

INTERPRETING AND TRANSLATING AFRICAN PROVERBS: PROBLEMS AND CHALLENGES

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Living and working in Tanzania in 1966–74 as a teacher and researcher at the Lutheran Theological College Makumira (at present the Tumaini University) seem to have excited in me a life-long interest in African cultures. After that period of eight years, several visits to, and fieldwork in, Tanzania have not only kept this interest alive but strengthened it. My first published studies were in the fields of Anthropology of Religion and Medical Anthropology.

During the fieldwork in connection with these studies, I also got interested in proverbs and collected them as a side-project. In this way, I got ‘two birds with one stone’, as a common Tanzanian proverb puts it. But it was only in the 1990’s that I actually started to study Tanzanian and other East-African proverb traditions, as I needed new material for my teaching at the University of Helsinki. I am very grateful to Professor Arvi Hurskainen for his encouragement and comments during all those years we worked together at the Institute for Asian and African Studies.

In my three studies of African proverbs, I had to grapple with many problems new to me in translating the proverbs into English (Harjula 1997) or into Finnish (Harjula 2002; 2005) and in trying to grasp the meanings of the proverbs. There were the linguistic difficulties in translating the Swahili proverbs and the related problems in using translations of translations as a source material. There was the problem of the contextual elements and metaphors in the proverbs. And last but not least, there was the challenge to avoid the pitfall of following the first associations called forth by a familiar metaphor or an ‘easy’ proverb.

LINGUISTIC PROBLEMS OF TRANSLATION

My first study of African proverbs published in Finnish (2002) presents 500 East-African proverbs and the second one (2005) 400 proverbs. About 300 of these 900 proverbs I have translated directly from Swahili into Finnish. In translations, one of the most common linguistic challenges was caused by the HU-form that is used

in contexts which imply recurrent or habitual action apart from time. The idea of the HU-form can often be expressed in Finnish as well as in English by adverbs such as 'usually', 'generally' and 'always'. The HU-form is commonly used in proverbs, but it would be impossible to express the form by employing the aforementioned adverbs all the time if one wants to preserve the compact and striking style of the original proverbs.

A similar linguistic challenge was presented by the NDI-emphatic of 'to be', which is used to define sharply a pronominal, nominal or an adverbial antecedent. In Finnish and in English, the emphasis can be expressed with additional words, such as 'indeed', 'the very' and 'the self-same'. Also the NDI-emphatic is frequently employed in Swahili proverbs, but again, a constant use of additional words would in fact have spoiled the compact forms of proverbs and weakened their meanings.

As a rule, I have not added any extra words to my translations in connection with HU- and NDI-forms. Instead, I have often mentioned the appearance of the forms in my explanations of the proverbs, especially if the forms have seemed to add spice to the proverbs. Only occasionally, have I tried to bring out the forms somehow directly in my translations like, for example, the HU-form used in the following proverbs (Ndalú & King'ei 1996: 125, 643):

A sick person is *certainly* taken care of!

One who climbs up a ladder *also has to* come down.

In some proverbs, also the conversive form is used. The form conveys the opposite meaning to that expressed in the root, like in the following example (Ndalú & King'ei 1996: 726).

Muumba ndiye Muumbua.

God's descriptive name *Muumba*, 'Creator', is derived from the verb *umba*, 'to create'. The conversive form of the verb is *umbua*, which in the proverb appears in the personal noun class form *Muumbua*. What is the opposite meaning to 'Creator'? How should one translate *Muumbua*? In a Hindu context in relation to Shiva, one could easily translate the proverb: "The Creator is also the Destroyer." But this Swahili proverb has originated in an Islamic context. The function of the proverb is to warn a person who frightens someone or threatens someone with death. Indeed, a human's life and death are (NDI-form!) in the hands of *Jalali Muumba*, 'Honourable Creator'. The translations '*It is the Creator who also takes away*' or '*The Creator is the One who also takes away*' give the real meaning to the proverb, bringing out the idea of the NDI-form used in the proverb.

Proverbial language often uses archaic and dialectal expressions. This is also the case with many Swahili proverbs. Fortunately, the best collections of Swahili proverbs (for example, Ndalú & King'ei 1996) explain such expressions and give their equivalents in present day Swahili.

TRANSLATING TRANSLATIONS

About two thirds of the proverbs presented and analysed in my studies are translations of translations. Using translated collections of African proverbs as a source material requires careful source criticism, which often is something like detective work. A sound principle is that if unsure, do not use the material. For example, in connection with an old collection of Tanzanian Shambaa proverbs in German (Johanssen & Döring 1915), I hesitated for several months as to whether I could use the collection as one of my sources. Then, almost by chance, I found information on the two German authors: Both of them were missionaries among the Shambaa during a time when a good knowledge of the local language was a must for a missionary. E. Johanssen worked in the Shambaa area in 1891–1907. P. Döring, for his part, translated the four Gospels of the New Testament into Shambaa, and they were published in 1920 – a convincing proof of his linguistic skills and knowledge of the Shambaa language!

Even a small detail in the acknowledgements can be decisive when a researcher estimates the reliability of his or her translated source material. For example, I. Mumbande in his Zimbabwean Tonga proverb collection (2001: vi) thanks the Tonga Language and Cultural Organisation, who helped him with the 'literal English translation of the proverbs'. This obviously adds to the reliability of this collection, even if the idea of a 'literal translation' as such is very complicated (see the end of this article).

Another example here is H. B. Nestor's collection of Tanzanian Haya proverbs (1978). In her collection, she gives the original Haya proverbs and their translations both in Swahili and English. In translating the proverbs, I have used the Swahili versions, because her English 'translations' seem to be more explanations or commentaries than genuine translations. Instead, O. p'Bitek's English translations of Kenyan Acholi proverbs (1985) can be used as reliable source material. In addition to proverbs, he also has published Acholi songs and tales in English. Furthermore, O. p'Bitek is an internationally esteemed poet who has written several collections in English.

CONTEXTUAL ELEMENTS OF PROVERBS

The environmental context

Proverbial metaphors are often taken from the physical environment. This makes observations about, and knowledge of, the environmental context of the proverbs important. For example, one must have some knowledge of the weather conditions as well as of the flora and fauna in the Tanzanian Meru area in order to determine the meanings of the following proverbs (Harjula 1997: 20, 21, 38). At the same time, the second proverb in particular gives some idea of the challenges one has to face when translating African proverbs.

If you see that water carries logs, stay back.

Be careful not to be like a Strangler Fig (*mfumu*) that drove a useful tree (*mseseve*) away.

A hornbill (*ikurang'a*) said that it will make the bill for its brood, but spoiled it.

In the first proverb, the metaphor of 'logs carried by water' originates in the local weather conditions. During the rainy season, these tree trunks are a sign of flood somewhere higher on the slopes of Mt. Meru. The logs in a river are a signal of danger: Very soon the heavy masses of flood water start thundering down in and over the riverbeds. In the proverb, 'logs carried by water' and knocking each other is a metaphor for people quarrelling. The proverb acts as advice to keep away from such people, because getting involved in other people's quarrels may be harmful and dangerous.

In the second proverb, the Meru word *mfumu* refers to *Ficus thonningii* Bl. *Mfumu* means the type of the plant which grows upon and around a tree, slowly killing the tree and taking its place, hence my translation 'Strangler Fig'. The 'useful tree' (again my translation) in the proverb is *mseseve* (*Rauwolfia caffra* Sond.), an important tree for the Meru. The bark of the roots of the tree is used to prepare a remedy for different kinds of stomach troubles. In the proverb, *mfumu* is a metaphor for a person who likes to meddle in other people's lives with his or her advice or in other ways. *Mseseve* means a friend or a good neighbour. The proverb functions as a warning to a 'Besserwisser', because at the end a 'know-it-all' will drive away even his or her best friends.

In the third proverb, the Meru word *ikurang'a* refers to the crowned or the silvery-checked hornbill. A hornbill looks like something has gone wrong with its bill: A casque or a kind of horn covers the top of the bird's bill from the forehead

almost to the tip of the bill. In the proverb, the hornbill with its funny bill is a metaphor for a braggart who boasts of doing something that obviously is beyond his or her skills and resources. The proverb functions as a warning to such a braggart.

The context of oral tradition

Some proverbs originate in folk tales or old stories. In such a case, knowledge of the plot of the story may be the only key to a proper interpretation of the proverb. The following Meru (Harjula 1997: 12) and Acholi (p'Bitek 1985: 137) proverbs illustrate the case in question:

Are you like the hyena who pulled a cow out of a pool?

He has thrown the tortoise into the river.

The Meru proverb originates from an old story about a clever hyena. According to the story, the hyena pretended to be a friend of a cow which had fallen into a pool and was drowning. The hyena helped the cow out of the water to safety ... and ate it. Originally, the proverb may have functioned as a summary or a 'thesis' at the end of the whole story. As such, the proverb is employed as a warning to a person who pretends friendship, trying to use other people for his or her own benefit.

The latter proverb goes back to an Acholi folk tale about a hare who intended to kill a tortoise and asked: 'How do you want to be killed? Shall I dash you against the rock or do you prefer to be drowned?' The tortoise answered: 'What a fool you are to think that you can kill me by smashing me on the rocks! Do you not know my shell is unbreakable?' After this, the hare threw the tortoise into the river and the happy clever creature swam safely away. The proverb means that a misfortune can turn into a blessing, and wisdom and cleverness can save a person from a dangerous situation.

Usually, any proverb containing a name as the key metaphor originates in a tale or a story. The following Kenyan Kikuyu (Barra 1998: 17) and Tanzanian Meru (Harjula 1997: 58) proverbs illustrate the case.

The food found Wacū in the field.

Are you like Aṛaṛunya, who does not know his own people?

The first proverb is based on a Kikuyu tale about Wacū, a despised wife of a polygamous man. One day, the man gave a big feast from which he excluded Wacū by sending her to work in the fields. A fat animal had been slaughtered at the feast. Suddenly, a raven swooped down, snatched one of the best pieces of the meat and

brought it to Wacū. The proverb is used as a reminder and an encouragement: God takes care of his poor and despised ones!

In the second proverb, Aṛaṛunya is the name of a man who is told about in the oral Meru tradition. Aṛaṛunya was a greedy person who got a big inheritance but was not willing to share it with his relatives, even though they had a right to a part of the inheritance. The proverb functions as a warning against greed and envy.

Also God's name can appear in a proverb. In such a case, it usually is the genre of God's descriptive names (and not a tale or story) that helps to understand the meaning of the proverb, as the following Meru proverb (Harjula 1997: 118) illustrates:

God has a horn and a dipper.

The traditional customary or Meru proper name for 'God' is *Iruva*, now used also by Muslims and Christians. In addition to the customary name, the Meru use many traditional descriptive names to refer to God, such as *Mamwavi*, 'Giver of gifts' and *Mwuwurusa*, 'He who feeds'. These and other descriptive names crystallize the traditional Meru beliefs and ideas of God. In the proverb, *Iruva*'s 'horn' is a metaphor for God's wealth. The Meru image is parallel to the idea of the 'horn of plenty' (*cornucopia*), which is common in many cultures. With his 'dipper' God deals out his riches and gifts to people. The proverb is a statement reminding people that, ultimately, a good harvest, children, everyday food and other good things come from God as his gifts.

FAMILIAR METAPHORS WITH NEW MEANINGS

In connection with a proverbial metaphor already familiar to a researcher, he or she may be tempted to accept the first line of thought that comes into his or her mind. The first association called forth by a metaphor, however, can be misleading and result in a completely wrong interpretation of the meaning of the proverb. The following three Tanzanian Nyaturu proverbs (Olson 1964: 39, 52, 67) illustrate the problem in question:

The clothes of an old man are not without lice.

Water that is spilled can't be scooped up again.

Lips are needles.

In the first proverb, 'lice' does not refer to the dirtiness of an old man or his lack of hygiene. The proverb is not belittling or insulting, but on the contrary, it praises the wealth of an old man. An old man always has wealth in reserve like tobacco,

grain and cattle. The proverb is used when someone wants to ask an elder for a gift. As a cultural code, the proverb makes it difficult for the elder to refuse the request by pleading his pretended poverty and incapacity.

The second Nyaturu proverb is used in connection with death and it simply means that a dead person cannot be brought back to life again. The proverb has not got the wider use and connotation of the English saying of 'not crying over spilled milk' or the corresponding Swahili proverbs. In the third proverb, 'needles' is not a metaphor for sharp and insulting speech. On the contrary, 'needles' refer to the therapeutic possibilities of human speech. Where people have insulted each other, gentle and sincere words can sew up wounds.

Occasionally, a familiar but easily misleading metaphor can be understood only within the cultural world-view of the people in question. This is the case, for example, in the following Meru proverb (Harjula 1997: 97) related to their concept of time:

That which is behind looks at itself.

The Meru word *numa* means 'back' or 'behind' in everyday sayings like 'to look back' and 'to look behind'. In relation to time, however, *numa* refers to the future. According to the traditional Meru concept of time, the past lies in front of a person: He or she can 'look' at it, it is known to the person. The future is not known and does not exist as yet; this is why it is behind (one's back). A similar concept of time is also known in other African cultures. The Meru proverb is applied to a person who is worried about the future. The proverb functions as an encouragement to such a person not to worry because the future will resolve itself.

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Of course, in African proverb traditions there are plenty of proverbs which are easily translated and readily understood across cultural boundaries, such as the following Meru (Harjula 1997: 32, 81), Swahili (Nдалу & King'ei 1996: 142, 162) and Zimbabwean Tonga (Mumpande 2001: 291, 470) proverbs illustrate.

Better to fart from the rear than to fart from the mouth.

If a tree is too much for a baboon, how could you climb it?

Good luck is diligence.

Better to build bridges than to raise walls.

Never mess the mat on which you slept.

One feeling cold cannot wait to be called to the fire.

But, as often, explanations are needed to communicate the original meaning across cultural boundaries, even though a literal translation has been possible ('If you see that water carries logs, stay back'). In many cases, a literal translation is not possible at all, and an interpretative or 'dynamic' translation is needed. In such a case, the function and the meaning of a proverb has to be understood and determined, and only then can the proverb be translated ('Be careful not to be like a Strangler Fig that drove a useful tree away').

In a 'dynamic' translation, translation and interpretation are woven together. Formulating such a translation also has its problems, as it easily becomes more like a commentary: 'Human words can be like needles which are used to stitch up open wounds.' This formulation would have spoiled the compact form as well as the striking style of the original proverb, hence my literal translation 'Lips are needles', together with the necessary explanation.

A researcher who prepares a collection of African proverbs has a wide choice of means at his or her disposal. Whatever the choice in connection with each individual proverb may be, the basic criterion remains the same: To communicate the original meaning of a proverb as accurately as possible across cultural boundaries.

PROVERB COLLECTIONS

References given in the text follow the numbers of the proverbs in the collections.

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