

Ambiguity in Translation of Metaphors: A Case of Dholuo and Kiswahili

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Abstract

This study investigates ambiguity in the translation of Christian religious metaphors from Dholuo into Kiswahili through a pragmatic approach. Data is drawn from the sermons delivered in Dholuo and translated into Kiswahili. Sampled texts are analyzed and classified in a category referred to as ambiguity. The findings show various causes of ambiguity, mainly, socio-cultural differences and wrong inferences. This can be generalized to apply to translation problems associated with similar contexts. The article gives insight and suggestions in the application of pragmatic theories of communication in translation.

Key Words: Ambiguity, Metaphors, Translation, Pragmatic

INTRODUCTION

The present article describes ambiguity in the translation and interpretation of Christian religion metaphors from Dholuo into Kiswahili through a pragmatic approach. Attention is focused on changes in meaning of Dholuo words after being rendered in Kiswahili. The paper further examines the contexts in which the Dholuo words occur and contexts in which they are rendered into Kiswahili. Technically speaking, translation is the transfer of ideas from source language (SL) to target language (TL) while maintaining form and style of the source text through a written medium (Catford, 1965). However, it is important to highlight that in this article the term has been used to include both oral and written media. Although there are numerous research studies which have been done on issues of translation in Kiswahili in Kenya (Indede, 2007; Oluoch, 2006; Omboga, 2006, 1986; Wangia, 2003; Shitemi, 1997, 1990; Ali, 1981; Yaa, 1975), there are still several emerging issues on translation in Kiswahili. In Kenya as per the knowledge of this researcher there is no research which has been done focusing on translation of Christian religion metaphors from Dholuo into Kiswahili through a pragmatic prism.

The Languages and their Speakers

Of the world's 6000 languages, one third of them (2000) are on the African continent spoken by about 480 million people (Crystal, 1997, p. 316). In Kenya, a number of studies estimate the number of languages spoken to be 30-60 (Obiero, 2008). However, Webb and Kembo-Sure (2000) and Ogechi's (2003) position that there are 42 languages spoken in Kenya are widely accepted. This position however contradicts that of the Constitution of Kenya Review Commission-CKRC (2000) which proposed that these languages are 70; a position taken in this article. This number has taken into consideration even the endangered languages in the country. This position supports that of Ethnologue (2008). Kenyan languages are classified into three major groups namely Bantu languages (to which Kiswahili belongs), Nilotic languages (to which Dholuo belongs) and Cushitic languages. Statistically the Bantu languages comprise 65%, Nilotic languages 32% while the rest are Cushitic (Obiero, 2008).

The proto-language of Kiswahili is Kingozi which was spoken by the Ngozi people who are believed to have occupied the present Kenyan Coastal strip of Mombasa, Pemba, Kilwa, Lamu and Unguja. This is the region referred to as *the Swahili land* (Abdulaziz, 1979; Mbaabu, 1985). From the interaction between the foreign traditions brought by foreigners such as the Arabs the tradition of the Ngozi people changed and borrowed some characteristics from the Arabic and Islamic traditions. So a new tradition which was a blend of Arabic, Islamic and African traditions emerged (Abdulaziz, 1979). This is the Swahili tradition. Abdulaziz and Sow (1993, p. 546) observe that Kiswahili is spoken by 65% of the Kenyan population and at the same time is spoken widely in East and Central African countries (Tanzania, Uganda, Democratic Republic of Congo, Burundi, Rwanda, Malawi, Somalia, Zambia, Mozambique and Comoros Islands). This situation contributes to the existence of geographical dialects of Kiswahili such as: Kimvita, Kibajuni, Kipate, Kijomvu, Kingozi, Kihadimu, Kimtang'ata etc. This article argues for the standard Kiswahili dialect.

Many attempts have been made by historians and linguists to classify the Nilotic speakers linguistically in some categories. Ogot (2009, p. 9) for instance says that the Nilotic communities of East Africa can be categorized into three major groups namely: Southern, Eastern and Western Nilotic speakers. Each group in this classification has several languages and dialects within it. Linguists (such as Westermann, 1911; Greenberg, 1966) agree that these three categories as identified by Ogot fall under a branch of types of languages referred to as the Eastern Sudanic languages. In one way or the other they are referred to as the Nilo-Saharan languages. The Western Nilotic speakers according to Ogot (2009, p. 9) currently reside in the following regions: Southern Sudan along River Nile in the Bahr-el-Ghazal region (Naath, Pari, Jieng', Collo, Luo), North Western Uganda and its environs such as Lake Albert/Onekbonyo, River Nile, Lake Kyoga (Acholi, Padhola, Paluo, Alur, Lang'i, Kumam), South Eastern Ethiopia (Anywaa, Naath), Kenya and Tanzania (Jo-Luo). This article investigates the Luo language as spoken in Kenya today.

The Kenyan Luo is spoken by natives who inhabit the following counties: Siaya, Kisumu, Homabay and Migori. Kenyan Luo as compared to other languages of Kenya has got no serious dialectal complexities; however, there is some dialectal variation as spoken by natives of Siaya County, Kisumu and Southern Nyanza counties (Homabay and Migori). These variations are reflected at the phonological and lexical levels.

Example (1):Siaya Dialect	Southern Nyanza Dialect
a. Phonological // othieno (night)	/t/ otieno (night)
b. Lexical haro (rape)	haro (pruning)

The slight variation according to Oluoch (2013, p. 3) contributes to ambiguity in the selection and use of vocabulary which ultimately affects translation processes from Dholuo into Kiswahili.

Theoretical Framework

Though several translation theories exist, there is no distinct translation theory which dominates all the works in translation. Newmark (1988) observes that translation theory depends on various theories and the genre of text involved. Each theory according to Salevsky (1991, p.1) has three connections namely: to its own practical sphere; to the adjoining scientific disciplines which shed light on its specific subject; to the general theory of translating. In evaluating the success of translation activity, a pragmatic communicative language theory is very relevant. Pragmatics as defined by Yule (1996, p. 3) is the study of speaker meaning. It involves the interpretation of what people mean in a particular context and how the context influences what is said. Hence it is the study of contextual meaning.

This article shows how a translated text is miscommunicated from the source language to the target language. There are two pragmatic theories which are very essential to achievement of this goal, the Relevance Theory and *Skopos* Theory.

The Relevance Theory

This theory is attributed to Sperber and Wilson (1986). It was later on popularized by their student, Gutt (1991, 1992) as a fundamental theory to translation. Sperber and Wilson (1986) say that a communicator produces a stimulus- which they refer to as informative intention. The audience infer from this what the communicator means. So, communication works by inference. Inference is explained as interpretation gained by a receiver from utterances made by a speaker. It is based on a belief system. It is important to gain correct inferences in order to avoid ambiguity and obscurity so as to achieve the right interpretation. According to Sperber and Wilson (1986) and Gutt (1991), the process of communication succeeds because of the principle of relevance. Relevance is explained in this aspect as:

- An assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that its contextual effects in this context are large.
- An assumption is relevant in a context to the extent that the effort required to process it in this context is little.

So, relevance is dependent on two factors which go together: contextual effects and processing effort. Gutt (1991, p. 30) says: —The central claim of relevance theory is that human communication crucially

creates an expectation of optimal relevance, an expectation on the part of the hearer that his attempt at interpretation will yield adequate contextual effects at minimal processing cost. Gutt (1992, p. 21) explains further that for an utterance to be relevant it needs not only to be new in some sense but it must also link up with context in some way. Gutt (1991, 1992) portrays a relationship between relevance theory and translation. He says that relevance theory can lead to a deeper understanding of meaning of the original text (Gutt, 1992, p. 15). He asserts that ambiguity arises from inconsistencies with the principle of relevance which could be in the choice of a wrong / unusual word. Relevance according to Hatim (2001, p. 102) is achieved by features such as figurative expressions which are in the text to guide the audience in the interpretation. Metaphor is one of such figurative expressions.

In this study emphasis is on the context in which the metaphor is used in the source text. This calls for contextualization of the meaning of the metaphor by choice of a concept which has an equivalent meaning to that particular metaphor in the target language.

The Skopos Theory

This theory was proposed by Vermeer in 1972. Principle of this theory is to see translation as an activity on the original text. Vermeer focuses more on the receiver of the target text than the original text. And in this sense he explains translation as a presentation of the text in targeted context, targeted intention, targeted audience and targeted environment (Vermeer, 1987a: 29). It is because of Vermeer's assertion that Bal (2002) proposes that successful translation should not be confined by styles of the original text. This theory is understood from what Bal calls *Skopos* (in Nord, 1997: 29, 2000) which says that: *Every text is composed to achieve a particular goal hence it must achieve that goal*.

Skopos is a Greek word which means goal or intention. This word was introduced into translation in the 1970's by Hans. J. Vermeer as a terminology which refers to the intention and strategies of translation. The fundamental work on this theory is a book which was co-authored by Hans. J. Vermeer and Katharina Reiss known as *Groundwork for a General Theory of Translation* (1984).

Skopos theory puts more emphases on objectives/intentions of translation which will definitely guide into choosing translation strategies to be employed on a text to be translated so that to achieve desired target text. So, in this theory it is important to understand the intentions of translating the original text and the work of the target text. Reiss and Vermeer (1984, p. 119) outline key tenets of this theory as:

- i. Target text is identified through its roles;
- ii. Target text is a product of information in target culture and target language concerning information in original culture and original language;
- iii. Target text cannot be again the source of information;
- iv. Target text must have its own cohesiveness;
- v. Target text must marry with original text;
- vi. These rules must follow this order while *skopos* rules control every rule in this case.

Tenet number **ii** is important because it brings together original and target texts and their functions in both cultural and linguistic contexts. In this scenario translator is an important bridge between these two cultures and more so in the production of the target text. Tenet number **i** shows that every text has its distinct role which might not be the same for two different texts. Tenets number **v** talk about the *skopos* rules which deal with the success of the activity of transferring information in translation which emphasizes cohesiveness and fidelity between the original and targeted texts.

So, according to this theory *skopos* rule says that: translate/talk/write in a way that enables a text to have a function in an environment and to people who are to use it in their intended way. This is the overriding principle of this theory. These two theories are useful to translation analysis in the sense that they complement each other.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

This article presents a portion of the data in Oluoch (2014). The data were generated from a cross section of sermons from 8 Christian denominations based in Kisumu City. Sermons (texts) with mistranslations

were purposively selected for analysis. The texts were analyzed and classified into categories according to the nature of mistranslation. We used categories such as ambiguity, loan words etc. However in this article we deal with ambiguity only.

RESULTS

Ambiguity in Meaning of Translated Metaphors

This section deals with the definition of the concept of metaphor in the first instance and in the second instance it presents ambiguities in meaning of translated metaphors

The Concept of Metaphor

Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary (1989) defines metaphor as the use of a word or words to mean a different thing from the literal meaning of the word or words used in an expression. There are several approaches which try to explain the concept of metaphor. Aristotle (4 B.C.) observes that the idea which is transferred in metaphor is a meaning from one expression to the other expression. Davidson (1991, p. 495) holds that metaphor means what the words in their most literal interpretation mean. Grice (1991) differs with Donaldson by saying that metaphor is a figurative speech which has got no literal meaning but has contextual meaning. This is the position which this article takes.

Ambiguities

Translating figurative language is a challenging task because the meaning of a figure of speech in one language varies in another. This can vary even in different dialects of the same language. Texts which exhibit more than one meaning are referred to as ambiguous texts. In most cases, ambiguity results into distortion of meaning. Ambiguity may be caused by mismatch of the concepts and socio-cultural differences between the two working languages in translation process. In this article we consider the following examples:

Mismatch and Socio-cultural differences. The first example which shows how mismatch in choice of words and socio-cultural differences can lead to mistranslation hence wrong inference is:

2. a.i. *Nyasaye nene owacho ni dichwo in icham kuon gi luya (Dholuo).*

This sentence was translated in Kiswahili as:

- b. i. *Mungu alisema kuwa mwanamume utakula ugali na jasho.*
ii. God said that man you will eat through sweat (English).

In the Dholuo sentence there is an expression *in icham kuon gi luya*. This is a metaphoric expression. In this expression there are two concepts which have to be understood within the contexts of Dholuo and biblical. The first one is *kuon* which stands for food in human life within the Dholuo context. The second one is *luya* which stands for *difficulty in getting something* within the contexts of Dholuo and biblical. In the translated sentence in Kiswahili these two concepts were not captured the way they were supposed to be hence mistranslation occurred. In the Dholuo sentence the expression *in icham kuon gi luya* if understood within the context of the culture of that language then the concepts of *kuon* and *luya* do not have the same literal meaning as *ugali* and *jasho* in Kiswahili hence creating ambiguity in the target text. The concept of *kuon* within the prism of the source text, intended audience and environment means *whatever good thing in human life* while the concept of *luya* means *difficulty in getting*.

Failure to reflect this intended meaning in the target text definitely led to confusion among the audience. In terms of relevance theory therefore, the translator should decide how to make this text relevant to the Kiswahili audience so that the audience can achieve optimum inference at minimal processing cost (Gutt 1992). So, the study suggests that the Dholuo metaphorical expression was supposed to be translated into Kiswahili as:

c. i. *Mungu alisema kwamba mwanamume, chochote unachotaka cha muhimu maishani utakipata daima kwa uchungu au ugumu* (Kiswahili).

ii. God said that man whatever that is good which you will need in life you will always get it with much difficulty (English).

Another instance of mistranslation is found in the following sentence:

3. a.i. *Jokristo duto kas uru mana sianda u e wach tich Nyasaye* (Dholuo).

This sentence was translated Kiswahili as:

b. i. *Wakristo -wote -kazeni -matako -yenu -katika -kazi -ya -Kikristo* (Kiswahili).
Christians –all -you tighten –buttocks –yours -in the ii. -work –of –christian
All of you Christians tighten your buttocks (English).

In the Dholuo sentence there is the use of an expression *kas uru mana sianda u* which is metaphoric in nature. The intended meaning in this expression has not been reflected in the translated sentence in Kiswahili. In the Dholuo sentence there are the concepts *kas* and *sianda* which have been rendered literally into Kiswahili as *kazeni* and *matako*. These two words according to *Kamusi ya Kiswahili Sanifu* henceforth KKS (2013) mean- *tumia nguvu* and *makalio* which in English are *tightening* and *buttocks* respectively. This is a mistranslation and the implication is ambiguous. There should be some agreement among the participants that the concept of *sianda* within the context of the culture of the two languages that is Dholuo and Kiswahili and that of the bible means a different thing from the real *buttocks*. Hence the concept of *sianda* in the biblical context means *effort* which is equivalent to *juhudi* or *jitihada* in Kiswahili. This is the correct inference which the Kiswahili audience expects. So, in this case the metaphoric expression *kas uru mana sianda u* in Dholuo has a contextual meaning of *put more effort*. This now shows that the metaphoric expression was supposed to be rendered into Kiswahili as *weken* *juhudi/jitihada*.

From the above discussion, then successful translation was supposed to be:

c. i. *Wakrist oweken ijuhudi/jitihada kuhusu imani yenu katika mambo ya Kikristo* (Kiswahili)
ii. Christians put more effort on your faith in Christianity (English).

The sentence that follows shows another case of mistranslation:

4. a. i. *Wereuru kodgi gin muofuni ma otelo ni muofuni* (Dholuo)
This sentence was translated in Kiswahili as:

b. i. *Muwaache hao nivipofu wanaoongoza vipofu* (Kiswahili).
ii. Leave them alone they are blind people who are leading blind people (English).

In the Dholuo sentence there is a concept of *muofu* which has been rendered literally into Kiswahili as *upofu* which KKS (2013) defines as *mtu asiye ona kutokana na kuugua, ajali au kuzaliwa*- meaning a blind person in English. A blind person is not able to see, so, he/she is ever in darkness. In the Dholuo sentence there is a comparison between a person who is able to see and that who is not able. The person who is not able to see within the context of the Dholuo sentence and that of the bible means *somebody* who is a *sinner*, which is one who does not follow principles of Christianity. *Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary*- henceforth OALD (2010) defines the term *sinner* as a person who has broken God's law. This concept of a *sinner* is not reflected in translated sentence into Kiswahili. Therefore, failure to include the concept of a *sinner* in Kiswahili sentence contributed to a loss in meaning in translation. This is contrary to *skopos* rule which dictates that: translate in away that enable a text to have a function in an environment and to the people who are to use it in their intended way. In the context of Christianity sinners are compared to blind people who are not able to see any wisdom. In this case, Kiswahili sentence was supposed to capture the concept of *muofuni* as *waovu-sinners*. Having that in mind, then successful translation which would have been relevant to the targeted intention and audience was supposed to be:

- c. i. *Muwaache hao ni waovu wanaoongoza wenzao ambao pia ni waovu* (Kiswahili).
- ii. Leave them alone those are sinners who are leading other sinners

(English). More so, mistranslation is depicted in the following sentence:

- 5. a. i. *Nene oora ni mondo adwar rombo ma olal ei od Joisrael* (Dholuo)

This sentence was translated in Kiswahili as:

- b. i. *Nilitumwa ili nimtafute kondoo aliyepotea Israeli* (Kiswahili).
- ii. I was sent to look for a lost sheep in Israel (English).

The Dholuo expression *rombo ma olal* in the Dholuo sentence is metaphorical. In the context of biblical traditions the term *rombo* refers to people who have faith in Jesus Christ and his teachings. The Dholuo word *olal* means *lost* in English. Therefore, the contextual meaning of this metaphorical expression is supposed to be *people who are not strong and faithful in teachings of Christian religion*. This is supposed to be the intended meaning in the source text.

Although *rombo-kondoo* has got no direct relationship with a human being, however, in the context of the Dholuo sentence the characteristic of a sheep getting lost in the grazing field is being compared to a Christian who is not strong and faithful in the word and teachings of Jesus Christ.

The translated sentence in Kiswahili is a mistranslation because there is a direct transfer of the concept *rombo ma olal* from Dholuo into Kiswahili as *kondoo aliyepotea- a lost sheep*. In this translation there is no agreement between the traditional contexts of the two African languages and that of the bible, hence loss of intended meaning in translation. According to this research *kondoo aliyepotea* is not reflecting fully the concept of *not strong and faithful in the word and teachings of Jesus Christ*. So, this research proposed that the concept *rombo ma olal* was supposed to be translated into Kiswahili as *waumini ambao niwalegevu katika imani ya dini ya Kikristo*.

Hence the whole sentence was to be in Kiswahili as:

Nilitumwa nimtafute mtu yeyote ambaye ni mlegevu katika imani ya dini ya Kikristo. If the translation captures the above sentence then, it will reflect one of the *skopos* principles that target text must marry with source text.

Successful translation was supposed to be:

- c.i. *Nilitumwa nimtafute mtu yeyote ambaye ni mlegevu katika imani ya dini ya Kikristo* (Kiswahili).
- ii. I was sent to look for anybody who is not strong in the faith of Christian religion

(English). The final example in this study that shows mistranslation is:

- 6. a. i. *Un e kado mar piny* (Dholuo)

This sentence was translated in Kiswahili as:

- b.i. *Nyinyi ndio chumvi ya ulimwengu* (Kiswahili)
- ii. You are the salt of this world. (English)

The word *kado* in the Dholuo sentence has been used metaphorically. This word according to culture and context of the Luo people means *salt* which is an ingredient which is used in the preparation of a meal. However, within the context of this sentence this word has not been used to refer to this meaning but, to that meaning of the role of Christians in integrating other people in spread of the work and teachings of Jesus Christ among other people. So, in this context the preacher believes that the Christians have qualities of *salt* of adding flavor in the teachings of Christ. As the Christians interact freely with their fellow Christians they add flavor to the religion hence being referred to as *kado-salt*. Both the preacher

and the audience agree that Christians are *kado*- salt however, there is no direct link between the Christians and *kado-salt*.

In the translated sentence from Dholuo into Kiswahili, the Dholuo metaphor *kado* has been translated literally as *chumvi* in Kiswahili which KKS (2013) defines as *madini meupe ambayo hutiwa katika chakula wakati au baada ya kupika ili kuongezea ladha* which is equivalent to the English term salt that is defined by OALD (2010) as *a white substance that is added to food to give it a better flavor*. This translation according to this research is not successful. This is because the contextual meaning of this metaphor in Dholuo that is- integrating other people in the spread of the word and teachings of Jesus Christ has not been reflected. Although, the biblical traditions concur with those of the Luo people and other communities on the role of *kado-chumvi* in cooking, this translation never considered that while translating this metaphor literally in Kiswahili the intended meaning would be lost. This translation would have been relevant to the context of the target audience if the concept of the spread of the word and teaching of Jesus Christ would have been captured.

Hence successful translation was supposed to be:

- c. i. *Nyinyi ndio mtakaoeneza dini ya Kikristo ulimwenguni* (Kiswahili).
- ii. You are the people who are to spread the word and teachings of Christianity in the world (English)

Table 1. Ambiguities in translation

Dholuo	Literal translation in Kiswahili	English equivalence	Correct Kiswahili version	English equivalence
<i>icham kuon gi luya</i>	utakula ugali na jasho	eat with sweat	ugumu/uchungu	difficulty
<i>kas uru mana sianda u</i>	kazeni matako yenu	tighten your buttocks	juhudi/jitihada	more effort
<i>muofuni rombo</i>	vipofu kondoo	blind people Sheep	waovu waumini	sinners believers

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS AND CONCLUSION

Data presented show that ambiguity in meaning of translated metaphors is attributed to three main causes: mismatches, socio-cultural differences and wrong inferences. A mismatch is reflected in wrong choice of lexemes and figurative expressions. Example 2 is an illustration of mismatch of concept in *icham kuon gi luya* in Dholuo which could also mean *difficulty in getting something good in life* in Christian religion context. This is translated in Kiswahili as *utakula ugali na jasho* which has literal meaning of *you will eat with sweat* in English. This does not bring out the idea of *difficulty* as intended in the target text. Another mismatch of metaphorical form is depicted in example 3. The Dholuo metaphoric expression *kas uru mana sianda u* has been rendered literally in Kiswahili as *kazeni matako yenu* (which literally means tighten your buttocks in English) does not communicate the same meaning of *juhudi/jitihada* (put more effort). It does not reflect the intended meaning in Kiswahili.

Concerning socio-cultural issues, it is important to note that the cultural component is paramount in translation particularly when the languages involved in this activity and cultures are not related. The target text should reflect the culture of the target community as observed by Leppihalme (1997). In many of the ambiguities observed in this study, it emerges that the cultural differences were a major contributor. In example 5 for instance *rombo* which is a Dholuo metaphor could easily be conceptualized more readily by an average Christian than some. In the account of Christianity and its context *rombo* is a symbol of a *believer/faihfal* in Christianity. The average Kiswahili speaker may not infer this contextual meaning. Principally, socio-cultural differences in translation should effectively be tackled to avoid ambiguity which may lead to meaning loss in translation. With respect to problems of mistranslation due to socio-cultural differences, Munday (2001) argues that translators must always be keen to create effective communicative clues in the text to make it relevant to the context of the receptor. However, Wangia (2008, p. 82) cautions translators to be very particular when making assumptions in their choices especially when dealing with implied meanings. This is because both the translator and the audience may have different world views hence what may appear very obvious to a translator may not be to a receptor. This is why we argue in this article that the receptor's needs in translation process are paramount. If we

consider example 6 in this case which show the expression *un e kado mar piny* in Dholuo which must be understood by inference. The question we may ask at this juncture is how the literal translation which appears in this example as *nyinyi ndio chumvi ya ulimwengu* (literally rendered in English as *you are the salt of the world*) would aid a Kiswahili audience in inferring correctly the intended meaning.

On several occasions translation may fail to render a meaning as expected by the target audience. This occurs especially when translators make assumptions which are not familiar to the audience. Ideally a translator must always have the audience in focus. From this study it is evident that translating across languages is a very difficult task. What then should a good translator do? The translator needs to understand what could be the source of mistranslation by identifying ambiguity in the text, complex figurative language and a concept which is not translatable hence may require an explanatory note. In conclusion, we recognize that the nature of translation subjectively varies according to type and purpose. In order to achieve a successful translation, a translator needs to be aware of the kind of challenges to face in the translation process. It would be nice to know if anything can be done about the existing translations like to review them and come up with new editions with notes or illustrations

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