

Language in Education, Mission and Development in Africa Appeals for Local Tongues and Local Contexts

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Negative outcomes arising from the use of European languages by African people in African contexts are perhaps the least visible to the Europeans themselves. To them, all seems well; their languages are a boon to Africa, and because they are the ones paying the bills, things continue as they are. The power of international languages grows – but what damage is being done in the process? To what extent are language policies making it impossible for people to take responsibility for their own lives?

This article raises logical questions as to the desirability, practicality, morality and sustainability of such use of European languages in Sub-Saharan Africa. What are the implications for the African Continent of continuing to (supposedly) self govern on the basis of that which is not locally rooted? What is actually happening when cultures and legal systems are transported en-masse from point X and dumped wholesale onto country Y?

Short as it is, this article can only survey the issues. But the author's message is clear – the current rate of linguistic globalisation, added to the colonial foundation on which African nations are already based, is handicapping the building of stable productive African societies. Urgent action is advocated to transfer genuine self-responsibility to African governance, to churches, to NGOs and to the public sphere as a whole.

1. Cross-Cultural Self-Deception and its Outcome

Cognition is a prerequisite for communication which leads to understanding. Inference determines the way in which this happens, i.e. how a stimulus will be understood as having meaning. That is, words do not of themselves carry meaning. They evoke meaning through their peculiar impact on someone's cognition and context (Sperber 1995:2). That this process of cognition is largely subconscious is evident. When someone speaks to me, it seems *as if* meaning is encoded in their words. This apparent ability of words to carry meaning can be very convincing, and so very deceptive. Whether it be through long habituation, or whether it is innate is debatable, but it is commonly assumed that words carry meanings. [1]

Differences between people of different cultures and worldviews are reflected (or contained) in the complex cognitive stimulus-response mechanisms of the mind. The cognition systems of people of the same culture share many similarities, thus enabling them to understand one another sufficiently for many practical purposes. The more distant the cultures of origin of the communicators concerned, the less alike are their inferential cognitive networks. Recognising the tendency of the mind to self deception is key in comprehending what goes on in 'cross-cultural communication'. To some extent consciously, but even more subconsciously, the mind works to make sense of whatever stimuli it receives. (My mind will automatically correct and make sense of something that seems wrong. Someone telling me 'I have come tomorrow to help you' I correct as meaning 'I will come'. If someone tells a cook that the toasted wickens are overdone then the cook will assume the person to have meant roast chickens, and so on.) One result of this is that translation of the words of people of a very different culture into a familiar language, will give an impression of understanding, whether correct or not. [2] This impression gains currency with the passing of time as the complexity of linkages in the mind accommodate what is foreign. (The undermining of such supposedly orderly relationship is part of what is called *culture shock*.) Unfortunately, because of the deception mentioned above, a person's use of their innate stimuli-responses in attempting to comprehend what is foreign, has limited accuracy. Because there is an instinctive tendency

for the human mind to expect to be functioning in only one culture and *not* cross-culturally, the mind domesticates the foreign. (Venuti 1998:5)

There is no objective map of the mind's stimulus/response combinations. Unlike a landscape with predictable physical features that can be ascertained from a distance, even by different people simultaneously, the cognitive landscape of stimuli-responses resembles a four dimensional multi-textured multi-coloured jungle! The complexity of this pattern is such as to be beyond human capabilities of accurate description, rather as it would be impossible to describe a three dimensional scene if restricted to the language of only two dimensions. We do not know, physicists tell us, what electrons are, what they look like, or exactly where they are – but we know that they exist because of the impact (charge) that they have. Examining our own minds is more difficult than examining electrons, because whereas electrons are 'out there', for our minds there is no vantage point other than from within them.

Translation (between cultures), explaining one kind of four dimensional jungle to another, is fraught with impediments. We do not know what the 'foreign' *is*, only the impact that it has on us. Part of that impact will be on our subconscious, which is beyond our understanding never mind explanation. When someone explains what s/he felt or experienced in response to the foreign, s/he is in effect, I suggest, drawing on an unfathomable depth of their person that is closely linked to the cognitive subconscious. Also, difficulties of understanding will be more serious between unrelated cultures that use the same language, such as when Africans and Europeans both use English. The use of a common language can conceal rather than reveal differences. The implications of this should be becoming clear. That is – that teachings and governance in order to take account of local conditions and avoid making cultural blunders, should be of local origin.

2. Grasping a Foreign Culture

In today's world of shrinking boundaries cross-cultural communication is more and more important inside and outside of the church. I would here like to describe the nature of such communication in what to me is a simple but very helpful way, and from that description proceed to consider the practical possibilities of it occurring.

The practical way in which cross-cultural communication causes difficulties arises from differences in nuanced meanings and *implicatures* [3] of words used. This applies even if (and this is the case that I consider here for the sake of simplicity) one language, let us say English, is being used by both (or all) parties. I illustrate translation differences through Table 1 below.

Table 1. Implicatures of English usage in East Africa as against in the UK

English term	Implicature in the use of this term in the UK	Implicature in the use of this term in East Africa
Rain	Bad	Good
Fat (person)	Bad	Good
Pension	Good	Bad
Courting	Good	Bad
Tree	Scenic object	Firewood
Paraffin lamp	Rare object	Common object
Table	Every-day item	New and relatively rare item
Bread	Staple diet	Luxury diet
Shoes	Keep feet warm	Required to look modern
Wedding	Ceremony to initiate life together	Ceremony performed for stable couples
Water	Comes from tap	Comes from spring or stream
Chicken	Meat bought frozen	Sleeps in our sitting room

That the above may be generalisations I think does not detract from their validity. If someone considers my examples to be 'wrong', I nevertheless ask them to bear with me in considering implications that are illustrated by them. In addition to having different implicatures as above, the meanings themselves of some words can be different in Englishes in different parts of the globe. An example is 'courting', where the same word is often used in East Africa to describe a process of preparation for marriage that is vastly different to the one practised in Western countries such as the UK.

It is possible for people, as presumably the readers of this article, to gain some understanding and appreciation of the above differences. Description of such differences has been the bread and butter of travellers' tales, anthropological accounts and ethnographies for decades, if not centuries. The question I would however like to ask is: how easy is it for someone to have all such differences in mind in the course of cross-cultural conversation, planning, decision making and discussion? That is, does my having a knowledge that such differences exist enable me to make plans regarding the lives of a foreign (to me) people in a way that means that I can truly take account of the many ways in which they use language, even if the language is English? Or will I in directing my mental activities in other directions (such as planning or conversation etc.) return to a default understanding of language, that is likely to be rooted in the kinds of implicatures familiar to my own people? Even though I may be able to appreciate the educational value of having information such as that in Table 1 above, will I realistically be able to learn sufficiently the implicatures of a second (and even third or fourth) living vocabulary/culture/context so as to be able to intelligently engage in communication with or about a foreign people? How is such a set of implicatures effectively learned? Surely it is only through a long-term exposure to a people, by living closely with them? That is assuming it is possible at all. Another question that arises is: once having understood the importance of being able to grasp the implicatures as well as 'meanings' of words, is it most helpful that the language to be used with that culture be the same international language, or is the learning of a foreign language advantageous? A completely foreign language might provide a vital separation in the mind between meanings and implicatures of 'equivalent' words?

But does all the above really matter? Is it not sufficient to communicate internationally in a language in which meanings and implicatures simply approximate? Is lack of attention to such detail important? I suggest that it is vital that we consider depths of language use, and not assume language to be merely a crude tool for engaging in surface-level interactions. Many examples could be drawn even from the above small Table. A European text saying that a 'fat man came' is not implying (as it would in East Africa) that he is happy and successful, but that he cannot control his eating habits. Not having a pension may not in Europe imply that one has chosen to spend all one's income in culturally appropriate ways on the extended family as it might in Africa (Maranz 2001:16), but more likely that one has not used sufficient foresight. [4] "He lit a paraffin lamp" is an everyday statement in places not connected to mains electricity, but conjures up very different thoughts where people are accustomed to operating with electricity. Such implicatures that are bread and butter to normal communication are, I suggest, vitally important, and a failure to grasp them results in communication failure.

My suggestion on the basis of the above is that any cross-cultural communication at any depth (and human beings tend to like to communicate at depth) requires a deep knowledge by at least one party of the culture of the 'other', plus an ability to keep two language categories (those of the two cultures concerned) separate in the mind so as to be able to communicate using one of the two categories (Mazrui 1993). Such language understanding as is required *cannot* be learned either in a classroom or through professional contact over short periods. The human mind's ability to deceive itself (see above) is too great for that. It requires a long-term vulnerable exposure to the daily life of the 'other' people. Also, such different understandings of words are best achieved when the language in question is

different. That is, that it is helpful to have language barriers in places where there are cultural barriers so as to prevent texts (of all sorts including written and oral) from one culture swamping those in another in an un-translated (i.e. not transformed so as to be appropriate) form.

The above, if correct, has important implications. The cultures of many people within the Western world are, I suggest, sufficiently similar to be able to benefit through communication using a common international language such as English. However, the differences between so-called 'Western' and 'Non-Western' cultures are sufficiently great to make communication via international Western languages such as English more harmful than helpful in the long term. I suggest rather that translation is a vital middle-process, and that this translation should be done by people with great expertise and a high level of exposure to both cultures. Translation on the basis of word for word conversion, or even dynamic equivalence is insufficient. Rather the translation needs to take account of pragmatics so as to translate implicatures. (See, for example, recent translation models based on relevance theory (Gutt 1991).) It is in the long term more helpful to translate between different languages (for example from English to *Kiswahili*) than between the same language (for example between American English and East African English).

What is at stake in the current globalising world is great. Failure to attend to the above concerns is going to handicap severely the functional abilities of non-Western societies who are 'under attack' by Western tongues. This may lead to the disastrous collapse of whole societies, or the invention (or perpetuation) of racial boundaries leading towards a global 'caste system', perhaps akin to that known to exist in Hinduism today. At the very least we may see the rise of fundamentalisms that are linked to the preservation of distinct aspects of 'threatened' cultures that have come to be misunderstood by powerful neighbours. Already it certainly leads to widespread corruption.

3. Cultures that are not 'pristine'

One failure of many missiological writers (and that of others who attempt to make in-depth descriptions of peoples in the non-Western world) is that of not realising that the 'errors' of previous generations of missionaries (colonialists/development workers) have already had a lasting impact. In 99% of the African 'mission field' one is not converting people from pure 'animism' into Christianity, but neither is one assisting (in whatever way) 'normal' Christians of the same sort that we have 'at home'. In addition to the foundational impact resulting from their own culture of origin, the contours of Christianity in Africa have also been profoundly influenced by the particular strategies of previous generations of Western missionaries. Hence we are no longer in a situation of *preventing* people from becoming dependent on and misunderstanding the West. They are already dependent, and have already misunderstood the West, as the West has misunderstood them. Amongst the important questions that should now be asked is how to *correct* gross misunderstandings that have already occurred. This may be more and not less difficult than the original missionary task!

The obvious approach to take to a prior imbalance is to redress it. The actual response being widely expressed on the 'mission field' today, however, is that because someone has already got used to having too much of something, it is best simply to feed the growing appetite. If it is prosperity teaching that people have had too much of, then the response is that the rate of provision of prosperity be stepped up! This seems to be what is happening in East Africa, and presumably also elsewhere. Amongst the reasons for this is the unwillingness of Europeans to share closely in ways of life characterised by poverty, ill health, and presumed associated dangers. As a consequence 'missionary' activity is a *pulling* of people from the African way of life into a European way of life – even when on the African person's home territory. If African people (as others in the world) need education and assistance it should be with a view to their living their lives in a way that fits with how *they* live and not how others

live! The only way to effectively achieve this as a Westerner is to be vulnerable to African people and to reach them in their *own* languages.

This is a situation that needs urgent attention. Yes of course the African people will ask for 'more money'. Who wouldn't? In fact, offering it is putting them into a trap. [5] They have learned from experience that European people have little or no patience to learn their language and culture. Is anyone prepared to prove them wrong on that score?

4. English – the False Prophet

A new missionary (or development worker) coming to Africa is quickly faced with a difficult language question. In many Anglophone countries on the continent, people find they can 'get by with English', so few see the importance of learning an additional tongue. What are the consequences of this decision to 'get by' spread over thousands of foreign workers, and many decades?

Personally speaking, judging by my experience amongst the Luo people [6] which has led to my being fluent in *Dholuo* (the language of the Luo people), it is extremely debilitating. It makes it impossible for me to interact 'normally' with Luo people in Luoland, except for the few who already know me well. Wherever I mix in different social settings I am surrounded by whisperings of 'he knows *Dholuo* ...', groans, laughter and other expressions of amazement over my familiarity with this 'tribal' language. The Luo people are surprised, taken aback, and even shocked, to find a white man who is fluent in their vernacular. I may be the only white person in Kenya who is the exception to the Luo people's underlying understanding that "white men are ignorant". I mean - how can one be considered intelligent if one does not understand a people's language? The notion that 'whites are ignorant' being almost constantly perpetuated (every time a White visitor comes to Luoland – which is rather frequently) means that people's initial assessment of my likely intelligence is very low. I can get talked down to like a child, and people will not expect me to understand their real issues. I suppose you could say that the Luo take me as *primitive*. This is an interesting turn of circumstances.

Something is wrong when after 100 years of colonialism there is (perhaps) no other Westerner who is a fluent speaker of *Dholuo* in Kenya, despite this being a language of three million plus people! At the same time the English speaking Western world is an enormously powerful influence in the life of every Luo person today. This means that while British/American rooted international policies have almost entirely taken over much of the lives of the Luo people – there is no one able to intelligently comment on their impact. What does this say about efforts to overcome racism?

We are heading towards a similar circumstance in Africa as the caste system in India. [7] Severe marginalisation and oppression of the Luo language (and many others in Africa) is denying people groups the means (briefly – self understanding) with which to progress. Instead, while their own languages are totally ignored in the formal sector of life and economy, they remain the foundation for all the important social parts of their lives. So they are stuck in a time-warp. The more the West forces its presence into all corners of Africa, the more the people's own development can be hindered as a result. The reader may object that the whole point of an international language is that it will *enable* development. So indeed the theory seems to run, although this kind of development is very much one of 'dependence', usually on charity.

Visionaries imagine an African continent in decades ahead being divided into English, French and Portuguese sections, with local languages pretty much forgotten. The attempt to do this, however, is seriously debilitating millions of people. English (and the other European languages) simply does not belong to Africa. Perhaps it could belong, if a big wall was put up to keep Westerners out. Recent trends, however, in international relations are moving in the

opposite direction. This means that (constant) attempts at indigenising English, are as constantly being thwarted. African uses of English are marked as 'wrong' in the formal educational and governance system in a country such as Kenya. But, whether through ignorance or frustration, African countries far from putting up a fight are figuratively speaking rushing into the jaws of the lion. Throughout much of Africa, the standard for English is British or American. Hence African issues, conditions and problems are ignored, while African people are making guesses and building elaborate structures in the ether in order to attempt to line-up their English with so called 'international' standards. Not only has the African person's own language been consigned to a prior age, but the language that they are forced to use through official orientation and ever increasing links to the West cannot be their own.

Trying to use someone else's language in *their* way while trying to explain things *your* way is intellectual suicide. Too much of this is found in African universities and education and the wider society around them. It is sad. The connection between language and the 'real' world that native English speakers so value is destroyed. English words are said to mean African things. 'Lying' is just the norm – the only way to get by. Corruption is a normal part of life. The spreading of this mantle of Western hegemony spells disaster for the African people, who are at the same time silenced through their own dependence.

The solution to this situation is at once simple and difficult. Westerners who want to intervene to help the people need this advice: DEPOWER YOURSELF (i.e. be poor) and USE THE LANGUAGE OF THE PEOPLE YOU ARE REACHING! Those wanting to perpetuate cognitive incoherence by promoting the use of European languages in Africa should be aware of the disaster that looms on the horizon. [8]

5. Implications for the Interpretation of Scripture

Having re-evaluated many of the interpretational processes going on between Western and non-Western nations, particularly in Africa, we are left to consider the implications for Biblical interpretation and with it the beliefs of Christians and the running of the church.

As Kuhn (2001) has noted with regard to the self-understanding of African founded churches (AICs or African Indigenous Churches), it is widely appreciated that these churches have rooted their beliefs in local language interpretations of the Scriptures. As a result there is a popular view that these churches have made a conscious decision to move away from Biblical orthodoxy to accommodate aspects of their own culture. I suggest, along with Kuhn (2001:89-90), that this view is, at least in most cases, incorrect. On the contrary, these churches see themselves as following genuine orthodoxy, but now *interpreted through their own languages* as they read it in their own Scriptures. The singular beliefs and practices of these churches frequently arise from their being true to the language used in their translation of the Scriptures.

In saying this I am implying various things:

1. The need for a language to be Christianised in the course of time as it comes to be used in Christian ways (Tshianda 2005:46).
2. The importance of Christian tradition in guiding a new church. I am here differing from the idealist Protestant belief of *sola scriptura* and suggesting that following the Bible without having a historical church to learn from is an inadequate basis for the Christian faith.
3. Following on from the above – it is important to have Christian education and debate occur in the language of a people, so as to enable the language and its use to develop in Christian ways. (See also Harries 2006.) If this fails to happen a church will continue either to be foreign or unorthodox in the true sense, in order to be true to the language that it uses.

What is foreign in a church can take on a 'godly' character. The sound of Latin has for centuries reminded people in the Roman Catholic church of the holiness of God. In the same way nowadays English as the language of international relations and the Christian church, has taken on a divine character for many in Africa and presumably elsewhere around the globe. Much that is culturally European – the wearing of shoes and clothes in general, formal education, clerical garb and the drinking of tea, are being interpreted as Christian activities or rituals. This is an embarrassment for members of the original culture – who find that procedures which were quite rational in their culture of origin have become religious rituals in another. It can certainly make it difficult for the foreign visitor to feel at home in the new foreign but all too familiar set up!

It is extremely difficult for natives, especially of poorer countries of the world, to get a sufficient grasp of English to be able to use it at a formal or an international level. This severely limits their ability to interact with their wider community, and therefore leads to idleness and thoughtlessness. (The only way is simply to allow others to do things for you.) The English that dominates their lives remains out of reach. It is easier just to accept what some foreigner has said than to try and correct them, just to be mocked for your lack of linguistic acumen. It is especially difficult to be inventive and innovative in a language that you barely understand. This difficulty of course becomes exaggerated if the owners of the language, who are particularly likely to find fault, are present. The use of a language such as English in Africa has a stultifying effect and encourages laziness in the church and in life in general.

Christian teaching (i.e. words) as with other teaching, does not easily move across cultural and linguistic barriers and remain intact. Invariably such movement *transforms* it. It is in effect impossible to know just what will 'come out in the wash'. What may be highly orthodox or commendable teaching at the point of origin may be something quite different when assimilated at its 'foreign' destination. The way to ensure that teaching 'strikes home', is to move the teacher with the teaching. That is, the only way to effectively transfer the orthodoxy of Christianity from one culture to another, is to have the person who is familiar with this orthodoxy in the culture of origin become as familiar as possible with the target culture. This is why missionaries (and development workers) must learn the language of the people they are reaching, and be immersed in their culture.

Summary and Conclusion

The way that the human mind responds to stimuli so as to produce meaning or understanding is here shown to be such as to result in confusion in the process of communication across cultures. That is, the mind instinctively corrects 'abnormalities' in stimuli arising from foreign cultures so as to fit its familiar scenery. This kind of confusion, whereby the foreign appears familiar, is one reason why the close governance or control of a people by those foreign to them is often unhelpful.

The same difficulty arises if we consider language use across cultures in terms of implicatures instead of only meaning. Examples given illustrate that the implicatures of words with the same meaning can be vastly different between cultures. Because implicatures are central to communication, familiarity with language (meanings) may not enable someone either to communicate meaningfully or understand clearly.

Increasing rates of globalisation resulting in few, if any, cultures being untouched by the West, means that peoples' response to the West will be affected by their prior experience of it. This frequently being an experience of dependence has many implications that certainly reduce the options for straightforward honesty in communication. For example, because English is invariably accompanied by wealth in its spread around the globe, the misleading impression is given that the use of the language invariably leads to increased wealth as an

outcome. In fact, wherever English appropriates power in a non-English community (especially a poorer community) it condemns non (or non-fluent) English speakers to increasing ignorance over things that are vital for their own lives. The spread of English, because it makes it more difficult for native English speakers to discover 'what is really going on', adds to the recipe for disaster. Vulnerability and language learning should be the starting points for cross-cultural intervention.

The language difficulties explained above are found to be as or even *more* pertinent for the missionary task of planting and nurturing churches. The church should be heading the field in ensuring the vulnerability and linguistic prowess of her servants in cross-cultural service.

In particular intervention outside of the West by Westerners for whatever purpose, but especially in church and evangelism, should be conducted in non-Western languages, and with sufficient vulnerability.

Footnotes

1. This 'code model' of meaning has, according to Sperber and Wilson, been extant at least since the time of Aristotle. It is widely believed to date. (Sperber 1995:2)
2. Readers will assume language to have 'cohesion' and 'coherence.' (Yule 1996:140-141)
3. i.e. meanings that are implied in the use of a particular word in a particular context.
4. Maranz points out the importance amongst African people of meeting immediate needs, thus suggesting that savings such as for a pension are immoral.
5. This is clearly recognised in Western societies themselves where many people fall into the trap of taking credit that they end up not being able to repay.
6. Of Western Kenya.
7. Wallbank (1958:27) indicates that the caste system in India has "certain commendable features" especially as it helped "many [immigrants / invaders] with various levels of culture ... to live together." Unlike Wallbank tells us in Europe where "backward peoples ... were either exterminated or enslaved" (1958:27-28). Which way is Africa heading?
8. Note that the above is not necessarily advocating the saving of every ethnic language on the continent of Africa. I believe that regional languages such as *Kiswahili* can be used and promoted to great advantage.

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A longer version of this text can be found on the web at www.vulnerablemission.com. The website includes a number of useful resources and is well worth visiting.

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