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A critical analysis of Igbo-English translations in social media posts: A study of Twitter and Facebook

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to conduct a critical analysis of posts and comments written in Igbo language on Facebook and Twitter, which are automatically translated into English upon user request. The main focus is to examine the accuracy of the translations provided by these social media platforms, such as Facebook and Twitter, for posts written in Igbo. Additionally, the study aims to understand the challenges presented by language barriers in communication, shedding light on the linguistic and cultural differences between Igbo and English. Furthermore, the research aims to highlight the difficulties encountered by machine translation systems employed by these social media platforms and language learners when translating between Igbo and English. It also aims to identify areas that require improvement for future reference. Following Anthony Pym's proposed method of error analysis for translation analysis, the study endeavours to identify and rectify inconsistencies in automatic translations, enabling readers to grasp the intended message and contribute to the improvement of machine translation applications. Qualitative data was collected over a specific period from posts written in Igbo and automatically translated into English on Facebook and Twitter. The collected data was subjected to analysis. Results from the analysis show that these platforms need to make significant improvements in order to achieve better translation output.

Keywords: Translation; Machine Translation; Error Analysis; Facebook; Twitter

1. Introduction

The growth of social media platforms has created new opportunities for language usage and communication, leading to an increased demand for translation services. This demand is particularly significant given the multicultural diversity of today's world. Platforms like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram have expanded both in terms of their reach and usage, allowing for automatic translation of posts from indigenous languages to the user's chosen language. Consequently, the accuracy and efficiency of these translation tools have become crucial for multilingual communities.

Nigeria, a country with over 500 languages (Oyebade, 2015), is an example of one such multilingual community that interacts not only in person but also through social media platforms. This interaction has prompted social media platforms to make improvements to accommodate cultural diversities. In recent times, platforms like Twitter and Facebook have started offering translations for posts written in foreign languages or languages different from the user's selected language. With just a click of a cursor, users can have posts written in any language translated into their preferred language.

This remarkable feature enables a broader viewership of posts, as they can be automatically translated for users who request it in their desired language. Consequently, information spreads beyond just the speakers of the original poster's

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native language, reaching anyone who chooses to click the translation button. It brings the world closer together, transforming it into a tightly-knit digital community.

In Nigeria, ensuring effective communication among different linguistic groups is crucial due to the country's diverse languages. Fortunately, technological advancements on social media platforms have facilitated bridging this language barrier. Platforms like Twitter, Facebook, and others now offer direct translation of posts into English, which has been Nigeria's official language since 1947, as established by Sir Richard's constitution (Danladi, 2013). Given Nigeria's multicultural diversity, it is essential to pay closer attention to the accuracy of these automatic translations. According to Kemp (2023), approximately 25.3 percent of the Nigerian population above 18 years old uses social media, which amounts to around 193.9 million people out of a total population of 221.2 million as of the beginning of 2023 (Kemp, 2023). These statistics demonstrate a substantial user base of social media platforms in Nigeria, making it highly advantageous for the country to have access to reliable translation services for both local and foreign languages.

As Nigeria grapples with issues of linguistic diversity and inclusivity, particularly with the translation of social media posts into English, there is a need for rigorous research to better understand the nuances of language use and translation in this context and how to improve these platforms to better translate posts. As argued by scholars such as Oyebade (2015), multilingual education and communication are crucial for promoting linguistic diversity and social inclusion in Nigeria. A study on Igbo-English translations on social media can provide valuable insights into the challenges and opportunities of multilingual communication in Nigeria, and promote more effective and inclusive language policies.

However, with the passing of time, it is discovered that little or no improvements have been made on the automatic translation of indigenous Nigerian languages on social media apps such as Facebook and Twitter. The machine translation software used by these apps barely give comprehensible output, without any regards to context or content, especially for a language like Igbo, where one word can have different meanings according to the context. This has made us decide to carry out a research on the Igbo-English translations done by Facebook and Twitter, two of the most common social media apps used in Nigeria. The study of Igbo-English translations on social media is relevant for several reasons including the fact that with the increasing use of social media platforms, there is a need to examine how language is used and translated, especially as they relate to multilingual communities. This research will highlight the need for the loopholes that can be found on social media automatic translations to be breached for easy accessibility of information, which social media is one of the main sources by helping the CEOs of these platforms make informed decisions on how to enhance user experience, mitigate risks as well as strengthen content moderation. Again, the result of this study can provide insights into the challenges and opportunities of language translation in a digital age and create strategies to improve translation accuracy and efficiency in multilingual communities.

This paper is important in advancing our understanding of language use and translation in a Nigerian context and can contribute to the development of language policies that promote linguistic diversity and inclusivity. To this effect, this study will examine the accuracy and effectiveness of the translations done by Facebook and Twitter as well as identify the areas requiring improvements for future translations such as appropriate use of terminology and the idiomatic expressions to preserve cultural nuances. It will also provide insight into the challenges faced by translators and language learners when translating from Igbo to English. The research will highlight the need for improvement on machine translation tools provided by social media platforms for better translation quality.

2. Literature Review

Studies have been carried out on how automated translation in social media platforms has revolutionized global communication, bridging language gaps and improving intercultural affairs; however, little research has been carried out that targeted the accuracy and effectiveness of automated Igbo-English translation on Twitter and Facebook. In 2022, Cahyaningrum researched the quality of the Indonesian to English translation made by Facebook. Her findings showed 50% of the translations were inaccurate while 70% was barely acceptable. As for readability, the researcher concluded that there was 30% readability from these translations as there were vocabulary limitations and a lack of proper equivalent to replace certain terms in the target language. In a related study, Kamil (2014) conducted a corpus-based analysis focusing on the translation of Indonesian to English on Twitter. The findings revealed challenges in translation but that clarity was maintained in the target language despite these challenges. Herman (2019) conducted a research study that analyzed Twitter content in Indonesian. In his research, he employed the oblique translation method developed by Vinay and Darbelnet and applied it to the translations performed by Twitter. On the other hand, Chilukwa (2015) conducted an analysis of Facebook posts during the fuel subsidy removal protest. The researcher found that the protesters employed linguistic techniques such as code-switching, utilizing indigenous languages like Yoruba, as well as pidgin and Standard English, in their communications. The focus of the study was not on evaluating the effectiveness of Facebook's automatic translation of these languages but rather on examining the overall impact of

the online protest. Surprisingly, there is a notable lack of research in this area, considering the significant role played by social media platforms and the gap filled by the inclusion of the automatic translation feature.

However, number of researches has been carried out on the use of error analysis as a model from translation analysis. Results from these researches grouped errors of translation into two main groups, according to (Jahanshashi et al., 2015). In their words, “research conducted in the translation error types is few...the existing researched are classified into two groups; one studying syntactic errors only, the other the studies focusing on both syntactic and semantic errors” (244). On the other hand, Zearo (2005) posits that errors are categorized into three types, meaning, form and compliance. Pym (1992), on his part categorizes errors according to the language levels, pragmatics or culture of the target language. The study of translation errors has become more interesting to scholars in recent years and strategies have been given on how these errors can be decoded which would be reflected on this research.

3. Theoretical framework

The research work employed error analysis as a theoretical framework for translation analysis. The theory of error analysis was originally proposed in the 1960s by Stephen Pit Corder and his colleagues, James Harding and Richard Hudson. It serves as an alternative to contrastive analysis, a behaviorism-influenced approach used by applied linguists to predict errors based on formal distinctions between learners' first and second languages. The theory aims to identify and analyze errors made by second language learners.

The foundational work of these scholars laid the groundwork for the theory's development and its application in second language acquisition (SLA) and the study of language errors. Various researchers have contributed to the evolution of the theory, including Anthony Pym, whose insights will be incorporated into this research. Pym emphasizes the significance of errors as they provide valuable insights into the translation process, revealing the challenges and difficulties faced by translators and apprentice translators. He stated that the definition of translation errors stems from that of translational competence which, for him, is the “process of generation and selection between alternative texts” (4). He went further to define translational errors as manifestation of a defect in any of the factors entering into the skills mentioned. Errors in translation, like he said, are attributed to a number of causes including misunderstanding, and can be located on different levels such as language, culture and so on. Furthermore, he explained that over-translation, under-translation, semantic inadequacy, and so on, some of the terms that can be used to describe errors lack common distinction and is mostly categorized as “equivalence”, according to him, the most abused term in translation analysis. According to Pym, error analysis is crucial for analyzing and categorizing errors during the translation process and they are grouped into two; binary and non binary errors. For him, binary error “opposes a wrong answer to the right question;

...nonbinarism requires that the TT actually selected be opposed to at least one further TT1 which could also have been selected, and then to possible wrong answers. For binarism, there is only right and wrong; for non-binarism there are at least two right and then the wrong ones” (4).

4. Data and Methods

Qualitative data was collected from Facebook and Twitter between September 2022 and March 2023. These errors are grouped according to the type of error they fall under which include use wrong term or mistranslation, translation of proper noun, inconsistency in terms, and miscellaneous.

4.1. Mistranslation

Mistranslation occurs when the intended meaning of the source text is not passed across to the target language. This can happen due to various reasons including cultural interference, linguistic differences as well as lack of proficiency in either the target or source languages. Serious consequences can arise from mistranslation. Apart from major misunderstanding, it can also lead to unnecessary cultural insensitivity which can cause some legal complications, if care is not taken. Igbo language, a very tonic language, sometimes has more than one word that have the same spelling but with a variety of meanings. The difference can only be detected from the pronunciation or with the use of tonic signs. Most people typing on social media do not use these signs, the native speaker understands the post, but it is very difficult for a machine to translate these terms. From the translations rendered by the Twitter and Facebook apps of the Igbo language, a greater percentage of the translations were mistranslated. In the table below, some of the mistranslations found on Facebook and Twitter are presented.

Table 1 Mistranslation

S/N	Original post	Automatic Translation	Commentary
1	Alu melu na nke ikpeazu a.	It's not yours on the ground marriage happened in the last one.	The machine translation does not do justice to this expression. The translation given by the machine has no correlation with what the meaning of the post. The original post can be better translated to "the abominations of these days!" to at least portray what the author meant.
2	Jehova parakwa tule ndi mgbu a.	Jehova protect these sick people.	Like the previous comment, there is no correlation between the automatic translation and the main post. The expression "Chineke parakwa tule" is an expression often used for "God observe this situation" and "ndi mgbu" is an argot that is generally used to express "jokers or insane/foolish person". Therefore, the expression can be translated to "May God observe these jokers" .
3	Kilikili azu.	Circle of fish	Tiny fish
4	Ogunu na afio ?	The battle is in the middle	Here, the use of ogunu is a dialectical use of the term "o gini?" which means "what?" The expression therefore translates to "What is happening?" Note the lack of relationship between the source text and the automatic translation
5	Azu ojo	The fish of the rain	Bad fish
6	I di isi ka aturu	You are like a tiger	Your head looks like that of a sheep/you look like a sheep
7	Ndi asiri gbakaa ute	Those who gossip are going to the mat	This is an idiomatic expression that can simply be used to say "gossipers". The equivalent therefore is "people with wagging tongues"
8	Oburo egwu achi utaba n'aka agba	It isn't the dance of the one who is playing with the hand	This is an idiomatic expression that was literally translated, albeit incorrectly (it is not a dance danced with tobacco in hand is a better literal translation). An equivalent idiomatic expression therefore is "it's like swimming against the current" or it's like navigating a minefield" .
9	Ndi eriri eri	Those who have been eaten	This is similar to "ndi mgbu" but can literally be translated to "the scammed/foolish people".
10	Obanyekwulu	He has been in the middle of no where	It is part of it/It entered
11	Ntasi obi ndi enwero ego data	Comfort of the broke data	Comfort of those who have no money for data
12	Olilanya ndi na acho daily bread	Our hope for those who are looking for daily bread	Hope of the daily bread hustlers

It is seen from these examples that the machine translators do not take into cognisance the different dialects of the Igbo language. Again, it is seen that the automatic translation has little data bank because some of the words are everyday words but it could not use appropriate equivalents to translate them. It shows a need for a serious upgrade to be carried out on the glossary of words used by these apps.

4.2. Translation of Proper nouns

Translation of proper nouns is a delicate subject considering the cultural implications of such translation. Some researchers like (Vermees 2003, Sanaty 2009) believe that it is a simple enough task, but it involves delicate process

which requires the translator to consider carefully the meaning of the name to be translated. As seen by these examples listed below, some proper nouns however do not translation, especially if there is no direct equivalent in the target language. Below are a list of such examples as seen on Twitter and Facebook.

Table 2 Translation of proper noun

S/N	Original post	Automatic translation	Commentary
1	Chukwunonso, zukwanu ike	Holy God, rest in peace	Chukwunonso is a name (male and female) that means God is near.
2	Ozo Ofiadulu	Another one of the best friends	Ozo Ofiadulu is a title conferred on worthy indigenes in the Igbo tradition. It has no English equivalent but Ozo can be loosely translated as Chief while ofiadulu means “the profitable forest”.
3	Ozo Ogbu Agu	Another one that kills the lion	Ozo Ogbu agu, as above, this is a chiftancy title. “Ogbu agu” means “lion killer”

4.3. Inconsistent use of terms

This is a situation where different meanings or translations of a particular term are used interchangeably in the course of the translation of a text. There are many reasons why this could occur including difference in context, linguistics challenges and multiple meanings associated with the term in question. In the examples below, it was discovered that the interchanged words were given entirely different meanings, which was still far from the contextual meaning.

Table 3 Inconsistent use of terms

S/N	Original post	Automatic translation	Commentary
	Chukwunonso, zukwanu ike – Nwoke m, zukwanu ike	Holy God, rest in peace Rest well my man	“Zukwanu ike” is a slang used today to either admonish or calm a person down. It is often employed amongst friends in a laid-back setting and it implies a person should let go of worries or take a break. Therefore “zukwanu ike” can be translated as “chill!” or “relax!”. Note that the automatic translation not only mistranslated the meaning, but it mistranslated it on both contexts.

4.4. Translation of proverbs and idiomatic expressions

Translation of proverbs and idiomatic expressions goes beyond literal translation; the nuances in both the source and the target language must be completely understood by the translator for a high quality translation to be achieved because of their figurative nature. Unfortunately, the automatic translations rendered by Facebook and Twitter did a great disservice to the richness of the Igbo proverbs and idiomatic expressions in the posts translated. Some examples are listed below with the equivalent that would have better served.

Table 4 Translation of proverbs and idiomatic expressions

S/N	Original post	Automatic translation	Meaning
1	Ndi eriri eri	The people that have been eaten	Those that have been taken for a ride!
2	O buro egwu achi utaba n’aka agba	It is not the dance of the one who is playing with the hands	It’s an uphill battle/it’s like pulling teeth/ it’s like trying to find a needle in a haystack/ it’s like banging your head against a brick wall/ It’s like trying to squeeze blood from a stone
3	Aku fechaa	The wealth is over and over again	Every cloud has a silver lining/there’s light at the end of the tunnel

4	Ndi asili gbakaa ute!	Those who gossip are going to the mat	Those with wagging tongue
5	Ndi mgbu!	These sick people	Jokers
6	Rapunu ife edere na motor bata na motor	Leave the written on the motor get in the motor	Cut to the chase

4.5. Miscellaneous

It was discovered that these errors in translations done by Facebook and Twitter is not restricted to the Igbo language alone. Here is an example of such error in Yoruba language:

- Original post: Mama niyen... iya afuni man wo be... iya dada... iya alaye

Facebook translation: Mother niyen... The mother that gives don't look at it... yes mom and mom... iya alaaye.

Human translation: That's a mother... who gives without a blink of an eye... a good mother.

- Facebook post: Iya logbe (na mama you carry)

Facebook translation: This logbe (na mama you carry)

Human translation: Carer of mother

Some other erroneous translations that were not listed above include: Twitter post: Bia Arinze bugalu Oga Ogechukwu ngwa afia ahu kita. Gwa ya na afuberom balance mu ogwalu m na omeelu transfer.

- Twitter translation: Come to Arinze and bring Oga Ogechukwu the coffee. Tell him that I hav paid off my balance and done the transfer.

Human translation: Come Arinze, take the goods to Ogechukwu's boss. Tell him I haven't seen the balance he said he transferred to me.

- Twitter post: Uwa bukwanu ofu mbia... Gba mbo na agbasapu obi ma ana agwa gi all these things.

Twitter translation: The world is full of aliens... try to open your heart and tell all these things.

Human translation: You only live once...Try and keep an open mind.

- Twitter post: Nne okwa gi ka m na akpo. Negodu idiot, mpa gi onwere motor? Aga m etinye oyi gi nwoke na cell. Jee juo ese m na mgbada Awada.

Twitter translation: Is your mother calling me? Negodu idiot, don't you have a motor? I'll put you cold man in a cell. Go and ask me to paint in Awada

Human Translation: Babe, it's you I'm calling. Look at the idiot, does your father own a car? I'll lock up your boyfriend in a cell. Go and ask about me at down at Awada.

5. Conclusion

Advent in technology and social media platforms has increased the demand for translation services, especially in a multilingual country like Nigeria, where numerous languages are spoken. A number of social media platforms have caught up with the trend by introducing automatic translation features to cater to this demand, allowing broader viewership and dissemination of information in foreign languages. However, translation of indigenous Nigerian languages such as Igbo remains a challenge. Inaccurate translations that lack contextual meaning and lack of understanding of cultural nuances remains a vital problem for these machines. This research focuses specially on

highlighting the inefficacy of the machine translation applied by Facebook and Twitter, two of the more popular social media platforms in Nigeria. It identified the limitations faced by these platforms and provide insights for future improvements by the developers.

Qualitative data was collected and analyzed from Facebook and Twitter between September 2022 and March 2023, focusing on specific examples of mistranslation and other related issues. The findings indicate that the cultural differences between Igbo and English were overlooked; the dialects in Igbo were not considered and the machines lacked adequate database of terms to enrich the output.

Consequently, significant improvements are needed in the automatic translation of indigenous languages on social media platforms to help address the challenges of language barrier and better serve multilingual communities by promoting linguistic diversity and ease effective communication in the digital age. This research finding will provide insights into the challenges of language translation in the digital context as well as contribute to the development of language policies that would breed inclusivity in the Nigerian context and in the Diaspora. Further research is required to improve the accuracy and efficiency of digital translation tools used by social media platform, as well as discover the nature of social media translation on Hausa, a more widely spoken language.

Compliance with ethical standards

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Disclosure of conflict of interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interests related to this research and publication.

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