

Tradition or Translation? Anthropomorphism in Nuer Literature

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Abstract

More than ever, translation in children's literature has grown immensely, particularly in the space of other cultures. However, there has been little to no discourse on translation studies in exploring the use of anthropomorphism in writing. Nuer myths, such as *What's So Funny, Ketu?*, explore what it might mean to accept the relationship of human and other species. The tale conjures up a number of questions about the limits and allowances of anthropomorphism in literature, and their relation to language, representation, and reality. The article aims to show how anthropomorphism explains the role of translation in the wide field of discourses pertaining to oral literature. It outlines the tradition of anthropomorphism in oral cultures and then explores how the difference of animal relations is recorded when written. As we tend to place animals in an entirely different category from humans, *What's So Funny, Ketu?* seeks to illustrate animals outside the hierarchy and structure of human society and employ them to objectively challenge and question human hegemonies. In *What's So Funny, Ketu?*, I will argue, that anthropomorphism serves as a means of translation employed to link realms that are conventionally separate, challenge traditional human structures and operate outside national boundaries.

Keywords: Anthropomorphism, Nuer, Oral literature, translation

Introduction

More than ever, translation in children's literature has grown immensely, particularly in the space of other cultures. However, there has been little to no

discourse on translation studies in exploring the use of anthropomorphism in children's writing. In some regards, many argue that what this form of literary style does is develop a sense of compassion and affinity between humans and animals. However, I would like to argue that animals in literature are arguably placed in an endless, almost incurable state of difference and are unable to speak for themselves because of their othered position. Myths such as *What's So Funny, Ketu?* conjure a number of questions about the limits and allowances of the spaces of humanity and animality in their relation to language, representation, and reality. *The Man and the Snake* and *What's So Funny Ketu* are just two of many Nuer narratives of language, of crossings, of mystery and suspension, of being on a threshold that is defined by inscriptions of difference, of individual and collective subjectivities, always in spaces of translation. The narrative of *What's So Funny, Ketu?* thus becomes a literary text that is shaped by the complex negotiation of translational boundaries and by the challenge to the protagonist's language and identity encountered in the process of this experience. The focus of this paper, therefore, is a stylistic study of the animal-related metaphors in Nuer literature from a literary perspective. Through *What's So Funny, Ketu?* I will argue, that anthropomorphism acts as a means of translation employed to link realms that are conventionally separate, challenge conventional dominant human structures and operate outside national boundaries. The scope of the study will cover only some of those animals within the Nuer climatic region and cultural milieu, which are found to have contain great interest .

Literature Review

Anthropomorphism, "where animals and even inanimate objects take on characteristics and capabilities of human beings", is one of the most notable features of African literature (Luthin, 38). According to Luthin, all cultures, especially oral cultures, make use of anthropomorphism in their narratives. He writes, "the mythologies of animistic hunting-and-gathering societies in particular are often heavily and crucially anthropomorphic" (Luthin, 38). In African literatures, Isidore Okpewhoco illustrates how animals have long been used, in art, folklore, and ceremonies to express deep patterns of contemplating the world. Of significant importance "and one the reader[s] should guard [itself] against [is] to

interpret anthropomorphic myths and stories as merely “children's fare”; because “they are not” (Luthin, 41). As Luthin tells us these distinct narratives are responsive to multiple levels of interpretation and are available at any degrees of style in any way their “audience—traditional or modern—care to approach them with” (Luthin, 42). In truth, anthropomorphism has always provided oral cultures with a crucial means for exploring one of the most important themes of knowledge: “the relationship between ourselves and the natural universe” (Luthin, 42). Through translations such as , *What's So Funny, Ketu?*, readers are given a glimpse to a remote time in Nuer literature when the difference between people and animals are often times blurred, giving ways to see oneself in spaces unfamiliar.

The Translator's Role

In general, as Newmark states, translation is “rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text.” (Newmark 1988, p.5) However, I would like to argue that the mission of a translator is slightly different when confronted with different forms of literature, in this case, the folklore. As Isidore Okpewho illustrates in her book, *African Oral Literature*, African “literature” as we know today, has historically been written in order to be performed on stage. The translator of such a text has therefore must consider that the readers not only follow the written form of the prose but also and primarily its oral version. This fact influences the work of a translator to a great extent. Nuer folklore such as *The Man and the Snake* display exactly his tendency. “It is a form that in actual fact and practice appears predominantly in the sense that it is “improvised, unscripted, and collectively produced” (Barber, 6).

For a translator, though, that is the challenge and the real pleasure in doing the work: learning how to carry into another culture the fullest possible share of what is present in the stories. Just what and how much is inevitably lost in the process of translation is difficult even to imagine. It's not so much that information is lost, rather that, as Okpewho suggests, the very substance of verbal art is missing. The translator, as a result, must be involved in a pain-staking process of attempting to recode words of lost images for another audience of readers and ascribe them with significance. In *What's so Funny, Ketu?*, the names

of all the characters are included, the epic metaphors of animals are drawn out at length, and the speeches are given full play. Author Verna Aardema is opposed to any attempts to render this folklore into colloquial English; she prefers simple words with an archaic style to convey the dignity and tradition of this literature from the past. In contrast, the children's version concentrates on action, for instance, instead of seeing the man "writhe with fear from the snake", Aardema version illustrates a man in full pursuit away from the creature. (Huffman, 229). Although Aardema retains a few grammatical errors present in the Huffman version such as excluding pronouns, she simplifies the story for children, consistently adhering to the theory that folklore speaks to a wider audience than just children. Her adoption of the narrative as a guide, a wise woman speaking to those with limited information, further reinforces this impression.

Aardema allows her readers, presumably to be those of young children, the excitement of gaining exclusive access to the simple words of the original orator with the use of short lines of dialogue. By this I mean the text does not render long extensive prose that the reader must mediate meaning from, rather use illustration as a means of communication, in what I will argue leaves the role of herself (the translator invisible). The division between visibility and invisibility is linked to what Venuti terms as "domestication" and "foreignization". According to Venuti, foreignizing strategy assesses that the translator makes her/himself visible with respect to the target culture, language and/or literary canon. It also requires as Toressi states "a more active stance to defend one's choices, for instance, against the publisher's commercial requirements" (Toressi, 99). However, notably in the translation of authors less disruptive such as Aardema, a domesticating strategy usually makes the translator less visible. In *What So Funny Ketu?*, however, as we have just seen, even partial domestication does not necessarily hinder, but at times actually enhances, not the interruption of the translator but convergence of the source culture.

What's So Funny, Ketu?

The animals in *What's So Funny, Ketu?* have their communication translated into the English language by Aardema. In the narrative, a snake, bestows on Ketu a

“magic gift”, who now has the ability to understand what animals are thinking, after saving his life (Aardema, 1). Ketu must not tell anyone what the animals are really thinking about, or he will die. As a result, Ketu promises not to reveal the animals’ thoughts to anyone, not even to his wife, Nyaloti. Unfortunately, this causes difficulties for Ketu as, his gift of translation, leads him to laugh uncontrollably to the point where he startled everyone near him. This then leads to ensuing problems between his wife Nyaloti, the village Chief, and his community. The animals themselves, however, serves as more prominent characters in the text, as they are a focus for examining animality in humanity. “One day Ketu heard his dog yelping, *kao, kao, kao*, behind the hut. He investigated and found the dog worrying a harmless little snake . . . Ketu scolded the dog and sent him slinking off, *prada, prada, prada*, with his tails behind his legs” (Aardema, 1). The peculiarity of the rendering the animal sounds and the difficulty sometimes inherent in simply reading the dog’s utterances reflects the difficulties in interpreting the creature itself.

The motif offered by anthropomorphism allows readers to explore the role of language in defining what is unintelligible, strange, and most important of all, othered. In her article, “The outer limits of otherness: ideologies of human translation in speculative fiction”, author Kelly Washbourne writes, if words “are irreconcilable with our own, so too are their practices, the principles on which they are based, their material culture and their thought processes . . . In other words, language untranslatability in the genre stands for frustrated confrontation with newness” (Washbourne, 289). The horror of untranslatability, according to Washbourne, lies not in accessing otherness, but in witnessing the process of language being made to perform in “othered” ways (Washbourne, 291). For the dog’s rendering show a foreignizing translation strategy that inhibits Ketu’s understanding of the creature’s language. This is “not done in a way that exhausts or captures the alienness . . . [but] suggests a defamiliarized world view” where the individual does not have the ability to relate (Washbourne, 291).

Ketu’s self-positioning along the range of animality often abandons his human perspective, especially when he starts to hear other animals speak. As he begins to hear the mosquito say “I know they’re in there! Fat, juicy people! But I can’t find a big enough crack” (Aardema, 3). It is then, that Ketu must

acknowledge the biological and ecological realities of the animal's identities, which begins to manifest itself in an increasingly obvious reaction to animal mimicry. Ketu's ability to understand these animals is a constant negotiation between his humanness and animality. In the context of his struggle for survival, Ketu's ability to translate is more than a rational and logical interpretation. Instead, it accepts the liminal space of translation between humans and animals, a space of shared understanding by both Ketu and the animals.

Creative Understanding

Turning to works anthropomorphic literature, from Africa for instance, the use of translation is certainly not invisible; it is, rather, an analysis of the term translation as "creative understanding" that is hard to find. This is partly due to the prominent discourse of translation where, according to Bakhtin, "there exists a very strong, but one-sided and thus untrustworthy, idea that in order to better understand a foreign culture, one must enter into it, forgetting one's own, and view the world through the eyes of this foreign culture". Instead of viewing translation as an act of "penetration" in another's culture, Bakhtin argues for a dialogic penetration in which the "the possibility of seeing through" the eyes of others entail something new and enriching (as cited by Bezerra, 47). Therefore, translation must involve a "dialogic encounter of two cultures... not result in merging or mixing" but one where "each retains [its] won unity and open totality [where] they are [both] mutually enriched" (as cited by Bezerra, 47)). In this regard, Paulo Bezerra offers us a reflection related to a new dialogue of culture in the space of literature today. In her article, "Translation as Creation", author Paulo Bezerra defines translation as a conversation of creative individuals from multiple distinct and diverse cultures. Translation must involve a "genuine dialogue of cultures, in which the translator rummages the guts of the original, listens to the voices that populate it, dives into the sometimes almost inscrutable side of the language" (Bezerra, 47).

Oral Literature Today

Ketu is a hybrid character whose gift of translation is eliminated by the end of the novel, a representative of a literary skill rendered extinct. That his linguistic talents do not survive is indicative of a questioning of tradition. Though we may not aspire to return to the traditional way of life of the past, we cherish oral tradition because it is the foundation of wisdom and civilization. In a contemporary African context, the function and relevance of Nuer literature depends upon the effective exploration of its anthropomorphic form. The historical evidence shows that oral narrative as part of the growth of the Nuer personality is so important merely because it encourages a movement towards greater self-awareness and enriches a new confidence in the individual self. The coming into being of written folk-literature is also an expression of the cultural confidence in which the society remains to be cohesive, innovative rather than imitative. Therefore, oral literature as an interdisciplinary subject is a vehicle for socio-cultural and economic growth. It is an appropriate yardstick for examining, analyzing, comparing and evaluating the past history of the Nuer and the current condition in which they are found.

Conclusion

Implicit in *What's So Funny Ketu?* is the notion that the world is inhabited by different sorts of subjects or persons, humans and non-humans, which apprehend reality from different points of view. This is relationship as what I argue translation at work. Taking seriously the multi-perspectives of different realities means that our relationship in such a context can only make sense in a translational frame. It is only by recognizing the defining difference of others, trying to understand differing backgrounds, culture, and forms of communication that we can begin to engage in dialogue on better ways to understand others, and ourselves. It is arguably the refusal of translation, the idea that there is one universal language and standard, where fiction and language may never thrive. Accepting translation is accepting negotiation, one that is "open ended, unpredictable, subject to change, never complete", means acknowledging that otherness cannot be wished away in a fantasy of identity or assimilation"

(Cronin, 80). Thus, *What's So Funny, Ketu?* is for readers an attempt to see the world through the eyes of others and with whom we cannot communicate.

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