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# Biblical Hermeneutics in Relation to Conventions of Language Use in Africa: Pragmatics Applied to Interpretation in Cross-cultural Context

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DISCUSSIONS on hermeneutics have rarely considered one very important factor. That is, *how* words are *used*. Such is the bread and butter of the academic disciplines of pragmatics and discourse analysis. I would like to consider the implications of this in today's 'shrinking' world, especially in relation to biblical interpretation and Christian teaching and mission in Africa.

The Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) and its associates in Bible translation have undoubtedly done an impressive job in taking the Scriptures into diverse languages around the world. Somewhat in close sequence to possession of Scriptures in mother tongue, we also however find emergence of New Religious Movements or, in the African context, AICs (African Indigenous Churches). We can ask ourselves why such apparently non- or marginally orthodox movements are so quick to emerge if the translation process has been so successful? It would seem that indigenous people do not always come to understand or apply (i.e. use) the Scriptures 'as they should'.

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## Scriptures Boost Traditional Beliefs

A good clue as to why this should be is given by Sanneh, who points out that far from the translation of scriptures being a means of oppressing 'traditional cultures', it very often results in their revival![1] On careful consideration this should not surprise us as Bible translators into mother-tongues are of course 'forced' to use terms that already have deep and wide roots in the pre-existing way of life. Finding such in written form in a book said to have originated in God himself is likely to be a boost to traditional rituals and practices, now given official Christian legitimacy and sanction. It is ironic that churches and their Bible teaching, often considered to be destructive of traditional cultures, are shown by Sanneh as being rather the refuge for the latter!

A few example of how this works in the Luo language of Western Kenya written from an indigenous African perspective, may illustrate this point:

- 'Holy Communion' is a new, foreign and no doubt powerful white-man's ritual but becomes *sap ruoth*—a memorial celebration for a departed Luo chief.
- 'God' who was a mysterious ambivalent fellow originating in distant parts of the globe who one can barely fathom, is now clearly identified as *Nyasaye*—the very life-force that has guided our people for generations.
- That strange looking nuclear family need no longer be our model for Christian living, as the Old Testament is replete with examples of big men having multiple wives.
- Confusing teachings on science and physical causality need no longer be taken seriously, as numerous biblical examples make it clear that at the root of suffering and misfortune is no less than *ketho kwer*, which we (i.e. the Luo) know to be breaking the laws handed down by our ancestors.

## Lip Service not Matched by Action!

Some of the above is old hat to missiologists. Although it must be said—it is deceptive in its penetration and power. That is, while a missiologist may give lip service and recognition to the above, his/her mind gravitates back to his own roots when giving a morning devotion or preparing a message to share at the Sunday service. (Such 'gravitating back' can, in my view, be avoided to some extent if a non-western language is used.) The same of course happens in our theological seminaries that are dominated by western texts and inputs. In other words, even the degree of recognition of what happens once the Scriptures are indigenised has much less impact than it 'ought' when it comes to their mainstream interpretation and application in the church.

The question is being asked as to why theological education around the continent of Africa continues to be in English, French and Afrikaans despite the availability of vernacular Bibles,

1 Lamin Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the missionary impact on culture* (New York: Orbis Books, 1989), p. 83.

and despite the fact that living churches on the continent mostly operate in African languages?[2] This is an important question. Its answer, at the moment I suspect, has more to do with economic power than reasoned theology. Seminaries will continue to be in cloud–land, considering sets of questions foreign to peoples' experience, until this question is addressed.

Teaching in cloud-land may not be so bad in itself. But we need to remember that students at such seminaries are trying to *apply* what they are taught. Being unfamiliar with deep lexical and cultural implications of even commonly used English words, our African students assume 'new' English words to be equal to African equivalents. (There are, of course, also many other reasons as to why what is taught in seminaries may not be very practical for the African context. This much discussed area is not the major focus of this essay.) As a result, applying seminary knowledge becomes at least disruptive, at worst catastrophic for the church.

As in many areas of cross-cultural activity, lip service is these days often given to vast existing cultural differences. Implementing such lip-service becomes the difficult next step that is rarely taken, especially by monolinguists (or monoculturalists). More serious issues lie under the surface. Scholars have recently become astutely aware of issues concerning language *use*. This is considered in detail in the discipline of pragmatics, which is an important theoretical foundation for this work.[3]

## The Folly of Inter-sport Language

A good illustration to help a monolingual person to understand the dilemmas that arise when we take account of pragmatics is to think of sport. The English-speaking world knows of many sports and games. Each one has its own vocabulary! In cricket we have *out, over, run* and *innings*. In football we have *goal, defence*, a *shot* and a *free kick*. In tennis we have a *set*, a *match*, a *racquet* and a *serve*. Now imagine that these games represent different peoples with distinct languages. One people and language of tennis, one of football and one of cricket.

If a football player says to a cricket player that he scored a goal, the cricket player won't have a clue what he is talking about. So the football player must learn the language of the cricket player. Instead of reporting that he scored a goal, the football player must say that he got a run. But hang on, you may say, a goal is not the same as a run! And that is exactly the problem!

Then it comes to be the turn for the cricket player to explain to a football

**2** Tinyiko Sam Maluleke, 'African Christianity, the Bible and Theology', in Gosnell L.O.R. Yorke and Peter M. Renju (editors), *Bible Translation and African Languages* (Nairobi: Acton Publishers, 2004), pp. 161-176.

**3** For more details, see Stephen C. Levinson, *Pragmatics* (Cambridge Text Books in Linguistics) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983) and Geoffrey H. Leech, *Principles of Pragmatics* (London and New York: Longman 1983).

player that the ball hit the wicket, and thus he was out. Football fields do not have wickets, but do have goal posts, and players are not knocked out, but the ball can go out. So from saying the ball hit the wicket and the player was out, we get the ball hit the goal post and went out—in other words a corner was awarded! Having a corner awarded in a football match is quite different from a batsman walking out at the end of his innings. And that is exactly the problem!

In tennis a powerful serve that hits the net has to be retaken, as it is counted a failure. In explaining this to a football player, the tennis player is forced to say 'powerful shot' instead of 'a powerful serve'. When the football player hears that the powerful shot has put the ball into the net, he may rejoice at this, leaving the tennis player askance!

Those examples (that could be multiplied many times) are powerful illustrations of translation blunders which I face constantly here in Africa. Such things happen constantly when English and African people converse. They are also what I find in the essays written by African students using English. African students using English write like a cricket player who is used to describing a cricket match using the terminology of football. When I mark the essay using my knowledge of football, I see all the familiar terms being used. The terms do not seem to be used in the right way, but I give the writer the benefit of the doubt and give him a grade as I hardly want to be accused of being biased.

But does this analogy of sport hold up? After all, one person can learn to play many different sports, and adjust accordingly. If I play football I say 'good goal', whereas if I play cricket I say 'good run', and there is no confusion.

We would of course never be so foolish to teach someone the language of a sport without also teaching them how that language is used and the rules of the game. There is no 'inter-sport' language. Every sport, has its own language. Note that even if the same word(s) are used in different sports, the way they are used and their meaning varies significantly! A football player, a rugby player and a cricket fielder can all 'catch the ball', but for the football payer it is a foul, for the rugby player very normal, and for the cricket player means that the batsman is out!

Anyone inventing an 'inter-sport' language would be laughed out of town! So why don't we laugh when English is used as an international language? Perhaps we ought to laugh more, or cry! In fact, the impracticality of such 'inter-sport' sharing of wisdom illustrates why western theology introduces confusion into the African church and why it is actually often best for an African theological student to learn *not* to apply what he/she has been taught.

## Language is Meaningful only in Use

We are now beginning to delve below the tip of the proverbial iceberg in terms of language usage and hermeneutics. A raft of issues regarding daily language practice now need to be unearthed.

The ongoing concealment of these

issues is rooted in false conceptions of the nature of language. These conceptions that have spread around the world helped by western economies appear to be rooted in notions of Greek philosophy and of the enlightenment. The misconceptions suppose that language is a bridge between a person and a physical and social world 'out there'. Because, barring a few variations in climate and skin colour, the physical and social worlds appear to be the same around the world, and so also language. As a result, it is supposed, that as I talk to my mother about issues affecting my neighbours and friends, I am doing what young men do the world over.

But do they? In this instance clearly not in today's world. Many urban dwellers have little clue as to the lives of their neighbours, and are caught up in media presentations of what should be live-issues, and networks of friends rooted less and less in geographical proximity. But what then are friends?

'She is my friend' is a phrase all men know to use with caution (except of their wives) even within the confines of western English. Men need to be very careful how they even express themselves regarding fellow men, as 'we had a friendly time together' can be quickly misunderstood, and men holding hands as they walk is similarly quickly interpreted to mean something that Africans who do this habitually are shocked by! 'My friend' I am often told in African uses of English as a prelude to an uninhibited blunt request for funds by a complete stranger. 'He is my friend' is stronger than 'he is a friend of mine', and then we have, 'he is just a friend'. A good friend implies that you have been helped, but there is presumably no bad friend. A husband and wife can be 'friends of mine', but the wife is definitely not 'my friend' although I 'am friendly' (in moderation) whenever I meet her.

There are clearly acceptable and unacceptable, advisable and ill advised ways of *using* the word friend. To give a definition of friend is far from adequate to enable understanding of the *use* of the word. In fact, appropriate detailed knowledge of *uses* of the word 'friend' clearly arises from a comprehension of all factors pertaining to relationships within a community! How often does this apply?

'Christians do not greet each other by saying "how are you" but by saying "Praise the Lord"', an old lady told me in a Luo village (translation from *Dholuo*). So on meeting a fellow Christian, while being unsure as to whether one has already greeted them, one can ask, '*ase pako kodi ruoth?*', being, 'Have I already praised with you the Lord?' meaning, 'Have I greeted you yet (this morning)'? Again, knowing the *meaning* of *ruoth opaki* will give an Englishman little idea of its *use*.

The common western conception that words are there to *prepare for* a doing, well illustrated by the widespread use of behavioural objectives in educational curriculum planning,[4] seems to fly in the face of Austin's realization that we do things *with* words, and that applies really to *all* words![5]

**4** For example, see Gary A. Davis, *Educational Psychology Theory and Practice* (London: Addison-Wesley Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 305-329.

**5** J. L. Austin, *How to do Things with Words* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962), p. 52.

What are the implications of such a discovery, if indeed it is true that the role of words is not primarily in *meaning* but in *doing*? Why should I pay attention to a word anyway, if it is not going to do anything for me?

The reason the relationship between meaning and doing seems to be confused in the western worldview would seem to be connected to the pre-eminence of a mechanical perception of the world. A carburettor by itself does nothing, but knowing its place in an engine and knowing where to put other similarly 'useless' bits, results in a powerful driving force. So words are taken as meaning things that only 'do' something when correctly combined with other words.

## Ringing Bells in the African Theology Department

What would be the implication of the absence of such a mechanical worldview? That is, of a worldview where there is no perception of postponed doing? In a sense we are here referring to Mbiti's much maligned suggestion that in Africa there is no future.[6] Instead of taking words as meaning things which later in some elaborate complexity do some doing, every word is expected to be un-postponed doing. An accumulation in the doing-ness of many words is what results in the desirable way of being.

Some bells should here be being rung in the African theology department! In many African languages someone who is sick, if asked how he is, will say 'a little bit', thereby acknowledging that his life-force level is low. In African thinking, salvation is a boost or guarantee to that life-force. This is why a saved person cannot possibly get sick, and why salvation is considered an ongoing or frequently repeated experience. (I am aware that in saying this many westerners will consider me in theological error. Yet I am saying that this is a natural and logical conclusion if the Bible is read in many African languages.) Again, African people are noted for their liking of long church services, as those many words continue to add to force levels. Any absence of a morality identified in African Christianity[7] clearly arises through words being valued for what they *do*, and not in constructing an understanding that can later be considered to be moral.

Examples of profound differences in word usage's between cultures can easily be multiplied. I can put my finger at random in a dictionary to find words, and explain how usage of those word differs between African (Luo) and Western (British) cultures:[8]

- I find the word '*mistrust*'. This word is often used to malign a fellow westerner but in the Africa that I know this word is 'normal'. Peoples' hearts being by default

**6** John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (London: Heinemann, 1969), pp. 15-22.

**7** See for example Keith Ferdinando, 'Biblical Concepts of Redemption and African Perspectives of the Demonic' (Unpublished PhD thesis, Council for National Academic Awards, London Bible College, UK, 1992), p. 284.

**8** I have used Carole A. Capen 1998, *Bilingual Dholuo—English Dictionary Kenya* (Tucson, Arizona 1998).

guided by 'bad' forces,[9] makes mistrust the default position.

- '*Bullet*' is in English a thing that hits another, hence a bulletin board brings information and an innocent person can be found by a bullet from a gun. A bullet (*lisasi* in *Dholuo*, from *Kiswahili*) in Africa implies that your fate has caught up with you. The bullet wouldn't have hit you if you hadn't erred in your relationship with the forces of the universe, for example by saying the wrong thing to someone or breaking a taboo. (Many scholars have pointed out that in Africa death, as also suffering, is always caused by sorcery, spirits or a curse.)[10]
- '*Self-love*' is a desirable feature necessary for being able to love others in western thinking, but must be bad in the Luo way of thinking as it implies a reduced investment to the common good. Mbiti goes so far as to suggest that love is a rarely used word in Africa.[11]

In conclusion we can say that, in a different culture, every word is *used* differently!

## Conventional Hermeneutics Falls Far Short in the Cross-Cultural Environment!

So what is the relation of the above to the discipline of hermeneutics? In the cross-cultural sense, I hope I have made it clear that the numerous detailed considerations dealt with under the heading of hermeneutics, even though they may all be important, are only a small part of the interpretational differences one is faced with in a cross-cultural environment. Ignoring differences in language usage has been a primary cause of unsuspected shocks, causing AICs to emerge from mission churches.[12]

Two further examples can serve to emphasize the point. Take the words of Ezekiel 31:6a: 'All the birds of the air nested in its boughs' (NIV). I think of the words of an old lady who is my neighbour in my African village home. Her late husband liked trees, and therefore preserved many of them and planted others on his land. This has resulted in our having many songbirds all around us. I rejoice in the dawn chorus, but 'winyogo goyona koko' (Dholuo) said the old lady, literally translatable as 'those birds hit me with their din' or 'these many birds disturb me with their unpleasant noise'. I have at times spotted the old lady chasing away owls from her house at 5.00 in the morning, as owls are said to bring death to the home. She is cutting down trees as fast as she can, partly so as to reduce the bird population. Her use of

**9** Note the popularity in Africa of the book, *Moyo wa Binadamu* (English = 'The heart of man'). *Moyo wa Binadamu* (Arusha: Kituo cha Maandiko Habari Maalum—Kimahama, 1996).

**10** John S. Mbiti, *Introduction to African Religion* ( Second Edition) (Nairobi: East African Educational Publishers Ltd., 1991), p. 117.

**11** Mbiti, *African Religion*, p. 38.

**12** Application is of course much wider to many fields of human knowledge that are communicated cross-culturally.

the term 'bird' shows that to this lady 'birds' are akin to devils. Understanding this remarkable change of use of a common word can be ascertained only by attention to use of language, or a knowledge of culture.

Turning to 2 Chronicles 36:18a: 'He carried to Babylon all the articles from the Temple of God, both large and small…' The picture that this brings to my mind is that of an ornate Anglican church with numerous crosses, candlesticks and items of historical interest; this of course being informed by my having seen numerous illustrations of 'Temples' in various contexts over many years, as well as having visited various churches of this type. I suspect that an informed African interpretation could go in one of two directions. First, 'temple' could be associated with 'shrines' that some African people are known to have as sites for making peace with their ancestors. Thus 'ancestors' have come strongly into the picture. The 'articles' have now become those of African shrines—wooden carvings, perhaps skins, stones, etc. For those African people in which the priest is the household head, the shrines are small and the 'articles' correspondingly few. Alternatively (and perhaps simultaneously) is the notion of temple (in many East African languages *hekalu*, a loan word from Arabic via Kiswahili) as a foreign thing understood by outsiders. Those outsiders have things that are very powerful, understood of course in holistic African cultures as a peculiar power of the gods. So we have an implicit African understanding here that appears in some ways closer to the Ancient Near Eastern one, in which the articles (in the quote above) being carried away implies a severe reduction in power. Although, given African people's meeting with modernity, this 'power' now resembles what we in western English call 'technology' and could be computers, cameras and video machines.

I believe that these examples fall outside of the breadth of conventional hermeneutics. They can be discovered only by exposure to language in use, that is of course inherently related to culture.

Many stark differences in language-use conventions arise between the West and the non-West. The church is disadvantaged in its understanding of the non-western world insofar as it has been swept into the western worldview. It would be supposed therefore that a church that has maintained a 'traditional' theology or ecclesiology may be more able to integrate into the African way. The 'pure westerners' who work in Africa, such as experts in development who work as consultants around the world, can be supposed to be much more seriously disabled in their understanding than church workers.

## Biblical Interpretation in the Light of Language Use Conventions

Such differences in language usage have wide implications for biblical interpretation—that are these days all too often simply glossed over. Scriptural passages can be examined for these differences. I selected Psalm 100:1-3 pretty much at random. I believe that comparable differences in interpretation according to language-

use conventions will be found throughout the Bible. I look at the NIV comparing an African with a western language-use convention.

Verse 1. *Shout for joy to the LORD, all the earth*.

African people are widely known for their overt expression of 'emotion', used as a means to bring spiritual or heart power, that may seem senseless to 'rational' people.

Verse 2. *Worship the LORD with gladness. Come before him with joyful songs.*

The Luo have a long tradition of pakruok, which is of praising someone, almost as a pastime. A musician can be given a gift in order to sing in praise of someone. God's seeking praise in this way implies that those praising him are doing so in direct return for favours.

Verse 3. *Know that the LORD is God*.

God in the West is he who 'fills the gaps' which are not filled by science, whereas in much of Africa this is God taking the credit for nature and science. The latter can be known as hono (Dholuo), often translated back into English as 'miracles'.

*It is he who made us and we are his.*

Acknowledging that 'we are his' is a way of asking for help and support in exchange for obedience and service in the patrimonial system widespread in Africa. In western use of such language, this is more a statement of fact.

*We are his people, the sheep of his pasture.*

The shepherding notion in Africa is seen as provision in every sense, but in the West primarily restricted to the spiritual realm. This is because western society has many of its own mechanisms for physical provision.

… and so on.

The doing power of words is important in peoples' relationship with the super-human or metaphysical realm. God is clearly not dependent on our 'doing', but does value our adoration (Deut. 5:9-11, Psalm 150 etc.), i.e. our heartfelt words. Traditional healing practices clearly make much use of the doing-power of words by using incantations, encouragement and repetitions of key terms for calling on deities and for healing. Healing, it will be noted from the above, is a restoring of vital-force levels, and not foundationally a bio-physical realignment of the body or its parts. Herein lies the nub to much confusion between whether God 'heals' or not in African churches. The word 'heal' is clearly used differently according to cultural context.

## The Contextual Presence of 'Spirits'

In the above examples and more widely the presence of bad forces or evil spirits associated with ancestors who have some grudge must be remembered. Turning to God can have a danger equivalent to that of being 'teacher's pet' in my memory of my secondary education. Playing up to the teacher gives considerable advantages, but the wise pupil always has his classmates (in this case the departed) in mind because, if he is not careful, they can come to trouble him should 'teacher' not be looking! In practice offerings and other due respect must continue to be given to ancestors.

It is this constant presence and presumed activity of those who were once members of our (extended) families that is perhaps the most difficult for westerners to understand in terms of its effect on biblical hermeneutics. In my conception as a westerner my departed ancestors are gone. Even should I dream about them, this will not trouble me in the slightest. This does not apply to the Luo, or many other African people! Imagine having your late grandma watching you lie in bed, your late aunt making your child sick because you have not yet sacrificed a chicken for her, or your great uncle stopping your son from getting a job. Every time you read your Bible you must be thinking how what you read will help you avoid those troublesome spirits. Whenever you talk to someone else you must be careful as to what you say because the spirits are listening. Every dialogue is in effect a 'polylogue', with all that this implies.[13]

The same applies to Bible expositions. It is impossible to tell whether what is said is in response to you as living respondent, or whether it is said to please some over-hearing deceased predecessor, or both. Taking the answer given to the latter as if it is meant for you can be, to say the least, grossly misleading: What if the ancestor has left the command: 'always agree with the Europeans'? A European would in such an instance be wrong to conclude that someone who 'agreed with him/her' actually considered him/her to be correct.

We could take another illustration: picture the conversation between yourself as pastor and your church member whom you meet in town, if you were to start chatting with him, but unbeknown to you he is sitting within earshot of his mistress who up to this time has been unaware that he has a wife and children.

The situations are not helped by the currently widespread perceptions of these 'ancestors' as being evil. In *Dholuo* they are often referred to as *jochiende*, which is also the translation for *devils*.

Egner is amongst those who find a routine deceptiveness in language use in Africa. She found her Ivorian friends regularly making promises that they could not possibly fulfil.[14] Southall tells us that among the Alur people in Uganda there is a 'divergence between stated rules and observed or even recollected behaviour and … great verbal stress by the Alur on regularities which do not obtain in practice'.[15] The Alur's description of their way of ruling their people was found by Southall to be there to impress and not to be truthful. That is, they use language to create (political authority by impressing people with their words) and not to describe (what actually happens)!

## Unique Language Usages

Certain uses of language may be taboo

**13** Catherine Kerbrat-Orecchioni, 'Introducing Polylogue' 1-24 in *Journal of Pragmatics* 36(2004) [PDF] <www.elsevier.com/locate/pragma> (accessed 3 Dec 2003).

**14** Inge Egner, 'The Speech Act of Promising in an Intercultural Perspective' (SIL International. <www.sil.org/silewp/2002/001/silewP2002-001.pdf> (accessed 8 Jan 2003).

**15** Aidan W. Southall, *Alur Society: a Study in Processes and Types of Domination* (London: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 238.

and unsustainable by local people. Foreigners making such uses may be tolerated, but not imitated. As pregnant women will even avoid speaking of their pregnancy and hide it for as long as possible in cultures such as that of the Luo of Kenya; pastors may also do the same regarding issues in their churches. Open sharing is making oneself vulnerable to mysterious evil (witchcraft) powers.

Mismatches in vocabulary and terms very easily arise cross-culturally. On first arriving in Kenya I was told that there is hardly any witchcraft around these days. As the years went by I found the latter to be very prevalent. Perhaps it was a condemnation of practices such as witchcraft from the West that encouraged people to redefine their practices so as to fall linguistically outside of this much maligned category! A preacher's condemnation of witchcraft may meet with approving nods and smiles, while the very thing he is condemning may be practised but under a different name!

The example of different types of snow often associated with discussions on Sapir and Whorf's theory of language determinism illustrates the possibility of whole realms of meaning and value being lost in the process of translation. (The language of the Eskimos apparently has many distinct terms referring to different types of snow. How does one deal with these distinct terms in a text if translating into English?) Devising English equivalents for Eskimo terms for snow will hardly solve the issue, because English people will see no need for the use of such a bewildering array of terms. Thus vast and critical realms of life's key functions can be omitted by well meaning hermeneuts who are ignorant of language-use conventions. (In the same way that, in the above example, any importance attached to reference to different types of snow will be lost, so also important conventions of language usage can be lost in the course of translation.)

## Conclusion

The ignoring of differences in language-use conventions is no longer acceptable in today's world. The apparent dominance of western culture may have concealed but has not done away with these differences. It may give the deceptive impression that they are no longer there, but they are! They will not disappear overnight, if ever. Language *usages* are not picked up in classrooms or even from textbooks but from participation in peoples' lives. We need a hermeneutics of language usages, or we need to put hermeneutics on the shelf for a while as we explore the impact of the Scriptures on peoples' living cultures. Translating the Bible into African languages has been a valuable exercise. Now we need Christian scholarship *in those languages*. Only thus can conventions of language use, with their manifold implications for hermeneutics, begin to be taken account of in the derivation of non-western theologies.