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

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

1.1 BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

Many people are still sceptical about the existence of Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome (AIDS), despite the many cases that are reported. They still do not see the seriousness of this life-threatening infectious disease and sometimes talk about it ironically as the "radio disease" – widely publicised but not yet experienced (Ingstad, 1990:28). Despite all the current attempts to minimise the impact of AIDS on societies worldwide, the rate at which this fatal disease affects people is increasing at an alarming rate. With only less than two decades of the spread of this deadly disease, AIDS has already passed the stage of being referred to as an epidemic and is now called a pandemic. This is attributable to a number of factors. However, it does not fall within the scope of this research to identify all the contributory factors that give rise to this disease. This research focuses exclusively on one problematic aspect of *cultural adaptation,* which is, to a large extent, reflected in the use of figurative language. When counsellors use metaphoric language to talk about AIDS and other sexually transmitted diseases, the chances are that their target audience is unlikely to understand such messages. The use of this type of language often results in ineffective communication.

The research interrogates whether or not it serves any good purpose to satisfy cultural stereotypes at the expense of complete accuracy. In short, the research tests the hypothesis that translation, which places cultural norms above accuracy (by preferring idiomatic at the expense of communicative translation when dealing with essential issues such as HIV/AIDS

texts) is likely to annihilate the rainbow nation of South Africa. To avoid possible confusion, it should be indicated at the outset that this postulation is focused on the translation of health texts, particularly those that are geared towards educating people about Human Immunodeficiency Virus (HIV) and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). As such, put in context, the basic question the study attempts to answer is; does the use of figurative language impede the communication process? For the purpose of this study, the concept of 'metaphor' should be understood as a generic term. It should be interpreted as an all-encompassing umbrella term covering all different kinds of figures of speech.

There is a generally accepted tendency among translators and campaigners to insist on culture-bound terminology (which, in Sepedi, involves an exorbitant use of figurative rather than direct language) in their endeavour to educate the public about sexually-transmitted diseases. When they talk about sensitive issues like bodily fluids and sexual behaviour, certain language-related problems occur. The problem, according to Alberts (1997), is not terminological because such words exist in African languages. The problem, Alberts argues, is sociolinguistic. Some words have very limited domains and may not be used by polite people lest they breach politeness rules. Wardhaugh, (1986:234) in similar vein, develops this argument by saying that certain things are not said, not because they cannot be, but because "people don't talk about those things; or if those things are talked about, they are talked about in very roundabout ways". Speakers therefore employ euphemism to avoid mentioning certain issues directly. Wardhaugh goes on to say that certain things or objects can be referred to only in certain circumstances, for example, only by certain people, or through deliberate circumlocutions. These people constantly resort to circumlocution and euphemism in order to avoid use of tabooed language, particularly those pertaining to

private parts of the body, bodily functions, sex, and so on. This option of metaphoric language is perceived to be an appropriate means to avoid offending the audience. However, the use of such language often cripples communication. The words used are unlikely to carry the message and meaning accurately, or with the same effect and precision. The audience, for whose use they are intended, let alone non-mother tongue speakers, therefore misconceives them.

Ratzan's (1993) statistical study reveals that cultural issues hinder current efforts to educate the public about the AIDS pandemic and consequently results in more HIV infection. He warns that attempts to combat this health crisis cannot come to fruition as long as the issue of changing the public's mindset about cultural influences continues to receive relatively less attention. As long as people still refuse to talk openly about AIDS, this sexually transmitted disease with no known cure is destined to continue to plague human life even in the twenty-first century. The solution to this problem, Ratzan argues, is to develop holistic and integrated communicative strategies that will help bring the disease into the foreground of people's awareness. It is this postulation that prompted a study of this nature in order to test the validity of Ratzan's position.

Unlike many researchers who dealt with AIDS as an exclusively biomedical disease, this research is devoted to sociolinguistic aspects of the pandemic. Sekhukhune (1998:112) notes that language is society-governed. This means that there are cultural manifestations and interpretations that influence speakers to prefer one language variety to another in an attempt to conform to the societal norms. Though indisputable, the study notes that the way campaigners currently communicate about the scourge of HIV/AIDS places young people at

the risk of infection. It is therefore imperative that AIDS campaigners review such communication mechanisms in their awareness campaigns.

The reasons for undertaking this research are obvious. The researcher is motivated by a sense of responsibility to the community wherein he lives which is hit by this deadly virus, and partially by a curiosity to understand the dynamics surrounding this phenomenon.

This research seeks to discover whether there should, in the near future, be alternatives sought for metaphoric language in translation. It is envisaged that the conclusions drawn from this study will not only clear the confusion surrounding current practices but also translate the findings of this research into practical application. In conclusion, the report will offer suggestions, where applicable, for optimising the effectiveness of communicative interaction in health education. Moreover, it will provide opportunities for further research to be undertaken in the foreseeable future.

1.2 AIMS OF THE STUDY

The aims of this research project are multi-fold. Firstly, the research aims to examine existing translation practices in the domain of sexual and reproductive health education, that is AIDS and sex education projects. In particular, it focuses on how health terms with sexual connotations are translated from English into Sepedi. Secondly, the research aims to locate the findings of this study within two conflicting theoretical approaches to health translation, that is, an orientation towards cultural as opposed to communicative translation,

and to compare their legitimacy. In other words, which of the two approaches could be most effective when translating health documents? Thirdly, it attempts to test the hypothesis that the use of figurative expressions at the expense of direct language in AIDS campaigns hinders comprehension. Lastly, it attempts to spearhead realistic efforts to develop strategies of educating the masses about sex education without offending them.

1.3 DEFINITION OF TERMS

The following are the definition of terms as used in this study other than their everyday use:

CULTURE

The term culture in this context has not been used in the artistic sense of visual or performing arts. In other words, it does not refer to the appreciation of literature, music and works of art. This conceptualisation is rather used in the conventional sense of social culture, which is defined by Newmark (1988:94) as "the way of life and its manifestations that are peculiar to a community that uses a particular language as its means of expression". Briefly, culture should be understood in the sense of what a person must know in order to function in a particular society. This seems to go along with Goodenough's definition:

> A society's culture consists of whatever it is one has to know or believe in order to operate in a manner acceptable to its members… Culture being what people have to learn as distinct from their biological heritage, must consist of the end-product of learning: knowledge, in a most general… sense of the term (Goodenough in Hudson, 1980:74).

According to Wardhaugh (1986:235) culture is the know-how that a person must possess to get through the task of daily living, a view that supports Goodenough's contention. In simple terms, culture is a set of assumptions, beliefs and attitudes that people build up over time. These assumptions, beliefs, attitudes and values, which are characteristic of a particular society, evolve slowly. They become so internalised by people that they are no longer aware of them.

CULTURALISM

This term is derived from the term culture, which refers to the sum total of ways of living built up by a group of people, and handed down from one generation to another. Bernardi (1977:32) defines this concept in the broadest sense to mean established ways of sharing and regulating experience that communities and groups evolve through common forms of expression and means of approach in which traditional values and norms are advocated. From a linguistic perspective, the term according to Hymes (1964:67) could be defined as a doctrine that believes in the preservation and promotion of traditional forms of communicative interaction. In this context, it means a preference for metaphoric or figurative expressions at the expense of direct communication.

CULTURALLY–SENSITIVE CONCEPTS

In this context, this refers to those terms that are not easy to voice because they may sound offensive. In this study, these are terms explicitly associated with sexuality.

EUPHEMISTIC EXPRESSIONS

Contextually this refers to figures of speech whereby speakers speak about one thing in terms that are seen to be suggestive of another. According to Nida these are used in place of other meanings or expressions which are not their synonym but with which they have an association of ideas often mediated through supplementary components (1974:201). It could best be defined as the "dressing up of language in certain areas of life to make what is referred to more presentable and culturally appropriate" (Wardhaugh, 1986:235). This coincides with Newmark's remarks that these expressions are merely being used for the purpose of "colouring" language rather than sharpening it in order to describe the life of the world or the mind more accurately (1988:84). Euphemistic expressions are used in ordinary circumstances as substitutes for taboo words. They enable speakers to talk about unpleasant things and disguise or neutralise the unpleasantness.

LINGUISTIC TABOOS OR AVOIDANCE LANGUAGE

In most general reference taboo is a kind of behaviour which is believed to be supernaturally forbidden or regarded as immoral. According to Wardhaugh (1986:234), and as used in this study, taboo is an avoidance in any society of behaviour believed to be harmful to its members in that it would cause them anxiety, embarrassment or shame. In language, they are expressions that are unsuitable for use in a specific social context, and are therefore prohibited or restricted. Linguistic taboos are often replaced in ordinary usage by euphemism.

1.4 THE POLITICS OF AIDS EDUCATION: A BRIEF OVERVIEW

1.4.1 NATIONAL CONCERN OVER THE MAGNITUDE OF AIDS INFECTION

The government together with non-governmental organisations, community-based structures, private sector and the civil society is making an effort to engage in campaigns aimed at curbing the AIDS epidemic. A number of projects such as *Love Life* have been set up to lead the campaign against the spread of the disease. Substantial financial resources are being channelled into these projects in an attempt to put a stop to this scourge. Despite millions of rands that are budgeted for AIDS awareness campaigns, this not only sexually-transmitted disease continues to spread at an alarming rate. The reasons for this are many, but the scope of this research allows us to single out one aspect only. It is predicted that miscommunication, as indicated earlier, to a certain extent, contributes to the spread of STDs and the virus that causes AIDS. Campaigns frequently fail to reach a wider audience because of poor communication. It is hoped that if the campaigners could begin to impart and share their knowledge of the disease in a less complicated language and without fear of remorse, something could still be done to counter the transmission of the HIV virus.

The intense war against AIDS aims not only to provide condoms to members of the public, but also to help them develop certain life skills. This is because the AIDS virus is not only spread through sexual encounter but also through contact with infected blood. Even those who are not sexually active or deliberately abstain from sexual activities may be diagnosed as HIV positive. People therefore deserve to know about the disease, so that they can make

informed and constructive choices based on accurate knowledge. If people are properly educated, they will be in a better position to make necessary and responsible decisions.

1.4.2 NORTHERN PROVINCE ON THE PROBLEM OF AIDS

The fact that there is an ever-increasing number of incidents of AIDS in the Northern Province cannot be disputed. A comparative study reflects that out of the nine provinces in South Africa, the Northern Province is amongst the most affected in terms of HIV/AIDS infection. The latest statistics shows that the rate of AIDS infection stands at 42% which is higher than most of the other provinces in the country. Despite this ever-increasing scientific evidence, the public continues to culturally condone its deeply ingrained traditions and attitudes towards the disease. People still believe that a cure will soon be discovered as has happened with other diseases such as smallpox, tuberculosis and cancer which also threatened the existence of humanity, before a cure was found. However, the likelihood that by the time a vaccination or medication is discovered, the whole population may be infected by the HIV virus is immense. The statistics of the past three years in both the Southern and Central regions of the Northern Province bears testimony to this. The following table represents the increase in percentages of the HIV-positive results of tests taken at ante-natal clinics in these two regions.

YEAR	SOUTHERN	CENTRAL
1996	2.87%	1.16%
1997	0.9%	1.5%
1998	1.54%	3.02%

A SPECIMEN OF THE INCREASE IN PERCENTAGES OF HIV INFECTION OF WOMEN TESTED AT ANTE-NATAL CLINICS

Out of a total of 333 pregnant women tested annually, there is a noticeable increase in percentages of HIV infection. It must, however, be noted that these estimates are just the tip of the iceberg. They may be an underestimation since the tests were performed on women who were treated at clinics and hospitals while many of the patients consult traditional and faith healers. Besides, the results are also not representative since they are not inclusive of the other five regions.

The Northern Province Department of Health and Welfare has embarked on a number of community-based campaigns and workshops in all its seven regions to educate those who are sceptical about the seriousness of HIV/AIDS. At a provincial roadshow that was held at ga-Mphahlele (Seleteng) in the Southern region (Region 2) on World Aids Day (1st of December 1999) a call was made to attendees to join hands in making sure that the message about HIV/AIDS is made loud and clear. This implies showing a commitment to educate those who are ignorant of the disease.

The School's AIDS Week was also one of the mass communicating strategies adopted to inform and create awareness amongst school-going children about the effects of this pandemic. Health counsellors by virtue of their profession, whether they like it or not, are thrust into the role of advisers in matters relating to sexuality. It is their responsibility to ensure that integrated and comprehensive methods are put in place for the message to reach both ignorant and young people (the potential victims of this disease).

Hon. Johannes Roelofse, an MPL representing the African Christian Democratic Party (ACDP), warned the provincial government to develop, as a matter of urgency, strategies which should be adopted by the community at large to fight AIDS because, according to him, procrastination will not be "the thief of time", but "the thief of lives" (Hansard, 1999: 23). This implies that delaying the implementation of these methods will have devastating effects. He was supported by Dr. Aaron Motsoaledi, the MEC for Agriculture, Land and Environment, who went a step further and suggested that AIDS messages should be spread at community gatherings such as funerals, weddings and even in the church. He appealed to male AIDS victims to eliminate the myth that having sex with a virgin cures the disease (Hansard, 1999:30).

1.4.3 PROBLEMS ENCOUNTERED IN RUNNING AIDS WORKSHOPS

In spite of all the efforts made to promote AIDS awareness, the Department of Health and Welfare in the Northern Province still finds itself faced with numerous challenges that warrant special attention. In a brief interview with Maphutha Linah, AIDS coordinator in the Southern region, it was indicated that many problems are encountered in various

communities when workshops are held with young people about the disease. The following are, among others, culturally related problems that make the task of minimising this disease virtually impossible.

(a) Discouragement of certain discourses

It has been said in the introductory pages that cultural conventions impose sanctions and loathe referring certain objects in plain terms. Certain expressions which are seen to be in conflict with ethical and moral issues would be discouraged by the elderly people thus rendering the task of workshopping and educating the populace about the HIV virus extremely difficult. The elderly people strongly believe that to talk about illicit or immoral practices such as those involving sexual issues in public is a violation of the norms of society. They therefore advocate that such topics should only be spoken about behind closed doors, i.e. between husband and wife. AIDS campaigners are often ostracised by community members for non-compliance to these cultural artifacts.

(b) Workshops are taken for granted

The youth have a tendency to exhibit certain sociopathic behaviour at AIDS education workshops. When campaigners tackle, for instance, issues of sexual encounters, young people tend to relieve their embarrassment by giggling. Maphutha believes that this giggling is a clear indication that such campaigns are not taken seriously. Perhaps campaigners could be encouraged to bring with them testimonies of people living with the virus without any fear of victimisation to convince their audience of the existence of this disease.

(c) Abuse and inadequate use of condoms

Out of the many condoms that are distributed more than half of them are not used for their real purpose. Young people, especially from poor rural areas, misuse condoms by using them as playing objects like balloons. Besides, many people, especially women, are forced by social pressure to feel guilty for possessing condoms. Society does not perceive possession of condoms by women as a preventive measure against sexually related diseases, but instead as evidence of immoral tendencies. Women are also still disempowered in terms of decision-making involving the use of condoms during sexual encounters.

(d) No care attitude by conservative parents

Some parents have not yet realised the importance of AIDS education. Others are too scared to articulate themselves to their children. They find it very difficult and humiliating to carry on an intimate conversation with children. They also lack the confidence to talk to their own children about issues of sex education and relegate this responsibility to health workers and schoolteachers.

1.5 CONCLUSION

This chapter has provided a setting and framework that enables the audience to understand and contextualise the research problem the study intends to investigate. It has also highlighted the direction the research will follow for the realisation of its objectives. Subsequent chapters will explore this research problem further by examining the impact of

current trends in the translation of health texts particularly HIV/AIDS publications and possible ways to counter them.