The Necessity of the Use of African Languages in African Church and Society

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> "We should write our theology
> in African languages,
> because otherwise there are
> so many misunderstandings …"
> (Stinton 2006:141, citing Benezet Bujo).

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Introduction

This short article demonstrates why it is essential for the future well being of African church and society, that African people run their lives using their own languages.

Talking Dholuo

"Why are you talking to the White man in Dholuo you idiot" said the bus driver to his conductor sitting next to him as we shot down the road. I was besides the two of them on the front seat of the bus. "You don't know him?" was the conductor's response. "What do you mean" asked the driver? "He knows *Dholuo*" replied the conductor. "No, Impossible" came the response. The conversation continued that way, the driver apparently still oblivious to the fact that I could understand every word they were saying. The bus careered around a sharp corner. We stopped, someone got off, and we took off again. Then the driver leaned forward and spoke to me past his conductor. "*Ing'eyo Dholuo*" (Do you know *Dholuo*), he asked me? "No" I responded in *Dholuo* "*akia*" (I don't know). "Then what are you talking …?" he asked again, bewildered? "Why ask me if I know *Dholuo* in *Dholuo*?" I said in *Dholuo*. The driver burst into incredulous laughter. Many of the rest of the passengers joined in. "That's the man who cycles all around Siaya" explained someone else who obviously knew of me and my reputation "he's been here for years".

"He must be crazy" I could see people thinking. "Why on earth would a white man want to learn *Dholuo* these days? And he speaks it so well!" Like someone having had a mis-spent youth, I thought to myself, having spent decades of my young-adult years living in Africa. Years in which others of my generation have established families and careers for themselves, I have been 'running around' Luoland by bicycle (and sometimes in buses) interacting with the poor of the poor (the 'better off' in Kenya are more likely to use English) for, as far as my fellow-travellers could see, no very good reason. That exchange on that day was not unusual. Similar exchanges occur repeatedly. No matter how long I may have stayed in Luoland and how 'at home' I may feel mixing with my African colleagues; my pale skin still marks me out and I look like a stupid foreigner. The typical foreigner on a bus wouldn't have a clue after all about either the Luo language or the local culture – the average length of stay of Europeans in Luoland (at least the kind of European who rides a bus) is probably a month or less. Those were the people that I also 'looked like'.

It sometimes seems that whenever I am in any sort of crowd, I come to be surrounded by people gasping, and laughing incredulously over my knowledge of *Dholuo*. (It is often good for me to say something in social contexts so that people realise I know their language to avoid them embarrassing themselves by saying things about me on the assumption that I cannot understand them.) So then; why do I use *Dholuo*?

History

When called to work with the poor after finishing agricultural training in 1987, I had assumed I would be spending my life teaching farming. Instead, a few years later in 1993, the Lord took me from Zambia to Kenya and pointed me towards the teaching of theology. I believe he also wanted me to live closely to the African people. I determined in Kenya to work using the languages and resources of the people I was reaching. That decision has been difficult to implement; I soon discovered that a lot of the interest of African people in foreign missionaries was rooted in the latter's money. My refusing to use outside money or the prestigious English that is my mother tongue to support my ministry was incongruous to many. But, I kept on. I have lived in the same rural African village since 1993. I am rearing African children (orphans) in my home. (Thus I live without electricity or running water and use *Dholuo* as home-language so as to keep the children in their context.) My moving is mostly by bicycle and on foot between indigenous churches and our Bible classes that are spread thinly in this largely rural area. In addition to the above, I teach two-days weekly at an international American-run biblical seminary. I keep my computer and small collection of theological books at the same seminary.

Incredulity

Many Luo people are incredulous as to why I, an apparently intelligent man and a native English speaker, should bother spending years and years in learning and using their language, given that English is widespread and is very much the language of money and power in Kenya, a one-time British colony. My activities appear to be incongruous.

I tell people that in order to function in and be a help to that community I must learn and then use an African language. This could be *Dholuo*, or the other option available in much of East Africa is *Kiswahili*. I tell them that English does not translate into African languages and vice versa. In response some scholars tell me that theories of incommensurability have been shown to be wrong, and that any word in any language can be translated into any other language. I want to consider this below.

Some problems of Language

Many people take insufficient account of the link between human language and human activity. If someone's context or activity changes, I suggest, then so usually must the language being used. [1] For example, telling someone "turn off the television" will only make sense if they are watching television. Description of a football match is different from that of a baseball match. The way one talks at home with one's husband or wife is different to the way one talks to one's boss in the office. In fact, if a context or activity changes and the language stays the same, then that use of language usually becomes 'wrong'. This means that if two people are in two different contexts they will need to be using language in different ways. The same use of language in two contexts will be confusing.

Translation

Translation can be attempted in at least three ways:

1. Translation of the meaning of a word.
2. Translation of the implicatures of a word (an implicature is what is *suggested by* a word).
3. Translation of some of the implicatures of a word.

Actually though, words do not have 'meanings'; imagine finding the word 'cat' written on a piece of paper on the floor in your kitchen. What does it 'mean'? Unless you can relate the word to a context (who wrote it? why? referring to what … etc.) it is meaningless. Words do not carry meanings. They have impacts (Harries In Press). The nature of their impacts depends on the contexts of the use of words (see also Harries 2009).

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[1] There are presumably exceptions to this. "Come here!" could be said to someone who is watching the television, and could equally be said to someone who is typing on a computer.

The impacts of words that arise from the contexts of their use are known as their implicatures. If I see a furry thing jump from a tree that looks as if it will land on your head I might say 'cat' to mean 'get out of the way because something is about to land on your head'! On a game safari in Africa if I say 'cat' this is likely to mean 'look over there – there is a lion.' Because words do not have meanings but implicatures, it stands to reason that translating meanings will not be helpful. The question of translation is about whether implicatures can be translated, or the degree to which they can be translated.

It is sometimes thought that words carry meanings. Of course, this is inaccurate. Because words are not 'containers', they cannot carry anything. Words are merely sounds, or ink marks on paper. When someone speaks, their thoughts and 'meanings' remain in their head (Sperber and Wilson 1995:1). Words will only ever be meaningful according to what is already in the head of a person who hears them (or reads them). The content of someone's head arises from and varies according to the context of their life. One cannot, in this sense, understand something from a word that one does not already know.

Bath and Shower

When someone hears (or reads) words they respond to them in a certain way. Sometimes they may decide that the words are a nonsense, and choose to ignore them. If they consider them to be serious, significant, and intended for them, then they must by some means derive meaning from them. Sperber and Wilson tell us that people derive meaning according to the principle of relevance (1995). That is, people try to derive meaning from words by assessing what impact of the words has the greatest bearing (positive cognitive effects) with the least processing effort in the context in which they find themselves or the assumed context of the speaker (Sperber and Wilson 2004). I illustrate this process with an analogy in Table 1 below giving instructions designed for someone taking a shower. The same instructions are given to one person in a room with a shower in it (taking the role of a Westerner in this analogy that is then analysed below) and another in a room with a bath in it (taking the role of an African for whom the instructions were not originally intended).[2]

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[2] I am using the male gender in my analogy for the purpose of simplicity.

Table 1. Analogy of Shower Instructions being Extended to Someone in a Bathroom.

Instruction	Response of person in shower room	Response of person in bath room
1. Lock the door.	Sees door behind him and locks it.	Sees door behind him and locks it.
2. Remove clothes.	Strips naked.	Strips naked.
3. Open shower door.	Opens shower door.	Can't see any door except the entrance door. Using relevance theory, assumes that he is being instructed to re-open the door. Opens the door. (Is a bit embarrassed because he is naked.)
4. Turn on tap.	Turns on the tap in the shower.	Turns on the tap in the bath.
5. Wait.	Waits.	Waits.
6. Check the temperature.	Checks the temperature of the water in the shower.	Checks the temperature of the water coming from the tap in the bath.
7. Get under spout.	Gets under shower spout.	No way can he get under that tap. Must get 'under-something'. Picks up his under-wear.
8. Rinse yourself off.	Rinses himself in the shower.	Thinks he must have misunderstood as how can he rinse himself? The instruction must have been to 'wince'. This presumably because the water is too hot. He winces.
9. Pick the shampoo.	Picks the shampoo.	Picks the shampoo.
10. Apply to hair.	Applies shampoo to hair.	Applies shampoo to hair.
11. Rinse off.	Rinses off the shampoo.	Winces, again.
12. Get sponge.	Takes sponge.	There is no sponge but only a flannel. The instruction must have been 'spoon' (sounds like 'sponge'). Picks up a spoon.
13. Apply gel.	Applies shower gel to his body.	Can't see any gel. What to do?
14. Lather.	Lathers.	Thinks he hears 'another', so picks up another spoon.
15. Rinse.	Rinses.	Winces, again!
16. Close tap.	Closes tap.	Closes tap.
17. Get towel.	Gets towel.	Gets towel.
18. Dry yourself.	Dries himself.	How can he dry myself and he is not wet? Must mean 'sigh yourself'. Sighs.
19. Put your clothes back on.	Puts clothes back on. Washed and clean!	Puts clothes back on. Still dirty, and has shampoo in his hair, holding two spoons and some underwear in his hand.

Both the above people are attending to the same language use. The nature of the language use is very helpful to the person in the shower because it enables him (her) to wash and as a result

become clean. The efforts of the person in the room with the bath in it are less constructive. The person in the bath-room struggles to implement what they are being told. They assume that they are in the right place intended by the speaker, because otherwise if the speaker is an intelligent person why are they giving them these instructions? Yet we have found that their physical context is not that which is in the mind of the speaker. As a result, the instructions do not help the person to interact with their context to get clean, but result in an unhelpful and confusing procedure.

So What of Africa?

This can be compared to the situation in which African people are expected to draw on Western academia and to govern themselves using Western languages. The assumed context of Western languages is such that the message of Western academia can be confusing and unhelpful to them. The West frequently asks African people to 'adapt' what they hear to their own context. That is not an easy thing to do. If it were easy, then why are Westerners not doing it? The reason people in Anglophone Africa tend not to concede the presence of these difficulties, is because the rewards of learning English (i.e. accepting Western language uses) are greater than the apparent drawbacks that arise as a result of rejecting it. That is, to reject English is to be left to struggle without outside resources. To accept the use of English is to be given numerous perks that arise from contact with some of the most powerful people the world has ever known. In today's world the value of the perks more than compensates for the lack of utility resulting from the use of English. One outcome of following this procedure though is of course dependency. Many African people prefer to be dependent on the West than to be more self-sufficient but less well off materially (in the short term).[3]

Much of Africa being dominated by English leads to the problems outlined in the analogy above. An example of a difference between the West and Africa that we can consider as case-study here, is the presence as against absence of belief in spirits. Because native-English language uses do not refer to spirits, the use of 'proper' English by Africans leaves the spirits unattended to, not allowed for and not compensated for. The spirits are therefore left to run havoc. That is, their influence continues to be felt in a way that is beyond the radar of formal academia, the popular press (such as newspapers) and English discourse in general. These unidentified (in English speaking texts and discourse) spirits disrupt many of the activities that are planned with the use of English that might have succeeded if they had not been there. Imagine a driver following a road map in a city so as to reach a certain destination, while ignoring all the traffic lights ('spirits') as he drives. … African people's uses of mother tongue do, on the other hand, take account of the presence of spirits. They are therefore holistic and functional for African communities.

Someone may point out that those African communities who so use these holistic (mother-tongue) languages have been 'stuck' in poverty for generations. The use of English appears to

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[3] This is not to say that English has no utility. It has utility as a bridge or international language, but its use bring many disadvantages in the local context.

free them from this poverty. This freedom arises through its giving them access to outside resources. (Nearly all donors who come to the African continent look for English speaking Africans to work with.) It can also occur through a process of ignoring problems that only impact in the long term. (Let us compare this to two working people who are earning the same salary. The one who does not put some of his income aside for a pension will appear to be better off in the short-term, but the one who takes out a pension fund may very well be better off in the long term.) An 'ignoring' of spirits may bring short-term benefits, which are later likely to be cancelled out through the impact of long-term problems brought by the spirits.

Another way of considering this issue is by asking which of two approaches to a problem is preferred:

1. An intelligent thinking approach to a problem that takes account of the circumstances of the problem or
2. A non-thinking approach to a problem that ignores some key aspect of the circumstances concerned.

No. 1 represents African people's use of their own languages in seeking to solve their problems whereas No. 2 represents African people's uses of Western languages in solving their problems. (This assumes of course that their own languages flex and change in response to new inputs into their communities. This is often not happening these days because important segments of African life are governed by Western languages.[4])

This situation would be a less serious problem if English could be flexible for African people to use as they see fit. That is, taking our above analogy, if people using baths were able to influence the design of instructions they receive so that they could be suitable to help people who are using baths. In today's world however at least two things have happened:

1. The dominant English speaking world is no longer involved at grass-roots level amongst African people. Native English speakers inside and outside of the church prefer to act as donors and to have Africans work at the coal face. As a result, they are becoming less aware of cultural differences (that African people are using baths unlike Western people who are using showers). That is, they are becoming less and less aware that languages need to be used differently in African than in the native-English speaking world.
2. Native English speakers consider that there are right and wrong ways to use their language. Economically, they are in charge of their language. If they see instructions that do not fit to the context of communities that have showers (following our analogy above), they will consider those instructions to be wrong. Ways of using English that are responding (perhaps in helpful ways) to the African cultural context will be marked as 'wrong' by Western academia and Western society. Once so considered wrong, they will not get funding for

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[4] When, for example, all official functions are carried out in English, African languages are not stretched to deal with the modern world. Instead they tend to fossilise in traditional usage patterns.

publishing or support to enable their spread. As a result African people using English are not being equipped to interact with their own cultures.

It should be clear that the use of local languages that take account of the presence of spirits need not be synonymous with perpetuating belief in spirits. I suggest that it is more likely to be a means of doing away with fear of spirits. This is on the assumption that language use based in an understanding of spirits is a better way of overcoming fear of spirits than language use that ignores spirits. This can be compared to the way that language use that is aware of the functioning of all parts of an engine is more likely to be helpful in enabling the maintenance or repair of an engine than language use that ignores certain aspects of the functioning of an engine. Similarly, development is more likely to be effective if the language in use in planning and implementing it relates accurately to the context of the people concerned than if it is used 'as if' the context was other than it is. God's word will be communicated more accurately if it is translated into a real local context than if it is left untranslated and is communicated in a way that it fits best into a foreign context, and so on.

Being forced by circumstances to use a language other than one's own to run one's own affairs, in a way that is controlled by foreigners who do not comprehend one's context, contributes to corruption and the acceptability of lies in much of Africa. Taking our analogy above, the person in the room with the bath, if he is intelligent, will realise that precisely following to the letter the instructions that he has been given will not be helpful to him. Instead, once he is aware that the objective of the exercise he is engaged in is to wash and be clean, he will follow some principles – such as filling the bath with water, the use of shampoo with water to wash his hair, closing the bathroom door after he has entered and not opening it again, rinsing himself with water instead of wincing etc. But, if he is wise, he will not tell the speaker that what he is saying is a nonsense for his local context. This is because the speaker concerned is sending him money on the understanding that he is following his instructions. Should he tell the speaker to go away because he is handling his own affairs well enough without him, or should the speaker realise that he is not following his instructions to the letter, then the speaker may get offended, and certainly may withdraw his funds.

What we have then is a situation in which theoretically, apparently (and legally) our person is having a shower, but actually he is having a bath. This person having the bath is having to ignore or re-interpret a lot of the instructions he is being given. At the same time it is in his interests to conceal the fact that he is interpreting a lot of the instructions differently than they were originally intended. This concealment is in due course likely to have him accused of lying and being corrupt. Once it has become necessary to conceal one thing, then it can be essential to conceal very much more. Woe be it to a people and community when concealing of the truth and telling of lies becomes the norm.

This situation of course impedes a lot of research into Africa. If research is carried out using English then the fact that African people are enjoying baths as against showers (see analogy above) – i.e. differences between African as against Western culture – is effectively occluded from view. This is increasingly the case as globalisation continues its never-ending march,

when concealing truth can be more effective at getting the rewards from donors than telling truth.

Actual implicatures ('meanings') of English words will be different in Africa as against those in the native-English world. For example, the instruction to "open shower door" will 'mean' "make sure the plug is in the bath".[5] For purposes of research into Africa that is to be communicated into the Western world, the Westerners concerned need to be working in African languages, and need to have learned those languages 'in context'.

Conclusion

The use of African languages is essential for healthy sustainable development of the church, as other institutions on the African continent, in this globalised age. Let us bless African nations by taking their languages seriously through having some missionaries carry out their ministries using local languages.

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[5] That which needs to be done by the person intending to bath before turning on the tap.