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Documentation and Translation of Some Igbo Riddles into English and French Languages

Nkechinyere Obiageri Chidi-Mbah

Lecturer, Department of Foreign Language and Translation Studies (FLATS),
Abia State University Uturu, Nigeria

Abstract:

Riddles known as "gwam gwam gwam" and "les devinettes" in Igbo and French languages, respectively, form part of the wealthy heritage embedded in Igbo oral literature. Unfortunately, Igbo riddles are presently going into extinction in the face of modern technology and globalization. This work aims to document and translate some Igbo riddles into two international languages: English and French. In order to effectively attend to this work, we searched for and documented some of the already existing Igbo riddles and translated them through the process of reading, deverbalization, and re-expression (translation) of the riddles, after which we judged our translation. The entire process is based on Eugene Nida's theory of Principles of Correspondence. The study reveals that the translation of an Igbo literary text is dominantly a cultural translation both in figures of speech and anthroponyms. The research recommends that translators of Igbo literary texts must be competent in Igbo language, the linguistic culture of Igbo, and all figures of speech as well as other forms of usage of the Igbo language.

Keywords: Riddles, documentation, translation, deverbalization, Re-expression

1. Introduction

Wikipedia asserts that a riddle is a statement, question, or phrase with a double or veiled meaning, put forth as a puzzle to solve. They come in the form of questions intentionally phrased, requiring ingenuity in answering them correctly. The online Cambridge English Dictionary defines a riddle as 'a type of question that describes something in a difficult and confusing way and has a clever or funny answer often asked as a game'. According to Micro Robert, 'Les devinette constituent une partie intégrante de la littérature orale africaine et en constituent un genre très important.'

Riddles constitute a fundamental part of African oral literature, thereby forming part of its important genre. (Our translation)

This definition shows that riddles are oral and not written literature, mostly designated for the young. In Igbo cultural setting, riddles are fabricated by the aged to test the degree of intelligence and the sociocultural awareness of the young. Young people on their own do not pose riddles to the adults because it is assumed that the latter are already well-versed in them. Riddles are spoken according to flora and fauna of an environment.

Riddles, as a game that comes in the form of questions, require rapid responses. Positive responses attract applause. In the olden days, they served as a form of relaxation after a hard day's job in Igbo society. They also served to educate or awaken the conscience of children to their immediate environments and were used for contests during moonlight games.

2. Why the Documentation and Translation of Riddles?

The days were gradually going into extinction when parents gathered their children to teach them cultural values. The present-day families hardly have time for themselves: the parents leave home early and return late, while the children watch cartoons on television throughout the day. Such children end up learning about alien cultures. It is sad to note that some of the present-day parents are ignorant of the Igbo cultural heritage because of their laissez-faire attitude towards it. These parents cannot impart the said cultural values to their children/wards. Therefore, documentation and translation of riddles become essential to preserve the culture for posterity.

Secondly, the reading and writing culture was non-existent: It took the advent of the colonial masters to bring home the awareness. Ironically, the said colonial masters cast aspersions on African culture as barbaric. O'Grady opines that there are three generations of language loss:

- Firstly, the generation of monolingual parents
- Secondly, the generation of their children who acquired a foreign language to become bilingual, and
- Lastly, the third generation of grandchildren who become monolingual in their parents' acquired foreign language, thereby losing their mother tongue. (paraphrased)

In view of O'Grady's opinion, one wonders how many African languages would survive beyond this century.

It is well-known that language is the vehicle that propels culture. Therefore when a language is going into extinction, the culture is not left out. For fear of the extinction of the Igbo culture, there should be documentation of certain aspects of the culture, which include riddles. Riddles, as one of the aspects of African oral literature, transmit the culture of the people: therefore, translation of the riddles makes for a better understanding and appreciation of Africa, which was earlier termed barbaric and cultureless by the colonial masters. Translation of Igbo riddles into international languages will also make it accessible to other world cultures and, by extension, contribute to universal culture.

3. Components of Igbo Riddles

As was earlier slated in the introduction, a riddle consists of some form of puzzle that requires intelligent responses. It starts with the expressions 'gwam gwam gwam', (tell me) or 'onye ka m bu?' (who am I?) also 'gini ka m bu?' meaning 'what am I?'. Affirmative response attracts applause or a gift item. Some riddles are formed with a lot of personification: objects and places are given human characters. This makes the answer to the riddle more difficult. For example:

Gwam gwam gwam otu nwanyi kuru aka, umu ya agbaba n'ohia.

Answer: osisi ugba

Tell me a certain woman who clapped and her children ran into the bush.

Answer: the oil bean tree

In the above riddle, the oil bean tree is given the character of a woman.

3.1. A List of Some Igbo Riddles and Their English and French Translations

- Igbo: Gwam gwam gwam, akwa Chukwu suru na-adighi ako ako?

Answer: Ire

English: Tell me the cloth washed by God that remains wet?

Answer: Tongue

French: Dis-moi un tissu lavé par Dieu qui reste humide?

Answer: La langue

- Ihe si n'elu wutuo, kwe n'isi, too onwe ya?

Answer: Ngwere

English: What jumped down from a height, nodded, and praised itself.

Answer: The lizard

French: Ce qui a sauté d'un haut, fait oui de la tête et s'est loué?

Answer: le lézard

- Enwere umunne abuo; nke no n'elu kwube okwu, egebe ya nti, ma nke no na mgbada kwuo nke ya, iru ndi mmadu agbaruo.

Answer: Onu na ike

English: There are two siblings; when the one upstairs speaks, people listen, but when the one downstairs speaks, people frown.

Answer: The mouth and the anus

French: Il y a deux soeurs, lorsque celle en haut parle, les gens écoutent, mais quand celle en bas parle, les gens se froncent les sourcils.

Answer: La bouche et l'anus

- Onye gi na ya kwu na-aga, o notu n'ihu, o notu n'azu?

Answer: Mkpò

English: You are walking with someone; sometimes he is at the front, at other times, he is at the back. Who is he?

Answer: A walking stick.

French: Dis -moi ton compagnon de marche qui se met tantôt devant tantôt derrière au fur et à mesure que vous marches?

Answer: La canne

- Gwam agadi nwanyi otu ntu ime?

Answer: Jioko

English: An old woman that conceives but once.

Answer: Plantain

French: La vieille femme qui ne tombe enceinte qu'une seule fois dans sa vie.

Answer: Le Plantainier

- Ihe gba aka baa ohia, chiri umu puta. Ede

English: What went alone into the bush and came out with children.

Answer: Cocoyam

French: Ce qui entre dans la brousse tout seul et sort avec les enfants.

Answer: Le taro

- Gwam osisi oma m huru n'uzo, e jighim mma m ji egbu ya.

Answer: Nwanyi oma m huru n'uzo, e jighim ego m ji alu ya.

English: Tell me, the beautiful tree I saw on the road, but I did not have the machete to cut it.

Answer: A beautiful lady that I met but I do not have the money to marry her.

French: Le bel arbre que j'ai vu en chemin mais je n'avais pas de coupe-coupe pour le faire tomber.

Answer: Une belle dame que j'ai rencontrée, mais je n'avais pas l'argent pour l'épouser.

- Ihe gba aka ari elu.

Answer: Agwo

English: What scales heights without the use of hands.

Answer: A snake

French: Ce qui grimpe des hauteurs sans échelle.

Answer: Un serpent

- Ibe ji gazuru uwa n'ile.

Answer: Onwa

English: A half portion of yam that is shared by the whole world.

Answer: The moon

French: Une portion de l'igname partagée par la monde entire.

Answer: La lune

- Ogbu nwata n'ihu nne ya.

Answer: Aguu

English: What beats the child in front of the mother?

Answer: Hunger

French: Ce qui frappe l'enfant devant sa mere.

Answer: La faim

- Ihe l wufuru na mgbala, o soro gi na-ala.

Answer: Ntu

English: What you poured away in the garden, and it followed you back home.

Answer: Ash

French: Ce que vous avez jaté au jardin, et il vous suit jusqu'à la maison.

Answer: La cendre

- Ihe dara n'olulu ma o reghi ure.

Answer: Okwute

English: What fell into the ditch and did not decay.

Answer: A stone

French: Ce qui est tombé dans le fuisse sans decomposer.

Answer: Une pierre

- Nwanyi are ano.

Answer: Ikwe

English: The woman with four breasts.

Answer: A mortar

French: La femme au quatre seins.

Answer: Un mortier

- Ihe kuru mmiri gbagoro elu.

Answer: Aki bekee

English: What went up carrying water.

Answer: Coconut

French: Ce qui est allé en haut portant de l'eau.

Answer: La noix de coco

- Onye nani ya mutara nwa a na apiwa onu.

Answer: Udara

English: The only one whose child's mouth can be pressed open.

Answer: African star apple

French: Qui seul a un enfant don't la bouche sera brisée.

Answer: La pomme étoille africaine.

- Agbogho oma ji abali aga.

Answer: Onwa

English: The beautiful lady who walks about at night.

Answer: The moon

French: La belle demoiselle qui ne se promène que le soir.

Answer: La lune

- Oke ehi nwere mpi alaka.

Answer: Jioko

English: The bull that has horns with branches.

Answer: Plantain

French: Le boeuf avec des cornes à branches.

Answer: Le plantainier

- Ihe gbazuru ohia dum oso, osuso esughi ya.

Answer: Nkita

English: What ran through the bush without sweating.

Answer: Dog

French: L'animal qui a parcouru le champ sans transpirer.

Answer: Le chien

- Ihe buru nna ya ukwu uzo taa oji.

Answer: Mbo

English: The servant who ate kola before his master.

Answer: Fingernail

French: Le servent qui prend le kola avant son patron.

Answer: L'ongle

- Mmadu abuo na-aga n'uzo, mmiri na-ama otu, o naghi ama nke ozo.

Answer: Nwanyi di ime

English: Two people walking in the rain; one is soaked, the other is not.

Answer: A pregnant woman

French: Deux personnes qui se promènent dans la pluie, l'une est mouillée et l'autre n'est pas.

Answer: Une femme enceinte

- Ihe mere eze jiri rachaa ntu.

Answer: Ube

English: What made the king leak ash.

Answer: Pear

French: Ce qui a fait que le roi lèche la cendre

Answer: La poire

- Ihe jiri ikpere gazuo ubi nna gi.

Answer: Ogu

English: What went round your father's farm on its knees.

Answer: Hoe

French: Qui a fait le tour de la ferme sur ses genoux.

Answer: La houe

- Ute kachasi nke Chukwu jiri aka ya tua.

Answer: Eluigwe

English: The widest mat spread by God.

Answer: The sky

French: La natta la plus large étendue par Dieu.

Answer: Le ciel

- Otu ogbo di nadighi onye makariri ibe ya.

Answer: Enwe

English: A special group where one is more beautiful than the other.

Answer: Monkeys

French: Un peuple particulier dont personne n'est plus beau que l'autre.

Answer: Les singes

- Okwuru nwere nwanne nwanyi toro ya nke umu ya kara gbaa. Gini bu aha nwanne ya nwanyi a?

Answer: Okwuru bekee

English: Okro plant has an elder sister whose children are bigger. What is this sister's name?

Answer: Pawpaw

French: La plante de gombo a une soeur aînée qui a des plus grands enfants. Comment s'appelle sa soeur?

Answer: La papaya

- A mataram ka m siri joo, were ji abali n'aga. Onye kwuru nke a?

Answer: Usu

English: I know how ugly I am, so I chose to move about at night. Who said this?

Answer: The bat

French: Je reconnais ma laideur, j'ai choisi alors de ne me promène que la nuit. Qui a dit cela:

Answer: Le Chauve-souris

- Ihe duru nwata odu n'ihu nne ya.

Answer: Agbusi

English: What counseled a child in the mother's presence.

Answer: The soldier ant

French: Ce qui a donné conseil à un enfant devant sa mere.

Answer: La fourmi soldate

- Nne ji otu aha akpo umu ya dum.

Answer: Okuko

English: The mother who calls all her children by one name.

Answer: The hen

French: La mère qui appelle tous ses enfants par le même nom.

Answer: La poule

- A bu m osisi o be akwa, Ndi mmadu na añụ anya mmiri mu n'obi ọma. Onye ka mu bu?

Answer: Nkwu

English: I am a weeping tree. People happily drink my tears. Who am I? Answer: The palm tree

French: Je suis un arbre pleureur. Les gens boivent mes larmes avec joie. Qui suis-je?

Answer: Le palmier

- Otu akwa nwere umu kachasi n'ime ya.

Answer: Uwa

English: A single egg that contains the highest number of children.

Answer: The earth

French: Un seul oeuf qui contient le plus grand nombre de poussins.

Answer: Le monde

- Amaghi mgbe mmiri ga-ezo, nke mere m jiri buru ụlọm na-agaghari. Onye ka m bu?

Answer: Mbe

English: I do not know when it shall rain, so I carry my house wherever I go. Who am I?

Answer: The tortoise

French: Je ne sais pas quand il pleura, donc, je me promène avec ma maison. Qui suis-je?

Answer: La tortue.

- Abum oti egwu abali. Ndi irom na-akurum aka ma o buru godu mgbe ha achoghi. Onye kam bu?

Answer: Anwu nta

English: I am a nocturnal musician. My enemies clap for me against their will. Who am I?

Answer: The mosquito

French: Je suis un musicien nocturne. Mes ennemis m'applaudissent même contre leur volonté. Qui suis-je?

Answer: La mostique

- Otu nwanyi kuru aka ya, umu ya agbasa n'egwu. Onye ka o bu?

Answer: Ugbaka

English: A certain woman clapped her hands, and her children scattered in fear. Who is she?

Answer: Oil bean

French: Une certaine mère a frappé ses mains et ses enfants se sont dispersés peureux.

Answer: L'Haricot beurre

- Abum eze ntamu, a nam atamu ma mgbe m no n'uju. Onye ka m bu?

Answer: Ijiji

English: I am a specialist in murmuring even in the midst of plenty. Who am I?

Answer: The housefly

French: J'aime murmurer même dans la brume de l'abundance. Qui suis-je?

Answer: La mouche

- Gwam gwam gwam, tịtịrọ, tịtịrọ?

Answer: Gbaba ọba weta ji.

English: Tell me 'tịtịrọ, tịtịrọ?'

Answer: Get into the barn and get some yams.

French: Dis-moi 'tịtịrọ, tịtịrọ?'

Answer: Va dans la grange et apporte des ignames

- Gwam gwam gwam ihe dara gbim, ma a nughi uda ya.

Answer: Nku anya

Tell me what fell down, but the sound was not heard.

Answer: Eye lashes

Dis-moi ce qui a tombé sans faire de bruit.

Answer: Le Cil d'oeil

4. Translating Riddles in Context

Riddles are used to create awareness in young people about their immediate environment, as said earlier. A lot of riddles talk about universal knowledge and eternal truths. In such cases, riddles are open to anyone who wishes to be part of the game. An example is 'Ute kachasi nke Chineke jiri aka ya tụa' (Eluigwe). 'The widest mat spread by God' (The sky). The sky, which looks like a widespread mat, is a universal phenomenon. With this universal knowledge, the translator will have fewer problems translating.

Nevertheless, riddles are not always universal in context. Some riddles are often formed in the indigenous languages. Languages use different ways to represent the actual meaning of riddles in their grammatical structure, morphology, and semantics. Translation is said to be an inter-linguistic and intercultural activity. Culture, as a way of life, is vehicled by language. People of the same culture share the same belief systems, customs, and traditions. They can be identified by some ways of life. Some riddles are formed using the flora and fauna of an environment in addition to the people's ways of life.

An effective translation of riddles requires a good understanding of the language and its cultural background. Lederer (1994) underlined the major interest of the sense theory:

La théorie interprétative (...) a établi que la processus (la traduction) consistent à comprendre le texte original, à déverbaliser sa forme linguistique et à exprimer dans une autre langue les idées comprises et les sentiments ressentis.

The interpretative theory established that translation processes consist of reading and understanding the original text, deverbaling its linguistic form, and expressing the ideas understood, and sentiments felt in another language. (Our translation)

Understanding the text is the first step in translation. Albir stresses the understanding of elements in their context: situational, verbal, and socio-historical contexts.

What does Albir mean by situational context? This includes all the elements in the environment applied in the statement ranging from the objects, the places, the people, and others. According to him, verbal context signifies all the words and sentences which surround the statement. On the other hand, the socio-historical context is the totality of the happenings, the movements, the codes, the body language, the gestures, the sounds, etc., necessary for understanding the statement. All these contexts are necessary for the effective translation of riddles.

To arrive at a good translation of riddles, understanding and deverbaling the cultural elements used by the first speakers is of great essence. It is only when this is done that the translator can choose the most appropriate technique of translation. Below are some riddles that need an explanation of the way of life before they can be understood and translated.

- Riddle: 1. Otu nwanyi kuru aka, umu ya agbasaa n'egwu.

Answer: Ugbaka

- Necessary explanation: The oil bean is not plucked from the tree in a typical Igbo setting. It has times and seasons for harvesting by itself. The dry season is the most appropriate for the harvest. When it has fully matured, in the heat of the sun, it starts to burst by making a sound that resembles the clapping of the hands. When this happens, the seeds scatter all over the bush. This is when people can go and pick them up because it is not plucked. This is the riddle's meaning: 'the woman who claps her hands and her children scatter in fear.'

- Riddle: 2. Ihe I wufuru na mgbala, o soro gi na-ala.

Answer: Ntu

- Necessary explanation: In a typical Igbo setting, before cooking breakfast in the kitchen (usekwu), one has to sweep and empty the ash of the previous night. It is always poured in the nearby garden (mgbala) as manure. Normally, once the ash (ntu) is poured, the air carries part of it back to the house alongside the person who threw it out. This is the reason for the riddle 'ihe I wufuru na mgbala, o soro gi na-ala.'

5. Conclusion

This research work has not exhausted the documentation and translation of all Igbo riddles but has succeeded in some. We believe it has come a long way in highlighting the necessity for preserving the Igbo riddles and other Igbo customs and traditions for posterity. With some of these locally formed Igbo riddles (having traditional Igbo elements), the Igbo culture can also be internationally exported, thereby showcasing the Igbo language and culture to the world. This work is, however, not exhausted but subject to further research.

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