

Translation, Tone Marking and Context: Implications for the Igbo Language Translator

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Abstract

All human societies fall back on translation to carry the richness of their cultural values and traditions across borders. Language is culture as it is being said and translating people's language into another one goes a long way to sell the culture of such people to others who can read and understand the translated works in their own language. Generally, translation has to do with two or more languages which, in most cases, have different structures. This makes the work of the translator more tasking given that literal translation in some situations will never work out. The translator therefore focuses on the contextual meanings of words he is translating. He is faced with many challenges in a language like Igbo where a particular word may have different meanings. In such a situation, we have established the fact that tone marks are very essential tools that can help to facilitate the translator's activities. In this work, we have selected a certain number of Igbo words, indicating their meanings with tone marks and illustrating these meanings in sentences. This is aimed at highlighting the usefulness of tone marks regarding the contextual meanings of words and also to buttress the fact that a word has meaning only in its context.

Key words: Translation, Tone marks, Context, Diacritics, Tongue-twisting.

Introduction

Translation as earlier mentioned is not just a literal easy-to-do exercise. For one to be a seasoned translator, one has to have a deep-rooted knowledge of his two or more working languages. He should be conversant with idioms, proverbs and other coinages and concepts in his working languages so that his work may be easier. As a matter of fact, one should study the cultures to which the working languages belong. The reason for this is not farfetched. As it is said that language is culture, for one to understand a language very well, one should also know what the culture is all about given that certain concepts in the language are embedded in the culture. Again, a translator has to be aware of the fact that certain words may have different meanings so as to enable him ascertain the particular meaning of the word in a given context.

In tone languages such as Chinese, Igbo inclusive, in which differences in tone can change the meaning of words, the issue of tone-marking is highlighted. Different tones represent different pitches in Igbo (Okoli, 2017) and other languages as follows:-

 / for high pitch
 \ for low pitch

 ó for step or mid pitch

These tones, according to Umeodinka et al, (2019: 98) are referred to as òAkaraudaoluò in Igbo language and a collection of these tones make up what we refer to as tone marks and they are placed on top of word syllables to indicate high, low or step/mid pitches. They give a sense of pronunciation and meaning to a given word. On the other hand, diacritics also help in the pronunciation of Igbo words. Diacritics in Igbo orthography are those marks (mainly) dots placed under the vowels i, o, u, to make room for tone marks e.g. i = , o = , u = . When these marks are placed under the letters of the alphabet, the meaning of words changes also, for example

isi = head
s as (to tell lies)
olu ó neck
l ó work
ukwu ó waist
kw ó leg

From these examples, we can deduce that diacritics are as important as tone marks in a translation exercise. They guide in the pronunciation of words which eventually helps in understanding the meaning of the words.

In this work, we have selected 25 Igbo words,



having different meanings highlighted by tone marks. These words are also represented in sentences for further illustration. Tone marks are also useful in the aspect of language known as tongue-twisting. Here, a particular word can be repeated several times in the same sentence. It is only with the use of tone marks and diacritics that the different meanings of that word are ascertained. An example of this will be presented later in the course of this work.

It is imperative that any translator having Igbo as one of his working languages take cognizance of the tone marks, otherwise he/she might fall into the confusion of giving another meaning to a word that has multi meaning.

Added to the relevance of tone marks to translation is the role of context. Context is another determining factor in the meaning given to a word, hence the saying that a word has meaning only in its context.

Translation is the re-expression in another language of a text or message which is written in another given language. In re-expression, the translator makes sure that:

- the entire message in the source language is reflected in the target language.
- the language in the target language flows in such a way that it is difficult to know that it is a translation.
- the meanings of the words in the source language text are understood clearly before the commencement of translation.
- he, the translator, is not controlled by the structure of the source text since it may not correspond with that of the target text.

Tone marking and illustrated examples in sentences

1. akwa

- ākwá (egg): (mid(step)/high tones) A zṛtaram m akwa n'ahjā
I bought egg from the market
- ákwà (cloth): (high & low tones) Nye m akwa ahụ.
Give me that cloth.
- àkwà (brigde): (low & low tones) Any si n'akwa mmiri gafere.
We crossed the bridge.

- he understands the global meaning of the source text before venturing into translation as this will help him to know the actual meaning of a given word.

Tone marks: These are marks placed on word syllables to indicate high, low or step/mid pitches. They aid in the pronunciation of words and to ascertain their meanings. Tone marks are also very useful in tongue twisting. Examples of this will be presented later.

Context: The circumstances that form the setting for an event, statement, or idea, and in terms of which it can be fully understood.

Synonyms: circumstances, conditions, surroundings, factors, state of affairs etc.

List of twenty-five selected Igbo words for illustration.

akwa	ibu
akpu	ogu
agba	ada
egwu	agwa
isi	ube
ike	aja
oke	akara
azụ	anụ
ngu	ite
eze	biri
egbe	ahia
aku	agbu
buo	



- ákwá (Cry):
(high & high) Any n r akwa nwa ebe a.
I heard the cry of a child here.
 - ākwá (to sew):
(mid(step) & high tones) Nne m na-akwa akwa.
My mother sews cloth.
2. akpu
- ákpú (cassava):
(high & high tones) Biko z tara m akp n'ah a.
Please buy cassava for me from the market.
 - ákpù (swelling):
(high & low tones) O bu akp n'isi.
He has a swelling on the head.
 - ákpù (knot):
(high & low tones) Biko kechie akp ah nke oma.
Please tie that knot very well.
 - ākpú (to crawl):
(mid(step) & high tone) Agwọ na-akp akp .
The snake crawls.
 - ākpú (to mould):
(mid(step) & high tones) Ụm nwany Okigwe na-akp ite ọ.
Okigwe women mould earthen pots.
3. agba
- àgbà (jaw):
(low & low tones) Nwoke a nwere agba ogologo.
This man has a long jaw.
 - àgbà (appointment):
(low & low tones) - Ụm akw kw na onye nkuzi ha yiri agba echi na- abịa abia
The students and their teacher have an appointment for tomorrow.
 - ágbá (paint) :
(high & high tones) Were agba cha tee n' lọ gi.
Use white paint on your house.
 - àgbà (prestige):
(low/low) Onye Ụkọchukwu ah nwere agba.
That priest has prestige.
4. egwu
- égwú (dance):
(high & high) Ada maara ka-esi gba egwu.
Ada knows how to dance.
 - égwù (fear) :
(high & low) A na m at egwu nd oshi.
I am afraid of thieves/I fear thieves.
 - gwú (to dig):
(mid(step) & high): Ọ na egwu ala.
He is digging the ground.
 - égwù (to swim): Ụm ntak r na-egwu mmiri n'ehihie.
Children swim in the afternoon.
5. isi
- ísì (head)
(high & high) I nwere isi ole?
How many heads do you have?
 - Ís (to cook)
(high/mid) A na m akwado isi nri.
I am preparing to cook.
 - ìsì (blind):
(low & low) Nwoke a kpuru isi.
This man is blind?
 - ísì (odour)
(high/low) Mmiri a nwere isi ọjọọ.
This water has a bad odour.

6. ike

- íké (Power):
(high & high) Ike di n'òbara Jizos.
There is power in the blood of Jesus.
- íkè (Buttocks):
(high & low) Nwanyị ahụ nwere ike ukwu.
That woman has big buttocks.
- ìkè (pod):
(low & Low) E nwerem ike ụgu abụọ.
I have two pods of fluted pumpkin.
- ké (to tie) (something):
(mid & high) Ha na-aga ike nkụ.
They are going to tie firewood.

7. oke

- óké (Male):
(High & high) Oke ọkụkọ kwara akwa n'ụtụtụ.
The cock crowed in the morning?
- òkè (share):
(low & low) Biko nye m oke nkem.
Please give me my own share.
- òké (rat):
(mid & high) Oke a tachaala azụ m nile.
The rat has eaten all my fish.
- ókè (boundary):
(high & low) Ndi okenye maara oke ala a.
Elders know the boundary of this land.

8. azu

- ázù (Fish):
(high & low) A gam etinye azụ n'ofe m.
I will put fish in my soup.
- āzú (back):
(mid & high) Kụọ m aka n'azụ biko.
Please pat me on the back.
- āzú (to buy):
(mid & high) A na m azu nri akpụ.
I am buying cassava fufufu.
- ázù (to train (a child)):
(high & low) Ndi okenye ma ka esi azụ ụmụ.
Elders know how to train children.

9. ngu

- òngù (shoulder):
(low & low) Buru ibu ahụ na ngụ gị.
Carry that load on your shoulder.
- gù (sauce from mixture of ash/potash):
(high/low) Mama Adaeze zụtara ngụ n'ahịa.
Adeze's mother bought potash sauce
from the market.
- ngú (go-to-hell):
(mid & high) E ji ngu ekodata ube?
Go-to-hell is used to pluck pears.

10. eze

- ézè (tooth):
(high & high) Otu eze m dapụrụ echi gara aga.
One of my teeth fell off yesterday.
- ézè (King):
(high/low) Nwoke ọcha ahụ bụ eze obodo m.
That fair man is the king of my place.

- ézè (to take cover):
(high/low) Ndi agha na-eze mgbo n'okpuru akwa mmiri.
Soldiers take cover under the brigade.
11. egbe
- égbé (Kite):
(high & high) Egbe beere n'elu osisi nkwu.
The Kite is perching on the palm tree.
 - égbè (gun):
(high/low) Nna m na-eji egbe ya achu nta.
My father hunts with his gun.
 - gbé (to crawl):
(mid/high) Obere nwa a na-egbe igbere.
This little child is crawling.
12. aku
- àkù (termite):
(low & low) Aku na-emebisi akuku n'ubi ndi mmadu.
Termites destroy crops in people's farms.
 - àkú (arrow):
(mid & high) Aku ahụ mawara nwoke ahụ ukwu.
That arrow pierced that man's leg.
 - àkú (to plant something):
(mid & high) Umuntakiri na-aku oka n'ubi.
Children are planting corn in the farm.
 - àkú (to knock):
(mid & high) Onye na-aku aka n'uzo?
Who is knocking on the door?
13. Ibu
- íbú (load):
(high & high): Donye ibu ahụ na n'ugbo ala gi.
Put that load in your car.
 - íbù (fat):
(high & low): Ugonna buru oke ibu.
Ugonna is too fat.
 - bù (to carry something):
(mid & low) A na m eje ibu nku.
I am going to carry firewood.
 - íbū (to prophecy):
(high&mid) Ibu amuma a dighikwa ofere.
To prophesy is not easy.
14. ogu
- ògù (fight):
(low/low) Ogu dara n'ime ahia Eke.
A fight ensued in the Eke market.
 - óg (twenty):
(high/mid) Nwa m nwoke di ugu afọ abuo na ato.
My son is twenty-three years old.
 - ógù (hoe):
(high/low) E nwere m naani otu ugu.
I have only one hoe.
15. ada
- ādà (1st daughter):
(high/low) Ada m nwanyi na-acha ocha.
My daughter is fair in complexion.
 - ádà (beetle):
(high/low) A hụm ada na-akpu nsi.
I saw a beetle moulding excreta.
 - ádà (to fall down):
Umuntakiri na-ada ada kwangbe na mgbe.
Children fall down from time to time.

16. agwa

- àgwà (beans):
(low/low) Agwa na-atọ ezigbo uto.
Beans is very sweet
- àgwà (character)
(low/low) Agwa nwantakiri nwan yi ahụ joro njo.
That girl's character is bad.
- Ágwà (name of a place):
(high/low) Onye isi ulo akwukwo anyi nke nwan yi bu onye Agwa.
Our headmistress is a native of Agwa.
- ágwá (to tell)
(mid/high) A na m agwa gi okwu a site n'ala ala obi m.
I am telling you this from the bottom of my heart.

17. ube

- bé (pear):
(mid/high) Umụ akwukwo m wetara m akpa ube.
My students brought a bag of pear for me.
- úbè (spear):
(high/low) A na-eji ube alu agha, jikwa ya na-achụ nta.
A spear is used for fighting and for hunting
- bé (cry of something):
(mid/high) A nuru m ube nwa a muru oheru n'ime oha.
I heard the cry of a new born baby in the bush.

18. aja

- ájá (sand):
(high/high) O ji aja nkiti wuo ulo ya.
He built his house with ordinary sand.
- àjà (sacrifice)
(low/low) Anyi na-achuru Chukwu aja ekele mgbe nile.
We always make sacrifices of thanksgiving to God
- ájá (to praise):
(mid/high) Anyi na-aja Chukwu mma n'ututu, n'ehihie na n'abali.
We praise God both in the morning, afternoon and night.

19. akara

- àkàrà (beans/cassava cake):
(low/low/low) Akara na achicha na-adị mma i ji eme nri ututu.
Bean cake and bread are good for breakfast.
- ákàrà (line/mark/sign)
(high/low/low) (1). Onye Uko chukwu merem akara nk'obe n'ihu.
The priest made a sign of the cross on my face.
(2). Nwantakiri ahụ kara ogologo akara n'akwukwu ya.
That child drew a long line on his book.
(3). I makwa na m nwere akara na nti m?
Do you know I have a mark on my cheek?

20. anu

- ánú (meat):
(high/high) Anu ewu na-atọ uto.
Goat meat is sweet.
- ānú (to hear):
(mid/high) Obere nnwa a na-anu ihe.
This little child hears.

21. otu

- ótù (one):
(high/low) Otu nwoke bara n'ulo nwan yi ahụ.
A man entered that woman's house.

- òtù (group)
(low/low) Ha niile nọ n'otu otu.
All of them are in the same group.
- 22. agu
 - ágù (lion):
(high/low) Agụ bụ anụmanụ siri ike.
The lion is a strong animal.
 - āgú (to read):
(mid/high) Ọ maara agụ akwụkwụ.
He/She knows how to read.
- 23. ukwu
 - úkwù (waist):
(high/low) Ukwu nwanyị ahụ buru ibu.
That woman's waist is big.
 - ùkwù (heap):
(low/low) Ukwu nkụ ahụ dị arọ.
That heap of firewood is heavy.
- 24. iko
 - kó (cup):
(mid/high) Iko a bụ iko ngozi.
This is a cup of blessing.
 - íkó (concubine):
(high/high) Onye isi obodo m nwere iko nwanyị.
My village head has a female concubine.
- 25. buo
 - bùó (sing):
(low/high) Ha sịrị anyị bịa buọ abụ.
They told us to come and sing.
 - bùó (to spit):
(low/high) Ha bịa ka ha buọ m asụ.
They came to spit one me.
 - bùó (to uproot):
(low/high) Biana buọ mgborogwu osisi ahụ.
Come and uproot that tree.
 - búó (to scramble for something):
(high/high) Ada, bịa k'anyị jee buọ ụbụ nri.
Ada, come let's go and scramble for food.
 - bùó (to curse):
(low/high) Nne ha bịa ka ọ buọ ha ọñụ maka agwa ọjọọ ha.
Their mother came to curse them because of their bad behaviour.

It should be noted however, that tone marks are essentially useful wherever there is fear of ambiguity, especially in lines of poetry or sentence examples in grammar texts. In such cases, the writer may adopt selectional tone marking, that is, tone marking only the ambiguous words. Let us also note that the Igbo words/sentences used in this work are based on central Igbo dialect. There are some other versions of Igbo dialects that may not correspond with the one used in this work.

Tone Marks in Tongue-Twisting

Tongue twisting refers to a situation in which one particular word (or consonant) is repeated several times in a particular sentence. And each of the repeated versions of the word portrays a different meaning. As earlier mentioned, it is only through the use of tone marks and diacritics that the different pronunciations and meanings of that word are ascertained.

Examples of such sentences in Igbo showing the different meanings of the word

- a. Nwanyị na-akwa ákwà¹ na-akwa ákwá² na ọkụk yiri kwá³ n̄elu ákwà⁴ ọ kwara kwá⁵ d n̄elu àkwà⁶.



õThe seamstress is weeping or crying because a hen laid an egg on the finished outfit (fabric/material) on the bed.ö

Akwa in the sentence means:

1. Fabric ó Nwany na-akwa ákwà.
2. Crying ó na-akwa ákwá.
3. egg ó na òkukò yiri kwá.
4. fabric ó nœlu ákwà.
5. Sew/sewing ó ò kwara kwá.
6. Bed ó dì nœlu ákwà.

The use of tone marks evokes the idea of diction, that is, the way some words are pronounced. According to Obobolo (2015) in his write-up *õThe language of literature: Theory & Practiceö*, in emotive usage of language, meanings of words are implicit. Permit me then to say that it is only through the diction, which is a product of tone marking, that the meaning of the word is made explicit. Obviously then, it is when the word is pronounced correctly that its actual meaning comes out. At this point, the translator can do his work with much ease.

A close look at our discussion so far shows that the majority of Igbo words have more than one meaning. I therefore opine that there is no limit to the extent to which tone marks can facilitate the translators' challenges of tone languages like Igbo. The importance of tone marks in the pronunciation and translation of Igbo words/texts therefore, cannot be overemphasized.

Coming to the issue of development of the Igbo language in general, there is no gainsaying the fact that translation plays a very important role here. In as much as indigenous languages (Igbo inclusive) have their peculiar elements and concepts which are adequate to express the cultures of their users, there is no doubt that with the advent of globalization and the foreign goods and services in countries like Nigeria, native speakers get into trouble as the nomenclature of such foreign goods and services are lacking in our setting. It is therefore through translation that indigenous names could be attached to the foreign goods.

Thus, the services of translators are needed at

all cost for the survival and growth of indigenous languages provided the translators are conversant with the concepts of any speech community they are concerned with. This will enable them to find equivalent forms of such concepts in another language and thus makes translation an enjoyable experience.

Recommendations

Having mentioned earlier that there are several other versions of the dialects of the Igbo language, the result of which some linguists disagree as to which dialect to be adopted, I recommend that the Igbo Academy, by virtue of its position, should determine and come up with the tone to accept centrally. The reason for this recommendation is that during my research for this paper, I discovered that different linguists differ in their opinion about the use and non-use of tone marks. This, to an extent, has affected the writing and translation of Igbo texts.

From the ongoing, we could see that tone marks are very important in translation especially in case of words with multiple meanings. Except for some Igbo translators who probably may know that a word may have different meanings, the rest will run into problems when they cannot discern the particular meaning of a word required in a given situation.

Again, if a machine should do the translation of a text that did not use either tone marks or diacritics, the translator will be faced with a lot of ambiguity. To this effect, I recommend that computational linguists should do a thorough research on tone marking and diacritics after which they should proceed to create a translation software in the Igbo language to check the



menace of ambiguity.

Conclusion

Indigenous languages, Igbo inclusive, are peculiar to their speech communities. A non-member of any given speech community can neither speak nor understand certain concepts and coinages of such communities. A translator who works with the indigenous language of such a community must be well grounded in their language and, in areas of ambiguity, he should use either diacritics or tone marks to drive his points home. Without translation, most of the works of art and literature written in indigenous languages will not see the light of the day. Take for example; Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* has been translated into several languages of the

world thereby popularizing immensely the story of that novel. The same thing will go for any other work of art, like novels, written in Igbo. Through translation of such works into other languages of the world, the Igbo cultures are transmitted to them.

We highlighted the importance of tone marking in Igbo language in this work. Unfortunately, many of our translators who did not do Igbo language as a course of study know little or nothing about tone marking. It is our candid advice here that they should take time to do an elaborate study on tone marking as this would enable them to translate more Igbo texts into other languages of the world thereby boosting its development.

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