

Issues in the Translation of an In-Text Igbo Expression in Achebe's *There Was a Country*

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Abstract

This paper looks at a glossed translation of a particular Igbo expression in Chinua Achebe's last work, *There was a Country*. The principal concern of the discourse is to understudy and review the translated expression with a view to verifying its correlation to the gloss. It is observed that based on a linguistic account, this particular translation as applied by Achebe does not give a clear representation of the intended Igbo expression as translated into English. Achebe's position as one of the foremost African writers confers on him the iconic authority such that what he writes and what he translates might be taken as the standard. Granted that such use of language emanated from a literary icon of such renown, a distal (non-native context) user/learner of the Igbo language might believe that it reflects the true interpretation of the said expression. This conclusion would certainly hamper the process of learning and understanding of Igbo/English in relation to the context of use.

Keywords: Achebe, translation, Igbo/English, context

Introduction

Glossed translation of words and expressions occurring in literary texts is one of the means by which a distal learner of a particular (or any) language can improve his knowledge. In other words, one who reads a text written in English and comes across an in-text expression written in any other language can glean a little knowledge of the incidental language by means of its corresponding gloss. Not a few persons, including this writer, got acquainted with the Yoruba language by means of glossed translations in Soyinka's works. These works, though primarily written in English, contain certain expressions rendered in Yoruba. The expressions whose translations are often rendered as footnotes often give a reader an insight into the nature of the Yoruba language. In fact, the glossed translation of a particular work helped in the generation of a hypothesis, to wit, that Yoruba does not have an exclusive word for the lexeme, father, (Iroegbu, forthcoming). This hypothesis would serve for another discussion in a subsequent research.

Achebe's choice to have his stories written in English was variously criticized by Wali (1963) who along with Ngugi (1986), (see Olaniyan & Quayson, 2007), maintained that any text which should qualify as African literature should be such that was written in any of the indigenous languages of the continent. Wali was evidently motivated by the Whorfian hypothesis which indicated a link between language, perception, cultural identity and world view. More so, Achebe had claimed that his major motivation for writing was to correct the wrong impression about Africa and Africans generated by the accounts as presented in the novels of Joyce Carey, Joseph Conrad and others. Thus, to Wali and wa Thiong'O, it was inconsistent for the writer to assume a self-deprecating posture of employing the language of those to whom he felt a kind of animosity. Achebe, using every avenue at his disposal, defended his decision to adopt the colonial bequest of a foreign language in expressing an African indigenous experience.

It is to the advantage and benefit of the Igbo society through whose reflection Achebe rendered the African experience that the creative writer did not heed the call of wa Thiong'O and Wali. Otherwise, and considering our discussion in this essay, Achebe would have no doubt made a poor writer using the Igbo language.

Literature review

Achebe is a writer whose works have unarguably received more than a fair share of critical and scholarly attention. It is perhaps on this ground that Eghagha (2004) comments that most students of English

language and literature focus “disproportionately on Clark, Achebe and Soyinka” (p. 484). Eghagha sees these authors as over-researched, which implies that any new work on them may be hardly original. In his opinion, most students who work on the aforementioned authors often have recourse to “a rehash of old, and sometimes pedestrian critical ideas” (p.484). He therefore condemns this act of rehashing old ideas and encourages researchers to disregard the over-researched authors so as to try their hands on emerging creative writers. Eghagha’s opinion is faulty in from two standpoints. First, he does not see the works of these authors as organic entities that bear direct or indirect link to attendant issues in human existence. Thus, he fails to recognize the fact that there could always be ways by which the respective works of these authors could apply to whatever was contemporary. Secondly, Eghagha seems to disregard the fact that these authors were still active in their vocation as writers. Clark published in 2010, six years after Eghagha had made his statement. The present text, *There was a Country*, came nearly a decade after Eghagha’s observation. Does he then mean that new works of these writers should be left alone because they had received more than a fair share of critical attention? Of course, this would not be Eghagha’s present stand. We referenced Eghagha’s opinion to show how wide-spread the criticism of Achebe’s work is.

Chukwuma (2003) sees Achebe as a very successful writer. She believes that “(t)he core of Achebe’s success lies in his innate sensibility and loyalty to his indigenous literary tradition”. Chukwuma further explains that “(t)he oral literature legacy provided (Achebe) with the tools and styles of literary expression” (p.125). In contrast to what we are compelled to conclude in this discourse, to wit that Achebe’s exclusive dependence on the English language grossly affected his use of the Igbo language, Chukwuma believes that:

Achebe’s western education rather than obliterate, sharpened his sensibilities and created in him a greater awareness and appreciation of his indigenous literature. The result is his transposing the oral art and fashioning his uniquely refreshing novels. (p.125)

We, to an extent, disagree with Chukwuma and believe the contrary. Achebe’s recognition as a literary artist is to the extent that he wrote in English. Although his writings display a well-articulated synergy of domestic world view expressed in a non-indigenous code, Achebe was not writing in his native Igbo language which would have given insight into the mastery of the latter.

Very similar to the view expressed by Chukwuma, Udumukwu (2007), in reference to Achebe and other earlier African/Nigerian writers like him, has this to say:

Accordingly, the writers’ awareness of their traditional orature forms an integral aspect of their education. The difference we witness in Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* does not manifest only due to his formal instruction in the tradition of the English novel. It comes also from the fact of his knowledge of Igbo orature. (p.13)

The import of Udumukwu’s assertion is that Achebe had adequately apprehended his people’s (the Igbo) culture and orature ever before he became a creative writer. There is no doubt about this because it is a conclusion that issues from a logical assumption. However, it is evinced that this knowledge has been adversely affected by Achebe’s wholehearted reliance on the English as a medium of artistic cum instructional communication. Thus, it appears therefore that while he was careful with his manipulation of linguistic forms to relate/enact his artistic creations in English, his natural language suffered neglect and disuse.

Nnolim (2007) ascribes to Achebe the role of a father in the process that led to the birth of Nigerian literature. Although he identifies Ekwensi as the foremost writer, Nnolim relegates the former’s work to a Eurocentric form that is non-reflexive of the African culture and indigenous tradition. Thus, Achebe who began to write shortly after Ekwensi appropriates the essence of true nationalistic features in literary creativity. Therefore, according to Nnolim, any attempt/effort to trace the genesis of what constitutes Nigerian literature requires that:

we must all hack back to Achebe for what is great in the tradition of the Nigerian novel, that tradition which, in addition to embodying the best in the art of the story and the best technique in the form of the novel promotes our awareness of what is really great and dignified in our culture, salted with the lilt of our local proverbs, the charm of our folkways, the respect of our ancestors, the beauty in our tradition – in sum the rehabilitation of the dignity of the black man bruised and damaged by the colonial master. (p.32)

Quoting the writer himself and corroborating Nnolim's opinion Udumukwu reiterates the fact that Achebe sees his duty and vocation as a creative writer as that which compels "re-storying peoples who had been knocked silent by the trauma of all kinds of dispossession" (Achebe, 2003, p. 79). It is important to point out that the "dispossession" as occasioned by colonial experience and as here being referred is not limited to the aspect of ideology and religion alone. Linguistic/language dispossession is a part of it. The irony is that Achebe and his contemporaries took this form of dispossession for granted in which case (wherein) the compulsion to speak, think and write in English has taken a great toll on the writers' performance in the indigenous language as exemplified by the analysis which is later to be undertaken in this discourse.

According to Taiwo (1969), Achebe and other writers of his ilk "draw freely on the oral traditions and thus make their works culturally relevant to everyday life of the local populace" (p. 27). It is the opinion of Tyson (1999) that "many indigenous writers from former British colonies prefer to write in English because that is the language in which they first learned to write" (p. 369). This view is reinforced by Achebe's position wherein he says "(f)or me there is no other choice. I have been given the language and I intend to use it" (Achebe, 1975, p.62). It was to a greater advantage to humanity that Achebe chose to exclusively write in the language with which he received a formal education.

Diala, (2014) recognizes that "Chinua Achebe in *There was a Country* highlighted as pivotal the role of countering negative representations of Africa and Africans in Western discourse and, moreover, of reinventing the continent" (p.33). Thus, beyond being a personal/private view of the devastating effect of the civil war, the novel serves a higher symbolic role of further projecting the African cultural heritage. This cultural heritage includes the language and other forms tradition/way of life of the people.

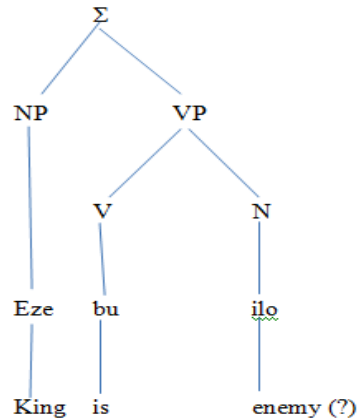
After pointing out some inaccuracies which he termed 'infelicities', and reiterating the pivotal significance of *There was a Country*, Emenyonu agrees that the work:

provides an inside view of the background of Achebe's family and personal circumstances (not found elsewhere) which not only give the reader important insights into Achebe as a person but also serve as very potent guide for the understanding of Achebe's early fictional works especially *Things Fall Apart*. (p.189)

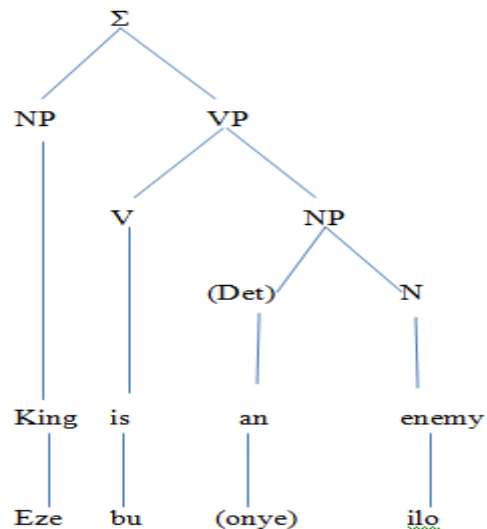
Emenyonu goes further to emphasize that the text is one of such books that should offer invaluable resource to 'teachers and students of Achebe's writings in particular and African literature in general' (p.189). Indicating his observed list of 'infelicities', he concludes his review of the text by declaring that these observed 'infelicities', 'individually and collectively, do not detract from the great merits of *There was a Country* (as the book) is unsurpassed by any work of fiction or non-fiction published so far on the Nigerian/Biafran war' (p.195).

Thesis of discourse: Translation of the Igbo aphorism, Eze builo ----> The king is an enemy (Achebe's translation)

Eze builo (There was a Country, page 246)



This is a tree diagram representing a simple break down of Achebe's use of the expression. A one-to-one account sees each linguistic item as contained in the text corresponding to its correlative in the two languages (Igbo & English). However, in the actual reproduction of the expression in English, Achebe introduces/applies a determiner which pre-modifies the term, *enemy*. In other words, and this is worthy to be noted, in its Igbo presentation there is no application of a determiner. The non-application of a determiner does not stem from the fact that Igbo does not have such an item. It is a common feature that most indigenous Nigerian languages do not possess any item illustrative of or translating to a determiner. However, unlike some other Nigerian languages, Igbo has a system of defining or pre-modification which is akin to the English article/determiner.



It is evident that Achebe does not apply the modifier, *onye*, in his expression of the Igbo idiom. In Igbo, particles or pre-modifiers such as *ndi*, *onye...nwa/ahu* are 'defining' items. Had he applied it in the original Igbo expression it is possible that his linguistic competence would have triggered off another interpretation, in fact, the real translation of which the inconsistency would have been quite apparent.

Issues of Inconsistency

The verbal form (bû)

Uchechukwu (n.d.) lists *bu* (with a dot/diacritic under the u to distinguish it from *bu*, carry) as one of the three stative Igbo verbs. Quoting elaborately from Welmers (1973) she explains that *bu* as a verb (corresponding to 'to be') is not understood as simply "to identify", but refers more to "being with" as

well as “being identified as” (p.57). She moreover notes that –bu is a copula verb “used in expressing present stative meaning as indicated in the expression:

O	bu	nwoke
He	be	man
He	is	a man/manly

To further illustrate the usage of bu, she uses the expressions:

O	buonyenkuzi		
He/she	be	person	teacher
He	is	a	teacher

(Source: Uchechukwu P.A. (n.d.), *A corpus-based analysis of Igbo and Spanish copula verbs*)

Emenanjo uses bu (without the diacritic dot) to illustrate “morphemic constituents of complex verbs”. Thus, here, bu translates to ‘carry’. In combination with other morphemes it can generate:

bufe	carry across
buwe	begin to carry
buba	carry into
bubata	carry inside
ibuba	to carry into
ibubata	to take/carry inside
bute	carry towards

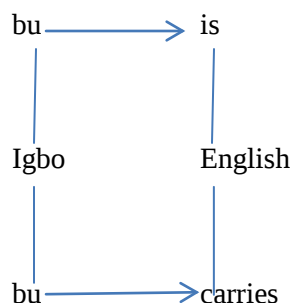
(Source: Emenajo E. N. *Elements of modern Igbo grammar*)

In distinguishing the two distinct ways to which bu as a verb can be applied in Igbo, Emenanjo(1987, p.169) uses the expressions:

- 1 Ada buite _____ Ada is carrying a pot (Ada carries a pot)
- 2 Chikebu woke _____ Chike is a man

The verb, *bu*, which translates to ‘is’ is a linking verb. Thus, it is used to link the two co-references, *King* and *enemy*. This shows another inconsistency which reflects/indicates Achebe’s mispronunciation of the word *bu*, or total ignorance of the inviolable form of this common Igbo idiom, Eze builo.

In its simple form, without any diacritic (a dot, indicating that its vowel content is nasalized), *bu* can correspond to two different translations as it is applied in the context. The first translation is that given by Achebe – which is faulty given that Achebe uses the expression in its idiomatic rather than metaphoric sense; the second translation is that where in the vowel is not nasalized and in which case the word translates to a lexical (rather than structural/linking) item. In the latter sense, *bu* is no longer ‘is’ but ‘carry/carries’. Thus, what differentiates *bu* (is) and *bu* (carry) in a written form is the orthographic convention of applying a dot under the vowel, /u/, for ‘is’, indicating its nasalization.



(the figure/diagram indicating Igbo and English correspondence in the two terms bu&bu)

Although he translates *bu* as ‘is’, Achebe does not apply the dot which would have indicated the nasalization of the accompanying vowel, and differentiated it from its homograph. This infraction is however insignificant, at least to an Igbo speaker who matches the context with the English translation.

The fact that the *u* is not dotted is not an issue considering that the typeset Achebe used might not have come with a dotted *u*. Barring any confusion, and in consideration of the context, *bu* in Igbo can translate to 'is' in English.

It is important to clarify that the verbal form which functions as an auxiliary in sentence 1 does not correlate to *bu*, rather the predicator, carrying, (not the finite) translates to *bu*. This is unlike the case in sentence 2 where *bu* (with a nasalized vowel as peak) correlates to "is".

Functional Translation

The nominal forms (Eze & ilo)

The two nouns following Achebe's application and translation are in a complementary association. In this regard, *Eze* and *ilo* are synonymous or co-referential in status. The co-referential status is based on Achebe's translation of *ilo* as "enemy". This translation is questionable as shall hereafter be analytically proved.

By functional we mean a translation which gives a clearer and more consistent representation of the expression based on the classification of the items in their syntagmatic relation.

Eze builo

Eze-----Subject (S)

bu----- (Finite)/Predicator (F/P)

ilo-----Complement (C)

King is (an) enemy

King-----S

is-----F/P

(an) enemy-----C

The item, *bu* does not indicate finiteness because tense in Igbo is marked by units higher than inflectional morphemes. To indicate past tense, Igbo uses a full expression such as: *namgbeochie*, *mgbegara-aga*, *nambu/namgbembu*.

Complement as it is used here differs from its traditional or formal grammar application where in it is consistent with a noun or adjective used in an apposite association with the subject of a verb in a simple clause/sentence. In other words, a complementary association indicates that the two references (subject & noun/adjective) correspond to a single identity.

Tunde is a teacher

Tunde is hard-working

Tunde & teacher, and Tunde & hard-working are in a complementary relation since they make reference to the same subject/thing.

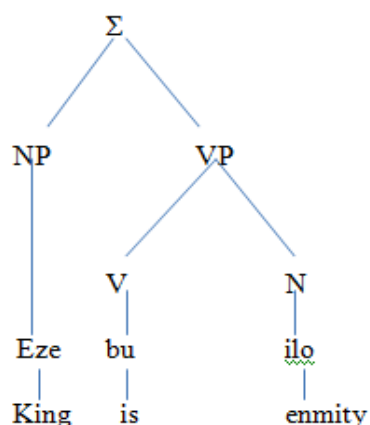
The functional idea of *complement*, however, applies to that where by a nominal item possesses the capacity to function as subject (see Halliday & Matthiessen, 2004). In this sense, the status of a complement is as a result of position and not necessarily on the basis of equation. Complement in functional terms captures the traditional essence of complement as well as object. Thus, the complement may or may not be in an apposite relation to the subject. In:

Tunde has a teacher

the item, *teacher* is functionally a complement to the verb *has*.

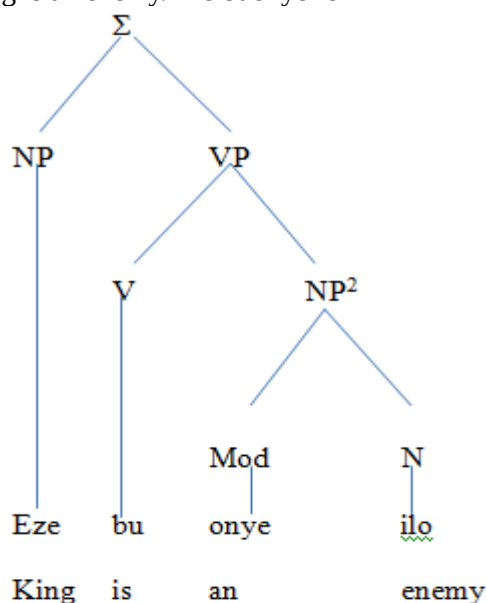
Translational Inconsistency 1

Achebe's translation of the item/noun/nominal form, *ilo* which is in a complementary relation to *Eze* is grossly inconsistent. This is because the word, *ilo*, as it often applies, does not translate to *enemy* in Igbo; rather in Igbo, *ilo* translates to *enmity* (abstract noun) while *enemy* translates to *onyeilo* (pre-modified concrete noun). Igbo morphology requires that the word *ilo* be pre-modified in order for it to capture its essence/idea of a concrete noun which corresponds to a personality rather than a concept/idea. Therefore, by interpretation and following the diagram below, *Ezebuilo* should normally generate a formal translation thus:



In the diagram above, *ilo* which translates to *enmity* is an abstract noun which in Igbo, considering the context in which it is used, requires no pre-modification. However, in Achebe's gloss a pre-modification is applied in the English representation of the expression. Thus, what we have is, *Kingisanenemy*, which in Igbo literarily translates to *Ezebuonyeilo* (this can be peer reviewed with any Igbo speaker/scholar).

King is an enemy/Eze buonyeilo



Note, in Igbo, sometimes, unique or status nouns when modified offer a generic sense but when not modified they make reference to something approximate to a particular individual. Thus:

Onye eze	→	A king
Eze (anyi)	→	(our) king
O yabu eze		He is the king
O buonye eze		He is a king (modified, corresponding to a descriptive identity)
O bu eze		He is a king (unmodified, indicating a common term/noun)

Translational inconsistency 2

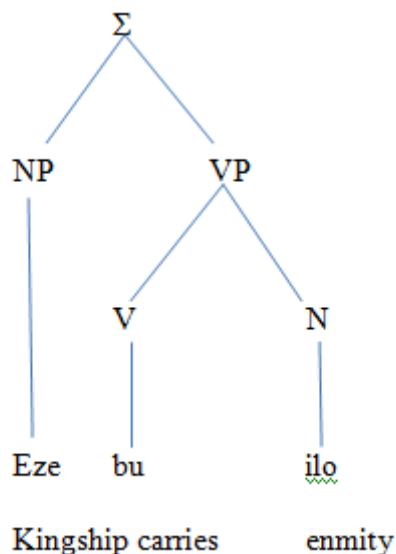
The second feature that offers a misrepresentation of the Igbo expression by Achebe is as a result of the mix up (confusion/ambiguity) existing in the two word forms, *bu* which is nasalized and *bu* which is not nasalized. Both terms are verbs, however, as already indicated, whereas the former is a linking verb whose function/application is structural; the latter is a lexical entity.

bu----- is (nasalized form, differentiated/indicated by a diacritic)

bu ----- carries (non-nasalized, not requiring a diacritic)

As it applies to the context and the sense in which it is used by Achebe, following the inviolability of the idiom, the second verb which translates to ‘carries’ should suffice. In this case, the relationship between the two nouns, *eze* (king) and *ilo* (enmity) is that of subject and object, following the traditional idea of these terms. In other words, the two terms are not in a complementary co-referential positions/situation. *Eze* and *ilo* assume distinct and autonomous statuses. This is the sense in which the idiom generally applies in the Igbo language.

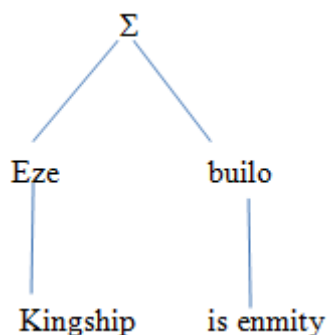
Eze builo



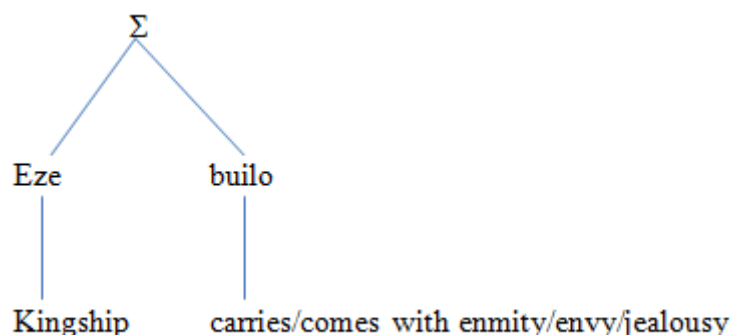
Of course, in its unmodified usage, the term *Eze*, as applicable to the context, corresponds to the essence rather than the personality. That is, the beingness in the noun where in it is an abstract form. Achebe's translation is the consequence of a one-to-one formal account of the expression as differing from the corresponding functional relation applicable to the idiom. Had Achebe conducted a functional translation, the term, *eze*, would generate *kingship* rather than *king*.

Translational inconsistency 3

Achebe translates the term, *ilo*, as *enemy*. This translation is inherently inadequate because, and as already explained, *ilo*, in its most common/popular application, does not correspond to *the person* in Igbo. In whatever context it applies, *ilo* is always an abstract noun. For *ilo* to correspond to its concrete counterpart, it has to be pre-modified (this we have already emphasized). It would require a great stretch of an improbable conception to understand/translate *ilo* as *enemy* rather than *enmity*. However, an exception is in the compound word which is a proper noun, *ibebuilo*. Here, *ilo* translates to enmity. As said, this is exceptional because in such other names/proper nouns that derive from compound where *ilo* features the term does not translate to enemy but envy, jealousy, or enmity. Such names include, *Iloegbu/Iroegbu*, *Iloako/Iroako*, *Iloka/Iroka*



Here it is a normal metaphoric expression in Igbo where *kingship* equates/is analogous/congruent to *enmity*. In this sense, the verb is nasalized, this we have already emphasized.



Here the expression is an inviolable idiomatic expression. It is sometimes borne as an appellation.

In the two translations above, *eze* and *ilo* are translated as *kingship* and *enmity* respectively, but in Achebe's gloss they correspond (translate) to *king* and *enemy*.

Translational inconsistency 4

Eze as king

Unlike *ilo* which has a straight-forward translation as *enmity*, there is a dual sense in which *eze* can be translated. Thus, *eze* can be; one, the person, that is, a reference to the personality or the individual. Secondly, the term *eze* is used to make a reference to the position, that is, the state of being an *eze* (beingness). In the first instance, *eze* can be perceived as a common/concrete noun which may/may not require a modification (pre-modifiers, *onye*, *ndi*, *nwa*, *nnukwu*, *oke* and post-modifiers, *-ukwu*, *-nta*, *-oha*, *-ji*, *-dibia*). At any rate, it might be titular or designatory. In the latter instance, however, *eze* is an abstract noun. This is the case especially when its application is idiomatic or metaphoric. Although Achebe adds that his is a 'literal' translation, the *king* is never an *enemy*; but *kingship* breeds *enmity*. In Igbo cosmology, the king was always subject to the people, hence the aphorism "ohan'eze". It was never "eze n'oha". Rather, when an individual owes gratitude to the state/society or intends to express absolute authority in Igbo world view, it is "ohakara, ohanyere, ohakim (Owerri/Imo dialect)". Achebe erred to have translated *eze* as *king* when in actual fact he had meant *kinship*; because, *eze* *abughionyeilo*, *manamaduibu eze n'ebute ilo*.

Differentiating the analyzed terms and some homographs through transcription and tone marking

Gloss (Igbo)	Transcription	Tone configuration	Gloss (English)
eze	/eze/	éze	king/kingship
eze	/eze/	éze	teeth
ilo	/ilo/	Íló	enmity
ilo	/ilo/	Íló	outside
bu	/bu/	bù	Is
bu	/bu/	Bù	carries/comes with

Conclusion

According to Emenyonu (2012) Achebe “calls himself a “conscious artist” with self-confident clarity of perspective in any story he tells. He does not allow anyone to dictate for him what or how to write on any issue in his fiction or non-fiction” (p.188). It is logical to conclude that this ‘self-confident’ attitude might have occasioned the misinterpretation which is hereby pointed out. In other words, Achebe took the translation of the Igbo expression for granted otherwise, an editorial or peer review mechanism would have chiseled out any of such inconsistent features/forms as is observed in this discourse.

As Achebe testifies, to become a king in pristine Igbo land, one had to take the fifth title. The requirement to get this fifth title was very elaborate and included; first, a feast organized for the entire community (for every title there was always a communal feasting) running on days, may be two to three market days; secondly, and this pertains specifically to the fifth title (ezeship), the aspirant must, according to Achebe’s account, pay off the debt owed by every member of the community. The entire process leading to ezeship was therefore very expensive and almost unaffordable to the citizenry. The consequence was that being an eze was an uncommon feat to which very few people ever aspired. And, as Achebe reveals, anyone who braved the odds and took the fifth title often became financially impoverished or wrecked such that in material terms the title holder had become extremely emasculated. The powers, prestige and recognition accorded the title are only symbolic.

If this is accepted as valid, and it is, especially to the extent of feeding the community for days on end, how then does the eze become an enemy? Is the eze an enemy because he liberated the indebted from an enslaving debt or is it because he fed the entire community? In consideration of these questions, it becomes obvious that the conclusion (Achebe’s translation/interpretation) that the king was an enemy is very wrong. It is the enviable height of achievement and societal recognition that attracts (the negative feelings of) jealousy, hatred and envy, hence the metaphorical aphorism that “kingship is enmity/jealousy/hatred or envy”.

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