

Magic, divine revelation and translation in theological education in the majority world today (with a focus on Africa)

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“one can demand or even require a vernacular direction for the faith in the interests of orthodoxy” (Sanneh, 1989:174).

Abstract

The impact or sense of text translated into a different worldview must be transformed to engage its new cultural context. An understanding of why and how this happens is vital for the globalising church to get away from a unicentral model of theological truth rooted in economic dependency on the hegemony of Western English. This article portrays intercultural translation in vivid ways using Scriptural example to show how some current models of translation depend on either direct divine revelation or magic for their success. This article advocates Christian discipleship at depth through intercultural missionary engagement rooted in local languages and resources.

Keywords: Cultural linguistics, theological education, Africa, indigenous languages, translation, intercultural communication, mission

1. Introduction

Casual observation points to a strong North American and European domination of formal theological education of Protestant Christians carried out in Africa and elsewhere in the majority world. A great deal of it is engaged in English. Even that which is not in English is often translated from English. Widely recognised problems in the African church include its dependence on the West and its orientation to the prosperity gospel. This short article uses a simple example to illustrate how indeed the failure on the side of formal theological education to take account of inter-linguistic and intercultural differences is contributing to the prosperity gospel, the generation and perpetuation of unhealthy dependency on the West, and other

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widespread maladies of the non-Western church. Surprisingly, perhaps, the linguistically related mechanism of translation brought to light is consistently ignored in the wider literature on the indigenisation of theology. This author advocates for theological education using languages that are indigenous to the majority world.²

2. Theological translation in practice

I ask what happens when Western theological reasoning is translated into an African worldview, specifically that of the Luo people of Kenya? I am personally familiar with the Luo people's language and to some extent with their worldview, as a result of having lived in Luo community in Kenya from 1993 to date. That living experience, and more generally my engagement with indigenous African contexts, continues to convince me of the need for vulnerability in communication, which includes the need to make serious use of African languages. (For more on vulnerable mission, see vulnerablemission.org).

My concentrating on one African language in this article, the Luo Language in Kenya, simplifies the scene in a continent in which there is a great diversity of indigenous tongues. Detailed discussion on ways to respond to multi-language contexts, and also more detail on just what constitutes 'African ways of thinking' go beyond this article. I suggest in passing that choice of almost any indigenous language has benefits because a language under indigenous 'control' will reflect indigenous worldviews. In brief, African ways of thinking are widely known to be holistic, unlike Western thinking which is dualistic.³

When I say, 'translated into an African worldview', I mean interpreted to be consistent with African ways of thinking. This could be done by translating into a local language, or it could happen in English, if the English in which it is to be understood were African (for example Luo) English. After all, "cultural diversity is not defined by the language we speak, but the ways these languages are spoken . . ." (Fiola, 2014). That is to say – when Luo people living in Kenya use English they tend to structure their use of English and suppose meanings of English terms, that originate in the Luo Language. Thus, English falls into line with their own ways of life.

Luo people do not know what they do not know. If there is content in the native English way of understanding that falls outside the worldview of a Luo person, then clearly for the Luo person to 'get' that part of the native-English content would require more than words. Words themselves do not carry content, they only represent

² This article is addressed to Westerners. Westerners are funding and administrating a lot of the formal theological education happening on the continent of Africa. This is not to say that formal theological education holds the key to the future of the African church. It is to focus on that sector where Westerners may have power to bring changes.

³ For more on the distinction between holism and dualism see Harries (2015).

things that people know or understand. For example, were a passage to refer to Valentine's Day or Big Ben, then a Luo person who has never come across either Valentine's Day or Big Ben will not understand the passage with respect to these things. Instead, the person concerned either has to leave the content of those words in some way 'blank' in their mind, or they have to substitute alternative content. For example, they may take a mention of Valentine's Day as referring to a 'valuable day' of some sort. Of course, the reverse also applies. English people do not know what they do not know. If there is content in the native Luo way of understanding that falls outside of the worldview of an English person, then clearly the English person cannot 'get' that part of the native-Luo content.

Every known English word has a place in a different world for Luo people who learn English by associating 'new' English words with words, concepts and contexts in their own language(s). In order to compare two implicit Englishes, native-English and the Luo-English, we would need to use some kind of labelling. Perhaps English-English (rooted in dualistic notions of foundationalism) could be written in blue, but Luo-English (not so rooted) in green. Or, every Luo-English word could be written preceded by a *z*, or underlined⁴ or put in bold, etc. The reader would then know that a word that is so labelled is to be taken as having a Luo-people's set of implicatures,⁵ impacts, or sense. An unlabelled word would be taken as having a native-English set of implicatures, or impacts, or senses.

It could be more difficult to distinguish these different versions of language (native-English against Luo-English) in spoken form than in written form. A strong accent would be one way of doing this. Or someone could use different voices, for example, a high-pitched voice (like a female voice) for Luo-English, yet a low-pitched voice (like a male voice) for native-speakers' English to distinguish the terms and their implicatures. The latter would make for an interesting conversation! It would also be rather intriguing, and certainly difficult to hold the two Englishes apart in one's mind as one talked. I guess it would be impossible to do this 100%, although perhaps one could do it to some extent. Theoretically at least one could say that as a result of this process the 'size' of the English vocabulary will instantly double (Pattberg, 2014).

3. The role of translation between two languages

I am not aware of the above kind of communication, in which it is made clear that two Englishes are being used simultaneously, being carried out in practice. Instead,

⁴ This is the approach I use in Harries (2011:1-22).

⁵ An implicature is what the word implies in a given context, rather than what it 'means', as if it had a fixed meaning that is independent of the context of its use.

when one language is used interculturally, the above kinds of differences are usually simply ignored.

The only alternative way of keeping different sets of implicatures and senses distinct would be for each to be expressed in its *own language*. In this case, two (or more) languages would each represent their own worldview. Each language having its own worldview (or, perhaps, range of worldviews or cultures) means that translation between worldviews would be reflected in the translation between languages. This is a means of communication that people have used throughout history. The association between a language and a worldview has, by default, generally been strong. A relatively extreme attempt at the separation of a language from a culture has only been enabled in recent centuries, and especially decades, by advances in technology – such as the printing press, and more recently radio and electronic communication.⁶

We then come across an interesting process known as translation. There is a widespread understanding, at least in native-English speaking circles, that inter-language translation is possible and helpful. This is based on the assumption that languages are rooted in a *universal* set of meanings, implying a belief in some kind of foundationalism. Translation draws on such ‘universals’. According to such universals, parallels are assumed to exist between signs (such as words) and their implicatures in one worldview or context, and signs and their implicatures in another worldview or context.

Sports may be analogous to languages. If translation is possible, then presumably a state, happening, or being in football (soccer) has an equivalent state, happening or being in tennis (or any other sport). In football we have things like; a goal, a penalty kick, a foul called handball, and a throw-in. *Now the mind boggles; what are the equivalent of these things in tennis?* This kind of mind-boggling illustrates the dilemmas, frustrations and frankly the impossibility of intercultural linguistic translation.⁷

4. Challenging Assumptions in Translation

Bible translators have long worked on the premise that what can be said in one language can be said in another. Gutt suggests that we have “unrealistic expectations of what translation can achieve” (Gutt, 2005:45). Translation cannot be “the silver

⁶ Languages have traditionally been learned by people in hand with their cultures, as they have been learned from functioning communities who are the owners of those languages. Technological advances like the printing press and radio enable learning of ‘language’ without a close sharing of the culture and way of life of its speakers.

⁷ “It is universally agreed that translating is impossible”, says Joosten, provocatively (2010:59), in his evaluation of the translation of the Septuagint.

bullet of cross-language communication,” he tells us, because comprehension depends on cognitive effects arising from context and not from within a text (Gutt, 2011:15-16). “Religion emptied of cultural specificity is a worthless abstraction”, Sanneh (1993:245) tells us. Languages flux and change along with the culture of the people who are expressing ways of life using those languages. I suggest that it is Christian living that renders languages sufficiently mutually translatable to allow expression of genuine Christian orthodoxy across all languages. Languages that are not used by Christians cannot have all necessary terms to translate Christian concepts, or those concepts would not be Christian. In other words, because God is one, our understanding of him is really the only basis for legitimate accurate translation. That is: God is the only true intercultural reality, the only legitimate basis for intercultural comparison and so by implication translation.⁸

These translation issues underlie Sanneh’s conclusion that “missionary adoption of vernacular categories for the Scriptures was in effect a written sanction for the indigenous religious vocation” (1989:159). As “missionaries could not be sure what precise implication might come to attach to usage” of translated terms, they “became ultimately helpless in the face of the overwhelming contextual repercussions of translation” (Sanneh, 1989:158). Translation into another cultural context, which has its own peculiar cognitive effects (see Gutt above), invariably transforms a message.

I am not the first to address these translation concerns. Tshehla (2002), Bediako (2003), Ekem (2003), Laryea (2002), and others have given them a great deal of attention. Tshehla tells us that “if our scholarship is to have any hope of being liberating scholarship, our primary sources must come from our subjects in their own tongue and terms” (2004:27-28). The above scholars come out in favour of the use of indigenous languages for the practice of the church. I once asked Bediako whether English could be the very thing that is limiting African scholarship and whether widespread use of English isn’t *the* problem of African theologians. His response, uttered six times consecutively, was “you are right.”⁹

5. Power issues that conceal translation concerns

Given the above, why are some of the above translation issues not more widely recognised? A major point of this essay is exactly that orthodoxy (with a small ‘o’) is in Africa almost universally formally expressed in European languages. I become acutely aware of this in church services that I attend in Kenya: It is possible in a Luo congregation to have some people who do not know English, and others who

⁸ Along the lines of the “universal human concepts [sought to be the basis] for contrastive linguistic semantics” by Goddard and Wierzbicka (2008). (This citation comes from the title of the article).

⁹ I asked this question and received my response in discussion at a lecture given by Bediako in 2006.

do not know Luo (the local tongue). Hence a preacher has the choice of using Luo and being translated into English or using English and being translated into Luo. Should the preacher be sufficiently versed in English and he know there are foreigners present, he will prefer to use English. This enables him to carefully express things correctly in the 'language of orthodoxy'. Should he instead use Luo, he could communicate much more effectively with native Luo speakers, but he would risk that translation into English would fall short of the required orthodoxy.

Orthodoxy is defined in English, not in African languages. The nature of indigenous understandings of African people's expression of theology in their own languages is these days never, in formal circles, the subject of study.¹⁰ For formal purposes, it is always English translations of what an African person has said that are evaluated. The outcome of indigenous unorthodoxies thus only becomes evident in unorthodox *practices* of African led churches, not in their liturgy or teaching.

Most scholars treat these as best ignored 'under the carpet' issues. People fear the racist connotations of pointing to unorthodoxy in Africa. 'Secular writers,' like Ogot, may be less concerned. Padhola Christians of Uganda (closely related to the Kenya Luo) deny that being a Christian is a "personal decision", preferring to understand it as a "group activity", Ogot (1999a:162) tells us. The same applies to the Maria Legio indigenously founded church amongst the Kenya Luo (Ogot, 1999b:218). Leaders of African churches see themselves as being "at par with Christ" said Ogot (1999c:128). The above-mentioned Maria Legio very much consider their founder to be 'on a par with Christ' (personal observation), hence he is frequently known as the Messiah, as the black Jesus.¹¹

6. How Translation happens and its relationship to 'error'

Despite various difficulties: translation happens. It happens intra-language (between speakers of the same language who have different cultural backgrounds) and it also happens interlanguage. I have copied a Luo-language translation of John 3:16 below:¹²

"Nyasaye nohero piny ahinya kama, omiyo nochiwo Wuode ma miderma mondo ng'ama oyie kuome kik lal, to obed gi ngima ma nyaka chieng" (Luo Language Bible, 1976).¹³

¹⁰ The same could be said of their expression on other concerns that are not theological.

¹¹ <http://lejonmaria.blogspot.co.ke/2015/02/simeo-ondeto-second-christ-black.html>

¹² My analysis of one instance of biblical interpretation illustrates what goes on more widely that is consistently ignored. Much of this is consequential for theological education.

¹³ From the Luo Language Bible (1976). Alternative Luo translations would not resolve the translation issues that are under consideration in this article, For example, the 1968 translation is as follows: "Nikech Nyasaye nohero piny ahinya, omiyo nochiwo wuode ma miderma, mondo ng'a ma oyie kuome

Key concepts in English have been designated some kind of equivalent in the Luo Language. For God we have *Nyasaye*, for loved we have *nohero*, for his son we have *wuode*, for gave we have *nochiwo*, and so on.

I would like to ask; how would a Luo speaker who is culturally a Luo and who is also familiar with English but unfamiliar with this particular English passage and its context, and unfamiliar with the above translation conventions, translate the above passage back into English?¹⁴ Many, perhaps almost an infinity of options, are possible. As a fluent Luo-language speaker – I suggest that the below is a possible option:¹⁵

“He who makes us prosper when pleaded to so thought of the dead that he gave his only son so that people who go along with what he says will not get lost but will receive prosperity to the end.”

I do not claim that this is an option that scholars or native speakers have agreed upon or would or should agree upon. It would be difficult to find mature and capable Luo speakers who are not familiar with the biblical passage in question in English. Yet, Luo people take the English word ‘god’ as being one who makes them prosper. The Luo term *Nyasaye* and the English term God are taken as synonyms. This despite the fact that native English speakers do not take God as the ‘provider’ of their prosperity.¹⁶

Those who are aware of Christian orthodoxy will realise that the above back-translation is theologically ‘wrong’ It seems to communicate untruth about Christianity and distorts the true biblical passage. A theological or bible student who translated John 3:16 back into English as above would by many be considered to be plainly *misled*. (For more on this see Harries, 2011). She would not be wrong because her translation is inaccurate. She would be wrong because her translation is not true to orthodox Christian doctrine and belief. This is how the original African language text can be neither right nor wrong, i.e. orthodox or unorthodox. In

kik lala, to bed gi ngima mochwere”. The same can be said of the 2000 version: “Nikech Nyasaye nohero piny ahinya, omiyo nochiwo Wuode achiel makende, mondo ng’ata ang’ata moyie kuome kik lal, to obed gi ngima manyaka chieng”, (Luo Language Bible, 2015).

¹⁴ This practice, known as ‘back-translation’, is of course a known means of double-checking translations. A key question perhaps not always sufficiently considered as this is done, is the presupposed context that a back-translator works with. Most people who do back-translations of Biblical passages being translated are already somewhat familiar with the bible, with what is acceptable theology, and with practices of the church.

¹⁵ Whatever the accuracy of the specific translation options I have chosen, I think few scholars would argue that differences ‘such as’ those I have identified between the languages / cultures do exist.

¹⁶ Many native English speakers perceive their prosperity to arise from a combination of chance, reason, and rationality.

this sense, it does not 'exist' until it is translated into a European language such as English, except as something with the potential to be translated into English. That latter translation is the one assessed as being right or wrong.

In today's world correction for the above erring student will not come from their own language. It will be communicated in English. That is to say, that little or no effort will be spent on 'correcting' the translation process. There are no Luo Language Bible schools, except perhaps somewhere a small, most insignificant and informal one.¹⁷ No-one in formal circles is trying to correct Christian uses of African languages. Formal theological education states what is correct in English. In practice, expression of correct theology in Luoland, as in much of Anglophone Africa, requires knowledge of English. According to the same logic, without knowing English, one cannot be a 'correct' (proper/orthodox) Christian. The English someone needs to learn, as we have discussed above, is not English that is an implicit translation from the African person's mother tongue. The English the person needs to know in order to be a 'correct' Christian is that of native-English speakers. That is, it is the English which relates to Western and not African ways of life.

7. Is there a reliance on magic?

Here is the need for 'magic' or direct divine intervention.¹⁸ Correct theology is expressed in English. In order to know the English that is needed to express correct theology, the African person must first be familiar with a Western (i.e. native-English) worldview. Yet we must ask: how can they become familiar with a Western worldview when they have been born and raised and are still finding themselves living in a culture that is vastly different from it? The only way that an African born person raised in Africa with an African worldview will learn this kind of 'correct' theology, if not by direct revelation from God or by a process of magic, is through rote learning the correct thing to say.

Something akin to what I have described as 'magic' occurred in the Biblical record in Acts 2:6-12; the disciples were heard speaking many languages, including some that they presumably did not actually know. This was a miracle performed by God. Seeking to rely on such a miracle is, according to some Christians, perhaps especially Pentecostals, legitimate. Wanting to rely on such miraculous intervention in order to acquire correct understanding, does put a question mark on the need for humanly imparted Theological Education. It also puts a question mark on the correction by the church in the West of the majority world church, lest the Western church that has 'reasoned' its theology in 'correcting' the majority world church

¹⁷ I have searched for such a school, and not found one.

¹⁸ I define magic loosely as; "the use of special powers to make things happen that would usually be impossible" (<https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/magic>).

be contrary to the will of God, i.e. the source of revelation. If the Western ‘mother’ churches are not there to ‘correct’ the others, however, then we have an issue of Christian unity. Can a church be one, if what it teaches is different in different parts of the world? On the other hand, we should also ask, given our above discussions: how can theology be contextualised if what it teaches is expressed in identical terms using the same language in whichever part of the world the church finds itself?

In practice, many churches in the majority world today have a dual-level theology or doctrine. Officially their beliefs are expressed in English or European languages. The doctrines they actually operate on in practice are much more accurately expressed in vernacular languages.

8. Solutions

In his study of cultural linguistics, Sharifian points to issues with respect to Aboriginal people in Australia that closely parallel ours here. Indigenous language communities invest conceptualisations into their languages, which are ‘left behind’ on translation into European tongues (2017:194).

While the dominance of European languages, especially English, in theology is reminiscent of Latin as language of the church in bygone centuries, there are important differences. There was no printing press, radio, television, and internet in the medieval church. ‘Correct’ doctrine tended to remain in the upper echelons of the church and hidden in its rituals. People were left to solve their own problems as best they could, under that broad if partly indecipherable umbrella. Today the penetration of English is enabled by technology. So, the need for rote learning is ever-growing, and penetrating right into the grassroots of the church.

The domination of European over African people is enormous and constantly growing. The association between the possession of white skin and power, authority, wisdom and ‘correct’ knowledge, never mind money, that is in Africa ever-growing, is fuelling racist thinking back in the West. African people are forced to rote learn. As technically African countries are independent, the same Europeans who have authority, do not need to take responsibility for Africa.

There being no easy solution to the above predicament does not mean it should be ignored. Western people could take African people seriously on their own terms, emancipating them, by working from a foundation of indigenous thinking and initiative, using African languages (rooted in African worldviews).¹⁹

This article is aimed at those who carry presuppositions of people of European origin. Others are free to read and respond to what I write. It is hard for me to

¹⁹ I do not go into detail here to explain that contextual learning of African languages requires ministry to be, in part at least, dependent on local resources. For more details see vulnerablemission.org.

speak intelligently into the African situation, especially using English. Non-Westerners who read this article should see themselves as 'overhearers'. This article challenges Western missionaries to engage their roles intelligently in relation to African contexts. That requires the use of African languages.

9. Summary and conclusion

The fact that culture / context affect how terms in language are interpreted inevitably results in alternative understandings of any particular text, corresponding to different cultures. Interpretation of John 3:16 is the case study here examined comparing English and Luo (western Kenyan) understandings. Implicit Luo interpretations appear erroneous when translated back into English. As a result, African Christians communicating in the global arena can easily have their theological understanding condemned. To avoid such condemnation, they express themselves in English in ways that are known to be acceptable to the dominant native-English world. Hence a close knowledge of Western English is required for theology in Africa to be expressed 'correctly'. Many African people being unfamiliar with the detailed cultural presuppositions underlying Western English cannot come to such correct language uses by their own means. Instead, they must learn by magic, direct divine revelation, or copy by rote. In practice, many African churches maintain two systems of doctrine and theology in parallel: Officially there is the globally recognised belief system, usually almost identical to that of mother churches in the West. Then unofficially there are the local theologies that are the basis for the actual functioning of the churches concerned, in intricate interaction with local cultural contexts.

Contemporary theological education that transfers programmes from the West to Africa enables African people to express orthodoxy by pushing contextualised theologies underground. The heart-rooted transformative power of the Gospel is easily lost in a sea of foreign impositions. The gospel can come to be understood as a means to material prosperity. An important key for gospel work to be able to penetrate indigenous cultures is for mission work to be carried out using local languages.

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