication. They state: ''In many respects, the proverb enables to avoid a direct and verbal face to face confrontation through the use of metaphors, euphemisms, allegories, tropes in general, and numerous stylistic subtleties. Their codification is conceived by the idea that words have a hidden, non explicit meaning. The meaning of a proverb is always factually differed.''In the same vein, another author, Amadou Kourouma, stresses the complexity and sharpness of proverbs as follows: ''the proverb is the horse of speech; when speech is lost, one can find it again through the proverb.'' (En attendant le vote des bêtes sauvages, 18). Therefore, to successfully translate a proverb the expert must track down and decrypt this escaping meaning. To reach such a goal, the translator or the paremiologist (i.e., the scholar studying proverbs) has to solve two major problems/take up two challenges: the semantic indirection and the cultural code because each proverb usually abides by these two principles. The goal of this study is to examine these principles to figure out how the translator can use them to decrypt the meaning of proverbs and translate them successfully. Our approach will predominantly use concepts and notions pertaining to semiotics and semantics to substantiate our arguments with a limited corpus of proverbs.

Materials and methods

The notion of "semantic indirection" is a semiotic concept used by Michael Riffaterre in *Semiotics of Poetry* to designate the semantic shift from the literal to figurative meaning. In semiotics and stylistics, the semantic indirection characterizes a technique that underscores the extent of meaning distortion occurring within an image (metaphor, simile, metonymy, synecdoche, understatements, and tropes in general). In brief, the semantic indirection undergirds the deceptive aspect of language by virtue of which a narrator or somebody can say something to mean something else. For instance, in this sentence: "Belinda is a flower", there is a semantic indirection in the sense that Belinda is not factually a flower, a plant, but a human being. However, since she is truly gorgeous, her beauty suggests that of a flower. Therefore, we use a metaphor in absentia to say something (a flower) to mean something else (a beautiful/gorgeous lady) by means of an underlying/implicit comparison (gorgeous like a flower). The semantic margin between what we say and what we mean creates the semantic indirection. Regarding the cultural code, it is a set of encrypted cultural elements and values nurtured from a specific society and that need to be known and decrypted by the translator. Since the cultural code can change over time and vary according to the society from which proverbs are generated, it must be historicized, or at least recontextualized whenever necessary. The cultural code enables us to be cognizant that most proverbs are endowed with two major functions: aphoristic and didactic. The former illustrates general truths, the latter is conceived to teach lessons or provide a specific form of instruction. In this case, such a function becomes precisely known as "mathesic", which means "relating to a new form of knowledge".

Let us take a Beti proverb from Cameroon (Central Africa) to illustrate the translation of a proverb through the analysis of the semantic indirection:

Example 1 "N'nom mot obege n'tom olugu" ->
French Translation: "Le vieillard porte son chapeau de gloire."
Spanish Translation: "El viejo trae su sombrero de gloria/de honor." ->
English Translation: "The old man wears his glorious/honorary hat."

Since the semantic shift starts from what is literally said to end in what is factually meant, the literal meaning is: "the old man wears his glorious hat". However, an analysis of the proverb shows that the construction "glorious hat" does not mean what it says. Indeed, its reference is deceptively easy because it cryptically points to another direction. It does not mean "glorious hat". The semantic shift is vindicated by the fact that "glorious hat" turns out to be a metaphor in absentia to refer to "white hair". Therefore, the old man wears his glorious hat factually means: "the old man has white hair". Consequently, the semantic indirection is built on the shift whose semiotic components are:

The literal meaning: "the old man wears his glorious hat" (What is said, and apparently meant),
The metaphorical meaning: "the old man has white hair**.**" (What is suggested, implied, and factually meant).

By means of a systematic analysis of the proverb and, more importantly, through the analysis of the second challenge that we cope with when we translate this proverb, the cultural code/context we can find tells us what it really means. The code stems from the fact that a proverb is a product of a culture and a specific society. To understand it, we need to acquire some substantial or, at least, basic information regarding this culture and contextualize the proverb in the light of such information. According to the semantic field theory, each word/construction is surrounded by a field of meaning and it is the context, not the word on its own, that helps us to decipher its meaning(s). Precisely, here the context is the culture of the society from which the proverb derives. Thus, it becomes an investigation tool that gives us the information required to unravel the adequate meaning. Therefore, the semantic indirection per se does not suffice to provide the key to the appropriate meaning. We must have another hermeneutic item: the cultural context and its code, that is, the status of old men in African society because of two major reasons:

-The semantic nucleus/matrix of the sentence (the most important word, the one that generates meaning) is "old man" in traditional African society from which this proverb stems;

-We have to examine the particular status of old men within this society to be enlightened on its meaning. It reveals that in traditional African society, old men are highly respected because they epitomize remarkable knowledge and wisdom. That is why Amadou Hampaté Ba, a renowned African traditionalist, praised their encyclopedic knowledge by stating: "In Africa, a dying old man is a burning library." (French translation: "En Afrique, un vieillard qui meurt est une bibliothèque qui brûle.") As a result, the whole society must pay a special tribute to old men. Consequently, "white hair" can be equated with a trophy awarded to them by nature to symbolize the glory and respect they have earned and that credit the knowledge and wisdom they accumulated throughout their long life. In the final analysis, "glorious hat" factually refers to "white hair'', which proves to be one of the best forms of validation in African culture: a symbol of glory and honor, knowledge and wisdom. The color "white" with the connotation of "pure, pristine" overemphasizes this connotation and the length of time spent to acquire such knowledge. These considerations enable us to decipher and vindicate both the metaphorical meaning and relevant translation: ''the old man has white hair". However, if we examine the way the meaning functions and the way it is produced or reproduced for the sake of effective communication, we realize that this metaphorical meaning generates a second level of meaning, metaphorical meaning #2. As a matter of fact, since "white hair" suggests "high respect", the long life spent to acquire knowledge sifted by empirical verification and deep wisdom in traditional African society; and high respect generally applies to old men precisely because of their commendable knowledge ("burning library"), then we come up with a second level of metaphorical connotation, the triptych: high respect, laudable knowledge, and deep wisdom. To recapitulate, throughout our semiotic investigation, we thus manage to deal with the major challenges inherent in translating this proverb: its semantic indirection and cultural code. Let us summarize them as follows:

I-Semantic indirection = The shift from literal to metaphorical/figurative meaning
-literal meaning = "the old man wears his glorious hat -
metaphorical meaning$_1$ = "the old man has white hair" =>

white hair symbolizes high respect, commendable knowledge, wisdom…

-Semantic shift 1: metaphorical meaning 1 = the old man has white hair

- Semantic shift 2: metaphorical meaning 2 = the old man is highly respected because of his remarkable knowledge and wisdom. The whiter the hair is, the longer the time spent to accumulate knowledge and wisdom, and the higher honor conferred upon him. The semiosis, which is the gradual progress from semantics to semiotics shows that we start from "glorious hat" (literal), arrives at "white hair" (metaphorical/figurative$_1$) and subsequently slips to and ends in "high respect" (metaphorical/figurative $_2$), and the final and relevant translation.

II-Cultural code = This proverb is a product of traditional African society where old age is glorified, highly valorized because it is emblematic of the endowment of wisdom and a tremendous amount of empirical knowledge. An old man has white hair, the symbol of wisdom and knowledge. ("In Africa, a dying old man is a burning library."). The cultural code finalizes the meaning and subsequent translation of the proverb.

Results, findings, and discussion
The abovementioned summary underscores two considerations: translating a proverb is preconditioned by the analysis of its semantic indirection (the ability to clearly distinguish between what it says from what it means), and the sociocultural competence (the ability to decipher the cultural code of the society from which it originates). This consideration provides us with the following theorem:

Trslt/Prov -> Sem Ind X Herm CC

This means "the Translation of a Proverb can be rewritten "Semantic Indirection multiplied by the hermeneutic cultural code" or "the translation of a proverb is the product of the semantic indirection and its hermeneutic cultural code (code that gives the key to the meaning or the interpretation of the sociocultural information)" where "Trslt/Prov" stands for "the translation of the proverb"; " ->" stands for "can be rewritten"; "Sem Ind" stands for "Semantic Indirection"; "X" for "the product" or "multiplied by"; "Herm. CC" for "Hermeneutic Cultural Code". Let us proceed with another instance.

Example $_2$: French: "Si tu veux apprivoiser la génisse, il faut d'abord séduire la vache" (West African proverb)

English translation: "If you want to tame the heifer, you must first seduce the cow".

Spanish translation: "Si deseas domesticar/domar la vaquilla, tienes que seducir la vaca en primer lugar".
Here, just like in the preceding proverb, words and constructions do not mean what they express. Thusly, the translation is deceptively easy because the meaning subtly evaporates, or escapes and follows another direction; hence the semantic indirection that is generated by such a meaning and its distortion. The two semantic nuclei of the proverb are: "tame the heifer" (1), and "seduce the cow" (2). The former seems to refer to an animal, a young cow, and the latter seems to refer to her mother, but the verb "seduce" gives us a semantic hint. It suggests that we deal with a love

affair between two humans, not two animals. For the sake of logic, we may posit that a love affair usually pertains to human beings because it is an emotional, psycho-physiological process. It is complex, holistic and involves sexuality, genitality and instinct. With respect to animals, a priori only instinct and genitality are involved, not sexuality and love stricto sensu. Additionally, one cannot seduce an animal but a human being. The nature of the animal-purportedly- a "cow" is emblematic of the status and gender. It points to two pieces of information: "older" (status) and mother (gender). The nature of "heifer" is also emblematic of the status and gender. It highlights two semantic cues: younger (1) and daughter (2). Accordingly, the literal meaning focuses on animals whereas the metaphorical focuses on human beings, and specifically women. It appears that the heifer and the cow are metaphorical connotations used to suggest a young girl and her mother respectively. Besides, since the verbs "seduce" and "tame" are a semantic hint for a love affair, this proverb means: if you want to conquer/marry a young girl, you must first convince her mother. This orientation provides the following formula:

I-Semantic indirection: Shift from the literal to metaphorical/figurative.
Literal meaning: If you want to tame the heifer, you must first seduce the cow.
Metaphorical/figurative: If you need to conquer a young woman's heart/to marry a young woman, you should first convince/impress her mother.

II-The cultural code: It really gives us the key to a better and deeper analysis of the meaning. Factually, in traditional West African society and especially in the Akan ethnic society, a young man who aspires to marry a young woman must first convince her mother in particular, and her parents in general. He should show them that he is worthy of being their future son-in-law through his attractiveness, selflessness, hard work, intrepidity, courtesy, and munificence because this cornucopia of qualities is eminently validated in the Akan society. Convincing her mother is important because within this society she is endowed with much more authority. De facto, the Akan society is matrilineal, based on matriarchate, which maximizes the mother's role.
Therefore, since the power is focused on the hands of the mother, a young suitor ought to convince the mother, not the father. Given all these considerations, it dawns upon us that the cultural code helps us to understand the proverb and find out its hidden meaning. The third proverb whose translation will be examined is from East Africa:

Example $_3$ "Inkoni ikubisse mukeba uyirenza urugo."
English translation: "The stick with which your co-wife was beaten, you should throw it beyond the fence/throw it away".

French translation: "Le bâton avec lequel ta co-épouse a été battue, tu le jettes par-dessus l'enclos."

Spanish translation: "El palo con el cual tu co-esposa fue golpeada, tienes que echarlo trás la cerca."

The meaning of the proverb looks simple or even transparent. Admittedly, in this specific case, the literal translation is plausible. However, notwithstanding such plausibility, the proverb subsumes a deeper meaning. Obviously, we have three semantic nuclei: stick (1), co-wife beaten (2), and throw it away (3) referring to a predicament and its agent (the stick), the victim (a woman, co-wife) and an explicit and expeditious action designed to be taken to ward off the predicament (throw it away). However, literally understanding and translating this proverb do not vouch for the full understanding of its semantic complexity. It is suggested by the figurative meaning and elucidated by the cultural code. The figurative connotation suggests that a crisis has occurred (conflict). The stick and the victim symbolize this conflict /crisis, and throwing the stick away is the virtual or prospective resolution of the conflict. Thus, the first two symbols represent a conflict and the last a resolution. Therefore, the morphology of the proverb and especially its underlying conjunction of symbols generate an allegory postulating powerful solidarity. Yet, it is the cultural code that fully clarifies this solidarity. Indeed, the decipherment of the code indicates that we are in a traditional African society and most of these societies are polygamous (the word "co-wife" is a semantic hint). The use of "co-wife" pre-supposes the existence of another or other wives (the Latin conjunction "cum" means with to suggest the notion of plurality, group or set). Living in such an environment entails a substantial amount of solidarity. Additionally, polygamy stands for a micro-cosmos and, as such, emblematic of the macro-cosmos of the whole African society in general and emphasizes a key-element: solidarity. Precisely, this value (soliadarity) prevails in African society. That is why the notion of family is very flexible, malleable, and broad over there. These elements substantiate the fact that living in such conditions usually requires mutual support. Consequently, "co-wife" should not be comprehended literally. It just refers to individuals and their role within the African macro-society. Accordingly, it suggests the solidarity Africans must nurture and implement to be able to circumvent crises and especially emergency cases. They must help one another by nullifying what harms others ("you throw it away"). What harms your neighbor might also harm you as well in a near future. Who knows who will be the next victim? Maybe you? Additionally, the decryption of the cultural code gives us another hint: African narratology. It shows the narratological paradigm typical to African oral literature (the proverb is a genre of oral literature). The plot morphology of African narratives is usually structured as a diptych, that is, a two-part structure at least: the conflict and the resolution. The conflict is suggested by "stick" and "co-wife beaten", the resolution by "throw it away". Consequently, the figurative meaning and the cultural code provide us with substantial information to illuminate the proverb, an allegory of effective mutual help/solidarity between individuals in society, and how to translate it into action, which leads to the following hermeneutic formulation:

Literal meaning: "The stick with which your co-wife was beaten, you should throw it beyond the fence/throw it away."
Metaphorical meaning and translation: we/people/ individuals need to eliminate what can harm others in our society/we people must prevent others from being harmed".

The Translation of proverbs embedding "cultural universals"
The analysis we have conducted hitherto is edifying. Indeed, it indicates that translating proverbs presupposes cultural competence because proverbs are sociocultural products. It turns out that if we must provide a proverb with a specific translation, we should be cognizant of its sociocultural genesis. However, are there any proverbs likely to be found in every culture? If so, how can we translate them? Philosophers Socrates, Plato, and Plotinus give us the answer. As a matter of fact, they had found that a sizable number of concepts, ideas, notions are common to every culture and society. They had pondered upon them and realized that even if they are expressed differently, they fundamentally remain the same in every society and culture. That is why they had called them "cultural universals" or "cultural invariants" to emphasize their ne varietur essence (their unvaried essence). These concepts ("universaux de culture" in French) were initially discussed and formalized by metaphysicians especially Plato and his disciples when they dealt with essentialism and archetypes, which mean perfect models. Subsequently, they were adopted in comparative literature, linguistics, and semiotics to postulate a modicum of possibilities for universal communication and inter-intelligibility. Comparatists like René Etiemblé and others have conducted insightful studies on this epistemic field in *Ouverture(s) pour un comparatisme planétaire*. For instance, the ideas or notions of "love", "grief," "happiness", and "weakness of human nature/condition" exist in any society and culture. They are the same. It follows that, watching people who are in love, happy, or grieving, does not require any special cultural competence to figure out their predicament or psychological condition because love, grief, and happiness are universal concepts. Accordingly, they are generally identical in any human culture and society. Therefore, when these cultural universals occur in a specific proverb, they can be easily understood and analyzed by most paremiologists regardless of their cultural backgrounds. In this respect, translating proverbs subsuming cultural universals does not require any cultural code, and their translation is less challenging since they are semantically transparent. Cultural hermeneutic expertise becomes unnecessary, but semiotic expertise is still useful. In that case we have the following formula:

Hermeneutic code = Semantic indirection X Cultural Universals/Invariants (instead of**: Semantic indirection X Hermeneutic Cultural code),** rewritten as: **"Herm C = Sem Ind X Cult Univ."** where **"herm C"** stands for "Hermeneutic Code**", "**Sem Ind" for "Semantic Indirection**", "**X" for "The Product of", "or "Multiplied by"**,** and "Cult Univ." for "Cultural Universal(s)"
Let us illustrate this case of proverbs in the following example:

Example ₄: **Latin proverb: "**In vino veritas."
English translation: "The truth is revealed through/by wine."
Spanish translation: "La verdad es en el vino."
French translation: "La vérité est dans le vin".
In this proverb, the semantic nucleus is "wine". It may also stand for a variant of alcohol and any other beverage likely to wreak havoc in the senses if it is consumed profusely by a subject. Wine is the metaphor and symbol of human

weakness/condition. Such weakness is universal. Wine stands for the agent that opens the soul and reveals what is concealed in the mind in a state of advanced drunkenness where it becomes impossible to dichotomize what we hide (the lies) and what it is truthful (facts). Because of social hypocrisy and the necessity of assuming different personae in human society, what we say is not always what we think. However, if we are under the despotic power of the generous consumption of alcohol, wine, or any beverage, we lose the control of the super-ego (Freudian terminology) which, in psychoanalysis, is the faculty and psychic moral authority that set up a censorship between what we think inwardly and secretly (and hide): the naked truth, and what we choose to say: the lie. When we lose its control, the ego takes over and shows our weakness because we cannot lie any longer, subdued by the diktat of alcohol or wine. Therefore, we tell nothing but the truth. This weakness is universal and manifests itself the same way in any culture and society. It stands for human nature in general and human condition at a stage where there is no more introspection and censorship; hence the fact that, in such a case, the meaning of the proverb becomes explicit: "the truth is in wine". By virtue of these observations, we have these three semiotic elements:

1-Literal meaning = Truth is in wine /truth is revealed through or by wine.
2-Metaphorical meaning = Drunkenness is a factor that betrays human weakness (We cannot lie when we are under the despotic power of drunkenness (wine = symbol of power subduing humans to reveal their universal weakness))
3-Cultural code = 0 or, at least, transparent because the universal idea of human condition/ weakness due to drunkenness is known to all cultures and societies.

Conclusion
In the light of this analysis on proverbs, we are instructed that translating proverbs is a complex semiotic operation. As a matter of fact, it entails the ability to practice a cogent hermeneutic and heuristic exercise by circumventing two major hurdles: the semantic indirection and the cultural code. To successfully accomplish his/her task, the paremiologist must know the sociocultural code of the proverb and be able to decrypt it. It follows that one of the best ways to master cultural competence is learning foreign languages because language and culture are taught and studied concomitantly. Indeed, those who study languages become, by the same token, endowed with the ability to comprehend the cultures of those who speak them. Immersion is another way by means of which one can be culturally competent. Additionally, the paremiologist/translator must be able to decipher the semantic indirection by doing a semiotic study of proverbs. In the final analysis, proverbs usually epitomize a mode of wisdom, lessons, general truths that we can learn to enhance our intellectual maturity and have a very refined understanding of life. They factually have a philosophical function. To exemplify their didactic aspect, in _Les Contes d'Ahmadou Koumba_, Birago Diop stated: "Le proverbe est la sagesse en comprimé.'' (16), which means: "the proverb is wisdom presented under the form of pill/tablet." In the same vein, in _Soundjata ou l'épopée mandingue,_ D.T. Niane acknowledges that the learning of proverbs and their appropriate use vouch for noetic maturity. He considers that

if a child has mastered proverbs, he has become mature by taking advantage of the lessons learned from adults. Consequently, proverbs convey immemorial wisdom and knowledge. They are eminently interesting, enriching and challenging in the sense that they catalyze a complex noetic activity, require cultural competence to be understood, analyzed, and translated optimally. They proved to be a didactic and heuristic tool that can fruitfully harness the mind and brain.

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