

THE INEQUALITY OF UNWRITTEN LANGUAGES: SOME REFLECTIONS ON THE CHRISTIAN USE OF THE VERNACULAR IN EASTERN AFRICA*

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ABSTRACT

Vernacular languages have become theologically important and their translation is a central issue. There is also a need for widespread unwritten vernaculars to be used liturgically. The fact that a language is written as opposed to be only spoken makes for an unequal equality and this is the issue we discuss in this article. The Vatican II resolution allowing the use of vernaculars in the liturgy has to be seen as a vital turning point in the functions of Christianity in many cultures outside the western world. It marks off a stage in an ongoing process of liturgical and theological change.

Keywords: language, translation, vernacular languages, unwritten languages

INTRODUCTION

For a global cross-cultural religion one of the most significant changes brought about by the Second Vatican Council of the Roman Catholic Church held in Rome 1962–65 was the decision to use vernaculars liturgically and to breakaway from the previous centrality of Latin. So suddenly vernacular languages became theologically important and their translation a central issue. This raised major issues concerning the translation of religious matters from one major written language into another of more or less equal literate status; Latin, English or German into Mandarin, Hindi, Arabic and Kanji over which expert bilateral translators have been at work for centuries.

However this decision also raises the need for widespread unwritten vernaculars or ones which have only recently been put into literate forms to be used liturgically and it is these with which we are concerned.

We should start with at least the assumption that both written and unwritten languages serve the same general religious and secular purposes and cope

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adequately with the emotions and ideas of their users. The fact that a language is written as opposed to be only spoken makes for an unequal equality.

Our point is that Vatican II permitted the use of vernaculars in the sacred ceremonies of the Roman Catholic Church with a consequential push to print the liturgy in the major written languages for which there have been Protestant vernacular equivalents for several centuries as well as an enormous corpus of Christian and non-Christian theological and philosophical work in those languages. The unwritten languages start with this handicap.

1. THE PROFESSIONALISM OF THEOLOGICAL TRANSLATION

Translation particularly in religious matters is usually viewed as a professional process for which the laity, however defined, are not either qualified to carry out or do not have enough interest, financial incentives or time to get involved. Yet in secular life translation is a constant process in which almost every individual is involved if not between natal and foreign languages as part of tourism or business, then at least between the various linguistic codes which exist in every major language and society.

Translation is also usually thought of as involving writing in which a professionally competent person writes down their conclusions after considerable thought. Thus it would seem that translation is tied to a major language which is not only written but also has substantial literate populations as well as literate traditions as would be the case with a number of eastern and western languages.

So translation in most situations starts with a macro-language made 'hard' by centuries of literacy supported by dictionaries and enormous quantities of written data. This puts unwritten languages at a considerable material and psychological disadvantage. Whether it is linguistically correct or not, they are thought to be inferior and not capable of reproducing the intended nuances in the major contemporary languages or in the old theologically relevant Greek and Latin. There is perhaps an assumption of their superior exactness despite the fact that they are often ambiguous; the Greek word which is used for the persons of the Trinity 'hypostasis' has at least twenty alternative meanings (Tanner, N. 2002: 31).

Our concern is with unwritten languages and their use in Roman Catholic worship. To study English, German or Mandarin, the learner starts with a printed grammar but to study the thousands of languages which have no written forms, one listens and leans to speak; they are spoken languages.

2. WRITTEN AND EXPERIENTIAL RELIGIOUS PRACTICES

The most important aspect of an unwritten language is not so much that it is obviously oral but that it is always a personal communication between people who are physically in touch with each other by sound if not at least by sight. The Venezuelan Guaica language requires sentences to have an ending particle which states whether this information relates to a person seeing the speaker, heard from as reliable source or is the product of myth or imagination (Nida & Taber, 1974: 116).

Outside this visual and audible range there can be no understanding of what is being said and if it is passed on, then whatever accuracy it may have had will be diminished by social and geographical distance. This is how information will have been relayed and it is not so much an information system based on rumour but one of finely balanced public opinions, uninfluenced by the abstractions of socially detached mass media.

Unwritten languages are free of the social divisiveness of spelling, punctuation and of course capital letters which have given rise to difficulties in discussion between Christians and Muslims (Tanner, R. 1979). It would seem that writing in the religious context is imposing a structure which is not present experientially in the practices of traditional religion, and indeed possibly not in religions which are tied to extensive assumed literacy. Individuals' pray without regard to syntax and the type of print.

Other than writings under divine influence or personal initiatives, religious writings are often the product of committees; their form is logical and their presentation systematic in which most of the key words are subject to definitions produced by the theologians of each particular religious group. It is a clear cut institutionalised process.

Even if there is a written order of service serving social as well as religious functions, it is a presumption to think that there is an automatic conjunction between what is being provided in writing and the use that is being made of it by devout and less devout participants.

There is no doubt that individual worshippers personalise their devotions in their own linguistic codes and in languages which will always have been different to the Latin used in the pre-Vatican II liturgy sanctified by millennia of use. When vernacular languages are used liturgically, there may no longer be any formalised and thus sanctified link with what the Church considers essential. There is a renewed reliance on translation for a central liturgical purpose rather than the parallel one which had occurred prior to Vatican II with an implied purpose of relating this to the understandings and needs of those speaking each vernacular. It is inevitable that the translating of unwritten or partially written vernaculars will go through the same processes as had occurred previously with the translation of the major written languages. The same sort of problems that English and French theologians faced 1500 years ago.

3. THE INTERPRETATION OF WRITTEN LITURGIES

Written liturgies are the result of lengthy committee work by a combination of linguists and theologians, but almost as soon as a completed text has been agreed, the social and religious environment for which it was created will have shifted away from any equivalences which it originally may have had. Once there has been agreement on what has been translated, written down and printed, it becomes functionally static and the processes of changing it becomes a long and tortuous one involving not only the previously committed intellectual specialists but economic interests as well (Tanner, R. 1973), it costs a lot of money to change major translations.

An almost necessary feature of translations by western linguists has been the attempt to be consistent following the requirements of logic and science and that changes have to be logically explained. There is certainly inconsistency in the Swahili translation of the Bible (Tanner, R. 1979), if only because the matters being translated do not have the hard semantic edges which might make consistency possible in such matters as the Holy Spirit. The Ayatollah Khomeini is reported to have said that what he defined one day did not commit him to reaching the same conclusions subsequently; consistency was not seen as a necessary religious virtue.

Speech in a largely unwritten language may have some grammatical consistencies and operate within specific but not particularly exact cultural schema, but consistency is rare if not environmentally impossible. In the absence of writing there are no means of insuring consistency and more importantly language is a social tool and its use in particular social situations cannot be replicated except by removing most of its specific and varying environmental features; the linguistic codes which are both regional, occupational and age related in all languages.

We can presuppose that in religious practice there may have been some measure of equivalence when the written word and the thoughts of the reader are in the same language. Even then it is not at all certain that there is any thorough understanding of what has been presented in writing beyond their mnemonic function as part of personal faith. It is salutary to remember that in many traditional faiths the diviners or whatever use glossolalia in their rituals and that these unintelligible sounds have acceptable meanings which are emotionally satisfying.

Individual adjust their religious understandings and needs to what is going on in their lives and these may not coincide but there is always a background that the original key words are basically ambiguous as they have many recognised alternative meanings or when this is not the case they have never been defined at all; they are adjustable semantic spanners. Individuals can have faith in an authoritative and sanctified 'spanner' while its uses at the same time are personal and uncontrolled.

Once theological ideas have to be expressed in languages which have no written heritage then the problems become increasingly complicated. The translator in the past started with a learned understanding of Greek and Latin and then an acquired knowledge of an unwritten language on top of their own natal understandings of Dutch, French-Canadian, Bavarian German and English.

These experts struggle to get the nearest approximations in these unwritten vernaculars to terms which have had centuries of written definitions and speculations attached to them; at best this is a socially and intellectually unbalanced equivalence. For these theologian-cum-translators there has to be an equivalent come what may because the Christian message is a universal one or they decide that there is no equivalence available in the vernacular and import an alien word which then become part of the vernacular Christian lexicon.

These first translators were outsiders to the cultures to which they have often devoted their working lives. However rationally multicultural they may be, they are still unconsciously as well as probably consciously tied to the thinking behind their own natal languages; a speaker of English is tied to the fact that this language has an indefinite future tense. Thus it is hard for them to accept that such a tense is absent from many languages and that the thinking of their speakers is tied to an immediacy which is absent from the thinking of natal speakers of English.

Similarly even if these translators recognise the inevitability of social status differences in their own societies, they adjudge it to be both ethically and politically wrong. So it is difficult for them to come to terms with languages in which personal pronouns reflect the status of the speaker; to use the pronouns denoting equality in talking with social and political inferiors is both uncouth and disingenuous.

Many unwritten languages are tonal and in their first written forms and indeed subsequently this is ignored and it might well take centuries of intellectual and indeed political will to put the complications of tonality into writing. In the meantime the ideological sophistications of tone in which similar but different sounds have different meanings is an issue which faces the priests who are natal speakers of Sukuma.

The result of this process may be 'a working misunderstanding' (Tanner, R. and Wijsen 1993). The five million Sukuma of Tanzania have the idea of a single all-powerful God beyond and behind all that happens to them in this world and this word is used in the Roman Catholic liturgy; the snag is that the Sukuma want this deity to keep away and leave them in peace and prosperity. There is no traditional idea of a loving God concerned for their welfare so what is in the minds of the Christian Sukuma when they are praying? Such differences must surely have been commonplace as Christianity expanded into cultures with unwritten languages.

4. THE CONCEPTUAL DIFFICULTIES IN VERNACULAR TRANSLATION

It is not surprising that unwritten languages just as much as the written ones outside the known structures of the major languages used in philosophy and theology should provide problems for the translator. They have structural elements which would appear to prevent the transfer of certain Christian ideas and present new elements into the necessary thinking of outsiders.

Once we accept the possibility and indeed the probability that religious and philosophical ideas can emerge from any cultural background, then there are translation problems. Regarding the possible translation into English of Chinese philosophic concepts, Richards wrote 'we have here indeed what may very probably be the most complex type of event yet produced in the evolution of the cosmos' (Richards 1953: 250). This statement should certainly be borne in mind when considering the translation of the ideas expressed in lesser known vernaculars.

An example would be the translations into Swahili of the word 'spirit' and 'love' for which there are nine and eight words respectively listed in the dictionary, so that for 'spirit' they ended up using one of the six available words for 'holy' and one of the words for 'spirit' producing an entirely new phrase. In Sukuma there are eleven words for marriage (Cory 1953), each of which is legitimate in certain circumstances and whichever one is chosen for Christian marriage excludes the other forms from legitimacy. So the translator is not so much translating as making ethical choices which then become part of that Church's doctrinal power (Tanner, R. 1993).

In addition to such problems as these there are structural problems in many vernaculars which are both widespread and far from being just the vagaries of anthropological investigations. Several vernaculars carry concepts of time which are not those used in western languages. As Pastor Mbiti of the World Council of Churches has pointed out, several Bantu languages such as Shona have no indefinite future tense, which makes the Second Coming to be of some immediacy whichever tense is used (Mbiti 1971) and indeed Sukuma has twenty-one tenses making it in that respect a richer language than English (Batibo 1985).

Some American Indian languages divide time into 'now' and 'not now' and so do not appear to have the ideas of the fluency of time; an arrow is never in flight but sequentially motionless. This might suggest that such peoples tied to many millennia of an annual subsistence cycle, may be seeing their religious needs in terms of immediacy. Certainly some such as the Sukuma of whom few are Christian have a traditional religion of reaction rather than pre-emption.

Once a religious belief becomes related to the necessity of intellectual understanding rather than the unintelligibility of sanctified foundations which is of equal utility to all the faithful, then the vernacular becomes a serious issue

and moreover a question of which one since each will have its own grammatical and semantic characteristics of which some have been mentioned above.

This is certainly important when Christianity could be considered as a parochial religion with little movement between such semantic units but now large numbers of people do not have any fixed geographical social base living in one community and working in another each with their linguistic codes, perhaps worshipping in a third.

An unwritten vernacular has a linguistic unity which is lost when it becomes written and starts to create a social divisiveness from the particular forms of the language which have become its written form. The Swahili of the East African coast with its literary background in Arabic script has become the romanized official language of Tanzania but the form in which it is spoken inland is very different to that recorded in grammars and dictionaries.

But even in universalising a vernacular there are still structural problems in languages which do not have a single asexual form so that it is either male or female speech. Others such as Burmese have personal pronouns which reflect status, compulsory inequality rather than equality. Such elements are quite antithetical to the Christian message.

5. THE CREATIVITY OF NEW LITURGICAL LINGUISTS

So for the Christian used to the liturgical use of their own written languages, the permission of Vatican II to use these more widely has just continued an existing trend. It has resulted more in discussion about the implications for class and regional linguistic codes in the process of which a single liturgical form was lost. An educated Han Chinese cannot necessarily read Mandarin religious ideograms.

In contrast the Christian using a spoken language for which the written forms have been available if at all for a century and mainly confined to the Bible of which the British and Foreign Bible Society has produced over three hundred translations, Vatican II provided liturgical opportunities to use the special features of their own vernaculars.

Apart from the semantic and grammatical difficulties, this has dovetailed into other changes involving political and territorial religious sovereignty. This has meant that translation has passed from the intellects of foreign scholars who may have devoted their professional lives to this work to that of national men and women using their natal languages for the exposition of religious ideas; the balance changing from creative translation to translating creatively.

These new writers of vernacular liturgies and theology would naturally be starting with the ideas which have grown up in their intellects as natal understandings coterminous with meanings carried by these languages. This would seem to circumvent the stage in which Christian theological and philosophical ideas were first cemented into the written works of western

thinkers and produced by their institutions which as missionaries they dominated earlier.

For these men and women thinking in their own natal languages without the intervening stage of a language foreign to them, Vatican II may have been a watershed of emotional and professional opportunity. The old generation of priests trained through Latin and in a tradition of dogmatic authority may have lost much of what they held to be the true basis of their office. This was compensated for by their increased roles in a local Church staffed by nationals to whom the missionaries are now auxiliaries on renewable visas. Certainly there is some nostalgia rather than regret over the decisions taken in Vatican II, but there is little conservative movement for a return to the past and certainly not to the use of Latin in a globally uniform liturgy.

What have these unwritten languages to offer which can be used in this new situation and it would be wrong to see their structures as making for insurmountable theological obstacles. Each language has its own genius (Nida & Taber, 1974: 3) and to even think that is not so for largely unwritten languages as opposed to the macro written languages of Europe and Asia is just ethnocentric bias. These vernaculars provide grammatical opportunities for new ideas and have rich vocabularies for their particular cultural interests as well as being adept in the development of figurative speech.

6. THE DOWNSIDE OF THE USE OF VERNACULARS AFTER VATICAN II

The downside of the use of the lesser known vernacular languages is the turning away from the unintelligibility of Latin for the laity who may have found it as intellectually and emotionally satisfying as the glossolalia of the traditional diviner and who may have been more interested in the socially and religiously authenticated sacredness of the sounds they heard and what they saw.

There is also the problem of which language is used. In Tanzania Swahili has been the national lingua franca for over a century and is now the language of official political dominance of a central government allied to an essentially coastal culture which has a popular Swahili saying that they are cultured and those inland are uncivilised 'wenyeji wa pwani, washenzi wabara'.

In such a situation it is perhaps inevitable that any Church which sees itself as nationally representative and represented should use this 'lingua franca' language liturgically and in the process pushing the lesser languages into the background. This leaves out the allied Sukuma and Nyamwezi languages spoken by some six million in a national population of twenty million and as well as leaving out Haya the natal language of a large number of Tanzanian priests.

It seems likely that few of the recently ordained can preach in this national language with any fluency since it is only the natal language of those living on the coastal fringe of whom the large majority are Muslims. The result of this is

that their natal cultural schema will often be different to that of the peoples to whom they are pastorally committed, they are in religious terms internal expatriates replacing the missionary external ones. This is not the case in a similar but politically newer situation coming from the use of Shona in Zimbabwe, the language of the dominant tribal culture and the depression of the minority Ndebele.

Then there are the same problems as in the use of English liturgically in which there is no uniformity because of the numerous linguistic codes used based on class, region, occupation, education, age and sex. In which form of Shona or Swahili are priests and nuns going to work in their pastoral vocations.

After many years of instruction through English which is wanted by them not as a follow through from colonial domination but as a necessary avenue into a language with a global range and its openings into intellectual ideas not yet available through their own natal languages.

A further problem which will not be solved by the use of vernaculars is that there will always be a human preference for verbal rather than written communication; talking is immediately successful, while writing and reading are time consuming in which even in a so-called literate society only a small minority specialise; one talks to God rather than writing petitions. People in all cultures if they are not using religious mnemonics, pray mentally using their own personal linguistic codes and there may be little coincidence between these emotional needs and the written structures of the languages in which they are expressed.

From this come a number of connected issues. The Church as an institution will always prefer and indeed require that its rules and regulations to be recorded in writing. So this means that the previous missionary translators are being replaced by national translators whose natal languages may not be the ones which the Church has decided to use liturgically. Although these new translators have a natal language, they have nevertheless gone through a long process of education in which they have passed through a series of languages. The sometime Bishop of Ngara had learnt in turn Hangaza, Swahili, English, Latin and French.

So the processes of translation have still to be learned and debated and it seems unlikely that these discussions will take place in the vernaculars involved and it seems that one group of specialists is going to be replaced by another. These ad hoc committees are likely to be composed of people with varying abilities in the languages under discussion. A Ruandan bishop disliked using Nyaruanda as he said that his natal language was French.

It probably involves the same unconscious process of seeing the vernacular as less important rather than inferior to the major languages in which they have been trained and in which they do most of their reading. It also seems likely that the processes of translation will diminish the particular genius of the spoken vernacular; the Benedictines of Songea produced a Swahili paper but its style made difficult reading.

Thus the legitimised use of vernaculars has not cut out the need to translate and the consequent choice of a specific vernacular form for areas of use which may not correspond to its majority use either semantically or linguistically. Indeed it may end up as the linguistic code of an educated minority.

If anything the required use of vernaculars has brought into insoluble discussion the choice of specific words for meanings which in practice either do not carry these meanings in the vernacular in question or are themselves in a continuous process of changing their meanings which were ambiguous to start with.

Above there will continue to be the continued dominance of individual translators in these initial stages of writing and translating vernaculars for the use of Christians liturgically and pastorally.

7. CONCLUSION

The Vatican II resolution allowing the use of vernaculars in the liturgy has to be seen as a vital turning point in the functions of Christianity in many cultures outside the western world. It marks off a stage in an ongoing process of liturgical and theological change.

It will bring into serious consideration processes of thought and ideas which have been in vernacular use for millennia and which have previously received no acknowledgment of their long standing semantic existence. This will bring into intellectual confrontations new concerns such as the long standing issue in China as to whether they venerated or worshipped their ancestors and whether such concerns could be part of legitimate Eucharistic involvement. This issue and no doubt many others have not yet come into public African theological discussions.

It may be prudent to remember that if Christianity can be seen as responding to human needs then the elasticity of a predominantly spoken language may be more pastorally useful than the use of resources to tying the languages used in religious practices to written forms.

Note: This article resulted from discussions with Father, N. Tanner S. J., Professor of Church History, the Gregorian University, Rome.

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