

**A COMPARATIVE STUDY OF ENGLISH AND IGBO PROVERBS WITH  
REFERENCE TO THEIR WORLD VIEWS: ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR/TO THE  
LITERARY TRANSLATOR**

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**ABSTRACT:** *All cultures have proverbs that are unique to them and it has been discovered that the same pragmatic information is derived from these proverbs drawn from different cultural conditions, terms and languages. Consequently, proverbs are commonly found in literary texts most especially in African literature. The thrust of this research is to study through the analysis of some popular English and Igbo proverbs with the view to identifying the motivational factors inherent in their choice of words, their similarities and differences, the influence of their word views, religion, social life and belief. We discovered that the same message is transferred from one language to another in spite of their cultural differences. In conclusion, what is said in one language can be said in another with special reference to the linguistic and cultural differences of the languages. This work will in no small measure alleviates the work of the literary translator.*

**KEY WORDS:** proverbs, world view, religion, culture, literary translator

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Many sayings in a language convey deep meanings, moral lessons, wisdom, and truth of a particular language community, and they drawn from tested and proven experiences of the people. They come in form of phrases or sentences. Some of these sayings are idioms, adages and proverbs. In this work we are laying emphasis on proverbs. However, since the era of colonization, English has become an international language used as a vehicle to drive different cultural concepts. Hence, wise words written in English are not necessarily English sayings. The English language has become a medium of communication. Igboanusi (2002, p.5) confirms this when he postulates that “The reality of English today is that it has provided linguistic tools and literary traditions for both the native and native writers” A good example can be seen in the works of Chinua Achebe, Zaynab Alkali, etc. In this paper, we are going to discuss purely Igbo proverbs written in Igbo and purely

English proverbs. We will also study the differences between an adage and a proverb. To this effect, a global knowledge of a people is necessary in the understanding of their proverbs.

### **Historical overview of the Igbo and English people**

The origin of the Igbo people has not been fully answered but it is believed they originated from an area about 100 miles north from their current location. The majority of them were farmers. Politically, they are a fragmental group with no centralized chieftaincy. The responsibility of leadership is left for the village council which comprises of the heads of lineage, titled men, elders and those who have economically distinguished themselves. The Igbo people believe in God, the creator – *chukwuokike*, simply *chukwu* or *chineke*. ([http://members.tripod.com/ih8\\_tuxedos/index4.htm](http://members.tripod.com/ih8_tuxedos/index4.htm)). They also believe that there are other minor deities such as *ala* – the earth-goddess. The spirit of fertility (of man and the productivity of the land) *andigwe* – the sky-god. This god is not directly appealed to for rain. However, they have full-time professional rain-makers who it is believed are able to call and dismiss rain, *muomiri* – the spirit of the river. *agwo* – a spirit envious of other's wealth, always in need of servitors. *ahanjuku* or *Ifejioku* – the yam spirit. *Ikoru* – the drum spirit. It is important to note that there are no shrines for *chukwu* but it is believed that he is the ultimate receiver of all the sacrifices made to the smaller deities.

.James (2011) informs us that the English people are a nation and an ethnic group native to England, who speaks English. Their identity originates from the early medieval period when they were known as old English. Historically, they are descendants of several people: the Celtic Britons, the Germanic tribes that settled in Britain, and the Anglo Saxons. Before the 10<sup>th</sup> century, the English population was not politically unified. It consisted of a number of petty kingdoms which gradually coalesced into seven powerful states. They practiced the legal system which insists that defendants' accuser and his evidence be thoroughly tested in court. Hence, a person is presumed innocent until proven guilty. The English are known for being polite and reserved. That could be why they have the following taboos: Do not rest your elbows on the table. Do not stare. Do not be overly familiar with people you do not know well. Do not ask personal questions such as how much someone earns, who they voted for etc. Do not speak too loudly or cut into a conversation. Christianity became the dominant religion in England in the 7<sup>th</sup> century. However, polytheistic Indo-European religions referred to as paganisms were practiced before Christianity took over. There has been a decline of the role of the church in Britain since the middle of the last century with less than half of the population attending church services or believing in God. It is estimated that, a third of the population have no religion, Vexen (2012). The industrial revolution began in England due to the social economical and political changes. But, absolute monarchy stayed the normal form of power execution.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

**Literary translator-** A literary translator is a translator whose main focus is to translate literary texts such as novels, poems, songs, religious texts, short stories, plays, etc. This is a special kind of translation because in order to getting meaning across, there are lots of other meta-linguistic factors such as mood, special play on words, language used, culture, religion, time, etc that he has to understand in order to convey the message. Yet, it is his duty to convey the said message. This type of translation agrees with the definition of translation proposed by Edmond Cary (1962, p.76) Translation is an operation which seeks to establish equivalences between two texts expressed in different languages, the equivalents always necessarily being a function of the nature of the two, of their destination, of the relations existing between the culture of the two peoples, their moral, intellectual and affective climate depend on all the contingencies specific to the time and place of departure and arrival. (Our translation).

According to Cary, translation provides natural equivalents after taking into consideration the nature of texts, the message, their cultures, their world views, and the time. To buttress this point, in an interview, Daniel Hahn, Director of the British Centre for Literary Translation, and Urdu language translator Fahmida Riaz, during a literary translation workshop that took place in Karachi on 13-17 October 2014 were asked the following question:

*Should a good translation faithfully capture the original text, or make something with a distinctive life of its own?* Daniel Hahn responded that:

*Assuming the faithfulness you're aiming for is fidelity to something more than just literal meaning, then any attempt at being faithful to the original piece of writing should entail making something that lives. It should have just the same pulse as the original did. Taking something living and fresh and transforming it into something dull and dead in another language doesn't seem like genuine faithfulness to me.*

Hence, a living message can be killed if certain factors are not taken into consideration..

### **Idioms, Adages and Proverbs**

Idioms, adages and proverbs are wise sayings. A proper understanding of these terms will boost the apprehension and appreciation of the work at hand.

An idiom is a set of multi-elemental group of words, or lexical entity with the following characteristics. a) A complete meaning cannot be derived from the meaning of individual elements. e.g. *to have a crush on someone*. b) The substitution of single elements does not bring about a systematic change of meaning. c) A literal reading results in a homophonic non-idiomatic variant. (Bussmann1996)

ii. A phrase which has a meaning that is commonly understood by speakers of the language, but whose meaning is often different from the normal meaning of the words is called an **idiom**.  
<https://overview.mail.yahoo.com/>

In summary, idioms are expressions that take on a figurative meaning when certain words are combined. The figurative meanings are different from the literal definition of the individual words.

b. Adage: To understand this term, we are going to look at three definitions

i. An adage is a condensed but memorable saying embodying some important facts of experience that is **taking as true** (<https://www.vocabulary.com/dictionary/adage> ) 27/10/2018.

ii. An **adage** is a concise, memorable, and usually philosophical aphorism that communicates an important truth derived from experience, custom, or both, and that many persons **consider true** and credible because of its longevous tradition, i. e. being handed down generation to generation, or mimetic replication. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Adage>) (28/10/2018)

iii. An **adage** is an ancient saying or maxim, brief and sometimes mysterious, which has **become accepted** as conventional wisdom. In classical rhetoric, an adage is also known as a **rhetorical proverb**. (<https://www.thoughtco.com/what-is-adage-1688967>) (28/10/2018)

In the above definitions of the term adage, three different expressions which almost portray the same understanding are observed:

i) Taken as true ii) Considered true iii) Has become accepted

Hence, this implies that there is no certainty that adages are true. But because of long-term use, they have been accepted to be true.

C. Proverbs: In this work, we will try to get a better understanding of the term ‘proverb’ via the definition drawn from different authors:

1. A proverb is a short, pithy saying stating a **general truth** or piece of advice. Proverbs are meant to convey common wisdom or prudent counsel about how the world usually works. Luke Wayne (2017) (<https://carm.org/what-is-a-proverb>)

2. A proverb is a simple, concrete, traditional saying that **expresses a truth** based on common sense or experience. (<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Proverb>)

3. According to Word-Ocean Dictionary (1979), a proverb is defined as a short and popular sayings pregnant with profound meanings among the masses, most of which **reflect the experience** of people’s life or their struggles

4. A proverb is a concise statement of an **apparent truth** that has, or will have currency among the people." Mieder (1993, p. 5) The Nature Of Proverbs

(A closer look at the understanding of adage and proverbs shows that both of them are wise sayings, but proverbs are more authentic than adages. There is no doubt or question about its truthfulness. It is certain that whatever is said in a proverb is true. Mieder (1993, p. 5) goes further to say that a proverb is “the wit of one and the wisdom of many”.

Proverbs are found in almost every culture but their frequency and usefulness is more pronounced in Africa, especially in Igbo land. This explains why Chinua Achebe defines a proverb as **Mmanu e jieriokwu** (The oil that is used to eat words). Oil here, symbolizes lubrication on one hand and beautification on the other hand. Consequently, proverbs have the tendency of solving problems; they are also used for admonishing, appraisal, instruction, etc. At the end, proverbs beautify

situation they come in contact with. It is important to note that proverbs do not come in a scattered manner. They have a form that makes them beautiful and easy to memorize. This will lead us to the classification of proverbs.

### **Classification of proverbs**

Proverbs come in different forms. These forms motivate their classification or categorization. There is no one classification of proverbs; there are as many classifications as there are paremiologists.

3.1 Classification by Yandia – in the course of her study of the book of proverbs in the bible, Yandia (2016) proposed six categories of proverbs.

- a. **Synonymous proverbs:** These are proverbs that are saying the same thing in different ways. They are commonly found in the bible Example: Proverbs 11:25, “The Generous soul will be made rich, and he who waters will also be watered himself.”
- b. **Antithetical proverbs:** Here the negative effect of the thought presented is reflected in the second line of the proverb. Example “They that sow the wind, shall reap whirlwind.”
- c. **Synthetic proverbs:** In this type of proverbs, each line conveys a different message but present itself as the same “Whoever hides hatred has lying lips, and whoever spreads slander is a fool.” This type is also common in the Bible.
- d. **Integral proverbs:** In this type of proverb, there is one message. The second line completes the thought of the first line. For example: If wishes were horses, beggars would ride.
- e. **Parabolic proverbs:** The first line of the proverb illustrates the second line. For example: A swarm in May is worth a load of hay; a swarm in June is worth a silver spoon; but a swarm in July is not worth a fly.
- f. **Comparative proverbs:** The proverb here compares two ideas. Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.

3.2 Classification by Norrick

Norrick, a renowned paremiologist in his study of a sample of proverbs drawn from the dictionary of English proverbs, distinguished five categories of proverbs which are based on the types of figuration they portray.

- a. **Synecdoche Proverbs-** These are proverbs in which the literal meaning of words in the proverbs and their proverbial interpretation stand in relation of macrocosm to microcosm or from whole to part. Example: Give a man a fish and you will feed him for a day.
- b. **Metaphoric proverbs-** Here, the nominal symbolize some character. Example: Genius is an infinite capacity for taking pains.
- c. **Metonymic proverbs-** This is based on the relationship between something literally named and what is intended. Example: Man does not live by bread alone.
- d. **Hyperbolic proverbs-** Here, amplification or exaggeration is implied. Example: Old soldiers never die, they just fade away.
- e. **Paradoxical proverbs-** They imply logical contradictions. Example: Less is more.

A look at the classifications above shows that each scholar has used different criteria to classify proverbs.

### Data presentation

A literal translation of the translated proverbs is added for better appreciation

Igbo proverbs	Literal translation	English equivalent
Onye ndidi na-eriazu upkọọ	A patient person eats big fish	A patient dog eats the fattest bone
Ihe agwọ muru aghaghi di ogologo	The offspring of a snake must always be long	Like father like son
Ndidi nwe mmeri	Patience has victory	All things come to those who wait
Emee ngwangwa emehara odachi	If one acts on time, negative situation is avoided	A stitch in time saves nine
Tinye mma gi n'ọbọ	Put your sword in its sheath	Let the sleeping dog lie
Agha eyirieyi erin gwuru	A crippled is not captured in a scheduled war	A danger foreseen is half avoided
A tatu ukwa, atatu aki	Chew a little of breadfruit, a little of palm kernel	All work and no play make jack a dull boy.
Ihe onye metere ogburu	One carries/bears the outcome of his action	As you make your bed you lie on it
Anaghi eji ukwu abuo awuogwe	You don't jump over a gulley with two legs	Look before you leap
Onye ube ruru orachaa	He that the pear ripens for, let him eat	Whom the cap fits let him wear
Awo adighi agba oso ehihe naefu	A toad does not run in the day for not reason	There is no smoke without fire
Ike gwu nwata, ike ogwu a diriya	If a child is tired to work, he looks for reasons to fight	A bad workman always quarrels with his tools
A kara gini na mbu	What was the initial agreement	A bargain is a bargain
Onye kwe chi ya ekwe	if one agrees, his god will also agree	When there is a will, there is a way
Nkita rachaa nsi eze eree ewu	The dog eats excrement, but the goat teeth rotten	Robbing Peter to pay Paul
Ogbu opi na-ezi imi	He who blows the pipe blows his nose	A workman is worthy of his pay
Ihe o sorogi jiriwaa ogodo, ma amu akputala	Use whatever to cover the loins but let not the penis be seen	The end justifies the means

Ọgbughi ka akilu na adan'onu ka o si ato	The sound of the bite of bitter kola does not correspond with its taste	All that glitters is not gold
Aka nri kwuo aka ekpe, aka ekpe a kwuo aka nri	If the right hand washes the left, the left should in turn wash the right hand	One good turn deserves another
Diochi anaghi ekwucha ihe ohuru n'elu nkwa	A palm wine tapper, does not disclose what sees on the tree	Keep secret secret
Akwukwo juru ohia, ohonu ahoro ukazi	There are many leaves in the bush but ukazi was selected	Many Are called, but few are chosen
Aku na-esi obi ike	Wealth breeds confidence	A heavy purse makes the heart light
Obenye bu oria	Poverty is a disease	A light pure is a heavy heart
Mmiri umeala na egbu ji	Still water that kills yam	Slow water runs deep
Ogbarasiri ike	Blood is strong/powerful	Blood is thicker than water
Anu bu uzọ na anu mmiri oma	The animal that enters first enter the river drinks clean water,	The early birth catches the worm
Onye chi ya naafuru oku amaghi na oyi naatu ndi ozọ	He that his god kindles fire for is unaware that other are feeling cold	He dances well to whom fortune pipes
Ihe a gutara na akuku oku n'ala na akuku onu	What you picked beside the fire will vanish/go beside your mouth	What is got over the devil's back is spent under his belly
Mberede nyiri dike, mberede ka ejiamara dike	Emergency defiles a man; emergency is the proof of manhood.	Necessity is the mother of invention
Agadi nwaanyi a naghi aka nka na egwu o mara aba	An old woman cannot forget the dance step she knows how to dance	You can't teach a dog an old trick
Choo ewu ojii ka chi di	Look for the black goat while it is day	Make hays while the sun shines
Nwata kwuokaka ya o soro garayarienri	If a child watches his hands he dines with the king	Manner maketh a man
A tua ilu nkirika nkata onye tara ahu amata	If one makes a proverb with old raffia basket, a skinny person is informed	A guilty conscience needs no accuser
Oko koo anumanu o kooya na osisi ,ma; okoo mmadu o jekuru mmaduibeya	If an animal feels itchy, he scratches his body on the tree,	No man is an island

	but if a man feel itchy, he goes to his fellow man	
Nwaanyi ọhuru adighi mma ibi n'ulọ anaruchagiarucha	A new bride is not supposed to live in an uncompleted building	Be ready, be prepared before you embark on a project
Abisi gbaa otule ọ muru akọ	If the ant bites the buttocks, the buttocks becomes wiser	Once bitten twice shy
A ukoo mmamiri ọnu o baa ofufu	If people urinate at the same portion, the urine foams	Unity is strength
Onye buru igu ka ewuna-eso	He that carries palm front that goat follows	He that blows the pipes dictates the tunes

### Data analysis

It is also important to note that the primary meaning of the words that constitute the proverbs in both languages is of no importance. The concept and message is our primary focus. Hence, we are not in any way translating the proverbs from one language into another. We are trying to look for their natural equivalence in the target language. Our analyses are based on the identification of the concept and message in the proverbs. The analysed proverbs were randomly selected.

Onye kwe chi ya ekwe - Where there is a will there is a way.

In this proverb, the world view and belief of the Igbo people is exposed. In Igbo cosmology, it is believed that each person possesses his own *chi* which is believed to be the spiritual force that accompanies the life journey of the individual. (Nweke 2016, p.150). Here, the Igbo man gives credence to his *chi* for every achievement he makes. Though, he recognizes the effort of his will. On the contrary, the English man makes reference to his will alone. For him, your will alone is the driving force that can lead you to achieving your heart desire. The motivational factors in the choice of words in these proverbs are their world view and religious inclination. The religious inclinations of both languages have influenced their proverbs.

-Diochi anaghi ekwucha ihe o huru n'elu nkwa - Keep secret secret

This proverb is simply telling us to control the way we divulge information. In other words, information is rated. Some are secret while some others are not. In the Igbo version of the proverb, one of the major occupations of the Igbo people is exposed. Before the advent of colonization, most men were either palm wine tappers or farmers or both. By the nature of their work, they were privy to many secret actions by the people. The Igbo man used what he was familiar with to express his idea. The English man in went straight to the point to say it in a strait language.

-Onye ndidi na eri azu ukpo - A patient dog eats the fattest bone.

In this proverb, “*onye*” is substituted with “*dog*” and “*azuukpoo*” is also substituted with “*bone*”. *Azuukpoo* means big fish gotten from a salty river, which is a delicacy to an Igbo man. On the



other hand,, bone is a delicacy to a dog. Note here that bone is a delicacy for an English dog but not so for an Igbo dog. The staple food for a core Igbo dog is excrement. That is why the Igbo has a proverb that says “*nkita raa nsh ieze ere ewu*” which literally means the dog eats excrement but it is the goat’s tooth that decays. Each language culture uses what is a delicacy to them as a symbol of/reward for patience. Though both languages used a delicacy, where the Igbo man uses a human being, the English man makes use of a domestic animal. Hence, this proverb is simply saying that if you are patient, you will be rewarded.

-Ndidi nwe mmeri. - All things come to those who wait  
 .This is another proverb with the word patience. “*Mmeri*” in Igbo is substituted with “*all things*”. And “*ndidi*” with “*wait*”. Here, the Igbo man is very direct with his message: patience has victory. The English man did not directly use the word patience but they used the verb wait. If you are not patient, you cannot wait. Waiting is one of the attributes of patience. Patience is implied. English also used the expression all things for victory in Igbo. The understanding here is if you have all things, you are victorious. The pragmatic meaning of the English version brought to light its equivalence in Igbo language. A closer scrutiny of this proverb shows that the English version is very emphatic and sure. There is no room for doubt, no exception “ALL THINGS” it is a little softer in Igbo.

-chọọ ewu ojii ka chi di - Make hays while the sun shines  
 To bring out the same pragmatic information, “*Ewuojii*” takes the place of “*hays*”. The Igbo man is looking for “*ewuojii*” while the English is in search of sun light. Using the same words will lead to wrong message because of their different word views and environment. because “*ewuojii*” is black and night is black. A black goat cannot be seen in the dark. One will ask if the night is not dark to the English man. Yes it is dark but early discovery of electricity in most places in their land has made night not to be very dark. Secondly, the climatic condition of their land informed the choice of the words in this proverb. Because they do not have sunlight most of the time of the year, they tend to preserve food for their animals by drying them in the sun. This implies that if you don’t make hays while there is sun light your animals will not have food throughout the year. This proverb simply means that one should do the needful at the right time for a better result.

-Okọ kọọ anumanu okọọ ya naosisi; ma okọọ mmadu o jekuru mmadu ibeya – No man is an island.  
 This proverb simply means that you cannot live alone. You must have need for another person one way or the other. To bring out this message, the life style of the two groups is brought to light. The Igbo man believes in closed relationship. Everybody is a brother or sister. Every aged person is a father or a mother. With this in mind, they can easily or comfortably ask someone by the side to scratch their back. The Igbo man believes that we are one another’s keeper. The English man used his topography

Tinye mma gi n’obo - Let the sleeping dog lie

This proverb is an advice to let peace reign. To an Igbo man, when the sword is in sheath, the warrior is at ease he is not in mood for war or attack. But when the sword is in his hand he is ready for any eventuality. When he says “tinye mma gi n’obo”, it implies that there is a conscious effort to allow peace to reign in the midst of a problem. Notably, an English dog is mostly meant for security in addition to their human security, while the Igbo dog is for hunting. If an English dog sees a stranger in his environment it will bark or even attack the person. This can only happen if it is awake. When it is asleep, there is tranquillity. It is important to note that the word “let” in the English version also implies a conscious effort to let the dog lie.

- Anaghi abga aka ahu nwata eze - Nothing goes for nothing

The Igbo version of this proverb brings to lime light the Igbo culture about teething. In Igbo cosmology, a child’s development of milk tooth is a joyous occasion and it is celebrated. The first person to announce the coming out of teeth in a child must give the child something mostly a fowl or money. It is an honour for one to be the first to announce it. To get that honor you must drop something. Because of this even when the parents see the tooth they will keep quiet until an outsider announces it. On the other hand the English man did not attach any culture to this proverb. For an English man, you must give something to get another. It a clear statement from direct life experience.

-Emee ngwangwa, emeghara odachi- A stitch in time saves nine

The literal meaning for the word *ngwangwa* in igbo is fast fast, quickly, with speed. But the pragmatic meaning here is *on time, at the right time, without delay*. If one employs the literal meaning of the words in this proverb, one will quickly say that they don’t showcase the same information. The common profession of English women and the base ten mathematic counting system informed the choice of words in the English version. Sewing and knitting are imported profession in Igbo land. In this counting system the basic number is from 1 to 10. Hence there are ten stitches to be made to complete sewing. If you make the first stitch accurately and on time, there will be no hitch on the path of the remaining nine and you will save time.

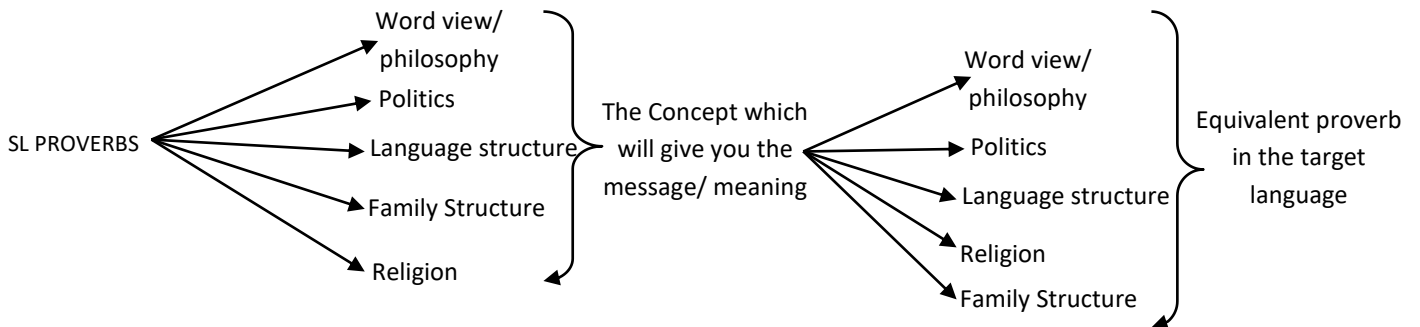
-Ihe o soro gi jiri nwaa ogodo ma amu aputala - The end justifies the means

This proverb simply, implies that to both languages, the process of acquiring something is of less importance. What matters most is the result. To pass this message, the attire of a core Igbo man is employed. Trouser is an imported costume in Igbo land. An Igbo man customarily ties a piece of cloth called *ogodo* around his waist in a peculiar manner to cover his manhood which is the only place to be covered. If you like use plantain or coco yam leaves to cover, what we do not want to see is his manhood. To the English man, if the end is good invariably the process is also good. In the two proverbs, what justifies the goodness of a thing is the result or end product. Here we observed some sort of similarity.

**RESULT OF ANALYSIS**

A closer look at the equivalent forms of the proverbs shows that the translation of proverbs from one language to the other is not an easy task. In fact, proverbs are not translated. What the translator needs to do is to find the equivalent conceptual message in the target language. The translator has to ask himself the following question: 1. what is the message 2. What is the concept behind this message in the source language first, then in the target language? This is so because the same message has different concept in the languages. Concept here means the approach, attitude, method, idea, thought, notion etc. a good example is found in the proverb. *Okọ kọọ anumanu okọọ ya na osisi, ma; o kọọ mmadu o jekuru mmadu ibe ya* (Igbo) - No man is an island (English). To bring forth the message in this proverb, the Igbo man first of all made a slight comparison between a human being and an animal. For animals, there is no strong link between one another. They do not help each other. But in the case of a human being, he cannot do it alone. There is need for another. Hence, no man is an island. This gave rise to the proverb “*Mmadu ka anumanu*”. Some others say “*mmadu ka ewu*”

The translation of proverbs from one language to another can be schematized thus:



**CONCLUSION**

The culture, belief, topography is showcased in their proverbs. Hence, unless a proverb appeals to the culture and concept of a people, it may not be understood or appreciated by them. It is also important to note the *faux amis* as we saw in the use of dog in proverbs above. What a dog symbolizes in one culture may be different in another. It now behoves on the literary translator to dig out the concept behind a proverb before attempting its translation. This will lead him/her to the study of the culture (which is an embodiment of religion, philosophy, politics, family structure, topography, world view etc) of his source and target language proverbs for a better identification of the equivalent proverb in the target language. Hence culture as it is seen in this work plays a major role in the choice of words in the construction of the proverb in a given language.

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