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The impact of culturalism in the translation of STDs and HIV/Aids materials

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CHAPTER 2: LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

2.1 INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides an overview of the tension between two opposing points of view concerning the relationship between language and culture. This tension impacts on how culturally-sensitive concepts should be translated.

2.2 THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

There is a long-standing claim concerning the relationship between language and culture. This claim can be traced back to the linguist Edward Sapir and his student Benjamin Lee Whorf. The claim is referred to as the Whorfian hypothesis since it seems to owe much more to Whorf than it does to Sapir. Sapir acknowledged the close relationship between language and culture, maintaining that they were inextricably related to such an extent that one could not understand or appreciate the one without the other. He says:

> Human beings do not live in the objective world alone, nor alone in the world of social activity as ordinarily understood, but are very much at the mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society. It is quite an illusion to imagine that one adjusts to reality essentially without the use of language and the language is merely an incidental means of solving specific problems of communication or reflection. The fact of the matter is that real world is to a large extent unconsciously built up on the language habits of the group… We see and hear and otherwise experience very largely as we do because the language habits of our community predispose certain choices of interpretation. (Sapir in Wardhaugh, 1986: 216)

Goodenough pursues this line of thought. He is convinced that language plays an overwhelming role in culture and the way it is learned. He states that it is in the course of learning his language and how to use it that every human being acquires the bulk of his culture (Goodenough in Hymes, 1964**:**83). These views are compatible with Nida's position. He claims that a text is embedded in a given situation, which is itself conditioned by its sociocultural background. He questions the wisdom of any translator who tries to "escape from his own cultural context" (Nida, 1964:148). The statements made by these authors emphasise that language is not an isolated phenomenon "suspended in a vacuum, but an integral part of culture" (Snell-Hornby, 1988:39). Therefore, all those who seek to enter into and understand a given culture fully must master its language, for it is only through language that they can possibly participate in and experience the culture (Hymes, 1964:83). Every language is therefore a symbol of the culture with which it is most intimately associated.

Wilss (1996:85) insists that language and culture are intrinsically intertwined. Indeed, he believes that "language is embedded in culture and vice versa". He further argues that "language is as much a cultural product as culture is a linguistic product". Bassnett-McGuire supports Wilss's view of the interrelatedness of language and culture by stating emphatically that:

> No language can exist unless it is steeped in the context of culture, and no culture can exist which does not have at its center, the structure of natural language. Language, then is the heart within the body of culture, and it is the interaction between the two that results in the continuation of life-energy. In the same way that the surgeon, operating on the heart, cannot neglect the

> body that surrounds it, so the translator treats the text in isolation from the culture at his peril (Bassnett-McGuire, 1980:39).

Mey also maintains that language is a sociocultural product. Two concepts that need to be clarified in detail here are: sociocultural and product. The former means that language is not the individual's private little process but the product of social activities. Language is naturally subject to the community's collective conditions for its use. As a cultural product, it has to conform to certain linguistic and cultural norms and values. Speakers must operate in a manner acceptable to other members. To Mey, language is not a "fossilized remnant of some remote, obscure process, but a living product of the society we live in" (1985:323). This supports the fact that it cannot be understood outside the context of the society within which it is spoken.

If the above statement by Bassnett-McGuire is correct we should not lose sight of the fact that whenever reference is made to language, culture is in one way or the other implicated. Language is said to be the product of culture 'as the pearl is of the oyster'. No case is known of either language or culture existing without the other. These concepts are so tightly related that they may be considered part of the same thing.

Many people believe in the static view of culture. They think that the concept of culture implies a well-defined, rather rigid concept. This somewhat all-embracing term should not be conceptualised as in past decades as a complex and relatively coherent web of beliefs and norms that are conservative, or resistant to change. Culture in Mey's view is "not a homogeneous amalgamation of stable and unchanging individual atoms of linguistic theory" (1985:324). For him it is dynamic and must;

> reflect the world that passed away, a society that was here yesteryear, yesterday, language-in-use supports the society that is alive today and tomorrow. A living language does not lock the culture into obsolete patterns. Rather, by sacrificing its roots without reneging on them, it pushes culture forward, casting it into new forms that are better adapted to the steadily changing societal relations (Mey, 1985:328).

From Mey's point of view, it follows that culture is not static but evolves slowly over time. Language is always in the process of changing. It evolves as generations pass by. It therefore could be associated with one's lived experience. This implies that the lifestyle that was experienced a century ago is no longer the same. It should be mentioned that cultural changes tend to occur alongside language changes in order to adapt to changing circumstances and to be continually attuned to the needs and aspirations of the people. As the two coincide, direct communication may take place.

2.3 CULTURAL CONVENTIONS AS BARRIERS TO COMMUNICATION

Language can be used to avoid saying certain things when tackling obscene subjects especially topics such as those dealing with sexual practices. Communicating about these topics can be difficult. Certain messages about sexual practices are likely to be perceived as inappropriate and in bad taste. AIDS campaigners try to be courteous at all times not to offend their audience. They carefully draft messages in such a manner that they will not invoke unanticipated and unwanted consequences. It is true that conducting AIDS education campaigns is a more controversial and sensitive issue in Sepedi than in English. For instance, certain terms that are perceived to be taboo in Sepedi, are often regarded as

humorous in English. Sex related discourse in Sepedi is condemned as unethical, illegal or at least immoral. The publications, pamphlets and posters mostly published by the National Department of Health to teach the public about HIV/AIDS and STDs prove this claim beyond reasonable doubt. These HIV/AIDS materials which prompted an undertaking of this research are translated from English into other official languages of South Africa. However, the study's field of inquiry is restricted to the researcher's language of habitual use. All the extracts used in this research are Sepedi versions.

This research draws upon the research conducted by Ratzan in America. He wanted to prove or disprove the hypothesis that teaching children about sex encourages them to indulge in premature sexual activities. The results showed that children who are taught life skills and sex education are more likely to feel good about themselves. This research has yielded some very interesting findings which are particularly relevant to this study. But what this theory fails to explain, however, is the way in which sex education is supposed to be taught. This study attempts to solve this puzzle by advocating a way forward thus rescuing AIDS educators from this dilemma.

2.4 IDIOMATIC[1] VS. COMMUNICATIVE TRANSLATION

For many years (and still today) the translation of health texts, particularly documents dealing with sensitive issues, was effected in terms of how the target audience would

[1] This term, unless the context indicates otherwise, is used interchangeably with 'cultural translation'. Cultural issues in Sepedi are, to a very large extent, manifested in idiomatic expressions.

receive them. This implies that the content of the message was changed to conform to the receptor culture. This traditional approach often did not take into serious consideration the information content of the material, because the information introduced was not linguistically explicit. It only succeeded in producing texts that were culturally attuned to the audience without necessarily communicating to them. Emphasis was based solely on the preservation of moral convictions and not on the conveyance of information to the readership. This then resulted in a conflict between cultural adaptation and effective communication. As a point of departure we can refer to Newmark's eight proposed possible translation methods (1988:45).

Source Language emphasis	**Target Language emphasis**
Word-for-word translation	Adaptation
Literal translation	Free translation
Faithful translation	Idiomatic translation
Semantic translation	Communicative translation

In fact only two of these types of translations are discussed in this study, i.e. idiomatic and communicative translations. The reason why the focus is exclusively on these two types of translations is that they form the crux of this research. It is also one of the aims of the research to come up with a valid, relevant and comprehensible translation method that is able to transcend cultural limitations.

What these methods have in common, as can be seen from the above diagram, is that both are target-language oriented. Despite this similarity, there is a vast difference between them.

Newmark (1988:47) defines idiomatic translation as the translation that reproduces the message of the source text but tends to distort the nuances of meaning by preferring colloquialisms and idioms where these do not exist in the original. That is why many scholars such as Dussé (1995) perceive it as an artful deviation from the ordinary and familiar words. One is tempted to agree with Dussé who claims that idiomatic translation pays full attention to the artistic qualities of the text, which serve aesthetic purposes, without taking into account the information content of the text. Idiomatic translation emphasises the pleasure and delight of the reader of the translation at the expense of the communicative interaction. This means that it endeavours to appease the audience without necessarily satisfying them.

On the other hand, communicative translation, as the term suggests, focuses on language as a vehicle to convey information. According to Newmark, this type of translation attempts to render the exact contextual meaning of the original in such a way that both the content and language are readily acceptable (natural) and comprehensible (intelligible) to the readers (1988:47). It could be said that this type of translation is functionally equivalent to the original in as many of its dimensions as possible. Communicative translation concerns itself with the manipulation of the linguistic system by the translator to encode a particular message. This type of translation accounts for how language is used as a means of encoding the speaker's intended message. One of the most striking characteristics of the communicative translation is that it is preoccupied with what should be said rather than how it should be said. The 'what' in this case refers to the content or subject matter, and the 'how' refers to the 'manner' of presenting the subject matter. It seeks to make information

more accessible to the audience taking into cognisance the different life situations**.** From these facts, one observes that adequate attention is focused on both the cultural backgrounds of interactants and communicative aspects of language.

The latter method therefore fulfils the two major standards of a good (qualitative and effective) translation, namely accuracy and acceptability. Any translation that does not abide by these two standards cannot be said to have achieved what Newmark terms the principle of 'equivalent effect' (1988:83). This principle requires the message to produce the same effect on the readers of the translation as that produced on the readers of the source text. Since health texts are by nature both informative and vocative[2], equivalent effect is more than simply desirable. It is essential since it is the criterion by which the effectiveness and the value for the translations of such health texts could be assessed.

These two major language functions, according to Newmark (1988:39-42) are instrumental within the communication process. Newmark maintains that in communication the message must not only provide information that is understood but it must also elicit a response (1988:41). This means that the target audience, upon receipt of the information, should be able to take the recommended course of action. For instance, they could be motivated to access the necessary prevention tools after seeing an HIV/AIDS message. If there is a no

[2] Two of the three major language functions, namely: the informative and the vocative functions (expressive function excluded). According to Newmark, the former deals with the external situation, i.e, the facts of the topic or reality outside language. This function is characterised by, among others, literal language, latinised vocabulary, no metaphors, simple grammatical structures, simple vocabulary, familiar style and short sentences. The latter focuses precisely on the readership (the addressee). Newmark uses this term in the sense of 'calling upon' the readership to act, think or feel or to 'react' in the way intended by the text. This therefore implies that vocative texts have to be instrumental or persuasive. To be user-friendly, sexual and reproductive health texts must abide by the above characteristics. They must be written in ordinary language that is immediately comprehensible to the target readership (1988: 39-42).

response attitude from the target audience, then one should begin to suspect the effectiveness of the message.

One also observes that this latter method places overriding emphasis on the aspect of communicative ability - the most important goal STDs and HIV/AIDS texts should strive to accomplish. It is the researcher's conviction that communicative translation, which readers may well find unusual, is far more effective in rendering translations of these materials understandable.

2.5 PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATING CULTURALLY- SENSITIVE CONCEPTS

Opinions are divided on the way in which culturally-sensitive concepts should be translated. There are two conflicting views. The first prioritises cultural sensitivity when translating these controversial concepts and the other is message-oriented. The former argues that these concepts cannot be fully understood outside a cultural frame of reference. This implies that translators should at all times strive to preserve cultural norms and rules when translating them into the target language.

Many sociolinguists call for the preservation of cultural prerequisites in translation. These scholars argue that language is not only a vehicle for expressing ideas and intentions. Deep in the roots of ordinary words lie the attitudes, values, aspirations, expectations, social rules and the sensitivities of people. They argue that any translation that ignores cultural conventions is bound to fail. Their approach to culture-sensitive texts is therefore culture-

oriented. The sociolinguists (Wardhaugh, 1986, Hymes, 1964, Nida, 1964) argue that the most important thing in a conversation is not the words used. Participants engaged in a conversation should also try to establish and maintain relationships. They should know when and how to say things to other people. For instance, they must know that the manner in which you talk to an elderly person differs from that used when talking to a young child.

These sociolinguists maintain that certain aspects should be taken into account when participants talk about sexual issues such as those associated with genitals and sexual intercourse. There are certain expressions which are strongly tabooed because they are associated with sex and private parts of the body. Campaigners often try to modify or resort to both using colloquial terms and loanwords from English such as 'phorostitšhute' (for prostitute) and 'reipa' (for rape) so as not to offend delicate sensibilities. It is believed that these evasions minimise the extent of offensiveness. These modifications may be futile however because such words are likely to cause a range of misunderstandings. A few common examples of phrases I have come across in workshops, radio programmes such as *Ngaka Nkalafe* and *MaAfrika Tumelong*[3] and in several translated health publications are:

(a) 'Ka setšo pele mosadi *a eya madibeng* o swanetše go bona ngaka go hwetša mothušo wa gore *a se boe a hwidinya diatla*.' (MaAfrika Tumelong, 1998.11.29). (Traditionally a woman is supposed to first consult with a traditional healer before she goes to a place of confinement for medication that will help her not to miscarry). The phrase '*a eya*

[3] Two radio talkshows which broadcast on Sundays on Thobela FM. In the first, which is broadcast at 18h00, a medical practitioner is invited to offer lessons on sex education and to answer health problems particularly sex-related ones. In the second, representatives of the elderly are also invited to teach the young people about African beliefs, practices and their cultural identity and heritage in an attempt to preserve them to the future generation.

madibeng' (go to a place of confinement) can hardly be interpreted to mean 'to give birth'. Similarly, the phrase '*a se boe a hwidinya diatla*' is likely to be interpreted literally as 'to return empty-handed' instead of 'miscarriage', its real meaning. There are accurate terms in Sepedi such as 'go belegela fase' instead of '*go boa a hwidinya diatla*' and 'go belega' instead of '*go ya madibeng*'. These alternatives can probably be understood by all. Speakers prefer the acceptable expressions such as '*go senyagalelwa*' (to suffer damages) and '*go goma tseleng'* (to turn halfway). It is not obvious that these italicised target equivalents are intended to refer to miscarriage.

(b) 'Go kotsi gore mosadi *yo a ribogago* a *tsene dikobong* le monna yo e se go wa gagwe.' (MaAfrika Tumelong, 1999.02.07). (It is risky for a woman to have sex with a man who is not her husband during her first few weeks of pregnancy). The phrase '*yo a ribogago*', although it enjoys considerable popularity, is misunderstood by the majority of the audience. Many assume that it refers to the early stages of a woman's first conception. It actually refers to the first few weeks of a woman's conception irrespective of whether it is her first, second or final pregnancy. The same applies to the use of the evasive phrase '*go tsena dikobong*' (which loosely translates as 'to get into blankets') or the commonly used phrase *'go robala'* (literally translates as 'to sleep'). This reminds me of a campaigner who used this latter phrase during an AIDS workshop targeted for primary school pupils. She said "Bafsa ba lemošwa gore *ge ba tsena dikobong* ba apare dikhontomo". ("The youth are advised to put on condoms during sexual intercourse.") A ten-year-old boy misinterpreted this warning. This young boy did not understand the phrase '*ge ba tsena dikobong'* in the sense of having sexual intercourse. He thought that the campaigner meant that they should put on condoms

whenever they go to bed. From that day onwards he acted in accordance with the warning. His mother discovered an unused condom in the bathroom, which the young boy forgot to flush, and called him. The poor boy told his mother that he was heeding the safety precautions pronounced at the workshop, i.e. putting on condoms every time he goes to bed in order not to contract the AIDS virus.

For effective communication, these evasive terms could be substituted by the literal and less offensive phrase 'go robalana'. Even the obsolete, but more direct phrase 'go nyobana' although perceived by many as offending, is to a large extent acceptable. These phrases 'go robalana' and 'go nyobana' may also cause some offence though the people who are so deeply offended can give no sustainable reason for their reaction.

(c) 'Naa mosadi o ema *go ya lehlapong* a na le mengwaga ye mekae? Le gona naa ge dikgwedi di se kae di ka feta *o sa ye kgweding* go šupa gore o imile?' (Ngaka Nkalafe, 1998.08.16). (At what age does a woman stop experiencing menopause? Again, if a few months pass without menstruating does this imply that one is pregnant?) The phrases '*go ya lehlapong*' (which literally translates as 'to have a bath') and '*o sa ye kgweding*' (which translates as 'without going to the moon') are derived from the idioms '*go hlapa*' and '*go bona kgwedi*' respectively. When these are mentioned even in context to young minds, the chances are that they are unlikely to be interpreted to refer to menstruation. However, women especially from adolescent stage upwards will definitely understand the meaning with relative ease. These two phrases are associated with an image of cleanliness or purification. They are suggestive of the fact that after

menstruation women's ovaries are ready to be fertilised. Women are likely to fall pregnant a few days after a menstrual period.

(d) *'Go se tsoge ga bonna* go ka hlolwa ke mabaka a mantši.' (Ngaka Nkalafe, 1998.10.11). (Failure to have a penile erection can have many causes). Slight misunderstandings may be made possible by the use of the phrase '*go se tsoge ga bonna*' (failure to have penile erection). But in practical simplicity, 'go totela' is more understandable than its counterpart. This phrase is popular among the youth but strongly tabooed by the elderly. It retains a slightly humorous flavour among the former group. A mere mention of it can provoke laughter from the youth; and by so doing rendering this arbitrary concept from being an insult into an acceptable concept.

This tendency to use figurative language is not only found in health texts. One could refer to the 'Curse of Eve', a biblical event in Genesis 3:16, when God says "Ke tlo go atišetša kudu tapišego go imeng ga gago, o tlo belega bana ga bohloko". (I will greatly increase your pains in childbearing; with pain you will give birth to children.) Many people certainly do not understand that the word '*tapišego*' in the passage is intended to refer to a woman's menstrual period. Although the source language (English) is not an exception in the use of figurative expressions, it is more direct and less euphemistic and does not render the texts incomprehensible.

On the basis of these examples and probably many others, it can be hypothesised that the intended meaning of figurative expressions is likely to be misapprehended by the majority of the audience, particularly the youth. There is therefore a need for research to test this hypothesis, and consequently provide a solution to these miscommunication practices. A

reasonable person will agree that the preference of the italicised[4] translations might confuse some listeners or readers, especially young adults. These translated phrases are obscure, unclear, inaccurate and irrelevant, for they are unlikely to communicate what they are intended to mean. For instance, it is hardly possible for a young adult to understand that '*go ya madibeng*' is equivalent to giving birth. History reveals that originally these expressions were primarily used amongst the elders to discuss topics that they did not want the youth to know about. If one could trace the etymology of the phrase '*go ya madibeng*' in example (a) above, one realises that the elderly deliberately adopted this phrase to deny the youth knowledge that children are born from a woman's womb. The youth were (and still are today) informed that women go to pools of water to fetch children.

From the facts and examples stated above, one is tempted to say that the stereotypes of insisting on figurative language are unconvincing. Figurative language does not straightforwardly say what it means, but always says it in terms of some other thing, often by way of ungrounded analogies. The use of metaphors distorts the real nature of the message, for they "describe one thing in terms of another" (Newmark, 1988:104). When the audience struggles to discover what a particular piece of work tries to communicate, the chances of misinterpretation cannot be overlooked. Dussé nicely sums up this claim by saying

> a problem that arises in the translation of metaphoric or idiomatic expressions when such expressions form part of a larger text and where the surrounding text (what others have called the it co-text) makes it almost, if not entirely, impossible to circumvent the idiom concerned, without losing something of the intention and much of the original text (1995:97).

[4] These italicised expressions are examples of euphemisms fashioned in everyday conversations.

The foregoing quotation points out the difficulty involved in rendering idiomatic expressions comprehensible. Translating metaphors from one language into the other is problematic, because they always serve two purposes, i.e. the referential[5] and the pragmatic[6]. It is in many instances hardly possible to fulfil these two functions without compromising the other. It is rare to find exact target idioms which describe things more comprehensively and concisely than is possible in direct language. In informative and vocative texts such as STDs and HIV/AIDS documents, the translator's first and ultimate loyalty is neither to the reader nor to the writer, but to the message or the fact of the matter. As a mediator between two parties, the translator's job is to eliminate misunderstandings. Communication of meaning is at the very heart of the translator's work. Metaphors are likely to result in the distortion of meaning because they "always involve illusion; like a lie where you are pretending to be someone you are not, a metaphor is a kind of deception, often used to conceal an intention." (Newmark, 1988:104)

Lehmann (1983:220) shares the same sentiments by pointing out that the figures of speech are misleading because they state a supposition rather than a fact. When people speak in metaphors, their messages often get misunderstood. To him the messages are extremely vital and have to be persuasively presented in ordinary language.

Gibbs' position is commensurate with the preceding comments made by both Newmark and Lehmann. He affirms that certain texts may not necessarily be concerned with the richness of linguistic devices and figurative manifestations. He writes that "literal meanings are

[5] It describes a mental process or state, a concept or a person, an object, a quality or an action in a clear and understandable manner. It is cognitive in nature.

proper, metaphorical language is distorted and deviant". Metaphors, according to him, "require a special talent or genius, which is alien to most ordinary people" (1994:121). Speakers should at all costs avoid using metaphors when their conversation deals with essential issues especially those that could cause damage to the life of an individual when misunderstood. Factual and accurate information is a necessity in such contexts to satisfy the target audience. From the facts mentioned in the preceding paragraphs, it is evident that cultural manifestations indeed influence the individual's choice of words.

In his opening address of the second in a series of language planning workshops involving language specialists that his department conducted, the honourable Dr. B S Ngubane, Minister of Arts, Culture, Science and Technology, stressed the need to "overcome our barriers of language prejudice in order to make a significant contribution to the transformation of our society." (1996:1) He articulated the view that

> an extensive transformation of our society will unquestionably fail if we do not recognise language as an essential resource in improving the quality of life of our people (1996:2).

Ngubane's perception of language as an important instrument in nation-building shares the sentiments expressed by Mey, who sees language being at home in a society-on-the move, using language as a revolutionary activity (1985:328). Both these expressions imply that language should be used as an instrument to develop and empower society. By sharing information with one another through language, people will draw from these informal discourses the knowledge necessary to confront challenges ahead. However, AIDS

[6] It does not only appeal to the senses, but also interests, pleases, delights and surprises. It is aesthetic in

education campaigns do not seem to comply with this assertion. Campaigners employ non-offensive strategies during communicative interaction thus maintaining linguistic etiquette and refraining from using profane language and obscenities.

Ngubane takes a step further and emphasises a need to create a climate of language tolerance. He also advocates a change in strategy, using communication and utilising it to be more efficient and cost-effective (1996:1). This implies consciously working to overcome the barriers to communication by replacing idiomatic phrases with factual, easily understood information. He warns that otherwise "our ignorance will be our downfall and we will ultimately fail those we are meant to serve." (1997:8)

A message-oriented approach acknowledges the relevance of cultural complications but not at the expense of effective communication. Effective communication in this case implies total accuracy, transparency of information. It is true that cultural dictates are vital, but not always essential in all kinds of translation. Approaches to translating certain text-types should be based largely on linguistic orientation than cultural transfer. For instance, in the field of sex education, cultural niceties sometimes have to be compromised in the interest of getting the real message across. Campaigners should come out of the cultural barricades and insist on effective and efficient communication. Anyone, who is incapable, could be compared to that absurd man in the proverb, who leaves his burning house to chase a rat fleeing from the flames. This view is seen in Ratzan's (1993) influential work, AIDS: Effective Health Communication for the 90s, which emphasizes the importance of educational information. The book provides evidence of how culture and society are

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nature.

affected by the AIDS epidemic and how we must think about these problems in new ways. It calls for the elimination of the 'bureaucratic maze and scientific jargon' that tends to dominate the field of health communication. He observes that:

> Effective health communication is our primary and most potent weapon in preventing the spread of AIDS. Until a vaccine or cure for HIV infection is discovered, communication is all we have (Ratzan, 1993:257).

Ratzan believes that we should use all the communicative resources at our disposal to educate the people on how to avoid contracting the disease. Transparency in the field of AIDS education must be a central concern. Turning a blind eye on this aspect will definitely generate adverse social and physical repercussions. It must also be borne in mind that it is messages, not languages, which are translated.

Herdt (1992:41) agrees with Ratzan's view that there is no need for us to provide for metaphor, hyperbole or humour where they do not feature. To him attention should be given to the things that are detrimental to the interest and welfare of the people. He argues that advocating for direct language is not aimed at offending the public but strives to communicate clearly and unambiguously to the audience, which is expecting to be informed rather than entertained. In her paper, *The Lexicographic Needs of Venda*, Mawela (1996:3) perceives translation not simply as a carrier of cultural models but as a communicative instrument. She states that communication breakdown is a direct result of attempts by language experts to appease cultural dictates which bring serious repercussions to the lives of many innocent people. Grey (1993:12) also registers his discontent with the tendency by many people to use non-literal language during sexual discourse. He observes that, for cultural reasons, people regard open talk as "being embarrassingly pornographic and

vulgar" and therefore rely on the myth of metaphor and rhetorics when discussing sexual behaviour. This tendency is often a stumbling-block or a bourgeois obfuscation to mutual understanding and reality. He therefore calls for a "thorough overhaul of sexual discourse" by using concise, familiar words and phrases that best express the intended meaning rather than uncommon expressions that are an inconvenience to the target audience.

In his introduction, McDonald points out that the purpose of words is "to enable us to communicate with each other" and to conduct our daily lives. But in performing this role they "affect us in many ways" (1996:v). We may be delighted, intrigued or even be disgusted by them. He argues that words are declared as taboo by tacit common consent. If everyone accepts that a particular word should be regarded as taboo, then it would be. Words, according to him, irrespective of whether they have sexual implications, are harmless. The problem lies with speakers who attach offending connotations to these innocent and arbitrary words. It is just that objective facts are often overwhelmed by subjective emotions.

McDonald goes on to say that as long as people reach a consensus, they are at liberty to select their own taboos. For instance, if speakers agree that the word 'apartheid' should be regarded as taboo, then it is. If this is the case, then one may ask if it is not possible to remove all the negative meanings attached to sexual terms to enable campaigners to communicate freely.

One notes from these viewpoints that figurative language is inaccessible to many of the youth in particular. It denies them the real message. The officiousness and parabolic nature

of language are experienced as ridiculous and often deflect attention from the real issues that the youth wanted to grapple with. There is no need for speakers to use complex vocabulary. It is imperative for those engaged in a communicative interaction to transform language in such a manner that it is readily accessible and understandable to others. Speakers (and in this case translators and counsellors) should be encouraged to use conventional, obvious and general words in the interest of clarity and simplicity.

Without been subjective one is obliged to point out that the route pursued by counsellors and translators is taking us nowhere. How do counsellors expect to curtail the rate of HIV infection if they condone the use of figurative language? Does this not justify the saying that "a carpenter who uses a chain saw and an axe to build fine cabinets will sell very few cabinets". Similarly a teacher who tests a first arithmetic ability with a calculus examination is not likely to get very promising results. In order to conscientise the ailing communities of the impact of HIV/AIDS, campaigners should be cautious in the use of metaphors. The use of metaphorisation is inevitable, but when discussing about life-threatening issues such as HIV/AIDS, they must be used meticulously and not bluntly.

2.6 CONCLUSION

The chapter demonstrates that language is an embodiment of culture and the two are inseparable. However, cultural manifestations should not be overemphasised at the expense of language. AIDS campaigners should obey cultural conventions and apply them with caution in order to ensure that they are able to reach out to the populace through effective

communication. Data collected in the next chapter provides ways in which language could be exploited without sacrificing culture.