

Arts and Africa

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ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Hello and welcome. This is Alex Tetteh-Lartey bringing you this weeks edition of "Arts and Africa".

I don't speak French and every time I read a novel, written by a francophone writer, but which has been translated, I have this nagging doubt that maybe what I'm reading in translation isn't really the same as what was written originally. There are, after all, some pretty useless translators about, translating words completely wrongly, or at the best, giving them the wrong shade of meaning. But there's more to it than that: In the realm of ideas and emotions the vocabulary of one language can never exactly match the vocabulary of another, because the people who speak one language may actually feel differently from the people who speak another. The novelist is as likely as anyone to fall prey to being misunderstood through a bad translation of his novel.

NIYII ALABI

If you take the two versions side by side, you can see that there are a whole lot of inaccuracies which can only be detected by somebody who knows the two cultures involved. To solve this problem I think, in my candid opinion, greater effort should be made to create more centres of comparative studies, rather than isolating English as a subject matter in the university from let us say French, or literature in English from literature in French. Because I think the two are complimentary.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

That was the voice of Nigerian academic Niyii Alabi. He's particularly well qualified to talk about the pitfalls of translation: He's doing a comparative study of anglophone and francophone African literature at the Sorbonne in Paris, and fluent, of course, in French and English. There may be flaws in translations, but without them we are all isolated from each other by linguistic barriers. So I asked him to talk about some of the classics of anglophone and francophone African literature, what relationship they have with each other; where, for example, does Amos Tutuola's famous novel, The Palmwine Drinkard stand? It's full of slang and pidgin English written as Tutuola heard it, not how it was taught in school.

NIYII ALABI

The English reader who reads Tutuola's English is completely at a loss and I think this is one reason why there is so much controversy hanging around his works. Even his latest work which was published in the United States only last year is considered a grammatical problem. The translator couldn't actually find the equivalent of that English in French. Although it exists, what I may call the pidgin French, it is still very commonly spoken on the streets in the Ivory Coast. I happened to be there for a year. Even amongst the students in the University there outside the lecture rooms, one could easily hear them talk this kind of French which is a pidgin French just like our English students in our universities at times communicate in the pidgin English. But the translator would not respect this. I think it's a cultural problem to be able to have an exact representation of what Tutuola put on paper. There was an attempt to polish the French because with people like Senghor still championing the sanctity and purity of the French language, I think the translator would not have been pardoned if he had rendered the French any less attractive, if I may say, than it should have been. Then he would have been condemned for having produced something which was not the French which was required of him.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

You said the translator of Tutuola paraphrased what he said rather than use the, what you call, equivalent of pidgin in French. Are there any writers who write pidgin in French pidgin?

NIYII ALABI

There aren't, I should say, Francophone writers who write in pidgin French but some of them deliberately insert pidgin expressions to really portray the social milieu that is being portrayed. Francis Bebe is very good at it. He depicts a scene where there are fishermen and the language is immediately changed to sort of portray this social milieu. And he's not the only person. Sembene Ousmane does it, Mongo Beti does it very well when he uses, what you call, this rather obscene language in his novels. So it is used but they don't deliberately go out for the pidgin English.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Now with the likes of you coming onto the scene, very hopefully the gulf between the Anglophone and Francophone writers will be brief. What hope do you think there is for this gulf to be bridged between them?

NIYII ALABI

Well we don't have to be too optimistic about it because few people, as I said right from the beginning, are really engaged in this kind of study but with time I think the need will sort of catch on with the others who have the interest but maybe don't have the motivation. And to be candid with you, if I hadn't come to Sorbonne in Paris, perhaps I wouldn't have had this idea to do a comparative study at all. So I think it really needs time, it's just a question of time.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Niyii Alabi thank you very much indeed.

NIYII ALABI

You're welcome.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

A cautiously optimistic look at overcoming the language barrier from Niyii Alabi.

In Somalia, there never has been a language barrier, despite the fact that it's a country which has been under the colonial rule of the French, the Italians and the British. The Somali language has remained not only intact, but also the only language of any significance and the first language of all Somali people. An enviable position you might think for the Somali when you consider that elsewhere in Africa, academics and writers are embroiled in a seemingly endless controversy over the respective merits of English and French as compared with the huge range of African languages. But until eleven years ago Somalia was a country linguistically handicapped. It had no standardised way of writing Somali down. Professor Goosh Andreshevsky recently came back from a conference in Hamburg, assessing the current state of the Somali language. Fiona Ledger asked him on his return for a personal view - what impact, in his opinion, has the written form of the Somali language had on the Somali literary scene?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

I think it was marvellous because before 1972 Somali writers had no reading public to address their works to. It was very difficult and then suddenly there was a possibility opened for them and there were literacy campaigns which were very, very successful, both the urban and the rural campaigns. There was a great deal of enthusiasm and there still is for that.

FIONA LEDGER

So you've got not only people who are hungry to read and are learning to read, you've people who are wanting to write?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

Of course, in fact there are more Somali authors both in poetry and prose than there are opportunities for them to write. But it is very fortunate that the Somali national daily called "The October Star" has special literary pages in which you get serialised short stories and novels as well as poetry and articles on literary criticism or even literary theory. There are many new writers who have become famous since 1972 who before then had no opportunity of writing. You see their English or their Italian was not good enough for them to become creative writers.

FIONA LEDGER

Do they, after they have had their works serialised in this fashion, do they then have a good chance of getting their works published as a book?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

Yes, though their chances are not very great. As I mentioned to you there are economic difficulties. Somalia is in a very difficult economic situation but the serialised novels are very popular. In fact you find, in Mogadishu and in some other towns, there are enormous crowds outside the newspaper kiosks waiting for the next instalments of a particularly favoured novel or short story. In fact some of these novels and short stories in serialised form are so popular that some people actually make a profit by xeroxing the old copies.

FIONA LEDGER

They photocopy them?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

Yes or sell the old copies.

FIONA LEDGER

Collecting them together in one work?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

Yes and some writers of course differ but some writers are extremely popular.

FIONA LEDGER

What about themes? Are we talking about traditional themes taken from oral literature?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

No, no you see when you asked me about literature, there are two streams at the moment in Somalia. One is writing down oral literature and publishing it also in the press, periodicals and also in book form as well. There are quite a number of books and also some of the oral literature written down, poems and stories, are also actually used in Somalia education. But then there's another stream, a completely new creative stream. In that stream there is a certain number of themes which are old ones. But these are not so common. The most common themes are themes connected with the realities of social life in modern Somalia. One of the leading themes is the pro-feminist, you know the emancipation of women and that is a very common theme favoured by many writers. For example the most recent novel by a man called M.X. Ousman called "Adeegto" which means womanservant, describes the difficulties of a young girl who leaves the nomadic interior because of poverty and difficulties there, comes to Mogadishu and finds it difficult to find employment and then the story is how she is badly treated and exploited by her employers and then it ends with a very happy ending. She marries a young police officer and all is well. But these stories are deeply rooted in the realities of Somali life.

FIONA LEDGER

You've studied the language for many years yourself. How does Somali bear up as a tool for conveying modern life?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

It does it very well, as a result of a very long experience, and I would like to stress again that the greatest pioneers of modernization in the Somali language, are Somali broadcasters.

FIONA LEDGER

The radio is a powerful element?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

It's a powerful element. It's a mainly nomadic country thinly populated with a network of roads which are not quite satisfactory. People are isolated but everybody listens to the radio.

FIONA LEDGER

Now is that just because the radio has standardised the language?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

No, not only that. There's another reason. One is that certainly it is unifying but there is another thing that these radio broadcasters many of them were actually great connoisseurs of poetry and so on and they refused to borrow words from foreign languages. So they created a whole new vocabulary from Somali roots.

FIONA LEDGER

And they're not just foreign words that are made to sound Somali?

PROF. GOOSH ANDRESHEVSKY

No, no, no. To give you an example. A word for satellite would be "handmade moon" or the word for electricity is the word taken from electrical charge, for example, and taken from the old word thunderbolt. So by this process of compounding, of inventing new words, of adapting old words, they created a whole new modern Somali language. You see, before the language was written, the broadcasters prepared the public by giving them a whole new vocabulary of modern radio journalism. So that Somali's, before Somali was written, knew all the words for things like security council, balance of payments, intercontinental ballistic missiles, tear gas or rate of exchange, things like that. So when people started writing in Somali, for example newspapers appeared, they all knew these words.

ALEX TETTEH-LARTEY

Prof. Andreskevsky bringing this edition of Arts and Africa to a close. Join me again next week. For now this is Alex Tetteh-Lartey saying goodbye.

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