

Challenges of Translating Creative Literature from English into Kiswahili

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Abstract

The translation of the classical 18th and 19th century Swahili poetry into English was an important step in disseminating this art-form to a global audience way beyond the African continent. Not only did this translation and adaptation of the classical poetry lead to the translation of Swahili prose in early 20th century but also offer useful insights into the nature of Swahili poetry in general. But, what was the criteria used in selecting the poetry works to be translated? The paper which is guided by the tenets of the Equivalence theory as expounded by Xie (2014) briefly looks at the major arguments for and against this theory in achieving meaning equivalence between SL and TL. In doing this, it explores the style and language of a number of classical Swahili poems and concludes that although it is difficult, if not impossible, to achieve a perfect equivalence in translating a rigid form such as poetry, varieties in translations are an asset rather than a liability. Secondly, since poetry is a means of expressing personal or national ideology, feelings and attitudes, its translation acts as a bridging tool through which different cultures can get closer. This is best exemplified in case of the translated Swahili classical poetry.

Key Words: *Literary Translation, Creativity, Figurative Language, Translator*

Introduction

Translation is an art-form that draws from both linguistic and literary skills. The activity involves a meticulous effort aimed at producing a text in which, "...the techniques, beauty, meaning and the form of the original text have been preserved" (Abbasi and Dastjerdi, 2008). The literary translator is called upon to strike a delicate balance between preserving the aesthetic elegance of the Source Language (SL) while remaining faithful to its meaning in the Target Language (TL). Successful translation requires constant practice with a wide range of literary genres, skills and experience in the art of translation.

However, this is easier said than done as, it is widely acknowledged that translation is a complex academic, theoretical, artistic and pragmatic process. In an effort to come up with an effective translation, the translator often meets a number of obstacles,

challenges or impediments. Such challenges may be linguistic or cultural in nature. For instance, the further the SL and the TL are from each other, the less is the structural and semantic affinity between them. It is therefore the objective that this paper attempts to demonstrate by using examples of translated textual evidence drawn from a number of published English-Swahili literary material drawn from contemporary Kiswahili literature.

It is worth noting that the language of creative literature differs significantly from that of everyday life in that while every day speech employs ordinary words and expressions to convey shared meanings, the creative literary artist uses ordinary words to express deep, artistic or textual meanings hidden in deep symbolism idiomatic or codified meanings. Therefore, literary language requires a trained mind to decipher the “hidden” or “philosophical” coinages whose meanings are embedded in the cultural, temporal environment and values of the era when the work was created. Thus, meaning in language and creative literature is time-bound. Again, the canon of literature in a given epoch gives rise to the emergence of different and sundry approaches of literary criticism which, in turn, affect such applied language arts as literary translation. This is why the literary translator must be alive to the fact that, while ordinary conversation aims at communicating factual information in a straight forward and realistic manner, literary style of communication is shrewdly coumflouged with idiomatic, figurative and symbolic meanings whose substance is often to be found in their implicature and illusion rather than in denotative sense.

With the foregoing in mind, the translator of creative text is aware that it is futile to aim at achieving a “perfect or flawless translation.” As Kiango (2006) observes, while quoting Catford (1965), it is more pragmatic for a translator to try and create “an appropriate translation.” This is because when the source and the target language do not share a common ancestry, their linguistic, environmental, socio-cultural and historical world-views are worlds apart, thus making translation equivalence difficult, if not impossible, to achieve. But, how does the translator set out to create a pragmatic or appropriate text in the TL? For instance, how does one tackle the idiomatic, social and cultural issues that arise in the course of the translation? These, and related matters are addressed in the sections that follow. Examples from various literary translations from English to Kiswahili literature will help shed light on how some translators resolved some of these issues and challenges.

Idiomatic Language Usage and Translation

Language usage is affected by social changes which occurs from time to time. Such changes give rise to new coinages in form of lexical items, catchy phrases, sayings, mottos, idioms or other figures of speech. As a result of such changes, language is forced to conform and thereby acquire new or additional lexicon and other material which find its way in creative literature. Due to passage of time, such material is no longer in active usage and so, the translator finds it difficult to render because, it had been conceived in a specific time and context for a time-specific usage. This means

only people familiar with that usage can fathom the historical meaning of such “outdated” material.

An example here is the popular saying in Ghana in the 1960's and early 1970's which Ayi Kwei Armah borrowed as a title for his famous novel. The idiomatic saying which was given a deep political meaning at the time was that,

“The Beautiful Ones are Not yet Born.” (Original meaning: **People of integrity are hard to find in society**)

When translated into Kiswahili later in late 1970's, the phrase, “**the Beautiful Ones...**” could hardly fully express the original shed of meaning in which the writer referred to moral “beauty” rather than physical attraction. Use of the adjective “beautiful” instead of “good or moral “ presented a challenge to the translator. This translation has led many readers to read the popular novel aiming at discovering this character with a dazzling beauty to behold only to be confronted with a meek and timid protagonist called, Man.

Similarly, the words of the following stanza of the popular political song of the time were which is quoted in the same novel also proved equally elusive when translated into Kiswahili.

In the English original

*Those who have been blessed with power
And swiftness of the eagle
And have gone before
Let them go
I will journey slowly
But, I too, will arrive.*

In Kiswahili, it reads

*Wale waliopata neema ya kuwa na uwezo
Na upaaji juu kama tai
Na wamewahi kupaa juu hapo mwanzo;
Na waende
Nitakwenda taratibu,
Na Mimi nitafika. (46)*

The fine political overtones here were easily overlooked. For instance, the word *power* is not well captured by the suggested Kiswahili lexical equivalent, *uwezo* but, rather, it refers to *mamlaka* or *nguvu*, that is *ability to get things done* or simply, *political influence*. Similarly, *nitakwenda* (I will go) does not bring out the intended idea of *journeying* which implies trekking or going on a difficulty and long trip by foot, thus the image of hardship. Perhaps, *I will struggle* or *I will trudge along*, would have been more appropriate in this context. In this instance *nitafika* (*I will journey*) would have been more appropriate. The final word *nitafika* is translated literary because the original implied meaning here was “*to arrive socio-economically*”, thus the new rich but corrupt socio-political class was said to have *arrived*.

Another illustration is the refrain used in the poetic novel, *Song of Lawino*, by the famous Ugandan poet and scholar, Okot P’Bitek. The chorus here line states:

Let no one uproot the pumpkin plant in the old homestead.

This statement which is repeated throughout the long poem is used in a deeply symbolic manner. The symbol is to be understood in two concepts namely, the *pumpkin plant* and *the old homestead*. The translator must be keen not to overshadow or under- translate either of these cultural concepts. The first one represents the values, attitudes and practices, that is to say, the substance of the Acholi (and by implication, African) culture. The second phrase, *the old homestead*, stands for the entire traditional culture. The translator has to bear in mind this in rendering this symbolic language in translation. Incidentally, this poem was first composed in the Acholi language before translations into English and later Kiswahili.

Another example of a cultural concept in this poem that re hard to translate include:

- *The woman with whom I share my husband* (naturally: *Mke mwenza*) is wrongly rendered as , *Mwanamke tunayeshirikiana mume* (p.12)
- *Similarly English cultural/political concepts are difficult to swahilize eg.*
- *Congress Party and Democratic Party* (these are left untranslated in the Swahili version (p.166)

The Role of Theoretical Underpinnings in Translation

Awareness and knowledge of the major theories of literary criticism is of immense help to the translator. However, translators cannot afford to rely wholly on a single literary theoretical model but rather they ought to be familiar with most of them and, in their practice, draw tenets, ideas and views from an eclectic approach. This is the advice by Landers (2001) in his authoritative book, *Literary Translation: A Practical Guide*. He offers two main reasons for his asserted view. Firstly, literary texts composed in different times do influence each other and secondly, this aspect of intertextuality has a bearing on the meaning (s) of the text which definitely affects its translatability. Simply put, latter day writers are often heavily influenced by the language, style and even, to some extent, the choice of themes of their predecessors. This characteristic is well pronounced in the case of “translations of translations” like in the following examples:

- Sophocles. Originally in Greek and later translated into English as *King Ediphus* then much later translated into Kiswahili as *Mfalme Edipode*
- Sophocles. *Antigone*. Originally in Greek later in English and Kiswahili under the title, *Antegoni*.
- *King Ediphus* was later to influence a modernized Africanised English version titled, *The gods are not to Blame*.
- Ngugi wa Thiong’o and Ngugi wa Mirii heavily relied on Ken Watene’s earlier version of *Dedan Kimathi* in producing their own later version by the same title which was written in English before being translated into Kiswahili.

Thus a translator will be forced to first be familiar with the text of the earlier versions of the present work to be translated in order to enrich his translation.

Apart from intertextuality, the translator must bear in mind issues outlined in the Reader-Response model in which three levels of meaning are amplified: Reader's own meaning; the Writer's meaning and Text' own meaning. The translator has to try and strike a delicate balance through careful interpretation, negotiation and harmonization of these three shades of meaning. In brief, the translator must ask himself, what did the writer in the SL intend the reader to understand and what was the objective? How was the text conceived and constructed and how is it likely to be interpreted today? Although it is obvious that the literary text may be open to various interpretations, it is upon the translator to render the meaning that is most plausible and sensible as far as the writer, the reader and the text are concerned.

Even though the socio-economic and cultural environment of the text can not be overlooked or slighted in translating a given text, especially texts of biographical type, in most cases, the translator confines himself to the singular identity of the text. This is important because as far as the writer's intended meaning or the reader's probable interpretation is concerned, it is not easy for the translator to fathom these two shades of meaning.

The dynamism of language and literature is well aptly given prominence in the theory of Marxism. This model amplifies the critical role played by historical and political forces in shaping the ideology in a given community or nation-state. The translation of Shakespeare's play, *Merchants of Venice* into Kiswahili as *Mabepari wa Venisi* is a good testimony to this fact. Reading the text of this play from a Marxist and Communist perspective, the translator, Mwalimu Julius Nyerere equated the name "Merchants" which in English simply means "rich business person" to *Bepari* (plural, *mabepari*, which in the Marxist jargon means a rich but corrupt business tycoon). Over time, this word (*mabepari*) had acquired a new connotative meaning, that of being a greedy, selfish, dishonesty, inhumane and exploitive individual. This tendency to color language with the political ideology explains, in the first instance, why the subjective choice by Nyerere to translate the two political plays by William Shakespeare: *Merchanst of Venice and Julius Caesar* out of the more than a dozen plays that the famous English play wright published. Obviously, some of Shakespeare's pieces such as *Macbeth, King Lear and Romeo and Juliet* were just as well known and loved just like the two picked by Nyerere. The moral here is political and religious linings play a pivotal role in the choice of texts to be translated or adapted.

Translator's Licence

The above examples underline the importance of the translator being observant of the dominant ideology of the time in considering what is to be translated, how and for what purpose. He does all this while still paying due attention to the text as an entity. In other words, the translator should retain the semantic sense or meaning of the words and phrases with regard to the time the SL text was composed. However, there are instances where the translator breaks away from the ideological grip of the time in which the SL text was composed. The translator does this simply by being selective on what words to translate and which ones to ignore provided, such an action will not change or erode the essence of the meaning of the SL into the TL. For instance, in translating the title of an anthology of poetry on the Angolan and Mozambican liberation struggle done by Margaret Dickson, Paul Sozigwa, the translator, deliberately skipped the sub-title part. The original English version which had been first translated from Portuguese under the title: *When Bullets Begin to Flower*, has a subtitle, *Poems of Resistance from Angola, Mozambique and Guinea*. It is this part that the translator did not consider necessary to translate probably because he regarded it as an excessive detail which was redundant or because, it is well explained in the content. The translator therefore only chose to translate the first part of the title which he rendered in Kiswahili as, *Risasi Zianzapu Kuchanua*.

While the translator is free to exercise his or her right of choice as to what to translate or leave out, care should be taken not to exclude elements or aspects that are crucial either in completing the meaning or fostering the aesthetic appeal of the SL text. One such crucial aspect is repetition in poetry. Not only does repetition serve the purpose of emphasis or stress but it a deliberate aspect of the musicality of the poem. It is therefore not wise to ignore such a characteristic while translating the SL text. A good example is in the translation of Okot P'Bitek's famous poetic composition, *Song of Lawino* referred to above, which was done by the same translator, Paul Zosigwa. While P'Bitek repeats some of the lines in some cases, the translator omits the repeated lines.

Example:

English Original

You kiss her on the cheeks

Like Europeans do

On the lips

Which look like open sores.....

As white people do

The last line in bold font is omitted in the Kiswahili translation which goes:

Unambusu mashavuni

Kama wafanyavyo wazungu

Kwenye midomo

(line above in bold omitted here by translator's discretion)

Kama wafanyavyo wazungu (P.25)

The translator's discretion or licence can also be witnessed in the manner in which some book titles in English original have been rendered in Kiswahili. For instance, while in translating some of the titles the translator has been quite faithful to the original like in the following cases:

English	Kiswahili
<i>Coral Island</i>	<i>Kisiwa cha Matumbawe</i>
<i>Government Inspector</i>	<i>Mkaguzi Mkuu wa Serikali</i>
<i>Treasure Island</i>	<i>Kisiwa Chenye Hazina</i>
<i>Animal Farm</i>	<i>Shamba la Wanyama</i>
<i>I Will Marry When I Want</i>	<i>Nitaolewa Nikipenda</i>
<i>The Beautiful Ones are Not Yet Born</i>	<i>Wema Hawajazaliwa</i>
<i>Weep Not Child</i>	<i>Usilie Mpenzi Wangu</i>
<i>So Long a Letter</i>	<i>Barua Ndefu kama Hii</i>
<i>Devil on the Cross</i>	<i>Shetani Msalabani</i>
<i>Mine Boy</i>	<i>Mchimba Madili</i>

Whereas these first five examples show a high degree of loyalty to the original, in the last title, the Kiswahili rendition, the original word "child" is now translated like the implied endearment name which actually means, 'my child or my baby or better still, my darling.

However, in some translations of titles from English original, the translator takes personal liberty with the language and the meaning thereby creating a new outfit in the translation. Examples here include:

English	Kiswahili
<i>(i) Things Fall Apart</i>	<i>Shujaa Okonkwo</i>
<i>(ii) No Longer at Ease</i>	<i>Hamkani si Shwari Tena</i>
<i>(iii) A Man of the People</i>	<i>Mwakilishi wa Watu</i>
<i>(iv) Crackdown</i>	<i>Maangamizi</i>
<i>(v) Voice of the People</i>	<i>Sauti ya Umma</i>
<i>(vi) The River Between</i>	<i>Njia Panda</i>

Each of the above title translations exhibit some form of challenge that the translator had to grapple with. The problem mainly stems from the meaning intended in the original or source language and the difficulty of rendering it correctly in the target language. Let's look at each of the examples:

- (i) Here, it is not easy to understand why the translator chose to ignore the wording of the title in the original and create his own rendition. The original title amplified the cultural conflict occasioned by the advent of the white missionaries and colonial administration in the traditional culture of Nigeria exemplified here by the Ibo community. The lead character, Okonkwo, is only used by the writer to show how blind resistance to change had to result in self damnation, a fate that could have been avoided with a little degree of flexibility. How then did this Swahili translated novel come to be known by

the name of the lead character is difficult to say but is a mark of the translator's licence.

- (ii) Again, the source and justification for the invention of the new word "*Hamkani*" remains a mystery. Perhaps, the translator introduced it for the purpose of stress or to emphasise the state of restlessness arising from the cultural conflict mentioned above.
- (iii) The idea of representation is absent from the English title. "A Man of the People" could as well mean a popular person who is equally admired and liked by all. "*mwakilishi*", meaning "a representative" perhaps came from the translator's own interpretation of the message of the novel because, the Man in the novel is an elected MP.
- (iv) The translation of original title, "Crackdown", was problematic in that although the lexical meaning is clear, the connotative political meaning implied in the autobiographical novel was slightly different. Lexically, "crackdown" can be rendered in Kiswahili by such synonyms as "*Ukandamizaji*" (repression) or "*Unyanyasaji*" (oppression). However, the intended and demonstrated meaning was that during the era of Moi's one party regime of 1980's and 1990's, political persecution was the order of the day. This explains why the form of political and legal repression, which is the substance of the novel, was not just meant to put down or control opposition but to destroy or exterminate it. This is why the translator felt the need to adopt the stronger word, "*Maangamizi*" which conveys the intended meaning of "extermination" or "wipe out".
- (v) The test here was for the translator to ask himself, which "people"? and since the answer is all the people excluding the ruling clique, then it was inevitable to use the appropriate word, "*Umma*".

Sometime, the translator's licence or liberty is to be observed in his fertile imagination as he creates new literary concepts in the process of playing around with words and meanings. This is evident in the following title renderings:

English

A Miners Letter

The Wretched of the Earth

The River Between

Kiswahili

Barua ya Kibarua (a pun on barua)

Mafalahi wa Ulimwengu (a new word, *mafalahi* is formed and preferred to the known words such as *mafakiri*, *maskini*, *wachochole* all of which mean the poorest of the poor)

Njia Panda (literally: *Cross-road*). Why cross-road yet the original idea was of an image of two villages divided only by a single river between them? Clearly, this translation fails to portray the intended meaning.

Generic Constraints in Translation

Formal literary expression is organized into different styles or genres each of which has its own stylistic and formal attributes. Each genre of literature has developed its own unique ways of using language and expressing meaning.

Literary critics and translators have to always consider the “what” (content) and the “how” (style and structure) of any work that they set out to analyse or translate. Although it is much less difficult for a translator of a literary piece to follow the structure and system of the original, this is not easy to achieve in the translation of poetry. As the examples below indicate, by its very nature, poetry as a literary form is rooted in the inseparable unity between brevity or economy of words and use of figurative or idiomatic language. Equally, use of ungrammatical structures, irony and illusion are also central features of poetic expression.

Additionally, as King'ei (2002) observed, this literary form becomes more difficult to translate mainly due to its oral nature which allows the poet to ignore rules of formal writing and incorporate manners conversational or verbal expression. Here are a few examples from the *Song of Lawino* translated into Kiswahili as *Wimbo wa Lawino*:

English	Kiswahili
<i>Maria the Clean Woman</i>	<i>Maria Mtakatifu (woman is ignored)</i>
<i>Mother of the Hunchback</i>	<i>Mama wa Mungu</i>
<i>Pray for us who spoil things</i>	<i>Tuombe sisi wakosefu</i>
<i>Full of graciya (grace?)</i>	<i>Uliyejaa neema.</i>

It is clear that in this translation, the translator did not fully appreciate the poet's intention which was to deviate from the meaning in the canonical liturgy or Biblical scripture so as express his disapproval by mocking those teachings. This is why he uses some words and phrases ironically or in a derogatory manner. Examples:

Clean woman is wrongly translated as “*mtakatifu*” (*holy*) instead of “*msafi*.”

Mother of Hunchback is wrongly rendered as *Mother of God* instead of *Mother of the man with a hunchback* (literally: *Mama wa mwenye Kibyongo*). The use of the Africanised word morphology *in graciya* (*for grace*) is purely satirical and it escapes the translator's attention again. By failing to understand the intention behind the poet's careful and deliberate choice of words, the translator fails to capture the substantive meaning in the above stanza.

Similarly, in the following stanza,

English	Kiswahili
<i>Oh! Lawino</i>	<i>Eee! Lawino</i>
<i>Come, let me see you</i>	<i>Njoo, nikuone</i>
<i>Daughter of Lenga Moi</i>	<i>Binti ya Lenga Moi</i>
<i>Who has just shot up</i>	<i>Aliyeanza kujitokeza</i>
<i>Young woman come home</i>	<i>Msichana, njoo nyumbani</i>

In his zeal to match the brevity of the lines in the English original, the translator misses the import of the phrase, *just shot up* which is poorly translated as *just come out* instead of *just started to mature*. Secondly, *young woman* is poorly rendered as *msichana (girl)* instead of *Bi mdogo*. Of course, the poet puts emphasis on the idea of passage from girlhood to womanhood' which the translator either ignores or fails to capture.

Translator's Genius and Creativity

In the course of translation, the translator comes across words or phrases that call for the use of one's genius and creative imagination. For instance, a look at the spelling of names in translation from this poem portrays the translator's effort to Africanise the Christian names is made to make the names familiar to his Acholi culture and audience. Here are a few examples:

Acholi	English	Kiswahili
<i>Eliya</i>	<i>Elijah</i>	<i>Eliya</i>
<i>Jekcon</i>	<i>Jackson</i>	<i>Takson</i>
<i>Paraciko</i>	<i>Francis</i>	<i>Fransisi</i>
<i>Tomcon</i>	<i>Thomson</i>	<i>Tomsoni</i>
<i>Gulyelmo</i>	<i>William</i>	<i>Wiliamu</i>
<i>Gilirigoloyo</i>	<i>Gregory</i>	<i>Gregoli</i>

Another example is in the Kiswahili translation of Ferdinard Oyon's master piece, *Houseboy* into *Boi*. Done by the famous Kiswahili poet and critic, Abdilatif Abdalla. When confronted with a song which contained words that he considered vulgar and offensive to the African ear, the translator chooses to play down the obscene phrase by completely leaving it out rather than replacing it with a more euphemistic one. Below is the song and its translation:

English	Kiswahili
<i>Ken ...Ken...Ken...Ken...</i>	<i>Ken...Ken...Ken...Ken...</i>
<i>Out of bed...out of bed...</i>	<i>Amkeni...amkeni...</i>
<i>He doesn't give a fuck for you</i>	-----

By leaving out the "obscene" words, the translator intended to avoid offending his readers' sense of decency. The phrase ignored by the translator, "*He doesn't give a fuck for you*", simply means, "He doesn't love you, care for you or value you". It ought to have been translated as "*Hakupendi* or *Hakuthamini* or *Hakujali kamwe*". So in effect, the fact remains the translator actually under-translated the text and thereby left out a satirical phrase which was crucial in understanding the writer's standpoint regarding the inhuman, racist and repressive repression of the Africans by their colonisers.

Conclusion

As has been observed in the introductory part of this article, the translator needs to tackle the issues of critical approach of the literary work being translated. This is important if he or she is to produce from the SL a TL piece from which the reader will elicit the same interpretation of meaning and intention by the writer as in the original SL.

Secondly, the translator should attempt to conform to the original style and form of the literary work under translation. Among other reasons, this is vital because writers adopt different styles to achieve different results or effects. In addition, the translator has to be imaginative and creative in trying to find appropriate lexical and semantic equivalents of words, phrases or expressions which differ significantly in languages of diverse cultural or generic backgrounds. Such an exercise can prove to be difficult because such meaning, especially in idiomatic languages are often elusive. The task becomes more challenging when the translator has to deal with specific culture-bound texts such as proverbial sayings, figures of speech, colloquialisms as well as texts rooted in specific historical or political contexts unfamiliar to the translator. However, in literary translation, the more taxing such texts are found to be, the more satisfying the result of the translation is bound to be.

The main objective of this article was to outline in brief some of the challenges that often beset the process of literary translation from English into Kiswahili. Comments on the theoretical nature of translation as well as the challenges in dealing with idiomatic expressions have also been highlighted as have the aspects of style and need for creativity. Perhaps, needless to state, there is need to delve more into the challenges of translating texts based on formal or non-creative registers in the two languages.

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