

TRAVERSING CULTURES THROUGH PROVERBS TRANSLATIONS: RUSSIAN-YORUBA-ENGLISH IN CONTEXT

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Abstract

Proverbs as a linguistic structure play significant roles in communicating deeper knowledge of speech among a people and one of the concepts that defines such a people as a distinctive and peculiar cultural entity. It is a rare knowledge that it also replicates a valuable source that influences and enhances cultural interactions between societies of cultural diversity, and closes the gaps of cultural bias, misrepresentation and apathy between societies of different origins. In this paper, the author examines proverbs as a medium for cross-cultural communications and an instrument for cultural awareness between societies of different origins. The study employs a Cross-cultural communication theory and to analyse Russian, Yoruba and English proverbs. Translation serves as a means of facilitating the subject of study as regards the understanding of the cultural awareness between the cultural audience. This paper might have some contents that are etymological in nature, but it is primarily not purposed to examine the etymology of proverbs and neither to discuss methods of translation, but to examine proverbs as the embodiment and custodian of cultures, and translation as a means of navigating across them. The Data for this study elicited from interviews with custodians and legends of Yoruba culture, personal and books on proverbs in the three languages.

Keywords: Culture, proverbs, translation, cultural diversity, cross-cultural communication

Аннотация

Пословица как языковая структура играет значительную роль в передаче более глубоких знаний о речи среди народа и является одним из понятий, определяющих такой народ как самобытную и своеобразную культурную сущность. Это необычный предмет дискурса в общей лингвистической практике, но доказательство продвинутых языковых навыков и эффективного

использования языка. В данной статье рассматриваются пословицы как средство межкультурных коммуникаций и инструмент культурного осознания между обществами различного происхождения. В исследовании используется теория кросс-культурной коммуникации анализировать и Русские, йоруба и английские пословицы. Перевод служит средством облегчения предмета изучения в отношении понимания культурной осведомленности между аудиторией культур. Эта статья может иметь некоторую этимологию, однако она не предназначена для эксгумации этимологии пословиц и не для обсуждения методов перевода, а для изучения пословиц как воплощения культур, а также перевода как средства навигации по ним. Данные для этого исследования являются первичными; включая интервью с хранителями и легендами культуры йоруба, личными накопленными знаниями как уроженца и литературой по этому вопросу в трех культурах, обсуждаемых в этой статье.

Ключевые слова: культура, пословицы, перевод, культурное разнообразие, межкультурная коммуникация

Introduction

There is no human society that exists independently of others. The interdependence of societies however requires awareness and knowledge of other cultures for effective communication and interactions. One of the cultural structures of a people is encapsulated in language whereas proverbs are one in the list of language structures that embody culture. Proverb is a language expression that is figurative in tone, an aesthetic part of language that showcases the uniqueness of a society's perspectives reflecting traditional beliefs, folk wisdom, cultural values and life experiences. It expresses cultural distinctiveness not only in linguistic parlance but also in history, ethics, religion, social, economic, and customary relationships. Notwithstanding the cultural peculiarity of each society, proverbs have universal applicability that makes intercultural translation relevant.

A proverb has been described as a short, traditional saying or phrase that imparts wisdom, advice, or general truths about life or human behaviour.

Proverbial expressions very much explicate unique language values that define a people's cultural heritage. They serve as a casing of wisdom of past generations and reinforce cultural continuity by educating the youth and instilling in them moral and ethical values. It is an oral tradition that is culturally handed down to generations and reverberates the cultural values and experiences of a particular society (Thang, et al., 2025).

Representing local wisdom, local knowledge, or local intelligence that constitute a component of the peculiarities that define the identity of a particular community or group, its importance as cultural communication medium has existed from time immemorial so as to symbolically convey deep messages and emotions.

Proverbs have traditionally become tools for bringing out inherent attributes that define people's value. Yoruba people, for instance, are identified with politeness, hard work, perseverance, ethics and perseverance (Olajide, 2016; Olanrewaju, 2020). Yoruba people usually exhibit politeness using proverbs to communicate special messages, with caution to avoid careless, casual, or thoughtless statements whose damage might outlast lifetimes. Aderinto, (2014) suggested that Yoruba people use proverbs in some situations, especially when a discourse or an issue that arises becomes expediently difficult to address. Aderinto (2014) suggested that Yoruba people use proverbs in some situations, especially when a discourse or an issue that arises becomes expediently difficult to address. At any public discussion which attracts the presence of non-natives or foreigners, proverbs have always been instrumental in concealing cogent messages that are only meant for the consumption of the indigenous audience while the non-indigenous people watch without a glimpse of ideas of their discussion.

Many interesting and effective proverbs have become a searchlight into communicating cultures across border. That notwithstanding, the jinx of the Tower of Babel that exterminated a one-language world was ably

reversed by translation in its breaking of the communication barrier that multifarious languages built. Thus, translation is hereby employed as a tool in unveiling cultural values that are encased in proverbs for cross-cultural rapprochement rapprochement.

Though English proverbs are characterised by expressions that hold more of universal truth compared to their Russian and Yoruba pairs, which are vast and embedded with cultural and historical elements. It indeed stands as a strong nexus that connects other cultures and creates a platform for integrating them because of its global accessibility.

Several dimensions in the structure of proverbs may pose difficulties in finding their semantic equivalents, most especially when cultural context is involved. Regardless of the nuances that often characterise the concepts and contexts of cultures, a pragmatic equivalent in every context is achievable to enable cross-cultural understanding and awareness.

Proverbs represent more than a language, they also form one of the components that define the culture of a society. In essence, translating a proverb entails communicating a culture, or sharing cultural heritage between people of different origins. Through them, the history, unique perspective and belief and spiritual life of a society are experienced. It reflects the history, culture and values of a particular language and its speakers. So, this paper addresses translation beyond the linguistic scope. It views it as a means of effective exchange of cultural legacies among diverse cultural societies. Proverbs have been instrumental in making clear and effective communication, adding creativity and fantasy to expression, cultural understanding, conveying complex ideas and making communication more engaging. People have used proverbs differently in ways that preserve their indigenous beliefs and practices. Such are the proverbs that originated from history, practices or beliefs which are distinctive or unique to a particular culture but not universal.

Interestingly, proverbs in general address a wide range of subjects and areas of life than can be examined in any single research work. For instance, proverbs are expedient for correction, reproof, warning, advice, encouragement and instruction. In essence, the contents of proverbs are reflections of a community's philosophical thinking, customs or traditions, beliefs, norms and moral ethics, and all that proverbs encapsulate.

Objectively, the advent of foreign religions and civilisations have eroded many cultural traditions, some of which have practically been thrown into extinction. But then, there has always been a mythical renaissance of the traditions preserved in proverbs. Sometimes, proverbs exude traditions, beliefs and values which enhance cultural assimilation because concepts and ideas that are enveloped in proverbs are hypothetical to querying traditions that are transmitted via myths.

For example:

Adiyẹ irana kì í şe ohùn ajegbe.

Translated as: A cork that is used to clear the path for a deceased is not something one eats without paying back.

This is a Yoruba proverb that resonates savage funeral tradition peculiar to Yoruba people in Yoruba land.

The narrative: When the body of a person who died in a hut was being carried back home, a ritual was done by removing the feathers of a cork and throwing them along the path where they trek. It was believed that the cork is a price to pay to make the path straight for the deceased. The cork would later be cooked and served to the bearer of the coffin and cork and others in the entourage to eat. Human is immortal, so the consumers of the chicken would one day die and be given a tribute in the same manner they gave to the late person. Hence, the proverb originated from the thoughtfulness that one is eating a chicken prepared on the

death of one person, the same way someone else will eat on his own death'. In other words, the chicken eaten is a debt that they will pay back. Some of the aspects where proverbs and cultures synchronise are discussed below for a better understanding of the interrelationship between proverbs and cultures.

Cultures in Proverbs

Proverbs with Cultural Background

Russian economy was shaped along traditional link in the middle of 15th century. Russian economy was shaped along traditional link in the middle of the 15th century. But there were changes in the latter part of the century which brought the peasants under the control of the landlords and State. There was sometime a legislation that then allowed the peasants to renounce the tenancy of the land they cultivate at the end of the agricultural cycle. This tradition became what they named St. Yuri's Day and celebrates on November 26. Peasants were allowed two weeks of the autumn feast to abandon their landlords and relocate to a new ones. The much awaited festival did not last forever as nationwide promulgation of the restriction on movement to St. Yuri's Day, contained in law code of 1497 was announced. The law code of 1550 limited peasants' departure. In 1590, this right was temporarily restricted by Boris Gudoniv and in 1649 completely cancelled¹ (Keenan & Hellie, 2025; Panchenko, nd.). The peasants waiting for their freedom day were disappointed at the announcement. The hysteria of Yuri's Day abrogation did not just disappear; it rather inspired the construct of a proverb:

Вот тебе, бабушка, и Юрьев день Translated: Grandma, here's your Yuriev Day. And in a literal sense as commonly phrased by Russians – "So much for Yuri's Day, Granny".

This is a sarcastic statement to express unpleasant surprise that came with

¹ See, Ivan IV, Tsardom, Expansion - Russia.
<https://www.britannica.com/place/Russia/Ivan-IV-the-Terrible>

the abolition of the so much celebrated liberation day of the peasants. The proverb has no situational replica because the event that generated the proverb is Russian-bound and exclusive to it. Though, a different culture may have its own way of mimicking the proverb as exemplified below using a Yoruba cliché.

‘Mo rí mu he, ete sonu’.

Literally translated as: I found a lost nose, my lips got lost. This is a form of antithetical statement that expresses an impulsive response to a strange happening. The lips getting lost denotes the lips or mouth that open in surprise at the sight of something unbelievable. Although the emotional effect that Yuri’s Day abolition created is expressive in Yoruba (Mori mú he, ete sonu) and English (Wonders shall never end), the cultural distinctiveness is associated with Russian and cannot be replicated in other cultures. The proverb could be an hypothesis for questioning the Russian tradition from which the statement emanated, thus creating the awareness of the cultural tradition in question.

A similar example of cultural background appears in Russian proverb:

Здоровье уходит пудами, а приходит золотниками.

English equivalent:

Disease comes on horseback, but steal away on foot.

The Russian proverb is cultural-specific referencing a weight measure that was identified with the Russians.

The Russians made use of an old measure called Пуд, transliterated as (Pood) and Золотник (Zolotnik) before the introduction of the metric system pound. Pood measured 16.38 kg and zolotnik 4.26 g. By weight conversion, 1 kilogramme (kg) = 1000 grammes (g) If 16.38 kg is to be expressed in terms of grammes, what we have is $16.38 \text{ kg} \times 1000 = 16.380 \text{ g}$. By using the gramme as corresponding measures,

Pood weighs 16 380 g and zolotnik 4.26 g. So, the Russian proverb - Здоровье уходит пудами, а приходит золотниками - conceptually meaning that, “Health leaves in Pood, but returns in Zolotnik” is a proverbial statement that connotes the velocity of diseases coming into the body and slowness of recovering. In a pragmatic sense, the proverb is warning that ‘prevention is better than cure’. Russian culture of measurement is here figuratively employed to convey the message and also to convey the traditions and practice embedded in the Russian proverbs.

Не мы тьем, так катаньем

Literally:

If not by washing, then by rolling.

English offers its equivalent by using language structure shifts with idiomatic expressions to explain the context of use.

English:

By hook or by crook (By any means possible; one way or another)

Yoruba:

*Bí a o ba ri **adan**, a sì fì òòbè ṣ’ebo.*

Катанье (rolling) was a primitive method of using a wooden hand-held washing machine for laundry. Clothes are washed by forcefully rolling them on the surface of the machine to make them clean, as there was no soap to use, but surface active agent was prepared from ashes. The literal meaning of the proverb is that, if there is no soap to do the washing, rolling will do it. This proverb uses a cultural object to warn that a goal must be achieved through whatever means available. The same ideal is expressed in Yoruba culture, but by using ritual objects:

*Bí a o ba ri **adan**, a sì fì òòbè ṣ’ebo.*

Àdán is a bat (a flying mammal that looks half a bird and half a mouse).

Òòbè is another species of bat family that cannot hang upside down.

The proverb translates, “if a bat (àdán) is not available for sacrifice, we

will use another bat species (oobe) as a substitute”. This express the same associative meanings in Yoruba culture. The different usage of animals and other materials like soap is a portrayal of the cultural peculiarities and diversities of the Russian and Yoruba proverbs.

Proverbs are cultural-specific when they exhibit unique values of a society, and cultural-diverse when they convey universal ideas.

Philosophical Thinking

Russian: *Не всё что блестит, золото*

English: *All that glitters is not gold*

Yoruba: *Ohùn gbogbo t’o ndan ko ni wura*

This is a universal idea that explicates the universal culture of philosophical thinking. This kind of proverb is construed from experiential analysis, deep thoughts and reflection to explain nature of reality. This depict a universal cultures that appreciate universal values.

The proverb is an aphorism that implies that not everything that looks precious is valuable or that appearance sometimes can be deceptive and not represent expected value. In other words, something might look good on the surface but be worthless. Philosophical truth that proverbs exude have shown that great philosophers like Socrates, Aristotle and Plato do not have the monopoly of philosophy thinkings; philosophical truths are rather universal culture.

Beliefs and Traditions

Some beliefs and traditions cut across various aspects of different cultures. One can take a glimpse into understanding some of these through proverbial expressions.

For instance, Yoruba culture is imbued with many cultural beliefs and traditions that any inquisitive mind would be curious to know. Some of the beliefs and traditions are taught through proverbial expressions that

raise questions from the non-natives. The beliefs are multifarious and can appear in the form of cultural festivities or traditions of naming. Name giving is a class cultural phenomenon in Yorubaland that has, most especially, historical and symbolic significations beyond ordinary individual identity.

It is true that every culture has naming patterns. In Yoruba tradition, there is a circumstantial pattern of naming a child based on the instances that surround the child's birth. In the Yoruba society names are not given to children arbitrarily. The Yoruba believe that one must take into cognisance all the events that occurred in the family before a child is conceived, during conception or after the birth of the child. This belief results in the proverb:

Ilé la a wò ká tó sọ ọmọ lórúko – We observe the events that transpired at home (family) before naming a child.

Denotatively, we consider a family's history, pedigree or antecedents before we name their child.

Yoruba people use names to expose the circumstances that surround the birth of a child or the history of a family. And this practice is expressed in another proverb that says: *ti ọmọ o ba bà itan, a ba aroba*. Meaning, "if a child does not grow to learn from history, he will learn through oral narrative". Name giving is a tradition that serves as an oral narrative reflecting a family background, religion, pedigree or child's history.

For example,

Babarinsa is a name from circumstances that reflect the events that surround the child's birth. Babarinsa is a child whose father died immediately after the delivery of the child (Akin, 2024, p.67). The mood in the family during the period would be a mixed one of joy and mourning. The name means "my father saw me and fled".

Enitan = (A person of history), is the one whose birth is surrounded by mishaps or mysteries. One of such cases is when a child is thrown away by her mother at birth, found and raised by strange parents.

Ìdòwú is, by tradition, the name given to a child that is born next to a twins.

Some names are even direct derivation from proverbs themselves. Such names are not given at birth; they are incidentally given or intentionally adopted from proverbs. They are used as appellation or pedigree associating the bearer with his profession, his view of life or some peculiar charisma.

Example. **Baoku** is a name derived from a proverb, “***Bi a o kú, iṣe o tán***”. Meaning, **If there’s life**, there’s hope.

Ajanaku is derived from a proverb, ***Àjànàkú kí ya’rara, ọmọ ti erin bá bí, erin ni i jọ*** (The **elephant** is never born a dwarf, an elephant will invariably give birth to its type).

A culture-specific custom

Some proverbs have cultural dimensions that make them reflect specificity. Such proverbs are constructed from a cultural viewpoint using cultural symbols as objects of reference. Some proverbs originated from cultural traditions that are practised by some societies. These traditions might be exclusive to them, having cultural impetus or backgrounds, but they usually reflect philosophical truths that impact universal moral lessons. The proverb however, takes the role of a searchlight into understanding the depiction of the concept. Purposes are served on this premise: the moral lessons are achieved, cultural practices and their customs are taught. Examples of such proverbs are;

“ *Ohùn t’o ntàn lødun eégún, bọ pẹ titi ọmọ Alágbaà a ra akara j’ẹkọ* ”

Meaning:

The Egungun festival lasts only a few days. No matter how long it lasts, the children of Alágbaà will still buy akara to eat ẹkọ.

Here are the concept of the proverb:

Eégún or Eleegun is a man dressed in eégún regalia called *eku*, and bearing the mantle and ancestral mystical power to perform in masquerade (egungun festival). Alágbaà is the name of the Head (superior) among different types of Eleegun, each representing his ancestral lineage.

Akara is a type of fried ball cake made from beans. It is common among the Yoruba people to eat with ẹkọ. *Ekọ* is pap made from corn.

It is a custom during the Egungun festival to fry and serve *akara* every day that the festival lasts for people to eat. Akara is not only prepared at Alágbaà house, other *Eleegun* must also bring their portions on a daily basis to his compound. So, it is certain that the children or family of Alágbaà will have more than enough to eat and probably throw into the waste. On the other hand, this free food period will not last forever, as the festivity will last only two weeks or at most three, if the sacrifice is not completed within two weeks. The children of Eleegun will have no choice but to buy akara with money after the egungun festival to eat ẹkọ. This gives a moral lesson that nothing lasts forever. One should be diligent with whatever opportunity at his/her possession because such an opportunity will last only a little time. Politically, it also warns that power is transient. The moral lesson here may not be understood by foreigners who are not accustomed to the culture. The question that must be raised to understand the content will lead to understanding the cultural tradition.

Though this culture is Yoruba exclusive, translation has made interlingual communication possible. However, this is not without challenges to foreign speakers who are alien to the culture because there are concepts in the proverbs that are strange to them.

Etiquette

When in Rome, do as Romans is an English proverb adapted from St Ambrose, a Roman Bishop. “if you should be in Rome, live in the Roman manner; if you should be elsewhere, live as they do there. This has a connotative effect of what Rome represents. Rome in this context represent a nation, society, community, and group in one hand. On the other hand, it depicts law, tradition or custom, and all that constitute national values. In a pragmatic context, the proverb warns that a stranger or visitor should obey the law and respect the norms of where they find themselves. A society is guided by laws, so, non-conformists may be reprimanded with punishment. The philosophy of the proverb subsists in both Russian and Yoruba in different stylistic patterns. For instance,

Russian: *В чужой монастырь со своим уставом не ходят.*

Literally translated as:

In another monastery, with your article, do not go. This can be syntactically rephrased as: Do not go to another monastery with your article.

Yoruba people do express the same idea in a proverb with the that has the same pragmatic context.

Bayi la a se ni'le wa, ewo ibo miran ni.

Meaning:

This is our practice in our home; it is a taboo in another man's home.

Cultural Beliefs

Гром не грянет, Мужик не перекрестится

Translated:

Unless the thunder strikes, a man won't cross himself.
Crossing oneself is a common religious practice by Orthodox

Christians in Russia as a reference for holy Trinity in the person of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Making the sign of the cross are done in different forms: by crossing three fingers – thumb, index and middle – each representing each of the trinity in reference to them, or by using an index finger to mark an imaginary cross on their chest. Crossing of fingers is not only done in reference, it is sometimes done out of fear or shock when one hopes for divine intervention for safety. Russians believe that lightening strikes is an act of God to punish sinners, it is albeit culturally believed that crossing oneself would prevent one from being hit by the lightening.

Although this proverb has its connotation that suggests that people tend towards being reactive than proactive; that is, not having a culture of taking precautionary measures until a crisis hits, It is worth noting here that Russians have a blend of cultural traditions and Orthodox traditions, but their culture is more deeply rooted in and shaped by Orthodox religion than cultural customs² (Youvan, 2024). The fact that Russian culture is more orthodox-oriented does not obliterate the subsistence of Slavic cultural traditional festivals like Maslenitsa Folk festival, Riendeer Herders festival, and Feast of Ivan Kupala, among others. Yoruba people have dissimilar belief or superstition that seem more pagan along this concept. It is believed that thunder strike is from a deity called 'Sango' to kill an offender but that it could be threatening to whoever stands on its way. So, it is believed that not playing inside the rain or standing at the entrance of a house when raining is a preventive measure against lightening or thunder strike.

² See "The role of Orthodox Christianity in Russian Culture".
<https://www.polyglottistlanguageacademy.com/language-culture-travelling-blog/2025/4/27/the-role-of-orthodox-christianity-in-russian-culture>

Attitude to Cultural value

Кто не рискует, тот не пьет шампанского

Translated:

He who doesn't take risks doesn't drink Champagne.

The Russian proverb is an expression of the idea that “fortune favours the brave. The proverb uses two objects – Risk as a symbol of death, and Champagne as a symbol of achievement. A tradition is here expressed that champagne is a wine to celebrate success.

English have the same concept in the proverb - Poverty waits at the gate of idleness. Meaning, if one does not work, one cannot expect any income.

Yoruba have cultural and historical dimensions to this idea.

Eni to ko ba se bi alaaru l'oyingbo, kò lè e se bi Adegboro l'oja Iba.

Translated:

He who doesn't carry loads on his head at Oyingbo market cannot live an affluent lifestyle like Adegboro at Oja Iba.

The proverb, which gives a moral lesson that there is dignity in hard work generated from the life story of a man in Yorubaland. Adegboro left Oja Iba, a locality in Ibadan, for Lagos in search of greener pastures. Since he had no capital for any investment, the only option available to him was to be hired to carry loads (alabaru/alaaru) in the market in a popular market named Oyingbo in Lagos. Some years later, he was able to buy a cart to ease himself of the load pressure, and sometimes later he bought a few more carts for rent to other labourers in the same business. Some years later, he was able to buy vans for commercial purposes. Adegboro became rich and he built a magnificent house at Oja Iba in Ibadan. Oja Iba is an area in Ibadan which was named after an Ibadan ancient warlord - Iba Oluyole. The market is popularly called Oja'ba.

When people approached Adegboro to ask for the secret of his wealth, he always would tell them that, *Eni ti ko ba se bi alaarú l'oyingbo, kò lè e se bi Adegboro l'oja Iba*. Meaning, if you cannot carry loads at Oyingbo market, you cannot live a grand style life like me (Adegboro) at Oja Iba. Yoruba has several proverbs to pass the same message in the same context.

For example:

O dé ìdí ọpẹ o gbenu s'oke, ofe lo ro pe o nro ni.

Translated as:

You came around a palm tree, you open your mouth wide expecting palm wine to be dropping into it. Do you think it will just be dropping without you tapping it?

Though in different cultural concepts, the proverbs are expressive of the idea that success does not come on a platter of gold, it is driven by risk taking which may lead to success if one can endure it.

Conclusion

Aspects of human lives and subjects that proverbs address are multilayered and inexhaustible, on one hand, and cultures that proverbs exude are too numerous for anyone to know all or to be captured in any single literature on the other hand. Since the purpose of this paper is not to teach proverbs but to showcase how proverbs encapsulate cultural tradition and values, those that are presented here have given a clear insight into understanding the cultural dimensions that they represent and serve as a purpose of hypothesis for further research.

Truly, with the advancement in civilisation, religion, technology and artificial intelligence, some of the proverbs have lost their original conceptualisation, and sometimes the cultural traditions they symbolise are eroding. Nevertheless, no matter what transformations have taken

place, the wisdom in the proverbs can never be erased because they were constructed from deep thought that makes them applicable to several daily life situations. In essence, a cultural concept may die, but the truth and its pragmatic applications remain relevant till eternity.

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