



Question of Equivalence in Translation: Analysis of the Mandinka-English Translated Transcripts of TRRC Witnesses in the Gambia

Oladotun Opeoluwa Olagbaju^{[a],*}; Abdoulie Senghore^[b]

^[a] PhD. Clinton School of Public Service, University of Arkansas, United States of America.

^[b] School of Arts & Sciences, The University of The Gambia, Brikama.

* Corresponding author.

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Abstract

Translation is a linguistic reality in every multilingual society, the Gambia inclusive. Although English is the official language of the Gambia, the government explores the instrumentality of translation to inform citizens that are unlearned about activities and programmes of the state. The Truth Reconciliation and Reparation Commission (TRRC) was established to take testimonies from witnesses or victims of human rights abuse during the immediate past administration in the country. Most of the testimonies were given in Mandinka or Wolof and translated into English during the course of the TRRC proceedings. The concern of this study is to determine equivalence in the Mandinka-English translations from the source to the target language in terms of meaning and content. The study employed a qualitative research design using four randomly selected TRRC case notes as source of primary data. Three research questions were raised and the result showed that Mandinka-English translations in the TRRC proceedings were not equivalent in meaning and content. Findings also prove that equivalence in translation is a possibility.

Key words: Translation; Equivalence; TRCC; Mandinka; English Language

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INTRODUCTION

Language is the resource used by humans to construct, organize and disseminate information for the existence of any human society. Araromi (2005) succinctly points out that language is the vehicle of communication per excellence without which human beings will find it difficult, if not impossible, to exist. Language provides a platform for human relations and cooperation within and outside a geographical entity because language is used to establish and maintain social roles and relations. Language plays influential roles in transaction, reconciliation and communication in every human society.

The Gambia is linguistically heterogeneous by default, therefore, different indigenous languages co-exist and share certain roles with English language which is the nation's official language and the language of instruction in schools. The Gambia is a multi-ethnic and a multi-racial society with an unparalleled degree of ethnic, racial and religious tolerance and civil tranquility. Small as it is, it has over fifteen ethnic groupings, with Mandinka being 36% as the largest, Fula 22%, Wolof 14%, Jola 11% alongside other smaller units like the Serre, the Bambara, Majango, and Aku (Omotosho & Senghore, 2018). The reality of the Gambian language situation as with most multilingual nations (Olagbaju, 2014; 2020), suggests that most of the citizens are bilinguals or multilinguals because they have access to more than a language daily.

Although English language remains the official language of the Gambia, the use of indigenous languages and translators or interpreters is not uncommon in the official business of the state. This is perhaps due to the high rate of illiteracy in the country. According to statistics presented by www.knoema.com, as at 2015, adult (15+ and above) literacy rate for Gambia had grown substantially from 36.8% to 50.8% which shows an annual increase rate of up to 21.04% in 2015.

According to Soyoye and Banigo (2010), translation is a survival skill in any bilingual or multilingual society

because people without the proficiency or skill to translate from a source to a target text in a multilingual setting will be poorly informed with regards to local and international events. Therefore, in a bid to include all the teeming populace without the requisite skills to communicate in English in the programmes and activities of the government, efforts are made to translate large portions of such programmes to the dominant indigenous languages (based on spread or number of speakers) such as Mandinka or Wolof.

One of such initiatives was the English-Mandinka/Wolof or Mandinka/Wolof-English translation allowed in the cross examination or testimonies of witnesses in the proceedings of the Truth, Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (TRRC). The TRRC was set up on 15th October, 2018 to investigate Yahya Jammeh era (1994-2017) for the purpose of uncovering the truth, seeking justice and avert the reoccurrence of such grave human rights violations in the Gambia. The Commission has the mandate to investigate past human rights violation, establish a clear historical record of what happened during the presidency of Yahya Jammeh, contribute to seeking justice and design of a national reparation programme for the victims of the regime.

The proceedings of TRRC are transmitted live on designated television and radio stations in the country. The Commission takes testimonies and cross examines witnesses in the search for the truth and uncovering the series of human rights violation in the gory days of the immediate past administration. Proceedings are conducted in the English language which is the official language of the Gambia, but witnesses are allowed to give their testimonies in the indigenous languages, especially in Mandinka and Wolof which are then translated to English by designated translators working with the TRRC. Translation has been described as both an art and a process by several authors. Catford (1965) considers translation as a process of substituting the words of a particular language for another while Hutchins (2001) argues that translation goes beyond mere substitution of word because it is more of an art than a process. Also, Odoje (2010) avers that effective translators must have a deep understanding of the morphological, syntactic, semantic, pragmatic structures as well as cultural nuances of both the source and target languages

The underlying principle in translation is that it involves the basic understanding of the two languages involved. However, the quality of most of the translations of the witnesses' testimonies in the TRRC proceedings in terms of content and equivalence has been a cause of concern to most of the people that are proficient in the use of these indigenous languages and English. Literature has affirmed that the processes involved in translation are challenging and there is nothing like a perfect translation. For example, Jurafsky and Martin (2000) assert that the cultural differences that exist among native speakers of

different languages make a perfect translation an illusion.

The implication of this is that both the verbal and non-verbal elements of the communication process in a particular language cannot be adequately reflected in another. Also, vital grammatical cues, cultural and semantic contents are often eroded in the Mandinka-English translations of the TRRC proceedings.

The concern of this study is to analyze the quality of some of the Mandinka-English translations of the TRRC proceedings in terms of its equivalence in semantics and content. In this study, semantics is about the adequacy of the translation in terms of meaning from the source language (SL) to the target language (TL), and the content focuses on the details captured by the translator in the process of translating from Mandinka to English or vice versa. The study also suggested how equivalence can be achieved from source to target language irrespective of the languages.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Translation of witnesses' testimonies and cross examination process is an important aspect of the TRRC proceedings in the Gambia. Translation helps to effectively bridge the gap between the speakers and non-speakers of English language and foster national integration and social tolerance. In spite of this, the study of translation has not received much research interest and there are no previous studies on Mandinka-English translation in the Gambia. The few efforts at improving the quality of translation are mostly through teacher-training programmes. Therefore, this study examines the equivalence of Mandinka-English translation in terms of semantics and content using translation samples from the proceedings of the TRRC as a case study.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Is there semantic equivalence in Mandinka-English translations of the TRRC proceedings?
2. Is there content equivalence in Mandinka-English translations of the TRRC proceedings?
3. Can equivalence be achieved in Mandinka-English translations?

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: ROMAN JAKOBSON'S LINGUISTIC MEANING AND EQUIVALENCE THEORY

Roman Jakobson, a translation expert, argued that language is not just about structure rather, the entire purpose of translation is to achieve equivalence. As-Safi (1996) describes equivalence as the core of the translation process because it deals with the attainment of bilingual replacement or sameness based on lexical universals

and cultural overlaps by matching the target text (TT) to the source text (ST) as much as possible. The theory emphasizes linguistic meaning and content equivalence in the process of translation. Jakobson's theory identified 3 types of translation which are:

1. Intralingual – paraphrasing, summarizing, or commenting within a language.

2. Interlingual – the translation from Source to Target language by shifting of meaning from one language to another.

3. Intersemiotic – the changing of a written text into a different form, such as art or dance.

According to Jakobson (2000), meaning and equivalence are linked to the interlingual form of translation, which involves having same message that is equivalent in two different languages. He opines that concepts in the source language as being transferrable to the target language through rewording and considers the differences between languages in terms of grammar, semantics and lexicon. Nida (2001) classifies equivalence in translation as either formal or dynamic. Formal equivalence centres on maintaining the structure of the message in the source text (ST) while dynamic focuses on retaining the genuineness of expression. The equivalence theorists share Chomsky's views about Universal Grammar as a way of analyzing the underlying structures of the Source Text in order to reconstruct them in Target Text, so that a similar response between the target audience and Target Text and source audience and Source Text can be achieved.

Similarly, Bassnett (1988) avers that equivalence in translation can be in four stages which are linguistics, paradigmatics, stylistics and textual or syntagmatic. Jakobson (1959) submits that equivalence is achieved in the process of translation when items in the original (source text) and translation (target text) share significant areas of common features in their contexts. The focus of this work is on the inter-lingual type of translation with emphasis on linguistic meaning (semantics) and content equivalence in Mandinka-English translation of witnesses' testimonies or cross-examinations during TRRC proceedings.

EQUIVALENCE IN TRANSLATION

Translation is an investable language experience for a bilingual or multilingual. Translation skills equip individuals with ability to converse, share thoughts or opinions without a recourse to the differences in their linguistic backgrounds. According to Nida and Taber (1969), translation involves the reproduction of the messages in source language (SL) in its closest natural equivalent in the target language (TL) in terms of meaning and style. In other words, translation seeks to produce a version that is very close in meaning and style to the source language.

Venuti (2000) avers that the translated version should share sameness in content and meaning with the text in the source language as much as possible. From the foregoing, it is obvious that translation is a task that requires the knowledge and skills in at least two language. Translation is an attempt to express the ideas expressed in a source language into a target language in a way that people who are proficient in the target language are able to comprehend what has been translated clearly and vividly. It is pertinent to note that a good translation must carry all the ideas of the original language as well as the structural and cultural features. In furtherance of this idea, Massaud (1988) suggests that a good translation:

1. Must be easily understood
2. Must be fluent and smooth
3. Must be idiomatic
4. Must convey to some extent, the literary details of the original.
5. Must distinguish between the literal and metaphorical statements.
6. Must reconstruct the cultural and historical context of the original.
7. Must convey as much as possible the meaning of the original text.

It is however, a pity that a lot of translations fall short of the recommendations by Massaud as stated above. Most of the problems common to translation are linguistically and culturally based. Linguistic problems in translation covers language-related aspects such as differences in grammar, syntax, morphology, words, pragmatics and ambiguity in meaning (semantics). The cultural problems deal with the contextual and situational features of the source language that may compromise the content or meaning in the translated version of the target language if not retained.

A poorly translated text is devoid of equivalence in content and meaning between the source and target languages and a text can be over-translated or under-translated. Critically examining these problems, the onus is on the translator to work towards the attainment of equivalence in the message from the source text to the target readers.

METHODOLOGY

The research adopted a qualitative design of case study model. The instrument used are the excerpts of the translated TRRC witnesses' testimonies and cross examinations during the committee's sitting in Kololi, The Gambia. A sample of four excerpts were randomly selected: both testimonies and cross-examination sessions. For the sake of neutrality in political matters, all the witnesses are treated as anonymous. The Mandinka-English translations of the four randomly selected materials were analyzed to ascertain their equivalence in

terms of semantics and content. The findings were used to answer the three research questions raised in the study.

Mandinka-English Translation and Analysis

1st Transcript of Mandinka to English translations from the TRRC hearings

Date: 27th March, 2018.

First Session

Question: How did you learn about what happened to your husband?

Witness A: *Wo somo ntell be serij ne doronj maaje amaj naa.*

2nd Translator: The next day, we sat down and we realized that he did not return.

Revised translation with equivalence: The next day, we were sitting down and we did not see him. He did not come.

Question: Who did you go with to West Field Junction?

Witness A: *Ndamaa le tata.*

2nd Translator: I went there alone

Revised translation with equivalence: I went alone.

Question: When you went to West Field Junction, what happened?

Witness A: *Emm a koleyat baake leh. Woluj nteh mij keta na wo dulato, Allah doronj ne sa fo no. Nta fono la.*

2nd Translator: It was very difficult. That day, what I felt that day, only God can say. I cannot explain how I felt.

Revised translation with equivalence: It was very difficult. On that day, what happened to me at that place, only God can say? I cannot say it.

Question: Who did you find in that office at the NIA?

Witness A: *Nfutata doronj, ŋa Bah tara sirij annij Baboucarr Jatta.*

2nd Translator: When I entered, I found Bah seated with Baboucarr Jatta.

Revised translation with equivalence: When I arrived, I found Bah seated with Baboucarr Jatta.

Question: What did they ask you there?

Witness A: *Yeŋ Nininjka Basir la korrd a jellu le ba bullu.*

2nd Translator: They asked me how many houses Basiru had.

Revised translation with equivalence: They asked me how many compounds Basiru has.

Analysis of the first transcript:

The Mandinka-English translation was not equivalent in meaning and content because in the first translation he made use of the wrong tense form: a past tense instead of a past continuous form. Also, there was a use of a redundant pronoun 'there' in the second translation which constituted an unnecessary repetition that hindered the flow of ideas and meaning. There is also a wrong choice of lexicon 'entered' instead of 'arrived' which would have been the equivalent of the Mandinka word uttered by the witness. Similarly, certain cultural elements were

not captured by the TRRC translator, one of such is the use of word 'houses' instead of the Mandinka equivalence which would have been 'compound'. This shows that the translation was poor in quality in terms of meaning and content. Therefore, the first research question raised in the study was answered that the TRRC Mandinka-English translations lacked equivalence in meaning.

2nd Transcript of Mandinka to English translations from the TRRC hearings

Date: 29th October, 2019.

First Session

Question: Witness was asked to repeat her answer on whether she was employed or doing any work?

Witness B: *Mantara fenjo fena mantara fenjo fena sañij. Mbuka feŋ keno.*

1st Translator: I am not doing anything now. I am unable to do anything.

Revised translation with equivalence: I am doing nothing. I am doing nothing now. I am unable to do anything.

Question: Why are you not able to do anything now?

Witness B: *Musoola doku jama ba abuloo le bala ana asiŋho. Nte la wol duŋ bey maŋ beteya sañij.*

1st Translator: Most of the woman's means of working is through the hands and the feet and as it is now, I am unable to do anything with those.

Revised translation with equivalence: Women mostly depends on their hands and legs to work. For me, both are no longer good.

Question: And why are you not able to use your hands and legs?

Witness B: *Yeŋ buloo katti le, yeŋ ñori le kaŋ siŋho, ñij fanaa ñij ntokuŋo ñij fanaa bonda la palasoto. So taamo ka koleya mbulleh*

1st Translator: They broke my hand and they also pushed me down and I dislocated my foot.

Revised translation with equivalence: They broke my hand, the pushed me causing the dislocation of this my hip. So, walking is difficult for me.

Question: You just started to tell us about what happened in the year 2006. Can you remember the precise date?

Witness B: *Haa, ŋhakiloo se bulla la kañ.*

1st Translator: Yes, I can recall.

Revised translation with equivalence: Yes, my mind can recall.

Question: How do you know Solo Sandeng

Witness B: *Nte naamu party killij neti UDP*

1st Translator: We all belong to the same party, UDP.

Revised translation with equivalence: He and I belong to the same party, UDP.

Question: The banner that they were holding? Do you know what was written on it?

Witness B: *Nte maŋ taa karaŋ mbuŋo to deh nte ma loŋ.*

1st Translator: I have not been to school. I do not know.

Revised translation with equivalence: I did not go to school. I did not know.

Analysis of the second transcript:

On equivalence of the translation in terms of meaning and content, the excerpts above are not adequate. There are several instances of ambiguity with regards to the TRRC translator's version. For example, 'I have not been to school' was the translation for a Mandinka statement that should have been interpreted as 'I did not go to school'. Other instances are wrong choice of tenses as in 'do (present tense)' in place of 'did (past tense)' and overgeneralization – the TRRC translator said 'We all belong to the same party, UDP' instead of the equivalent translation which would have been 'He and I belong to the same party, UDP'. These errors in translation shows that there was no equivalence between the TRRC translations and the witnesses' Mandinka. Therefore, the second research question raised in the study was answered that the TRRC Mandinka-English translations lacked equivalence in content.

3rd Transcript of Mandinka to English translations from the TRRC hearings

Date: 13th November, 2019.

First Session

Question: The witness was asked to give reasons for his promotions.

Witness C: *Nka dokuwo mej ke nuŋ, na kebbal laa tanaa inaata yey promote koteke*

1st Translator: Because of my hard work, the seniors were relying on me, then I was promoted again.

Revised translation with equivalence: The work I was doing, my seniors trusted me, and they came and promoted me again.

Question: What happened next?

Witness C: *Nii tata office, ibuka comfortable, becus mbey ŋa loŋ neh miŋ be kerij. Daa taa fola.*

1st translator: When you go to the office, you cannot be comfortable because we all know what was existing. No man can talk about it.

Revised translation with equivalence: When you go to the office, you are not comfortable because we all know the existing situation then. No mouth will say it.

Question: What kind of situation were senior police officers faced with at that time?

Witness C: *Wo tumola, ikka instructions le follow. Akuyateyeh, adiyateyeh. Foyaa nooma.*

1st Translator: During those days you only follow instructions. Whether you like it or not. You have to follow those instructions.

Revised translation with equivalence: At that time, you follow instructions; whether you like or not, you have to follow them.

Question: And what were people afraid of? What was the fear? What would happen if you either disobeyed

orders or didn't do what was expected?

Witness C: *Da mira ateh faŋo, ma, ifanjo yaloneh miŋ be kerij nuŋ. Nii ma loŋ ikaa moyleh.*

1st Translator: I think you yourself should know what was happening. Even if you don't know, you might hear it from people.

Revised translation with equivalence: I think you also know what was happening, Ma. If you don't know, you hear it.

Question: Can you give us some examples of problems they would cause if you disobeyed an order?

Witness C: *Example, nte faŋo la case, wo maŋ mo kumpa ŋij baŋko kaŋ. Barry nteh ka toŋa le fayeh.*

1st Translator: The example is my own case. Well, everybody has heard about that in this country. But me, I always tell him the truth.

Revised translation with equivalence: Example, my own case. That is not a secret to anybody in this country. But I, I tell him the truth.

Question: Are you referring to your own victimization that happened after the witch hunt?

Witness C: *Wo damaa faŋo nteh.*

1st Translator: That's not the only thing I'm talking about.

Revised translation with equivalence: That is not the only thing.

Analysis of the third transcript:

Similarly, during this session, the TRRC translator had several instances of overstatements or 'overtranslation' of the Mandinka spoken by the witness and this makes the content and meaning of the translated statements invalid or inadequate as far as equivalence is concerned. For example, '... everybody has heard' instead of 'it is not a secret to anybody'. Another example is, '...I always tell the truth' instead of the equivalent version of the translation that would have been '...I tell him the truth'. The translator also paraphrased the witness' statement instead of translating from Mandinka to English. Therefore, the first two research questions raised in the study were answered that the TRRC Mandinka-English translations lacked equivalence in meaning and content.

4th Transcript of Mandinka to English translations from the TRRC hearings

Date: 6th February, 2020.

First Session

Question: Witness was asked what Yaya said about the new religious sects in the country?

Witness D: *Wo toro mansakunda la karoola, yaya ko muna tina Islamic council maŋ ku ke la kuwotu,*

1st Translator: On the side of the government, if they are people who create problem for the governments, why did the Islamic Council allow them into the country?

Revised translation with equivalence: Because of the problems they cause for government, Yaya said why didn't the Islamic Council do something about them?

Question: Were those comments about the said sects true?

Witness D: *Wo tumoo toñanteh. Atumaroo le siyata toña ti*

1st Translator: Well, what they said lies were more than the truth in whatever they said.

Revised translation with equivalence: At that time, it was not true. The accusations were more of falsehood than the truths.

Question: What was Yaya's reaction when the term of that council ended?

Witness D: *Birij illa manda banta, ateh le follo ya foh komijko falindiro ñanta kelah bairi illa manda banta.*

1st Translator: As soon as their term came to an end, he was the first person to say that yes now your period has ended, now it is time for a new council.

Revised translation with equivalence: When their term ended, he was the first one to say, for example, that changes should take place because their term has ended.

Question: What happened on that Thursday?

Witness D: *Aramisa lujo Yaya Jammeh naata je da yellehh, anaata Bandinjo bai ana la molbay.*

1st Translator: On Thursday, Yaya came and open the place. That's the day he decided to ban Banding and his people and told them to leave.

Revised translation with equivalence: On Thursday, Yaya Jammeh inaugurated the place and he sacked Banding and all his people.

Question: Witness was asked to explain the election process for the Supreme Islamic Council presidency.

Witness D: *Innaata constitutionoo ñij yellemandij yellemandij mij batina Bakawsu te qualifife la.*

1st Translator: That's the time they decided to change and amend some parts of the constitution because they said Bakawsu is already qualified.

Revised translation with equivalence: They came and amended the constitution over and over so that Bakawsu will be disqualified.

Question: What happened after the amendments to the constitution?

Witness D: *Biraa ye presidano la ñij saratol fo doroo Bakawsu jollonta.*

1st Translator: When they decided to explain the position of the president, that's the time they dropped Bakawsu.

Revised translation with equivalence: When they stated the criteria to be president, Bakawsu dropped.

Question: How was voting conducted?

Witness D: *Bandinjo naata, Ayeh Lamin Touray Bullo muta iko allahu akbarr.*

1st Translator: Banding came and he caught Lamin Touray's hand and they all shouted allahu akbarr

Revised translation with equivalence: Bandingo came. He caught Lamin Touray's hand and they said Allah is great.

Analysis of the fourth transcript:

Lastly, the version of the translation for the fourth transcript shows lack of equivalence in content and meaning. This is because most of the information provided in the TRRC translation are not adequate or detailed enough. For example, '...Bakwasu is already qualified' was translated from Mandinka to English instead of 'Bakawsu will be disqualified'. Also, there were ambiguities and 'undertranslation' in the TRRC translated version. For example, the translation said that Bakwasu dropped but the TRRC translation said that Bakwasu was dropped. Also, the TRRC translation could have translated 'Allahu akbarr' into 'Allah is great' to achieve equivalence in the witness' translation in terms of content and meaning. Therefore, the third research question was answered that the TRRC Mandinka-English translations lacked equivalence but from the analysis and corrections of the TRRC transcripts, it is evident that equivalence can be achieved.

From the foregoing, it is evident that there is no equivalence in the transcripts of the translation of the TRRC proceedings in terms of quality, meaning and content. The results showed that the TRRC translator substituted some words in the course of the translation. This is contrary to the view of Hutchins (2001) that translation goes beyond mere substitution of words. The findings of this study also show that the TRRC translations do not comply with the 1st, 5th, 6th and 7th principles of a good translation according to Massaud (1988). This shows that the translations were not equivalent in both meaning and content. The findings of the study also confirm the importance of cultural elements in the translation process and this is in agreement with Jufasky and Martin (2000). The findings of the study also show that equivalence is possible if trained translators were engaged. This supports the findings of Bassnett (1988) and Nida (1991) that the goal of translation should be finding equivalence in quality, content and meaning from the source to the target text or language.

CONCLUSION

Translation is inevitable in a bilingual and multilingual society because people need to interact and exchange ideas. There are several problems associated with translation processes and these include ambiguity, overstatement or 'overtranslation' and 'undertranslation.' This study examined the equivalence of the translation of the transcripts of TRRC witnesses' in terms of meaning and content. The study found that the translations in the target language were not equivalent to the meaning and content of the message in the source language. The study also found that equivalence is possible in the Mandinka-English translation. It is recommended that translation skills should be taught as part of language courses in the Universities and other higher institutions of learning in the Gambia.

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