Intercultural Communication and Personal Relationships: A Study in the Translation of Tshivenḓa Kinship Terminology

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Abstract: Kinship terminology describes a system of familial relationships. The family is a natural and fundamental unit in society. Most kinship terms distinguish between genders and between generations. Languages indicate these distinctions differently. Whereas translators in some societies may find it easy to translate the kinship terms of one language into another, others may find it difficult when the languages use a different organisational system. A lack of knowledge of the culture of other societies could result in great miscommunication between language groups. A translator is regarded as an intercultural mediator who needs to explain one culture in terms of the other when seeking a communicatively satisfactory position when mediating cultural divergences. The purpose of this paper is twofold: to highlight the translator's difficulty in translating some Tshivenda kinship terms into languages that use a different system, and the importance to translators of knowledge of the culture of the people who speak the languages concerned.

Keywords: Translation, kinship terminology, personal relationship, intercultural communication, equivalent, target language, source language, intercultural competence

1. Introduction

Kinship terminology describes a system of familial relationships. The family is a natural and fundamental unit in society. According to Schapera (1977), there are five principal kinds of kinship terminologies which one could use to describe people with whom one is connected, either by descent from a common ancestor or by marriage. These can be classified, for example, into members of one's family, extra-familial kin (relatives of blood) and one's relatives by marriage. The relationship terms most commonly used are father, mother, son, daughter, grandfather, grandmother, grandson, granddaughter, uncle, aunt, nephew, niece, brother, sister and cousin (Nogle, 1974). Kinship terms are therefore a set of terms used by a group to name relationships, a system of names applied to categories of kin in relation to one another. Kinship terminology can be referred to as a system of terms used in languages to describe people's relationships to one another.

Tshivenḓa kinship terminology is structured differently from that of other languages. Tshivenḓa, one of the indigenous languages of South Africa that form part of the south eastern zone of Bantu languages, is one of the eleven official languages in the country. The language is mainly spoken in the Limpopo Province of the Republic of South Africa. However, quite a number of Vhavenḓa are dispersed in adjoining areas, including urban centres. Some Vhavenḓa live in the southern part of Zimbabwe and a small number in Botswana. People who speak Tshivenḓa are called Vhavenḓa (plural form), whereas a single person who speaks Tshivenḓa

is called Muvenḓa. Tshivenḓa can alternatively be used to refer to the language or the culture.

In languages such as English, for instance, kinship terms are organised according to a gender dimension, with male terms in one group and female terms in another, while in Tshivenḓa most kinship terms do not indicate gender. The lack of gender differentiation is realised in kinship terms such as *ṅwana* (son, daughter), *makhulu* (grandfather, grandmother), *muḓuhulu* (grandson, granddaughter), *khaladzi* (brother, sister) and *muzwala* (cousin). Kinship terms such as *khotsi* (father), *mme* (mother), *malume* (uncle), and *makhadzi* (aunt) indicate gender. The lack of gender differentiation makes it difficult to translate kinship terms from Tshivenḓa into languages such as English, or terms from English into Tshivenḓa. Since the translator assumes that he/she is dealing with kinship terms, he/she may translate them by reference to their nearest equivalent in the target language. But such translations may be very misleading: there may be only an accidental correlation between certain kinds of genealogical connection and the kinds of relationships which are the actual basis of classification in the system under consideration, so to translate its terms into English may be to treat accidental or incidental features as though they were distinctive (Scheffler and Lounsbury, 1971). Rosman and Rubel (2003) note that historically, "[c]omparative studies of kinship by anthropologists in the nineteenth century assumed that kinship terminologies could be freely translated from one language to another" (p. 269). Morgan (1871), cited by Rosman and Rubel (2003), argues that if people recognise that the kin terms they use in their own culture form a system, they are better able to recognise such systems in other cultures, and they become aware of the fact that these systems differ from their own. However, this is not as simple it might seem. Kinship systems convey important social information which carries the culture of the society, and it is difficult to provide accurate translations of the cultural meaning of kinship terms, particularly when the languages in question are not related. Through kinship terminology we are able to understand the intergroup relations in a society.

In order to translate kinship terminology one has to determine the methods of classification in both the source and the target languages. This can be achieved by consulting native speakers of the languages concerned or people who are fluent in both the source and the target languages. Knowledge of the structure of kinship relationships is of invaluable assistance when translating kinship terms (Rosman & Rubel, 2003).

The aim of this paper is to highlight certain difficulties that impede translation of Tshivenḓa kinship terminology that lack gender differentiation into English and of English terms into Tshivenḓa, and to show how this has the potential to result in intercultural miscommunication and misunderstandings among the speakers of these languages. The discussion will be focused on those kinship terms that distinguish between genders.

2. Translation as an Act of Communication

Translation can be defined as putting a language into the words of a different language. Newmark (1995) defines translation as follows: "Often, though not by any means always, it is rendering the meaning of a text into another language in the way that the author intended the text" (p. 5). Translation implies cross-cultural understanding. Rubel and Rosman (2003) note that one of the assumptions underlying translation theory is: The instrumental concept of

language, which sees it as a mode of communication of objective information; expressive of thought and meanings where meanings refer to an empirical reality or encompass a pragmatic situation (p. 6).

Translations are performed so that the difference is always presented as part of our quest for understanding the variability in the human condition (Yengoyan, 2003). Translation is therefore a form of communication between two or more languages. It is an act of communication in that a text produced for readers in one particular context is rendered for readers in another. One culture is explained in terms of the other when seeking a communicatively satisfactory position for mediating cultural divergence (Olk, 2009). The translator takes on the role of intercultural mediator by relating the source and target cultures to each other. Rosman and Rubel (2003) underscore this: "In Malinowski's eyes, language is an essential aspect of cultural reality and that cultural reality must be utilized in translation" (p. 273). This type of communication is rendered because communities are characterised by different cultural backgrounds which are expressed by translation. This form of translation may be referred to as cultural communication because it can be thought of in terms of differences in conduct across societies and of the mediating role of communication in socialising individuals into particular cultural ways of being (Philipsen, 2002).

People aspire to understand cultures other than their own. This can be achieved through translation of words, ideas and meanings from one language to another. Translation is one means of achieving cultural competency. Kim (1992) states: "The knowledge generated from the cultural studies provides useful insights into improving communication competence in dealing with specific cultural groups" (p. 373). It is important for societies with different cultures to understand the systems of other societies. This knowledge will help them to avoid miscommunication when mixing with people of different cultural groups in a social environment. This means that intercultural competence is essential if people of different cultural backgrounds are to live together.

In a way then, the translator becomes the mediator between two cultural groups. Olk (2009) believes that "… the ability to mediate between two cultures is an essential component of intercultural competence" (p 1). Intercultural competence is therefore implicit in communicative translation. Translation is a useful tool in uncovering deficiencies in people's intercultural competence and may in the end enhance this competence. Kincaid (1979), cited by Gudykunst (2002), defines communication as a process in which two or more individuals or groups share information in order to reach a mutual understanding of each other and the world in which they live.

Translation qualifies as communication because it is a process in which two or more cultures share information in order to reach a mutual understanding of each other. Rubel and Rosman (2003) assert that "[t]here are those who see translation as a natural act, being the basis for the intercultural communication which has always characterized human existence" (p. 6). Therefore, we can conclude that translation is a form of intercultural communication between communities with different cultural backgrounds.

3. Translation and Kinship Terminology

Whereas some societies may find it easy to translate kinship terms from one language into

another, it is difficult to do so when the target language uses a different system of terminology; the structure of kinship terminology frequently differs from one cultural group to another. According to Rubel and Rosman (2003):

> The values of the culture of the source language may be different from those of the target language and this difference must be dealt with in any kind of translation (p. 6).

In certain instances, Vhavenḓa do not allocate social roles to the sexes; the roles for both male and female are the same. As a result, certain kinship terminology is not differentiated according to gender. Nida (1964), cited by Rubel and Rosman (2003), argues that:

> Since no two languages are identical in meanings given to corresponding symbols, or in ways in which such symbols are arranged in phrases and sentences, it stands to reason that there can be no absolute correspondence between languages … no fully exact translation … the impact may be reasonably close to the original but no identity in detail. (p. 8)

Kinship terms reflect different sets of distinctions. They distinguish between gender (brother – sister), generations (child – parent) and relatives. These distinctions are indicated differently according to cultural groups. The Tshivenḓa kinship system is structured differently from that of languages such as English. Kinship terms that are difficult to convey in Tshiven ḓa include son – daughter, grandson – granddaughter, grandmother – grandfather, younger sister – younger brother, elder sister – elder brother and nephew – niece. Tshivenḓa kinship terminology determines and controls the social behaviour of the members of society; thereby guiding their communication.

Unless there is a cultural overlap between the source and target languages, there will be problems in the translation of cultural words. Newmark (1995) points out that "[f]requently where there is cultural focus, there is a translational problem due to the cultural 'gap' or 'distance' between the source and target languages" (p. 94). A lack of knowledge about other cultural groups could result in great miscommunication and inaccuracies in the translation in the target language. The table below reflects the Tshivenḓa kinship terms and their English equivalents:

Tshivenḓa Kinship Terms	**English Equivalents**
khaladzi	brother sister
khotsi	father
khotsimunene	father's younger brother
khotsimuhulu	father's elder brother
makhadzi	aunt
makhulu	grandfather grandmother father-in-law (of the husband) mother-in-law (of the husband)

malume	uncle (mother's brother)
mmane	mother's younger sister mother's junior co-wife
mmemuhulu	mother's elder sister mother's senior co-wife
mme	mother
mukomana	elder sister (including one's mother's sister's daughters and father's brother's daughters) elder brother (including one's mother's sister's sons and father's brother's sons)
murathu	younger sister (including one's mother's sister's daughters and father's brother's daughters) younger brother (including one's mother's sister's sons and father's brother's sons)
muzwala	cousin (one's mother's brother's children and father's sister's children)
ṅwana	child daughter son

As indicated above, Tshivenḓa structures its kinship terms differently from that of languages such as English. Tshivenḓa does not distinguish between terms according to gender, except for kinship relationship terms such as wife (*musadzi*), husband (*munna*), aunt (*makhadzi*), mother (*mme),* father (*khotsi*) and uncle (*malume*). Many of the Tshivenḓa kinship relationships have no separate terms for males and females. One relationship term is used for both; for example, in Tshivenḓa the relationship terms brother and sister are expressed by the same word, *khaladzi*. Without context, therefore, it becomes difficult to translate such kinship relations into languages such as English. The translator, as mediator, fails to convey the correct meaning to a non-speaker of Tshivenḓa because Tshivenḓa does not have gender differentiation for the term *khaladzi*. This leads to a misunderstanding on the part of the receiver of the message. People from a culture different from that of the Tshivenḓa will not reach a mutual understanding with those of the Tshivenḓa cultural group, and intercultural communication will not be achieved because there will be no shared understanding between the two groups. In the next section, we will discuss examples to illustrate some translational difficulties which can lead to intercultural miscommunication.

4. Translational Difficulties and Intercultural Miscommunication

Societies communicate differently. This is so because there are aspects of cultures which differ from one society to another. Hofstede (1992) notes: "The cultural systems of nations and of their subdivisons are very complex and cannot be described in simple terms. It takes

years to understand a single cultural system if one is not born to it. Even the cultural system in which we are born, cannot [be] said to be understood by us in a way which we can explain to others because we participate in it unconsciously" (p.90). Translating cultural terms from one language into another becomes a difficult task if the translator is not competent in the culture of both the source and the target languages.

In English we use the term *child* to denote one's son or daughter, which Guralnik (1981) defines as an *infant, baby, a son or daughter*. Wentzel and Muloiwa (1982) provide as the Tshivenḓa equivalents of the term *child, ṅwana, tshixele*. These equivalents do not include the kinship terms *son* and *daughter* because Tshivenḓa does not differentiate the kinship term *child* according to gender. Even if English has an equivalent for the term *ṅwana*, which is *child* in this regard, the term *child* can be further differentiated according to gender. Both a male and a female child are referred to as *ṅwana* or *tshixele* in Tshivenḓa. If one was asked to translate the term *son* or *daughter* into Tshivenḓa, one would provide the Tshivenḓa equivalent *ṅwana* interchangeably, for both *son* and *daughter*. To a Muvenḓa reader, the message will be incomplete because the translator has not captured the gender differentiation of the English kinship term. Guralnik (1981) defines daughter as a *girl* or *woman as she is related to a parent or both parents, a female descendant*; whereas son is defined as *a boy or man as he is related to a parent or both parents, a male descendant*. The terms *daughter* and *son* will therefore be translated by explanation; daughter will be translated as *ṅwana wa musidzana* (a girl child) and son, *ṅwana wa mutukana* (a boy child). Some Vhavenḓa may argue that the equivalent of *son* is *murwa*. *Murwa* is not a Tshivenḓa term, but one borrowed from the Sotho languages, in this case Northern Sotho. Sotho languages form a language group of the south eastern zone of Bantu languages (Sesotho, Setswana and Northern Sotho) bound by common linguistic aspects. They are three of the eleven official languages of South Africa. Northern Sotho is a language which shares borders with Tshivenḓa in the north, and both languages are mainly spoken in the Limpopo Province of the Republic of South Africa.

Van Warmelo (1989) explains the term *murwa* as derived from *morwa* in the Sotho languages. The Vhavenḓa adopted the term *murwa* from Sesotho sa Leboa since the ethnic groups are neighbours. When one translates the terms *son* and *daughter* into Tshivenḓa, one is thus struck by the absence of equivalents. The opposite is also true; the English equivalent of *ṅwana* will cause some miscommunication between the two cultural groups. A translator will find it difficult to provide the exact equivalent of the term as on its own it does not indicate which gender is in question. Therefore *ṅwana* will be translated into English as *child*, which is a general term encompassing both male and female. English can identify specific senses, i.e. daughter, son, infant, baby and descendant for *ṅwana*. However, *infant, baby* and *descendant* encompass both male and female. Without these distinctions, the translation could convey an inaccurate message which could result in miscommunication between the two cultural groups, thereby hampering intercultural communication.

Other kinship terms that can create intercultural miscommunication are *sister* and *brother*. Sister is defined by Guralnik (1981) as *a female as she is related to other children of her parents (boys and girls)*. The same holds for brother, which is defined by Guralnik (1981) as a *male as he is related to other children of his parents (boys and girls)*. In Tshivenḓa, the equivalent of sister is *khaladzi* (sister of male person), and the equivalent of brother is also *khaladzi* (brother

of female person). Van Warmelo (1989) defines *khaladzi* as *sister of male*, *brother of female*. Tshivenḓa does not distinguish between these male and female personal relationship terms; *khaladzi* is the equivalent of both *sister* and *brother*. However, sister is related to the opposite sex, i.e. male, and brother is related to the opposite sex, i.e. female. In English, sister is related to both male and female. For example, one could say *Peter is talking to his sister or Mary is talking to her sister*. This is also the case with *brother*. The translation of the terms *sister* and *brother* could be confusing if the translator does not understand the cultures of the two groups. In Tshivenḓa, sister is related to male siblings, whereas brother is related to female siblings. In order to provide the correct translation, the translator should be conversant with the culture of both the source and the target languages. In cases such as these, the context would be crucial in determining the correct equivalent. Translating *khaladzi* from Tshivenḓa into English may also cause translational problems. For example, in *Masindi u tshimbila na khaladzi awe (Masindi is walking alongside his sister/her brother)*, the translator may find it difficult to understand whether the correct English equivalent is sister or brother because Tshivenḓa does not differentiate between the genders. This may be exacerbated by the fact that the name Masindi can be bestowed on a male or a female person. Unless the context provides a clue regarding the sex of the individual in question, it will be difficult for the translator to provide the correct equivalent. If the word is translated as *sister*, but the required equivalent is *brother*, the translator will fail to mediate between the cultures.

Likewise, Tshivenḓa does not distinguish between male and female in kinship terms such as *younger sister* and *younger brother*, *elder sister* and *elder brother*. The equivalent of *younger sister* and *younger brother* in Tshivenḓa is *murathu* which denotes both male and female. However, a female calls her younger sister *murathu*, but she will call her younger brother *khaladzi*. Likewise, a male refers to his younger brother as *murathu*, but calls his younger sister his *khaladzi*. The same is true for an elder sister and an elder brother: both are identified by the kinship term *mukomana*, but like the term *murathu*, the kinship relationship term *mukomana* applies only when the siblings are of the same gender. In both cases, the correct equivalent for the opposite sex is *khaladzi*. Without this awareness, a translator could provide incorrect equivalents which might lead to miscommunication between the two cultural groups.

Tshivenḓa does not distinguish between the kinship terms *grandmothe*r and *grandfather* either. The equivalent for both terms is *makhulu*. This term refers to both male and female. Guralnik (1981) defines grandmother as *the mother of one's father or mother*, whereas grandfather is defined as *the father of one's father or mother*. One does not talk of a female *makhulu* or male *makhulu*. The equivalent of *makhulu* in English is simply grandparent, without referring to the gender. The idea of gender in Tshivenḓa would be inferred from explanation. In fact, there are no Tshivenḓa equivalents for the terms *grandfather* and *grandmother*. Therefore, translating the two terms from English into Tshivenḓa is difficult, and translating from Tshivenḓa into English raises translational issues. Translation from English into Tshivenḓa would again be coupled with an annotated explanation, for example, *makhulu vha musadzi* (a female grandparent) and *makhulu vha munna* (a male grandparent). *Makhulu* refers also to one's wife's parents. Both the female and male are referred to as *makhulu* in Tshivenḓa, whereas in English they are referred to as *mother-in-law* and *father-in-law.* Translation from

Tshivenḓa into English would be the more difficult, particularly where the context in the source text does not refer to the gender of the individual. In such cases, the translator would not be sure whether the *makhulu* referred to was male or female. In order to provide the correct equivalent, the translator would have to be guided by the context.

The same approach applies to the kinship terms *grandson* and *granddaughter*. Both have the same equivalent, i.e. *muḓuhulu*. According to Guralnik (1981), granddaughter is defined as *a daughter of one's son or daughter*; and grandson is defined as *a son of one's son and daughter*. However, the Tshivenḓa word *muḓuhulu* is defined by Van Warmelo (1989) as *grandchild*. The English equivalent of *muḓuhulu* is grandchild. Grandchild is a general term that refers to both male and female children. When translating the kinship terms *grandson* and *granddaughter* into Tshivenḓa, a translator may provide the general term *muḓuhulu* but this will fail to convey the specific meaning because it does not refer to the gender of the child concerned. Likewise, the translator will find it difficult to translate the Tshivenḓa kinship term *muḓuhulu* into English because it is a general term; without context it would be difficult to determine the correct equivalent. *Muḓuhulu* may also be used to refer to one's sister's son or daughter. However, it does not apply to one's brother's son or daughter because they are considered as one's children. In this case, the equivalent of *muḓuhulu* in English is *nephew* or *niece,* depending on gender. Tshivenḓa does not differentiate *muḓuhulu* according to gender in this regard.

The kinship term *muzwala* (cousin) is exceptional in this regard; it does not indicate gender both in Tshivenḓa and English. From both sides it is not difficult to determine its equivalent. Therefore, a translator should be acquainted with the system of structuring kinship terminology in Tshivenḓa in order to provide the correct English equivalent.

5. Conclusion

The exposition above has revealed that each culture is unique, making cultural translation a difficult if not an impossible task (Rubel and Rosman, 2003). The greater the differences between the two cultures, the greater the difficulty in finding equivalents. Some Tshivenḓa kinship terms do not differentiate between genders; there is instead one kinship term that denotes both male and female. Such kinship terms are difficult to translate into other languages, unless the aspect of gender is made explicit or suggested by the context. In some instances, Tshivenḓa does not have equivalents for other languages' kinship terms. This absence of equivalents brings with it translational difficulties, which can only be solved through explanation. These difficulties impede intercultural communication. The translator, as mediator, may fail to convey the correct meaning to the readers of the target language; this may lead to miscommunication because there will be no mutual understanding between the two cultural groups. In order to avoid such obstacles, translators of kinship terminology between languages which are not related should strive to understand the particular cultural systems involved. There are several ways we can gain knowledge about cultures. One of the best ways to learn about people in other cultures is to study their language. It is not possible to understand people's behaviour without understanding their language (Gudykunst & Sudweeks, 1992). Translators should therefore have a better understanding of both the source and target languages in order to interpret cultural systems of the societies involved correctly.

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