

# Ambiguity in translation : case study of the English translation of Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*

Rissikatou MOUSTAPHA-BABALOLA

Université d'Abomey-Calavi/Bénin

[rissikatouba@gmail.com](mailto:rissikatouba@gmail.com)

## **Abstract**

*This study is a qualitative survey completed in order to point out one of the difficulties translators can face when translating a text. It aims at pointing out language ambiguity and to highlight the possible aberrations it can cause when the translator has not got the source text author's intention. The corpus used for the study is Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956) translated into English by John Reed under the title *The old man and the medal* (1969). The research reveals that this novel translator has a broad understanding of Oyono's intention. This results to a translation without aberration of the source text ambiguous words and expressions.*

**Keywords:** translation, ambiguity, aberration, source text, target text.

## **Résumé**

*Cette étude qualitative a été faite pour ressortir une des difficultés auxquelles le traducteur peut faire face dans l'exercice de son métier. Elle a pour objectif principal de relever les mots et expressions ambiguës contenus dans le texte de départ et les aberrations possibles auxquelles peut conduire une mauvaise interprétation de ceux-ci par le traducteur. Le corpus de cette étude est tiré du roman *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956) de Ferdinand Oyono et traduit en anglais par John Reed sous le titre *The old man and the medal*(1969). La*

*recherche révèle que John Reed a une ample compréhension de l'intention de l'auteur du texte de départ. Ce qui a abouti à une traduction sans aberration des mots et expressions ambiguës du texte source.*

**Mots clés:** *traduction, ambiguïté, aberration, texte source, texte cible.*

## **Introduction**

The use of a word in a speech can lead to two or more understandings or interpretations. This word is said to be ambiguous. Ambiguity is a linguistic expression used to describe a word, phrase, or sentence when it has more than one interpretation. When it comes to deal with this kind of word in translation, the task is not easy, may it be for bilinguals or professional translators. The ambiguous word's interpretation to take into account in the target language when translating a text becomes then a great concern.

This is what leads the researcher to decide to tackle with the choice of a translator when s/he encounters ambiguous words or expressions in a text. The present research is based on Ferdinand Oyono's *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* and its translation into English. I have on one hand identified the ambiguous words, phrase or sentence in the source text and analyse how it has been rendered in English by the translator. On the second hand, an analysis of

the translator's choice to prefer one understanding to one another has been done.

Before going ahead, it appears compulsory to do a brief review of literature about ambiguity and its translation and to define the different concepts. After which an overview of Ferdinand Oyono and his *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* has been presented followed with an analysis of the collected data.

## **1. Literature review and theoretical framework**

### **1.1. Literature review**

#### **1.1.1. Language ambiguity**

Stuart et al. (2003) think that natural languages are vastly ambiguous, and the speaker's apparently effortless ability to account for this phenomenon is one of the central problems of modern cognitive science. However, each language has its peculiarity to express ambiguity. It seems that it is not necessary for the native speakers to be aware of all the possible interpretations associated with the sentence.

Gibson and Pearlmutter (1998) point out that sentence comprehension involves integration of multiple different cues to interpretation, including morphological, syntactic, semantic, discourse-level and probabilistic ones. If it is not easy for the

native speakers to account for all the possible readings of certain sentences, the situation will be more complicated for the non-native speakers.

As far as Clahsen and Felser (2006) are concerned, they assume that learners' ability to use sentence-internal semantic cues to interpretation may be similar to native speakers. They add that non-native speakers might be able to compensate for their grammatical processing problems by making efficient use of non-grammatical cues to interpretation.

For Quiroga-Clare (2003), ambiguity in language is an essential part of language, it is often an obstacle to be ignored or a problem to be solved for people to understand each other. She adds that language ambiguity has an important place in literature, psychoanalysis and computational linguistics. She concludes that language being a very complex phenomenon, it cannot exist without ambiguity.

It can then be concluded that every language is naturally ambiguous on various levels for the simple reason that words are most of the time put in a figurative way, offering a multiplicity of understandings. Thus, the intended meaning of a word can vary greatly depending on the linguistic context in which it appears.

How to deal with such words or expression when translating a text?

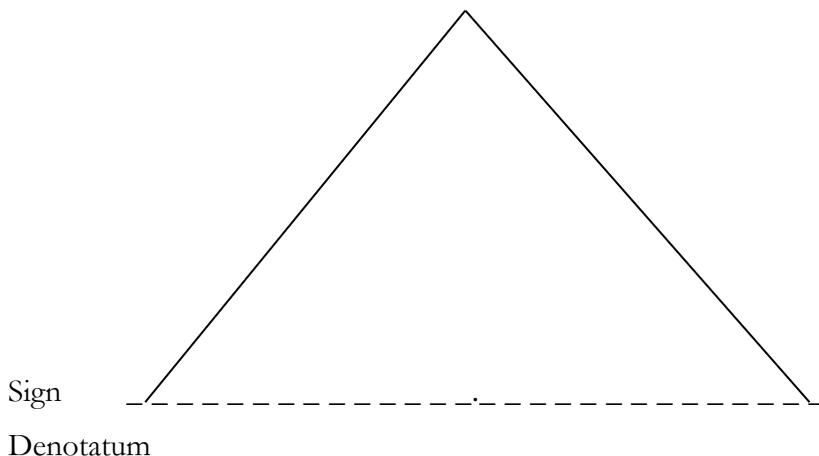
### **1.1.2. Ambiguity in translation**

Tokowicz and Degani (2010) define translation ambiguity as a phenomenon in which a word in one language can be translated in more than one way into another language. Ambiguity is then the property of language units to bear several different meanings; not only is the meaning of the words is ambiguous but also the relation between them. To explain why the language units are ambiguous, it is necessary to recollect that any language unit consists of three indivisible components: a sign, a concept and a denotatum.

The sign is the form, the expression of a language unit; the concept is the meaning of the language unit which implies the mental content of the language unit conventionally related to the sign in the minds of language speakers and the denotatum is the fragment of the real world, including the inner world of human beings, that corresponds to a given concept. According to common scientific opinion, there may never be a direct link

between the sign and the denotatum. It is shown by a dashed line in the famous triangle of Ogden and Richards.

Concept



Ogden & Richards, *Meaning of meaning* (1927: 279)

The most important fact to be born in mind in translation is that the relation between words (language signs) and parts of the extralinguistic world (denotata) is only indirect and going through the mental concepts. Thus, ambiguity in translation arises first of all due to the fact that concepts – mental images of the similar denotata – are strongly subjective and largely

different in different languages. Another source of translation ambiguity is the polysemantic nature of the language signs, i.e. the ability of a single word or expression to have different meanings.

Apart from these discrepancies in meaning and perception, translation is also hampered by such an innate feature of a language as connotation. According to L. Zgusta it consists of all the components of a meaning that add some contrastive value to the basic concept of a word.

This value may be positive as in the word “eagle” which can be understood as a connotation of freedom, courage ; or negative as in the word “fox” understandable as cunning, deceptive. Naturally, the number of regular, well-established connotations accepted by the entire language speakers’ community is rather limited – the majority of them are rather individual, but what is more important for translation is that the relatively regular set of associations is sometimes different in different languages. The latter fact might affect the choice of translation equivalents.

Thus, in the translation process, one should observe different factors causing ambiguity. At the same time there exist some disambiguation tools clarifying the meaning of the linguistic units. These are: linguistic context, situation and background information. However, neither the context nor the situation alone will lead the translator to the correct answer, unless s/he already has the relevant background information – common sense, knowledge of the way the things are in life.

To sum it up, individual/national perception, polysemy and connotation are features of a language which hamper the solution of the translation problem. Whereas context environment, situation and background information make the translation possible.

## **1.2. Theoretical framework**

### **1.2.1. What is ambiguity ?**

The *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary & Thesaurus* (2010) defines ambiguity as the fact of something having more than one possible meaning and therefore possibly causing confusion. Ambiguity can be intentional or unintentional. Intentional ambiguity is most of the time found in literature, mainly in poetry

or storytelling. The objective of the author is to make the readers have many different interpretations about what is written. Linguists classify ambiguity in two main types: lexical ambiguity and structural ambiguity.

Lexical ambiguity arises because some words have more than one meaning. Consider the word “smart”. It can be an adjective meaning “intelligent” or a verb having to do with pain. The sentence “this shot will make you smart” is ambiguous because of the two meanings of the word. The context can change the meaning as in the following examples.

- “We have developed a drug that improves memory.  
This shot will make you smart.”
- “This shot will make you smart. But a momentary pain  
is better than being sick for a week.”

Structural ambiguity refers to sentences in which the meaning of the words is not the issue, but how they are related. Consider the sentence “She saw a man with binoculars.” Does it mean that she looked through binoculars and saw a man, or does it mean that she saw a man, and he had binoculars with him?

### **1.2.2. What is translation ?**

Translation is a human activity known since very long ago and the profession of or a translator is among the oldest dating back to

biblical times and earlier. Until the late nineteen fifties translation had never been in focus of scholars' attention for many reasons:

- The word “translation” is itself ambiguous.
- Abundance of an easily available and relatively cheap workforce to do the job at an acceptable quality level.
- Relatively low quality of translation was generally satisfactory for the existing market.
- Until the introduction of computers and market globalisation the flows of multilingual information in the world had been rather fragmented.
- Translation is one of the complex problems that human intellect may face.

Komissarov in his *Theory of Translation Equivalence Level* (TEL) states that while translating you pass from one of the following equivalence level to another:

- sign level (words and word combinations);

- utterance level (sentence);
- message level (phrase, paragraph);
- situation description level (text fragments);
- communication purpose level (whole text).

For a satisfactory translation, none of these levels should be neglected.

## 2. Analysis of ambiguity in *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* and its translated version

### 2.1. Brief presentation of Ferdinand Oyono and his novel

*Le vieux nègre et la médaille* published in English under the title *The Old Man and the Medal* has been written by Ferdinand Oyono, one of the most renowned anticolonialist novelists of Africa. The author has written many novels among which *Une vie de boy* (1956), *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* (1956) and *Chemin d'Europe* in 1960.

In *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* translated from French by John Reed, Oyono writes about an older African man, Meka, who has worked closely with the colonials throughout his life and is to

receive a medal for his service. He comes to realise how isolated he is from both the native African world and the world of the colonials, who want to bestow an award but do not really want to associate with him beyond a superficial level. In *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, Ferdinand Oyono fiercely satirises the colonial situation through the eyes of Africans. The book is highly critical of the French, but also lambasts those Africans who have allowed themselves to be controlled by the colonialists.

## 2.2. Data presentation and analysis

### 2.2.1. Data presentation

In *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*, ten (10) examples of ambiguous words and expressions have been found as displayed in the following table. The different possible understandings of the ambiguous expressions have been provided and the translation given in the English version.

Example	Source text (French)	Possible understandings	Target text (English)
1.	<i>Mbogsi sortit de la case d'en face, un bout d'os entre les dents</i> (page 36).	Mbogsi came out of the opposite house with a bit of bone between his teeth.	Mbogsi came out of the house opposite with a bit of bone between his teeth (page 29).
		Mbogsi came from the house opposite, a bit of	

		bone between his teeth.	
2.	<i>Le bavardage des villageois finissait au seuil, dès que leur plante de pied touchait la poussière de la case d'Engamba et leurs yeux ne quittaient plus les lèvres de Nkolo Mendo</i> (page 37).	<p>The chatter of the villager ceased abruptly at the threshold, as soon as the soles of their feet touched the dust of Engamba's hut and their eyes were fixed on the lips of Nkolo Mendo.</p> <p>The chatter of the villager ceased abruptly at the threshold, as soon as the soles of their feet touched the dust of Engamba's hut and when their eyes fixed the lips of Nkolo Mendo.</p>	The chatter of the villager ceased abruptly at the threshold, as soon as the soles of their feet touched the dust of Engamba's hut and their eyes were fixed on the lips of Nkolo Mendo (page 30).
3.	<i>Elle fut bientôt entourée par des sirènes qui venaient de partout, des cases enfumées, d'un bout à l'autre du village, de ces mille pistes qui dans les villages sillonnent la brousse derrière les cases et conduisent soit au marigot, soit au champ</i> (page 42).	She was soon surrounded by "sirens" who gathered from every direction, from the smoky huts , from one end of the village to the other, from the thousands of paths which criss-cross the bush behind the huts in the village and lead to the river or to the	She was soon surrounded by "sirens" who gathered from every direction, out of the smoky huts , from one end of the village to the other, from the thousands of paths which criss-cross the bush behind the huts in the village and lead to the river or to the fields (page 34).

		fields. She was soon surrounded by “sirens” who gathered from every direction, out of the smoky huts , from one end of the village to the other, from the thousands of paths which criss-cross the bush behind the huts in the village and lead to the river or to the fields.	
4.	<i>Ils s’empoignèrent les mains, puis se repoussèrent</i> (page 48).	They took hands, then broke off. They took hands and repulsed each other.	They took hands, then broke off (page 40).
5.	<i>Il chassa un cabri qui se frottait contre le mur de sa case, puis rentra chez lui</i> (page 48).	He chased away a kid that was rubbing itself against the wall of his hut, then he went inside. He chased away a kid that was rubbing itself against the wall of its hut, then he went inside.	He chased away a kid that was rubbing itself against the wall of his hut, then he went inside (page 40).
6.	<i>As-tu bien voyagé ? demanda-t-il à Engamba allongé sur le lit d’en face</i> (page 80).	Did you have a good journey? He asked Engamba who was lying stretched out on the	Did you have a good journey? He asked Engamba who was lying stretched out on the bed opposite (page

		bed opposite. Did you have a good journey? He asked Engamba lying stretched out on the bed opposite.	69).
7.	<i>En une fraction de seconde, deux cercles s'étaient formés autour de Meka et de Kelara</i> (page 82).	In a fraction of second two circles formed around Meka and Kelara. In a fraction of second two circles were formed, one around Meka and the other Kelara.	In a fraction of second two circles formed around Meka and Kelara (page 72).
8.	<i>Mvondo souleva son pagne et vint s'asseoir, les fesses nues à côté de la lampe. Tous les hommes l'imitèrent</i> (page 84).	Mvondo lifted up his cloth and came to sit down on his bare buttocks beside the lamp. All the men followed his example. Mvondo lifted up his cloth and came to sit down on his bare buttocks beside the lamp. All the men sit down too.	Mvondo lifted up his cloth and came to sit down on his bare buttocks beside the lamp. All the men followed his example (page 73).
9.	<i>Amalia passa un bras autour du cou de Kelara et l'autre lui encercla la taille</i> (page 112).	Amalia put one arm around Kelara's neck and the other round her waist. Amalia put one arm around Kelara's neck and the other	Amalia put one arm around Kelara's neck and the other round her waist (page 100).

		arm round her waist.	
10.	<i>Ceux des indigènes qui tenaient encore leur coupe pleine la vidèrent sous leur siège</i> (page 116).	The Africans who still had full glasses emptied them under their seats.	The Africans who still had full glasses emptied them under their seats (page 103).
		The Africans who still had full glasses finished them under their seats.	

### 2.3. Analysis of the collected data

In the first example, the ambiguity results from whether one looks at the coordinated clauses as one entity or two entities with ellipsis. As presented in the collected data, this sentence can have two interpretations. For instance the sentence could mean that “Mbogsi came out of the house opposite” and as matter of precision the author adds “with a bit of bone between his teeth”, because Mbogsi has just finished eating and that bit of bone was to cure his teeth. The second interpretation could be that Mbogsi came out of that house (which might not be his house), “Mbogsi came out of the house opposite with a bit of bone between his teeth.” The ambiguity here, related to the expression “*la maison d'en face*”, is lexical.

The second example “*Le bavardage des villageois finissait au seuil, dès que leur plante de pied touchait la poussière de la case d’Engamba et leurs yeux ne quittaient plus les lèvres de Nkolo Mendo*” can be understood either that touching the dust of Engamba’s hut and fixing the lips of Nkolo Mendo are the conditions to be realised before the villagers ceased the chatter. Here, the sentence is taken as an indivisible entity. But if one takes into consideration the coordinating conjunction ‘*et*’, the actions of touching the dust of Engamba’s hut and fixing Nkolo Mendo’s lips are consecutive. So the first action that “the chatter of the villagers ceased abruptly” ; and that situation occurred “as soon as the soles of their feet touched the dust of Engamba’s hut” and the second action that follows is the fixing of Nkolo Mendo lips surely to carefully listen to him. In this example, the ambiguity is related to the whole sentence; it is then a structural one.

The third example, as the formers, results to two different possible understandings. The first interpretation could be that “sirens gathered at the same time from every direction, from the smoky huts....” The first interpretation which might be the best one but the less common could be that the smoky huts were situated from one end of the village to the other. In that case the clauses “She was soon surrounded by “sirens”” and “who

gathered from every direction, out of the smoky huts” are taken as one entity and the remaining of the sentence as a subordinate clause which presence is not compulsory for the understanding of the passage. The ambiguity here is also structural.

The sentence “*Ils s’empoignèrent les mains, puis se repoussèrent*” could, on the one hand, mean that “ they took hands” to “ broke off”, so the only action here is the breaking off, but the hands taking leads the way to the main action. On the other hand, it could mean that they did two different actions “they took hands” and “then repulsed each other”. This can occur when the involved persons are going to fight. The ambiguity, related to the understanding of the word “*repoussèrent*”, is lexical.

The possessive adjective “*sa*” constitutes the cause of the ambiguity in the fifth example. One could think that the hut belongs to the kid and instead to render it as “his”, s/he could translate “*sa*” as “it”. We have then a lexical ambiguity. A retranslation of the English version into French can create another source of ambiguity related to the word “kid” which primarily means “*enfant*”, “*gamin*” ou “*gosse*”.

The first possible meaning of the sixth example could be that it is the person who “asked Engamba” about his journey is the same

who “was lying stretched out on the bed opposite”. Or the other possible meaning could be that Engamba is the one who “was lying stretched out on the bed opposite”. In both cases the choice is quite difficult to make so it will not be easy to say which interpretation could be the most suitable. The ambiguity in this example is structural.

As far as the seventh example is concerned, the first understanding can be that two circles, one after the other, were formed around Meka and Kelara. But, it is also possible that the two circles were formed, one around Meka and the other around Kelara. As in the former example, the choice of the most suitable translation is not evident. Here also, we have a structural ambiguity.

In contrast with the previous example, the eighth example is not one but two sentences directly linked and the ambiguity is related to the second sentence. The first interpretation of “*Mvondo souleva son pagne et vint s’asseoir, les fesses nues à côté de la lampe. Tous les hommes l’imitèrent*” could be that the men did exactly what Mvondo did, that is “they also lifted up their clothes and came to sit down on their bare buttocks beside the lamp”. The second interpretation could be that the men just sat down as Mvondo did without lifting up their clothes. The ambiguity, related to the word

“*imitèrent*” impacts the understanding of both sentences. It is then a structural one.

In this example, the ambiguity is about the understanding of the expression “*l’autre*” which can be understood as Amalia’s second arm that has been used to round Kelara’s waist or as an indefinite pronoun used here to replace Kelara. In this case, it is Kelara who round Amalia’s waist. We have here a lexical ambiguity.

In the tenth and last example, “*Ceux des indigènes qui tenaient encore leur coupe pleine la vidèrent sous leur siège*”, the main clause “*Ceux des indigènes la vidèrent sous leur siège*” is ambiguous for it can be understood that native population have not been able to finish their drink, so they emptied it under their seats. Another interpretation is that they hid under their seats to empty their glasses by drinking the whole content. This example’s ambiguity is structural.

## **2.4. Discussion**

The above results show that ambiguous words and expressions has not changed from the source text to the target one. This is due to the fact that, John Reed, *Le vieux nègre et la médaille*’s translator has been as faithful as possible to the source text in his translation. This does not mean that the translator has not

perceived the ambiguity of these words or expressions or is not able to solve the said ambiguity problems; it is just that ambiguity is an entire part of literature and authors use them sometime to make the readers have many possible understandings of a statement.

In the fifth example, one can see that the target text itself bears another source of ambiguity related to the word 'kid'. This example simply shows that each language is ambiguous in a way and another and every translator should be aware of that situation in order to cope efficiently with mistranslation problems.

## **Conclusion**

Language being a very complex phenomenon, Cecilia Quiroga-Clare (2003) thinks that it cannot exist without ambiguity; and this represents both a curse and a blessing. Language ambiguity is a curse for it can be misunderstood by the non-native speakers and leads then to an inefficient communication. As far as being a blessing is concerned, language ambiguity can be used as a tool to show the enrichness of a given language. Ambiguity is then an entire part of language and it should not represent a problem

when translating. The translator should be aware of this fact in order to avoid mistranslation.

In *Le vieux nègre et la médaille* translation into English, John Reed has shown that he has thoroughly understood Ferdinand Oyono's text by rendering correctly the ambiguous words and expressions. John Reed has translated the original text by caring the ambiguity of the source text in the target one even though he surely knows about disambiguation methods. It can then be concluded that in the hands of a good translator, language ambiguity becomes a tool of proof of a given language mastering.

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