Challenges in Translating a Novel from English into Kinyarwanda: Focus on Mariama Ba’s So Long a Letter

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ABSTRACT

This paper pinpoints challenges encountered in the translation of a literary work from a source language into a target language and how these challenges can be addressed. The researchers want to equip Rwandan teachers and students with the material to be used in literature lessons as most of literature in that context are written in foreign languages. The researchers throw light on the translation of Mariama Ba’s So Long a Letter from English – originally known as a West Germanic language; into Kinyarwanda, a Bantu language. The paper is geared by the belief that some prose writings which should benefit a wider African audience are greatly affected by a number of factors including language barrier as many Africans do not have any knowledge of these foreign languages. As a rich and complex language, Kinyarwanda is often times affected by foreign languages English included. Translating a novel into Kinyarwanda from English is thus challenging as the two languages are too distant. It was found that Challenges encountered throughout the translation of the novel “So long a letter” from English into Kinyarwanda were mainly related to the translation of unknown ideas, genitive constructions known as “of phases”, figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, gender markers, proper names, active and passive constructions, proverbs and proverbial phrases.

1. INTRODUCTION

Literature is an art and a tool which reflects human beings and the world around them as it conveys human culture and values for society to ape and correct where necessary. For the artist to reach his/her goal, factors such as medium and readership or audience play a vital role. When the targeted audience are not well equipped with enough language skills, or do not have any knowledge of the author’s language, there is a likelihood that the author’s mission is greatly impeded. To grapple with this situation, translation serves as a good means so that a work of art can reach a wider audience and influence them. As Japhar (2019) contents that the translation of the original version influences the target language speakers, a novel written in English may carry the message relevant not only to English speakers but also other languages’ speech communities. Among the latter, Kinyarwanda speech community cannot be left out and is much concerned with the message conveyed in Mariam Ba’s So Long a Letter, a novel which depicts African society’s culture and values.

2. BACKGROUND AND PROBLEM STATEMENT

The Constitution of the Republic of Rwanda (2003) as revised in 2015, recognizes Kinyarwanda as the national language, and official languages besides French and English. Although that language is spoken by almost all Rwandan citizens, responding easily to the status of mother tongue for all them (Niyomugabo, 2015), that language is increasingly endangered by the influence of foreign languages while it is also the language considered to be among the most complex and possibly richest languages of the world (Nsanzabiga, 2012). It is realized that in most school libraries and public libraries, many books especially novels are written in foreign languages such as English, French and Kiswahili. This becomes difficult for Rwandans who do not master the foreign languages to be able to read and understand those books written in the language that they do not understand. Besides, in as far as Kinyarwanda literature is concerned, very few books written in our mother tongue are available for teachers and students who are teaching/studying Kinyarwanda language. Moreover, when it comes to Kinyarwanda language speaking, a simple observation revealed that some Rwandans tend to mix up Kinyarwanda with other foreign languages while speaking as a result of lack of suitable Kinyarwanda terms to be used. It is under this deliberation that this project aims to translating the novel So long a Letter written by Mariama Ba so as to provide resources written in other languages than French and English, Kinyarwanda specifically, hence to maintain and
develop the Rwandan culture as embodied in that common language to all natives of Rwanda country (Bazimaziki, 2018). Elsewhere, Ruterana (2012) notes that the cultivation of a reading culture especially among the youth in tertiary institutions will boost their academic excellence and ultimately their countries, growth prospects. This concern about the lack of a reading culture is felt by many African countries, eastern and western Africa. It has been found out that among the factors responsible for inhibiting the reading culture in Africa, there is an education system with a narrow perception of reading which has made students conceiving reading as a once and for all activity associated with passing examinations, getting a certificate, winning a job and attaining promotion. Inherently, many African people Rwandese included, encounter a very remarkable barrier in reading books because most of them are written in foreign languages that many Rwandans especially don’t master well. In that regard, there is a problem of Rwandans who want to read but face the problem of lack of enough books written in their mother tongue while those written in foreign languages hold relevant messages including African culture and values. It against this background that we decided to translate the novel entitled “So long a letter” by Mariama Ba from English to Kinyarwanda. This will also encourage others to write novels and develop an idea of translating some other books written in foreign languages to Kinyarwanda, thus the culture of creative writing.

3. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
A language is used as an instrument of communication among people from different societies. They exchange ideas, cultures and messages through both oral and/or written folktales. Considering the case of Rwanda, Kinyarwanda as the mother tongue is spoken and written by all Rwandans and few other people from Burundi. However, many books found in Rwandan libraries and bookshops are written in foreign languages namely French, Kiswahili and English which are not understood by many people in Rwanda yet Rwandans need to read books of different cultures all over the world. Among the means that can be devised to get these books, translation holds a pivotal role. It is referred to as a way enabling communication and exchange of cultures, information, ideas, and messages from one language to another. As such the present study concerned with the translation of the novel “So Long a Letter” aims to: (1) Examining challenges encountered in translating a literary text from a source into a distant target language and (2) understanding the novel So Long a Letter by Mariama Ba in the context of Rwandan culture so as to enhance national values among the Rwandan younger generation.

4. SIGNIFICANCE OF THE STUDY
Researchers in translation are mainly concerned with the development of the ability to translating from foreign into local languages and vice versa. In the view of Japhar (2019), translation nowadays plays an important role for the target language speakers mainly when the original text addresses the sensitive topic among the target language speech community. The significance of this paper is not exception as researchers want to put clear how polygamy as a theme in “So Long a Letter” affects the family and society in general not only in Senegal but also in Rwanda and worldwide. The Rwanda history shows that Rwandan women had been undermined in past due to historical issues. However, so far a lot has been done by the government of Rwanda to emphasize that people have equal rights including men and women. In the same way, the Kinyarwanda speech community would learn from the present how Ramatoulaye struggled to become self-reliant and took care of her children after being abandoned by her husband in favour of a second wife. This is a controversial issue in the whole country and in some parts of the globe. More so, the present study will contribute to the development and enrichment of Kinyarwanda language by increasing written literature in Kinyarwanda; and stimulating other Rwandans to translate more books from foreign languages into their mother tongue and vice-versa.

5. DESIGN AND TRANSLATION METHODOLOGY
This study is designed as a translation study hinging on the literary devices in Mariama Ba’s novel So Long a Letter. Researchers decided to explore the challenges faced in the translation of a novel from English into Kinyarwanda, the two distant languages to each other. “So Long a Letter” by Mariama Ba is a corpus in this paper as it is a didactic tool to human African society and Rwandan society in particular. The novel depicts the moral lesson to Rwandan society and the world at large mainly because polygamy and gender balance are among controversial issues in many parts of the globe. Thus, the paper ranges among the literary and translation studies hinging on a literary work as set in West African literature.

Translation methodology
In translation, what is transferred from the SLT to the RLT must be the same intended message or information that is explicitly expressed or implied by the former. Furthermore, a translator is expected to faithfully render that same message linguistically expressed or enshrined in the source text. In the view of Larson(1984:11), literal translation or word-by-word translation, especially in idioms, metaphors, and other figures of speech, such as those used in literature, notably in folk stories, fiction, drama and poetry, is liable to distort SLT intended meaning. It is therefore under this context that meaning-based translation was used through this translation of the
novel “So Long a Letter” by Mariama Ba in order to avoid any kind of mistranslation. The researchers translated the novel of which the original language was French comparing French and English versions so as to avoid any kind of distortion of the original message. This was done because the researchers was required to translate from the original to the intended language only. Furthermore, the researchers preferred meaning-based approach to literal translation/approach because the meaning-based approach especially that of various genres of literature would not distort the SLT meaning. It is rather the most idiomatic, natural, fluent and delightful approach in translation.

Brief description of the author and the novel translated

Who is Mariama Ba?

Mariama Ba catapulted into the African literary scene with her first novel, “So Long a Letter” which received much acclaim and admiration. The Senegalese writer, who was born in Dakar, Senegal, in 1929, was educated unlike many other women of her generation- at the Ecole Normal for girls in Rufisque. Brought up as a Muslim by maternal grandparents, she studied the Koran during school and in her early essays there are hints at the critical approach to society that she was to adopt in her later writing. A pioneer of women organizations. Her commitment to eradicating inequalities between men and women in Africa led her to write “So Long a Letter”. The novel, originally written in French, was translated into sixteen languages and won the first Noma Award for Publishing in 1981. A schoolteacher and inspector by profession, Ba promoted the crucial role of the writer in a developing country. She believed that the “Sacred mission” of the writer was to strike out at the archaic practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our practices, traditions and customs that are not a real part of our precious cultural heritage’. “So Long a Letter” succeeds admirably in its mission. Ba died tragically in 1981 in Dakar after a long illness just before her second novel “Le Chant Ecarlate appeared”.

Kinyarwanda Translation: Mariama Ba ni muntu ki?

MARIAMA BA yamenyekanye cyane mu buvanganzo nyafurika byinjijwe mu gitabo cy a mbera yanditse cyitwa “Ibaruwa ndende cyane” yakunzwe cyane. Mariama Ba ni umwanditsi w’Umunyasenegali wavukiyi i Dakar muri Senegali mu mwaka wa 1929 akaba yarize bitandukanye n’abandi bagore mu Ishuri ry’Inderabarezi ry’Abakobwa i RUFISIKE. Mariama Ba yarezwe kandi akurira mu muryango w’abayisirambo mu kwa ba nyirakuru ubyara nyina akaba yarize korowani mu gihe cy’ibiruhuko.

Ba yatangiye kwandika akiri mu ishuri ndets e no mu nyandiko ze za mbere hari ibintu bimwe na bimwe yabonaga bitaganda neza mu muryango mugari akaba yaranyabyanditse mu nyandiko ze zakurikiyeho. Kubera ko ari we wabaye uwa mbere ju guharanira uburenganzira bw’abagore, yaje gushyirwa mu nzego zitantukanye z’abagore muri Senegali. Igitekerezo cyo cyo kurundura ubusumbane hagati y’abagore n’abagore muri Afurika cyatumywe yandika igitabo yise “IBARUWA NDENDE CYANE”igitabo cyanditswe mbere na mbere mu rurimi rw’igifaransa, hanyuma gihindurwa mu zindi ndimi cumi n’eshe shatu ndets e yaje no guhabwa igihembo cyo mbere cyo kwandika no kumurika ibitabo muri Afurika. Iki gitabo cyahinduwe mu rurimi rw’icyongereza bwa mbere mu mwaka wa 1981.

Kinyarwanda translation: Ni ibiki bikubiye mu ibaruwa ndende cyane?

Ibaruwa ndende cyane ni uruhere rikanye rw’amateka mabi n’amaza yaranze umwari mugari w’umunyasenegali witwa Ramatulaye watare n’umugabo we. Iyi baruwa ndende yandikwe uwahoze ari inshuti ye magar Ya isat, ikubiyemo umubabarar, agahinda n’urugambiro rutoro sye, inziira y’umusaraba Ramatulaye yanyuzwe nyuma y’uko umugabo we asaka umwanzu utunguranye wo kumuharika. BN’ubwo byemewe n’idini y’abayisirambo, iki gikorwa Ramatulaye yanigafshe nk’ubugambanyi...
Challenges identified in translating the novel “So Long a Letter”.

Ordinarily, translation refers to the rendering of the meaning or message intended by a source language text (SLT) to a receptor language text (RLT) faithfully or accurately and fluently. However, in one way or another, a translator comes across with a number of challenges so as to respect all principles of translation. E.g. precision, economy, generality, internationality, transparency, Anti-obscenity, systemicity, consistency and acceptability. Here, the complexity is obviously due to the fact that the SLT which is English and the RLT which is Kinyarwanda in this project are different in term of their related culture, their type, lexicoLOGY, grammar, phonology, morphology, syntax, and semantics and programmatic, all of which determine the Language forms, style, idiom, naturalness and fluency.

Since Kinyarwanda Language does not have exact one to one word meaning that matches with English, we decided to use meaning based translation rather than literal translation. This helped us to find and use the meaning of terms, words, phrases, expressions and sentences according to the context in which they have been used in the source Language text. Furthermore, throughout this project I met a big challenge while translating certain beliefs, practices, concept, images, symbols, names, proverbs and idioms just to name a few because they are culture-bound and do not have specific equivalents in Kinyarwanda language.

Unknown ideas were one of the challenges encountered. There were numerous unknown ideas or foreign ideas in this novel. Among others, we came across names of place and people, housing and household objects just to name a few. In order to make the translation understandable to Kinyarwanda audience, we resorted to the following ways: The uses of descriptive phrase or compound words, substitution of a term similar to another known to the Kinyarwanda Language speakers, use a foreign word from another Language, preferably to gather with either a descriptive phrase or a general word, use of a word that is more general in meaning, and use of a word or a phrase that is more specific in meaning. For instance, the name of house SICAP villa was translated to Umuturirwa SICAP or Inubyako SICAP, Pont-Ville.

Also, translation of genitive constructions known as “of” phrases has been difficult because in Kinyarwanda they could be understood in two different ways. For instance, the phrase at the house of Mawdo or at Mawdo’s house could be translated as-kwa mawudo, Mu rugo rwa Mawudo or Mu nzu ya Mawudo. So we had to consider the context and translate this as “kwa Mawudo.” Amount of money is another case of these phrases. Having in mind that a good translation should be accurate, clear, natural and acceptable, it was not simple to translate the amount of money because we had to keep the meaning and value of the money. Therefore, to overcome this problem, we used a more generic term such as a future or a lot of money into money into Kinyarwanda. For instance: “Sometimes a coin, sometimes a bank note” was translated as Rimwe na rimwe ibiceri, ubundu inoti. “Coins and notes continue to pour” translated into “amafaranga menshi akomeza gutangwa.”

Literal devices such as metaphors and similes are among the challenges identified during the translation of the letter from English into Kinyarwanda. It has been too hard to translate figures of speech throughout this project. Literary devices or figures of speech are referred to as special expressions which are not supposed to be taken literally. They rather carry a meaning which is to a certain degree hidden below to the surface meaning. In order to overcome this challenge, we had to learn keenly and recognize when they are used in the source text, to understand why they are used and to know the real meaning including the tendency and attitude of speaker. For example in the novel, we have come across metaphors whereby we have a sentence like: “I weep with you for Modou, whom I used to call "bag of rice", for he would frequently give me a sack of rice. Here we had to consider the context and see reason why Modou used to be called “bag of rice” because he used to bring a bag of rice whenever he could come for a visit. So here, the author is using a figure of speech to emphasizes and recognize that habit of bringing a bag of rice all the time. Therefore, this had to be translated as follows: Uyu munsu nifatanyije namwe mu mubabaro twatewe na Modu (Modou) nakundaga kwita “umufuka w’umuceri!” kubera ko yakundaga kumpa umufuka w’umuceri!

As pointed out earlier, Similes also have been found in this project and they are known as powerful expressions that are used to make the message vivid and powerful and easy to remember. For instance, we came across such a simile: How many dreams did we nourish hopelessly that could have been fulfilled as lasting happiness and that we abandoned to embrace others, those that have burst miserably like soap bubbles, leaving us empty-handed?
After discovering the topic (what is being talked about), the illustration (what the topic is being compared to), and the point of similarities (what connects the topic and illustration) in this simile, we translated it as follows: Ni inzozi zingana iki twashakaga kugeraho kandi zashoboraga kugerwaho nk’umunezero udashira ariko tkuzirengagiza tugashikugira izindi nazo zigakendera nk’urufuro rw’isabune tugasigara amara masa?

**Active and passive case** is another challenge. While we were translating this novel, it was difficult to translate the passive construction. For example, the passage “Our grandmothers in their compounds were separated by a fence and would exchange messages daily. Our mothers used to argue over who would look after our uncles and aunts”. Here the author wanted to put the agent out of focus in order to focus in the events itself. We therefore had to discover the context of the passage and translated this as follows: N’ubwo ba nyogokuru bari batandumajwe n’imbago mu nyubako zabo, ntiyabanuzaga guhererekanya ubutumwa uko bwije n’uko bukeye. Mu buryo nk’ubu kandi ababayeyi bacu batubarya bahoraga baganira, bibaza k’uzakurikiranira hafi ba marume na ba masenge.

**Gender markers** were another challenge. In English language, pronouns are marked for gender, as masculine, female or neuter. For example in “she has been installed in my house for funeral in accordance with tradition” the reader will immediately discover the gender feminine because of gender marker “she”. However, in Kinyarwanda there is no distinctive gender pronouns except a few nouns, which designate males or female such as umuhungu to mean a boy, umugabo to mean a man and umugore to mean a woman. For this, we had to pay attention while we were translating. Such pronouns could be having their specific translation. We could rather refer to the antecedent and the phrase or sentence in order to discover the intended meaning in the SL. For example, this as follows: N’ubwo ba nyogokuru bari batandumajwe n’imbago mu nyubako zabo, ntiyabanuzaga guhererekanya ubutumwa uko bwije n’uko bukeye. Mu buryo nk’ubu kandi ababayeyi bacu batubarya bahoraga baganira, bibaza k’uzakurikiranira hafi ba marume na ba masenge.

**Proverbs and proverbial phrases** were another challenge during the translation. Proverbs are aphorisms referred to as metaphorical statements that reflect a generally applicable truth by reference to a typical specific phenomenon or experience (Seitel: 1976). Throughout this project, we paid attention to some proverbs in this novel so as to understand and interpret the contextually intended meaning, embedded in them. For example: on page (36) “You were advised to compromise: ‘You don’t burn the tree which bears the fruit.’ You were threatened through your flesh: ‘Boys cannot succeed without their father’. After assessing the literal and near idiomatic meaning of the expression used, we translated as follows Wagiriwe inama yo gushyikirana; “nta wutwika igiti cyera imbuto” watewe ubwoba, wahungabanyijwe binyuriye ku mubiri wawe. Abahungu ntibashobora gutsinda batari kimwe na se. Ntiwabyitayeho.

From the above examples, it is seen that major differences exist between both SL (English) and RC (Kinyarwanda) and this causes literal trans-lingual interpretation and translation of meaning inappropriate. Consequently, those differences pose challenges to making equivalent translation. The main solution was to bear the meaning-based translation after analyzing, interpreting and understanding the massage in the SLT so as to render the same meaning faithfully and fluently.

**6. SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION**

It is often time said that “a reading nation is an informed nation” which means that young African generations should know and preserve their cultures and values as taught through literary genres. Despite that translating Mariama Ba’s *So Long a Letter* from English into Kinyarwanda challenges, it is worthy for the Kinyarwanda speech community to know the message conveyed by A west African writer. We decided to carry out this study as the novel received much acclaim and admiration reflected by its contribution in eradicating inequalities between men and women especially in African countries where inequalities have taken root and where gender issues arise consistently. The researchers wanted to translate this novel into Kinyarwanda Language so as to allow Rwandans to read and understand the
Challenges identified throughout the translation of the novel “So long a letter” from English into Kinyarwanda were mainly related to translating unknown ideas, genitive constructions known as "of phases", figures of speech such as metaphors, similes, …gender markers, proper names, active and passive constructions, proverbs and proverbial phrases, among others. Possible remedies and/or solutions were resorted to while translating this novel so as to render the same meaning. Among others, we mentioned deep analysis of the meaning in the SLT before translating, the use of descriptive phrase, the consideration of the context, transliteration, borrowing and use the meaning-based translation, just to name a few. As “two heads are better than one”, we have found out that, translation and language development is not a one person’s task but rather a collective one. Since translation is one of the main means that help in promoting and developing African mother tongues, we realized that translation would help in standardizing orthography, vocabulary and other language features of the mother tongues and this would contribute enormously to the language and culture safeguarding.

Given that a few of Rwandans are acquainted with foreign languages, translation needs therefore to be done lengthily so as to allow a number of Rwandans if not all to read and understand books written in their mother tongues. In order to achieve the Rwandan vision, there must be information sharing through the Language that all citizens understand. Therefore, all government policies should be translated into Kinyarwanda so as to allow all Rwandans to understand them in order for them to be able to implement. As most of the documents in Rwanda are written in foreign languages. We would recommend that most of the documents especially bank documents, signposts, adverts and others be translated in mother tongue so that Rwandans who do not master foreign languages are able to interpret and understand those documents. Commercialization of Kinyarwanda as mother tongue is very important too. Here, we mean that Kinyarwanda should be used in commercial/economic domains so as to allow all Rwandans to read and understand properly the related information.

Kinyarwanda like other African mother tongues should be industrialized, intellectualized. Put another way, they should be used in all domains such as political, economic, medical, educational just to name a few. Musicians should be encouraged to compose songs in the standard Kinyarwanda instead of using colloquial one and/or mixing languages. Kinyarwanda like any other African mother tongues should be empowered through the language and other government policies so as to help in their promotion and development. One library per sector cannot be excluded from this list of recommendation. The government should establish libraries in each sector where people should get Kinyarwanda books of stories, Kinyarwanda proverbs, Kinyarwanda tongue twisters, folk stories, Kinyarwanda poems, and Kinyarwanda songs and therefore people especially young ones will learn the standard words to use in Kinyarwanda and the proper use of our mother tongue.

African curriculum should always put emphasis on the mother tongues as one way of developing them and preserving their cultures. Since the time RALC was established in Rwanda, we see a tremendous improvement in terms of Kinyarwanda development and Rwanda culture safeguarding. We therefore recommend a continuous mobilization in all sectors so as to develop Kinyarwanda as mother tongue and as the national Language. We believe that this paper augurs increase of demand for translation and adaptation, editing works and interpreting services from foreign languages to Kinyarwanda like many scientific textbooks, novels, and short stories among others; enrich that Bantu language. We recommend other scholars and translators to keep on translating more books written in foreign languages to allow Kinyarwanda speech community to get a hold of any communicated messages straightforwardly. Further discoveries on translation language development are encouraged accordingly.

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Nyandwi Gilbert is the Assistant Lecturer of English in the University of Rwanda, College of Education. He holds a master’s degree in Translation and Language Development from Uganda Christian University and Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education from University of Rwanda College of Education. He has a Bachelor’s Degree in Education with English and has carried research in his field of expertise which earned him skills and experience to use in his career. He has gained experience from working with several companies and institutions. Moreover, he has the skills necessary for translation and consultancy work.

Bazimaziki Gabriel is a PhD scholar in English Education in the University of Rwanda. He is a holder of Master of Education in English Language and Literature Education from Kampala University/ Uganda where he graduated in 2014. In 2018, he obtained a Post Graduate Certificate in Learning and Teaching in Higher Education from University of Rwanda, College of Education. From 2013 to 2017, he taught in University of Rwanda as an Assistant Lecturer of English and Literature. He has also taught the same subjects as a part time lecturer in Mount Kenya University/Rwanda and Mahatma Gandhi University/Rwanda in Post Graduate Programme. Due to his outstanding performance in academic and research, he was promoted to the position of Lecturer in 2018. He is
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