Journal of Languages and Linguistics

[ISSN 2958-1028]
Volume: 05 Issue: 01 | November-2026

JLL

A Comparative Stylistic Analysis of the French-Swahili Translation of Camara Laye's "*L'Enfant noir*" into "*Mtoto Mwafrika*"

Author
Margaret K. Thang'wa
Author's email: maggiethangwa@gmail.com

Kaimosi Friends University, Kenya.

Cite this article in APA
Thang'wa, M. K. (2026). A Comparative Stylistic Analysis of the French-Swahili Translation of Camara Laye's "L'Enfant noir" into "Mtoto Mwafrika". *Journal of languages and linguistics*, 5(1), 186–194. https://doi.org/10.51317/10mp1628

OPEN ACCESS
A publication of Editon Consortium Publishing (online)

Article history
Received: 2026-09-01
Accepted: 2026-10-06
Published: 2026-11-03

Scan this QR to read the paper online

Copyright: ©2026 by the author(s). This article is an Open Access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Abstract
The purpose of this study was to compare Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir* and its Kiswahili translation, *Mtoto Mwafrika*, at the lexical, syntactic and semantic levels, in order to establish whether the translation showed more convergence than divergence and whether meaning was lost. French–Kiswahili translation is under-researched, and comparative stylistics has rarely been applied to it. Comparative stylistics (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958/1995) was the theoretical framework. The sample comprised 35 units: five randomly selected from each of the seven procedures (*l'emprunt, le calque, la traduction littérale, la transposition, la modulation, l'équivalence, l'adaptation*) using random purposeful sampling. Each unit was judged as meaning preserved, shifted or lost. Contrary to the expectation of more differences than similarities, the languages converged in meaning: 30 of 35 units (85.7%) conveyed the author's message, 16 (45.7%) with meaning preserved and 14 (40.0%) shifted, while five (14.3%) lost meaning. Formal divergence was concentrated in the oblique procedures, which changed form without losing the message. The study contributes a procedure-based description of correspondences and shifts in one French–Kiswahili literary translation and shows that comparative stylistics applies to a Romance–Bantu language pair. It recommends larger samples, other translations and genres, additional translators, and the use of comparative stylistics in translator training.

Keywords: Camara Laye, Comparative stylistics, French–Kiswahili translation, meaning loss, translation procedures

INTRODUCTION

Translation between distant languages raises the question of how much meaning is preserved, shifted or lost. Loss is possible and widely discussed (Bassnett, 2014; Catford, 1965), but it should be demonstrated rather than assumed. French is a Romance language of Indo-European origin and Kiswahili a Bantu language, so a French–Kiswahili translation is expected to show more differences than similarities, yet previous scholarship has not adequately tested this expectation. The principal gap is the limited application of comparative stylistics, developed for French–English and French–German material (Vinay & Darbelnet, 1958/1995; Malblanc, 1963), to French–Kiswahili translation. This gap is compounded by the scarcity of comparative French–Kiswahili studies of translated literary texts, and by insufficient analysis of lexical and syntactic correspondences and of the semantic shifts they produce. To the best of the researcher's knowledge, no study has described these matters for the Kiswahili translation of Camara Laye's *L'Enfant noir*.

Accordingly, the study had three objectives: to compare the lexical, syntactic and semantic structures of *L'Enfant noir* (Laye, 1953) and its Kiswahili translation, *Mtoto Mwafrika* (Adam, 1974); to assess whether the translation leads to convergence or divergence in meaning between French and Kiswahili; and to evaluate the extent of meaning loss. These corresponded to three research questions: how the lexical, syntactic and semantic structures of the two texts compare; to what extent the translation leads to convergence or divergence in meaning; and to what extent meaning is lost. The focus was linguistic (lexis, syntax and semantics) and not the literary aesthetic effects of the novel, although in a novel the two are intertwined.

The study is set against a growing body of translated literature. Translations of European works into Kiswahili are increasing: from English, for example, Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (*Makabeti*) and Orwell's *Animal Farm* (*Shamba la Wanyama*), and more recently from French, for example Molière's play *Tartuffe* (*Mnafiki*) and Ferdinand Oyono's novel *Une vie de boy* (*Boi*). Such translations call for scholarly assessment, encourage Franco-African collaboration, contribute to comparative translation studies and lower language barriers.

Key terms are used as follows. *Translation* is the rendering of a source-language (SL) text into a target-language (TL) text, and a *translation unit* is the word, phrase or sentence compared across the two texts. *Lexis*, *syntax* and *semantics* designate words, the arrangement of words into sentences, and meaning, respectively. *Comparative stylistics* is the comparison of the means of expression of two languages in order to identify the translation procedures that account for their differences. *Convergence* denotes points at which SL and TL correspond in form or meaning, and *divergence* points at which they differ. *Meaning preservation*, *shift* and *loss* are defined under the theoretical framework.

In overview, the article presents the theoretical framework and the analytical criteria, describes the methodology, reports the results for the seven procedures of comparative stylistics, discusses what they show about convergence, divergence and meaning loss, and ends with the conclusion and recommendations for further research.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theoretical Framework

The research problem concerns how far French and Kiswahili correspond in a translated text and whether meaning survives. Comparative stylistics was adopted because it answers this directly: it allows lexical, syntactic and semantic correspondences and shifts between an SL text and its existing translation to be identified systematically, without the researcher translating. The model is that of Vinay and Darbelnet (1958/1995), set out in *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais*, with a comparable approach to French and German by Malblanc (1963). Its central concern is to compare SL and TL and to name the procedures that account for their differences. The framework was applied as a chain: comparative stylistics → seven translation procedures → lexical, syntactic and semantic comparison → convergence or divergence → meaning preservation, shift or loss.

Seven translation procedures. Vinay and Darbelnet distinguish three direct procedures (borrowing, calque, literal translation) and four oblique ones

(transposition, modulation, equivalence, adaptation), defined as follows.

1. *L'Emprunt* (Borrowing): the TL takes over an SL word, often for a culturally or semantically specific reference that is hard to render directly, e.g., *kanzu*.
2. *Le Calque* (Calque): a borrowed expression translated element by element, e.g., *blackboard – tableau noir*.
3. *La Traduction littérale* (Literal translation): word-for-word translation at sentence level, e.g., *I live in Paris – J'habite à Paris*.
4. *La Transposition* (Transposition): one part of speech replaces another without change of meaning, e.g., the noun *Le va-et-vient* and the verbs *Kwenda na kurudi*.
5. *La Modulation* (Modulation): a change of image or point of view for the same message, e.g., *chai* (Kiswahili) and *un pot de vin* (French) for a bribe.
6. *L'Équivalence* (Equivalence): the same situation expressed by independent means, as in proverbs, e.g., *tel père, tel fils – mtoto wa nyoka ni nyoka*.
7. *L'Adaptation* (Adaptation): used where an SL situation or cultural reference has no direct TL correspondence, so a comparable one is substituted, e.g., likening graduation to circumcision as a coming-of-age ceremony.

Lexical, Syntactic and Semantic Comparison

Each sampled unit was assigned to one procedure and compared lexically (borrowing, calque, modulation and, in part, equivalence and adaptation) or syntactically (literal translation, transposition). Its semantic effect was then evaluated, so the level at which a transformation occurs was kept distinct from the level at which its effect is judged.

Convergence and Divergence

Convergence was recorded where the TL unit conveyed the SL message (meaning preserved or shifted) and divergence where the message was lost. Formal differences of word or structure were recorded separately, so that they could be distinguished from differences in meaning.

Meaning Preservation, Shift and Loss

Meaning preservation means that the TL unit conveys the same content and communicative intention as the SL unit, whether or not its form is identical. *Meaning shift* means that the core message is retained but its image, grammatical category or emphasis changes, or an intermediary language alters the term. *Meaning loss* means that essential content is omitted, distorted or contradicted, so that the TL reader would not recover the author's message. Table 1 specifies how these criteria were applied to each procedure.

Table 1: Analytical Criteria for Meaning Preservation, Shift and Loss by Procedure

Procedure	Meaning preserved	Meaning shifted	Meaning lost
Borrowing	The borrowed term keeps the SL referent and is recoverable by the TL reader.	Form altered, or mediated by another language, but the sense is kept.	The TL form is a false match whose sense differs from the SL.
Calque	Element-by-element rendering gives the SL sense.	The sense is kept but the image or nuance changes.	Literal rendering gives a different or misleading sense.
Literal translation	Parallel structure gives a natural TL sentence with the same sense.	The sense is kept but emphasis or word order differs.	Structure transferred with an unnatural or distorted sense.
Transposition	The grammatical category changes and the sense is identical.	The category change also alters emphasis or nuance.	The category change alters or omits content.
Modulation	The change of viewpoint leaves sense and connotation intact.	The image or viewpoint changes and the message is kept.	The new image conveys a different message.
Equivalence	The independent expression matches in sense, image and register.	The expression conveys the same situation through a different image.	The expression conveys a different or partial message.
Adaptation	The substituted reference matches the SL in function and connotation.	A comparable TL reference or description replaces the SL one and the message is kept.	The substituted reference misleads or misrepresents the SL one.

METHODOLOGY

The study used a qualitative, descriptive and comparative design, combining parallel-text, unit-by-unit comparative stylistic analysis with simple frequency counts. The design was appropriate for three reasons. The translation already existed and was therefore examined as a finished product and not produced by the researcher. Each unit had to be read in context and interpreted to judge its semantic effect, which counts alone cannot capture. Setting each French unit beside its Kiswahili counterpart under common procedures allowed convergence and divergence to be compared systematically, and frequencies and percentages then summarised the patterns.

The texts analysed were the French source text, *L'Enfant noir*, by Camara Laye, published in Paris by Plon in 1953 (Laye, 1953), and its Kiswahili translation, *Mtoto Mwafrika*, translated by M. M. Adam and published by University of London Press in Nairobi in 1974 (Laye/Adam, 1953/1974). The 1953 Plon edition and the 1974 University of London Press edition were the editions used. The population was the complete text of each, so units were drawn from across the novel and not from selected chapters.

Random purposeful sampling was used. Both texts were read in parallel, and every unit illustrating one of the seven procedures was purposively identified, the procedures being the categories. Five units were then selected at random from each procedure's pool, giving a sample of 35 units (seven procedures × five units). Each unit was entered in an analysis matrix (Table 3) recording the SL unit, the TL unit, the procedure, the linguistic level, similarity or difference, semantic effect and a brief interpretation. It was also noted whether the TL rendering kept the author's message or lost the Kiswahili reader through expressions that did not conform to Kiswahili meaning. Units were grouped by procedure as mini-corpora, and frequencies and percentages were calculated for each procedure and for the whole sample.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Across the seven procedures, meaning was preserved in all five transposition units (100%) and in 60–80 per cent of the borrowing, calque and literal units; it was shifted in all five modulation units (100%) and in 80 per cent of the equivalence and adaptation units; and loss ranged from none (transposition and modulation) to one unit in five (20%) in each of the other five procedures. Overall, 30 of the 35 units (85.7%) conveyed the author's message: 16 (45.7%) with meaning preserved and 14 (40.0%) with a shift in form, grammatical category or image. Five units (14.3%) showed loss of meaning. Table 2 gives the frequencies by procedure and Table 3 the unit-by-unit analysis.

Table 2: Semantic Effect of the Sampled Units by Procedure

Procedure	Units	Preserved	Shifted	Lost
1. L'Emprunt (Borrowing)	5	3 (60.0%)	1 (20.0%)	1 (20.0%)
2. Le Calque (Calque)	5	4 (80.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (20.0%)
3. La Traduction littérale (Literal)	5	4 (80.0%)	0 (0.0%)	1 (20.0%)
Direct procedures (1–3)	15	11 (73.3%)	1 (6.7%)	3 (20.0%)
4. La Transposition (Transposition)	5	5 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)	0 (0.0%)
5. La Modulation (Modulation)	5	0 (0.0%)	5 (100.0%)	0 (0.0%)
6. L'Équivalence (Equivalence)	5	0 (0.0%)	4 (80.0%)	1 (20.0%)
7. L'Adaptation (Adaptation)	5	0 (0.0%)	4 (80.0%)	1 (20.0%)
Oblique procedures (4–7)	20	5 (25.0%)	13 (65.0%)	2 (10.0%)
All procedures	35	16 (45.7%)	14 (40.0%)	5 (14.3%)

Table 3: Analysis Of The 35 Sampled Units

French unit (SL)	Kiswahili unit (TL)	Similarity / difference	Effect	Interpretation
1. L'Emprunt (Borrowing) – lexical				
Boubous	Boubous	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Culture-specific term taken over unchanged.
Cora	Cora	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Culture-specific term taken over unchanged.
Métro	Métro	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Term taken over unchanged.
Mécanicien	Mekaniki	Different (form); similar (meaning)	Shifted	Form shows interference from English ("mechanic"); the sense is kept.
certificat d'étude	Skolashipu	Different (form and meaning)	Lost	TL term corresponds to "bourse" (scholarship), not "certificate"; misleads the reader.
2. Le Calque (Calque) – lexical				
lampe-tempête	taa ya karabai	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Compound rendered by an equivalent TL noun phrase.
coin d'œil	pembe la jicho	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Compound rendered element by element.
journal official	gazeti rasmi	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Noun + adjective structure kept.
cadre de bicyclette	fremu ya baiskeli	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Message accurate; the Kiswahili reader understands

				clearly.
moto-bécane	baiskeli ya moto	Similar (form); different (meaning)	Lost	Word-for-word rendering misleads; "pikipiki" expected.
3. La Traduction littérale (Literal translation) – syntactic				
il était musulman	alikuwa mu-Islamu	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Parallel sentence structure.
et que Dieu te protège	na Mungu akulinde	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Parallel structure; the wish is conveyed.
à la tête du lit	kwenye kichwa cha kitanda	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Phrase rendered word for word.
sans l'aide de Dieu	bila msaada wa Mungu	Similar (form and meaning)	Preserved	Parallel phrase structure.
les échos des rues endormies	mwengo kwenye barabara zilizolala	Similar (form); different (meaning)	Lost	Image transferred directly, giving an unacceptable rendering.
4. La Transposition (Transposition) – syntactic				
à l'énoncé de la douga	duga linapoanza kupigwa	Different (form: noun → verb); similar (meaning)	Preserved	Nominal phrase becomes a verbal clause; message kept.
Que nous étions heureux	furaha ilioje	Different (form: adjective → noun); similar (meaning)	Preserved	Quality expressed as a noun; message kept.
Têtes basses	inamisheni vichwa vyenu	Different (form: adjective → verb); similar (meaning)	Preserved	State expressed as an action; message kept.
Que tes études soient bonnes	masomo yako yalete tija	Different (form: adjective → noun); similar (meaning)	Preserved	Quality expressed as a noun; message kept.
Est-ce que tu vas te taire ?	Usu!	Different (form: verb → interjection); similar (meaning)	Preserved	Verbal command replaced by an interjection; message kept.
5. La Modulation (Modulation) – lexical				
le réduire en bouillie	hata akawa unga	Different (image); similar (message)	Shifted	Image changes from porridge to flour.
Pour mieux comprimer la poitrine	kuutuliza moyo wangu	Different (image); similar (message)	Shifted	Chest in French becomes heart in Kiswahili.
Tu adoptes ce même comportement	ufuate nyayo zile zile	Different (image); similar (message)	Shifted	Image of behaviour becomes image of footsteps.
La poudre d'or	chembe za dhahabu	Different (image); similar (message)	Shifted	Image of powder becomes image of grains.
Dès le soleil couchant	mara tu baada ya jua kuzama	Different (image); similar (message)	Shifted	Sun "going to sleep" becomes sun "sinking".
6. L'Équivalence (Equivalence) – lexical and syntactic				
il prenait goût au jeu	alianza kufurahia mchezo wetu	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	Image of tasting becomes image of enjoying.

Pour un bout de temps	muda mdogo sana	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	Image of size ("bit") becomes image of duration.
Poussât la porte de l'atelier	alivuka kizingiti	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	Pushing the door becomes crossing the threshold.
Alors, tu rêves toujours ?	jee, bado wajenga nyumba ufukweni mwa bahari?	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	Two independent expressions carrying the same message.
Filles et garçons mêlés	wanawake na wanaume pamoja	Different (form); partly different (meaning)	Lost (partial)	"Wanawake na wanaume" misrenders "filles et garçons" ("wasichana na wavulana" expected); "pamoja" for "mêlés" is sound.
7. L'Adaptation (Adaptation) – lexical and cultural				
Le couscous brûlant	ugali moto	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	West African dish replaced by its East African counterpart.
La pâte	Mseto	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	Dough/pastry rendered as a mixture of ingredients.
L'idée même du métro me demeurait obscure	habari ya kusafiri chini kwa chini ilikuwa ni jambo la mbali sana	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	No underground trains in Guinea; the concept is described.
Une galette	mkate wa ngano	Different (form and meaning)	Lost	"Galette" is closer to a cake than to bread; "keki" expected.
Le teint demeura gris	uso wake ulipotea rangi	Different (form); similar (message)	Shifted	No single word for "pale"; the translator paraphrases.

The findings by procedure were as follows. *Borrowing*: three of five units (60%) were taken over unchanged; "mekaniki" for "mécanicien" showed English interference (shift), and "skolashipu" for "certificat d'étude" lost meaning. *Calque*: four units (80%) kept the message, while "baiskeli ya moto" for "moto-bécane" misled the reader. *Literal translation*: four units (80%) had parallel structures, but "mwengo kwenye barabara zilizolala" transferred the French image into an unacceptable rendering. *Transposition*: all five units (100%) changed grammatical category (noun, adjective, verb, interjection) and preserved meaning; the level at which the change occurred (syntactic) is thus distinct from the level at which its effect was evaluated (semantic). *Modulation*: all five units (100%) changed the image (porridge to flour, chest to heart, behaviour to footsteps, powder to grains, sleeping sun to sinking sun) but kept the message. *Equivalence*: four of five units (80%) used independent expressions with the same message; "wanawake na wanaume" for "filles et garçons" lost meaning, but only partly, since "pamoja" for "mêlés" was sound. *Adaptation*: four of five units (80%) substituted or described a comparable reference, such as "ugali" for couscous and "kusafiri chini kwa chini" for the métro, which had no counterpart in Guinea at the time; "mkate wa ngano" for "une galette" lost meaning.

DISCUSSION

The findings address the research questions as outlined below. Semantically, convergence outweighed divergence by 30 units to five, so the expectation that French and Kiswahili would show more differences than similarities, because of their different origins, was not borne out. Formally, however, 13 units (37.1%) kept the SL form and 22 (62.9%) changed it, since changing form is the purpose of the oblique procedures. This formal divergence did not produce semantic divergence: the message was conveyed in 11 of the 13 units that kept the SL form (84.6%) and in 19 of the 22 that changed it (86.4%). The

languages therefore differed more in form than in meaning, and the procedures absorbed the differences. This is consistent with Vinay and Darbelnet's (1958/1995) view that oblique procedures bridge structural and conceptual gaps, and it indicates that the translator translated according to what suited the Kiswahili reader and not the form of the French.

Loss of meaning (five units) had three causes: a lexical choice that departed from the French sense, as in "skolashipu" (with English interference also behind the shift in "mekaniki"); over-literal transfer of an image ("mwengo…", "baiskeli ya moto"); and a near but inaccurate term ("wanawake na wanaume", "mkate wa ngano"). Loss affected three of the 15 direct units (20.0%) and two of the 20 oblique units (10.0%), a difference too small in a sample of this size to be treated as significant. The findings confirm that loss is possible in translation between distant languages (Bassnett, 2014; Catford, 1965) but show that it was neither inevitable nor extensive, and complete untranslatability was not observed. Cultural distance was managed by substitution or description, and the convergence may also reflect the fact that the novel describes experiences shared across languages and cultures, so that the Kiswahili reader can identify with the situations described.

These interpretations are limited by the sample size (35 units), the use of one novel and one translator, and the illustrative nature of the data, and should not be generalised to all French–Kiswahili translations.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Conclusion: Applying the seven procedures of comparative stylistics to *L'Enfant noir* and *Mtoto Mwafrika*, the study found that meaning converged far more than it diverged despite the languages' different origins, so the expected predominance of differences was not confirmed. Differences in form were absorbed by the oblique procedures, and meaning loss was isolated and traceable to specific translation choices. The study contributes a procedure-based, criteria-driven description of correspondences, shifts and losses for a French–Kiswahili pair that has received little attention, and shows that comparative stylistics can be applied to a Romance–Bantu language pair.

Recommendations: The findings point to several areas for future research. Studies involving larger samples should be conducted, as the 35 units analysed in this study are illustrative. Future research could examine all instances of each translation procedure or the entire novel to establish whether the percentages reported in this study remain consistent. Further studies should also examine other French–Kiswahili literary translations, such as Mnafiki and Boi, using similar procedures and criteria to determine whether the identified patterns are specific to the translation examined or characteristic of the French–Kiswahili language pair. Research should also extend to different genres, including drama, poetry and non-literary texts such as legal, journalistic and scientific writing, since the balance between direct and oblique translation procedures and the potential for meaning loss may vary across genres. Additionally, comparisons of several Kiswahili translations of the same French text, or translations produced by different translators across different periods, would provide insights into how individual translator choices influence meaning shifts and loss. Further research could also incorporate reception studies involving Kiswahili readers to assess the judgements of meaning loss made in this study. The criteria presented in Table 1 could equally be applied and refined in other language pairs. Finally, translator-training programmes could incorporate these procedures to demonstrate when direct translation is sufficient and when the use of an oblique translation procedure is necessary.

REFERENCES

Bassnett, S. (2014). *Translation studies* (4th ed.). Routledge.
Catford, J. C. (1965). *A linguistic theory of translation: An essay in applied linguistics*. Oxford University Press.
Laye, C. (1953). *L'enfant noir*. Plon.
Laye, C. (1974). *Mtoto Mwafrika* (M. M. Adam, Trans.). University of London Press. (Original work published 1953)
Malblanc, A. (1963). *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'allemand*. Didier.
Vinay, J.-P., & Darbelnet, J. (1958). *Stylistique comparée du français et de l'anglais: Méthode de traduction*. Didier.

Vinay, J.-P., & Darbelnet, J. (1995). *Comparative stylistics of French and English: A methodology for translation* (J. C. Sager & M.-J. Hamel, Trans.). John Benjamins. (Original work published 1958)