

SOYINKA'S *DEATH AND THE KING'S HORSEMAN* IN TRANSLATION: A CRITIQUE OF TRANSLATION THEORY AND PRACTICE

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Abstract

This study used the translation of Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* into French and Yoruba, as representative of Europhone African literature, to examine some current translation theories and practice. Descriptive terms and concepts like: "source text", "target text", "source language", "target language", "translatability", "untranslatability", "domestication" and "foreignization" seem not to be adequate as they show that translation theory is yet to cope with the challenges and realities of the Europhone African literature type. The peculiarities of the Europhone African text demands a re-appraisal of the principles and concepts of translatability. Such a re-appraisal will reveal that a source text oriented theory will be more amenable and effective in dealing with translation of Europhone African literary texts if the target-audience is the literary critic, otherwise a target text oriented theory will do if the target-audience is the non-specialised reader.

INTRODUCTION

Translation is a language activity that is very old. Its history has been traced to pre-historic times most especially in societies with written traditions. Venuti (2000) gives an overview of developments in translation studies in the 20th century. Topics treated included translatability, equivalent structures between source language and target language, textual and discursive features, situational, historical, ideological and sociological issues. Languages of oral traditions have not been left out of translation studies. Scholars have tried to trace, in time, the practice of translation in so-called oral societies in Africa (Bandia 2000; Rafael 1988; Cheyfitz 1991; Niranjana 1992).

However, translation studies as an academic research domain is still a relatively young discipline that is still “arguing about its (‘proper’) object of study, problematising its key concepts and its research methods ...(which) are part of its development and growth” (Schäffner 2004:1) and which must take into account all types of texts in all their ramifications, including African literary texts. Our aim in this study is to contribute to the on-going discussions of the development of this domain. We will examine how current translation theory and practice can handle Europhone African literary texts. Following Toury who says that:

“... no empirical science can make a claim for completeness and (relative) autonomy unless it has a proper descriptive branch. Describing, explaining and predicting phenomena pertaining to its object level is thus the main goal of such a discipline. In addition, carefully performed studies into well defined corpuses, or sets of problems, constitute the best means of testing, refuting, and especially modifying and amending the very theory, in whose terms research is carried out” (Toury 1995:1).

Using some relevant translation theories and practices, we will examine two translations of Wole Soyinka’s *Death and the King’s Horseman*. The first of these translations (which is in French) is *La mort et l’écuyer du roi* (Hatier, 1986) translated by Thierry Dubost while the second (which is in Yoruba) is *Ikú Olókùn Èsin* (Fountain Publications, 1994) translated by Akinwumi Isola. We note that each of the translators is a native speaker of the language into which he translated. Yoruba is, of course, the first language of Wole Soyinka and the source-culture for his play.

BASIC ASSUMPTIONS AND DEFINITIONS

We take translation studies as a part of the larger field of language sciences. In this sub-field, there are many theories. However, in this study, we will limit ourselves to

some traditional and relatively new trends that we think are reasonably representative of the group. We take concepts like “translatability”, “source-target text dichotomy”, “mediated text”, “domesticating” and “foreignizing” as normally defined in translation literature as working descriptive and analytical tools to be tested in our study.

The term Europhone African text has been used by several writers to describe what was originally called African literature in French, English and German or, for that matter, in any other European language. Some scholars, like Bandia (2000:358), have tried to limit its use to post-colonial African literature written in European languages but we do not intend to do so. We find it tempting to agree with Bandia that:

Postcolonial criticism represents European language writing as an off-shoot of imperial domination; however, portraying the African writer as a happy contributor to the Great Western Tradition via an idiom of compulsion can mask the stark power relations between the centre and the periphery (Bandia 2000:357).

However, this study will limit itself to the challenges that the works of African writers of European language medium pose to translation theory and practice. We will not get into the Postcolonial literature debate.

We believe that translation and the other language sciences, while considering these types of texts, need to focus on issues that are of theoretical and descriptive interest to their domain, hence the need to (re)define the term Europhone African text. We take this term to mean any literary text written by an African in a European language. This term can be used interchangeably with other terms like African European-language text or African Europhone text.

ANALYSIS

Theories

The theories that we will consider in this study can be grouped into three. This grouping is based on how each relate to the “source-target text” orientation concept.

The first type of translation theory group, considered traditional, is the one that is source text oriented. Writing about this type of theory group, Toury says:

Whether concerned with teaching or quality assessment, their preoccupation was mainly with the source text and with the proclaimed protection of its ‘legitimate rights’. Target constraints, while never totally ignored, often counted as subsidiary; especially those which would not fall within Linguistics of any kind (1995:24).

The second type of theory group is the one that is target text-oriented. Skopos theory (Vermeer 1978), Toury’s Descriptive target oriented theory (Toury 1978), General Translation theory (Reiss and Vermeer 1984/1991) can be said to be representative of this theory group.

The third type of theory group is the one that does not give any importance to the source text or to the target text. The Translational Action Theory (Holz-Mänttari 1984) is representative of this group. For this theory group, “.. neither source and target text comparison, nor linguistics, has any significant role to play, and translation is situated within the wider context of cooperative interaction between professionals (experts) and clients.” (Schäffner 1998)

Source-Target Text Orientation Theories and the French and Yoruba Translations of *Death and the King’s Horseman*

The first two types of theories, the one that is source text oriented and the one that is target text oriented, present the same optic to Europhone African texts, like *Death and the King's Horseman*. For these two theories, *Death and the King's Horseman* is the source text of *La mort et l'écuyer du roi*. This is supported by the fact that the translator and his publisher acknowledge the fact that the French work is a translation of Soyinka's play. The first problem is that of the information/message or communication item that the source text carries while the second problem has to do with the language used. The communicational content of *Death and the King's Horseman* is well anchored in the Yoruba society and world view. This is shown not only in the historical source of the play but also in the characters and geographical location of the scenes. The play has to do with what happened in a Yoruba town, Oyo to be precise. Apart from the Pilkings, (Simon, the District Officer and Jane, his wife), the other important characters are Yoruba not only by their names but also in all their beliefs and actions. This situation may seem to support the idea of some critics of the Postcolonial school that the author of a Europhone African text is merely translating from an African language (of oral tradition) into a European one (thereby contributing to the 'Great Occidental tradition'). In this case the question is how "does one define the writer's source and target languages since he or she is indeed the locus of both linguistic experiences, namely the language of the imaginary original versions and the language 'in between' which is the language of writing" (Bandia 2004: 360)

It is possible, at the theoretical level, to say that a source text need not exist in reality to have a translated version as Toury (1995) suggests. Following that logic

means that there is a source text somewhere that Soyinka used and that *Death and the King's Horseman* is just a target text that served as source text to *La mort et l'écuyer du roi*. This can be the source of many misunderstandings in both literary and translation studies. For instance, can one say that Soyinka is just a translator and not a creative literary writer? What will be the literary and ideological implications of classifying the works of Europhone African writers as translations? Are all writers translators? Are translators creative writers? It is the concept of source-target orientation that led scholars in translation studies into this type of argument that we deem unnecessary. The translation of the play into Yoruba, *Ikú Olókùn Esin* by Akinwunmi Isola raises other problems for the concept of source-target orientation. For instance, if we say that *Death and the King's Horseman* is a target text, i.e. a translation, who is the target audience? If we say that it is readers of English, how do we account for all the Yoruba words in the play? Sixteen out of sixty pages making up the text of the play contain English code-mixed with Yoruba words.. The question is whether the average English reader can still understand the play, in spite of the code mixing. Translation theories should account for socio-linguistically complex texts like *Ikú Olókùn Esin*. The play has a Yoruba source-culture but an English source-language and is translated into a Yoruba source-culture and language. Is the Yoruba version another source text or a target text? The least one can say is that source-target orientation theories of translation do not address adequately the peculiarity of the Europhone African texts.

The language of *Death and the King's Horseman* is also a problem. If there is a source text, by implication there is also a source language and a source culture just as a target text should also imply a target language and culture. It should be noted,

however, that the source/target language and culture issues do not pose the same problems to literary studies as they do to translation studies.

Many African writers of European expression have not hidden their discomfort at having to write in European languages. Ahmadou Kourouma, the Ivoirien writer, says:

“Contrairement à ce que l’on peut penser, il me semble que les langues africaines sont, en général, beaucoup plus riches que les langues européennes...”
(Kourouma interviewed by René Lefort and Mauro Rosi, for UNESCO 1999)

[Contrary to what one might think, African languages are in general extremely richer than European languages ...] (Our translation)

And the reason that Kourouma writes in a European language is because it allows him to communicate with other Africans who are not from his own language group.

(Kourouma, “Radio Chat”, Radio France Internationale, 5/9/2001). However, many critics find the language in which Europhone African texts are written to be peculiar: a language ‘in between’, ‘a hybrid’, a ‘bending’ of a European language, a ‘third code’, etc. which may manifest in relexification, mother-tongue interference, calquing and loan-translation. Linguistically, this perception is not completely correct for all Europhone African texts and the language in *Death and the king’s Horseman* is a good exception.

Soyinka’s use of English in *Death and the King’s Horseman* has a lot of code-mixing. The play has a lot of Yoruba words in English sentence structures. Right from the first page we have a Yoruba interjection - “Howu” (p. 9); an expression - “Esu-Harrassed day” (p. 9) and a noun - “alari” (p. 9). Unlike what some literary critics would like us to believe, code-mixing is neither an abnormality nor an unattested linguistic phenomenon in bilingual speech communities. In fact, code-mixing is the linguistic

reality of present day Yoruba society, something that started more than a hundred years ago but, which for unknown reasons, escapes the translation theories that talk of source-target text orientation.

Even if the translator of *La mort et l'écuyer du roi* is interested in capturing this linguistic reality of code-mixing in *Death and the King's Horseman*, most of the European languages (at least those who were colonial powers in Africa) have no corresponding linguistic system that offers the possibility. At any rate, translation theories must account for this phenomenon if Europhone African texts must be adequately treated.

Non Source-Target Text Oriented Theories

One would have thought that a theory that does not give any importance to the dichotomy of source-target text orientation would not have any problem with *Death and the King's Horseman* and its translation into French and Yoruba, especially one like Translational Action theory (Holz-Mänttari 1984) that claims that the “primary aim of translational action is to enable cooperative, functionally adequate communication to take place across cultural barriers” (Schäffner 1998).

We agree totally that a translation should “enable cooperative, functionally adequate communication to take place across cultural barriers”. But we find it unacceptable where Translational Action theory says that the translator should regard the source text as “a mere tool for the realization of communicative functions” and that he should be committed only to the target situation “because it is primarily the message and the commission, rather than the text itself, that have to be rendered for the client”

(Schäffner 1998:4). What this means is that, it is the message in the target language and the commission (the translation contract/demand) rather than the source text that the translator should be committed to.

The Europhone African text as source text for translation should not be considered a “mere tool” because it contains the culture, language and message that the target audience hopes translation will grant them access to. Secondly, how can the commission/contract “enable cooperative, functionally adequate communication to take place across cultural barriers” if the vehicle of the source text is considered as unimportant. While the target audience should be taken into consideration in a translation exercise, it should not be at the expense of the message of the source text. The translator owes the author of the source text and the target audience fidelity to the essence of the message of the source text without being tied down to just the literal meaning.

The competence of the translator as well as the quality of his output can be evaluated in terms of how he handles cultural and linguistic nuances and meanings from source text to target text. It is only if this is done appropriately that one can say that “cooperative functionally adequate communication has taken place across cultural barriers”. It is important to note that neither Thierry Dubost nor Akinwumi Isola adhered to the principles of translatorial action in translating *Death and the King's Horseman* into French and Yoruba.

A Europhone African text like *Death and the King's Horseman* poses a two-fold challenge to any translator, which in turn makes it difficult to ignore the source text. As already mentioned, a typical Europhone African text is written in a European language

which is neither the language nor the culture of the “message” that is to be transferred into another language and culture through a translatorial action.

If the source text had been ignored in the translatorial action that produced *La mort et l'écuyer du roi*, Thierry Dubost would have had to “sacrifice” either the message or the culture or both to satisfy the requirements of absolute commitment to the target situation. This would probably have resulted in a new play that would not qualify to be called a translation but a new work or at best an adaptation of Soyinka’s play. Of course, many members of the target audience may not know that what they have been given as Soyinka’s translated play is in effect the translator’s own work or “creation”.

On the other hand, if the source text is ignored in the translatorial action that produced *Ikú Olókun-Esin*, Akinwumi Isola would probably have betrayed the work of Soyinka but he would not have had the same situation that Dubost would have had (if he did the same) as most members of Isola’s target audience have access to the language and the culture of both the source and target texts.

The quality of the translations done by Thierry Dubost and Akinwumi Isola was enhanced by the fact that both translators respected the source text in their translatorial actions. As we noted above, this did not imply that they did not take the target audience into consideration. The truth is that fidelity to the source text is no excuse for the betrayal of the target language and culture especially where translation of Europhone literary texts is concerned.

Concepts

Source-Target Text Orientation

This concept is very important in current discussions of translation studies and this is why it can serve as a reference point for grouping theories in this domain. We have already dealt with this concept in our discussion of translation theories.

Translatability

“Translatability is mostly understood as the capacity for some kind of meaning to be transferred from one language to another without undergoing radical change.” (cf. Baker 1998: 273)

The notion is inevitably coupled with untranslatability. Few theories claim that all meanings are always translatable. Both translatability and untranslatability as notions turn around the issues of reference and sense and the possibility of getting them from the source text into the target text. All the discussions around these two notions, while being important, may not be pertinent for the translation of *Death and the King's Horseman*, a Europhone African text. This is because the issue of translatability or untranslatability of this play cannot just be limited to the cultural and linguistic difference(s) of the so-called source text and the target text, but to what may amount to the language of Soyinka in this play. The language of Soyinka in *Death and the King's Horseman* is a code that will not fit easily into any of the varieties of English. It is mostly code-mixing. Bokamba (1989) defines code-mixing as “... the embedding of various linguistic units such as affixes (bound morphemes), words (unbound morphemes), phrases and clauses from a co-operative activity where the participants, in order to infer

what isn't intended, must reconcile what they hear with what they understand" (cf. Ayeomoni 2006: 91).

Soyinka's language in *Death and The King's Horseman* is English code-mixed with Yoruba words as we have already stated. There are interjections like "Howu" (p.9 line 9), compound words like "Esu-harrassed" (p. 9, line 19); nouns like "etutu" (p. 12, line 11), and "sigidi" (p. 13, line 20). This language is at best an idiolect and it cannot be said that Soyinka always uses this code all the time in his every day communication or in all his creative works.

The online *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics* defines an idiolect as the "language use of an individual speaker. This personal manner of expression is, to varying degrees, apparent in an individual's pronunciation, active vocabulary and syntax." While other authors of Europhone African texts resort to other means to create their idiolects, Soyinka resorts to code-mixing in *Death and the King's Horseman*. It is safe to say that most Europhone African texts are written in one idiolect or another. For Zabus (1991), these idiolects serve "... not only as a means of providing "a distinctive African cocktail" but also as an attempt to resist, recreate and subvert the dominant (European) language." (cf. Barber 1996:8).

Apart from code-mixing, authors of Europhone literary texts have been known to resort to other strategies to create their idiolects. For instance, Zabus (1991) asserts that Gabriel Okara used syntactic relexification in his language in *The Voice*. Zabus defines relexification as:

Imaginative world-creating attempt at forging a new literary aesthetic medium or "third-code" out of the alien, dominant (European) lexicon. It is also an attempt at appropriating the Other's language in

order to make it one's own and bend its otherness
or fixity to artistic and ideological exigencies (1991: 103)

The idiolect of Ahmadou Kourouma represents another class of language type in Europhone African literary texts. Kourouma's language in his first novel scandalized the French establishment that no publisher in France accepted to publish it. It was after it got the "Prix de la Francité" and was published in Canada that the French publisher, Seuil, bought the right. Talking about this language, the author was castigated for "committing terrible violence" on the French language but Kourouma defends himself by saying:

Quoi que les gens dissent, je ne cherche pas à changer le français. Ce qui m'intéresse, c'est de reproduire la façon d'être et de penser de mes personnages, dans leur totalité et dans toutes leurs dimensions. Mes personnages sont des Malinkés. Et lorsqu'un Malinké parle, il suit sa logique, sa façon d'aborder la réalité.
(Interview –Lefort et Rosi, 1999)

[Unlike what people say, I do not want to change the French language. What I am after is to reproduce the way of life and of thinking of my characters in all its totality and dimension. My characters are Malinkes. And when a Malinke speaks, he follows his own peculiar logic, his own way of apprehending reality.] (Our translation)

Inspired by what Kourouma says here, we can adduce a reason why Soyinka uses code-mixing in *Death and the King's Horseman*. In the author's note to the play, Soyinka says the "play is based on events which took place in Oyo, ancient Yoruba city of Nigeria, in 1946". Apart from the fact that the play has both Yoruba and British characters, it is a (socio)linguistic reality that code-mixing (Yoruba-English) is common in everyday communication of that period and is still a present day linguistic

phenomenon in Yorubaland. Thus it can be said that Soyinka is only portraying a social linguistic reality by using code-mixing as the preferred code in his play.

It is apparent that translatability/untranslatability as notions do not encompass the situation of a code that is difficult to capture in time and space. That we have *La mort et l'écuyer du roi* and *Ikú Olókùn Esin* shows that Soyinka's play has been translated into two languages, but the issue is whether the idiolect of an author can be got into another language and culture without creating another literary work altogether, as an idiolect is subject to so many "extra" linguistic, social and inspirational factors. The need for translation theory to account for idiolects and other linguistic devices used by authors of Europhone African literary texts should not be seen as a demand for strict commitment to the literal, metaphorical and contextual meanings of the original nor should it be taken to be a negation or an acceptance of the fact that every translation in a sense and to some degree results in "another literary work". The issue at stake is accounting for a very important linguistic and stylistic aspect of Europhone African literary texts – choice of code; and the concept of translatability fails to do this.

A close look at Thierry Dubost's and Akinwumi Isola's versions will highlight some of the issues at hand. Dubost rendered Soyinka's English code-mixed with Yoruba idiolect as French code-mixed with Yoruba in *La mort et l'écuyer du roi*. What the translator did was to translate the English words and sentences while leaving the Yoruba words as they were in the original text. This is different from what Akinwumi Isola did in his own translation. Akinwumi Isola's translation is mono-code. With one exception (pp. 45-46), it is mostly a Yoruba text whereas he could have reversed the order of the code-mixing in the original to have Yoruba code-mixed with English.

The implications of the choice of each translator differ. Whereas Dubost's French code-mixed with Yoruba is likely to create problems for the target audience in terms of comprehension of the play, Isola's case will not be the same. An example of this problem can be found in Thierry Dubost's translation of the following:

“Oka-rearing-from-a-camouflage-of-leaves, before he strikes
the victim is already prone! (English text, p. 19)

«Okapi surgissant d'un camouflage de feuilles; avant qu'il ne
frappe, la victime est déjà étendue à terre » French version, p. 27)

« Oka” is the Yoruba word for “viper” but the translator went for the *faux ami* “Okapi”, a giraffe-like animal but that has no long neck. It is difficult to understand why the translator went for “Okapi” because it is not an animal that the average French man knows and if he should check from a dictionary, he will only be more confused when he discovers that an Okapi is the size of a giraffe and a herbivore. The Okapi, unlike the viper, is not known to attack people or hide under piles of leaves.

A possible solution for Dubost's French-Yoruba code-mixed text will be a glossary that explains the Yoruba words adequately. Another solution would have been for Dubost to have resorted to a French-English code-mixing if he felt that he must present a version that is not mono-code like Akinwumi Isola did.

Akinwumi Isola's mono-code choice (i.e. using only Yoruba utterances where the English version has English-Yoruba code-mixed expressions), makes his translation to lose in terms of fidelity to Soyinka's choice of style of expression as his target audience would understand the English words code-mixed with Yoruba. It is also unfortunate that the language and cultural differences between the British and Yoruba characters of the

play were neutralised by the mono-code rendition of the translation done by Akinwumi Isola. It is possible for Akinwumi Isola to turn the order of English code-mixed with Yoruba as found in the English version into Yoruba code-mixed with English in the Yoruba translation without creating comprehension problems for his target audience. Akinwumi Isola actually did code-mixing where Soyinka did not code-mix in the original play as can be seen in this short extract that we will be placed side by side with Soyinka's version:

Akinwumi's Translation pp. 45-46

E jowo e je ka ri invitation card yin

...

Bí e bá insist ...

E wà very kind gan-an o

...

After you.

...

E wà most gracious, Olorun.

Bawo le se find ibi yií?.

Soyinka's original, pp. 37-38

Your invitation card please ?

...

If you insist

How very kind of you

...

After you

...

You're most gracious.

And how do you find the place ?

Domesticating and Foreignizing

"Foreignization generally refers to a method (or strategy) of translation whereby some significant trace of the original "foreign" text is retained. Domestication, on the other hand, assimilates a text to target cultural and linguistic values" (Palopski & Oittinen 2000: 374)

These two notions appear to be dangerous for the target audience of a Europhone African text like *Death and the King's Horseman*. Thierry Dubost may have used the strategy of foreignization in *La mort et l'écuyer du roi* as the French translation contains a lot of Yoruba words. The following table shows the words in the English and French versions:

<u>Yoruba words</u>	<u>English Text</u>	<u>French Text</u>
Howu – Interjection	pp. 9; 19	<u>pp. 13; 28</u>
Esu – Yoruba divinity	p. 9;	<u>p. 13</u>
Alari – type of cloth	pp. 9; 17;	<u>pp. 14; 24</u>
Olohun-iyo – sweet-voiced person	pp. 9, 10, 11 p. 11	<u>pp. 14; 26;</u> <u>p. 17</u>
Araba - (type of tree)	p.12	<u>p. 17</u>
Etutu – placatory ritual	p. 12	<u>p. 17</u>
Oranyan – Yoruba ancestor	p. 12	<u>p. 17</u>
Robo– melon seed delicacy	p. 12	<u>p. 18</u>
Opele – divination beads	pp. 12, 13	<u>p. 18</u>
Ifa – Divination deity	p. 13	<u>p. 18</u>
Osanyin – Divination Bird	p. 13	<u>p. 18</u>
Elegbara – another name for Esu	p. 13 p. 17	<u>p. 19</u> <u>p. 24</u>
Sigidi – ritual mud statuette	p. 18	<u>p. 27</u>
Sanyan – type of cloth	p. 19	<u>*Okapi p. 27</u>
Iroko – type of tree	p. 19	<u>p. 28</u>
Oka – viper	p. 19	<u>p. 28</u>
Baaba o – Way of hailing	p. 19	<u>p. 28</u>
Oya – Deity, River Niger	p. 22	<u>p. 33</u>
Ogun – Deity of war	pp. 25, 46	<u>p. 39</u>
Awusa - Walnut	p. 29	<u>p. 44</u>
Egungun – ancestral deity	p. 44 (twice)	<u>pp. 69; 70</u>
Juju - Spell	p. 62	<u>p. 70</u>
Gbedu – type of drum	p. 44	<u>p. 70</u>
Osugbo – a cult		
Olokun – deity of the Sea		

These Yoruba words certainly manifest ‘a significant trace of the original “foreign” text’ but this is at what cost to the passage of the message from a source text/culture to a target text/culture. Foreignization will no doubt always be at a great cost to communicational function of a translation. As for domestication, if the European language of the source text (English in the case of *Death and the King’s Horseman*), does not assimilate the text to its own cultural and linguistic values, it will be hazardous for the translator of a Europhone African text to use this strategy. These two notions are not helpful as far as the translation of a Europhone African text is concerned and the

idea that the trend to domesticate or foreignize is linked to the 'strength' of the translating culture (Furuno 2002 cf. Gile 2002: 127) has not been proved empirically.

CONCLUSION

Our study has shown that mainstream theories and notions in translation studies have not adequately catered for the Europhone African text as shown by the two translations of Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman* into *La mort et l'écuyer du roi* and *Ikú Olókùn Esin*. The peculiarities of the Europhone African text demands a re-appraisal of the principles and concepts that have been discussed in this study. With this re-appraisal, a source text oriented theory will be more amenable and effective in dealing with translation of Europhone African literary texts if the target-audience is the literary critic, otherwise a target text oriented theory will do if the target-audience is non-specialised.

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