

The Sabbath Trap and other Pitfalls in Xhosa Translations of the Bible¹

Azila Talit Reisenberger
University of Cape Town

Introduction

This paper is formulated as a commentary on linguistic problems, particularly the significance of phonetic and cognitive aspects of words used in translating texts from one language to another. This significance increases when the text in question is the Bible, which has a major influence on people's lives and beliefs. Also, when the original language of the text and the recipient language are very different and represent cultures that are equally different. In this paper the relevant issues are dealt with, not in a theoretical manner, but rather by using practical examples from observation relating to the most recent translations of the Bible into Xhosa.

In order to prepare the way for describing some of the characteristics of the newest translation, a brief background to previous translations of the Bible into isiXhosa - and to the language itself - is given. In particular, the philosophy of translation determining the most recent translation is examined; and the significance of Xhosa culture in relation to the various translations is also considered. Lastly, we discuss some unforeseen, yet significant problems that have arisen despite cautious translation work and the ambivalence in interpretation and potential ambiguity for practice that could result.

Brief background to isiXhosa and translations of the Bible

isiXhosa is the language spoken by the amaXhosa, Tembu, Pondo and Fingo peoples living in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa². Today there are seven million isiXhosa speakers in South Africa, second in number only to Zulu speakers, with Afrikaans speakers numbering third among South Africans.³

As isiXhosa is a tonal language, what is most important for fluency and effective communication is the vocal intonation of the words, the length of the syllables, and the stresses placed on them, as the entire meaning of a word can change with a small variation in intonation and/or emphasis. In addition to the

difference in pronunciation of consonants and vowels from that of the Indo-European group of languages, isiXhosa also has three kinds of click sounds which are made by the teeth, tongue, lips, and the back cavity of the mouth. These are now written as “c”, “x” and “q”. Furthermore, each of these can be made implosive (by pulling air in) or explosive (by pushing air out), with a deep sound from the throat, or the addition of an “n” in the front, and so on. Early translators thus not only had problems of content to struggle through, but also decisions to make regarding the shape of these extra sounds.

The Bible was originally translated into isiXhosa in the early 19th century by European missionaries attempting to convert the isiXhosa-speaking people to Christianity. Among the first Christian missionaries to work among the amaXhosa was John Bennie, who arrived in 1821. He was the first to devise a Xhosa orthography and to translate some of the Bible into isiXhosa, starting with Psalm 23 (Satyo:1993).

In the 1830s, translation of the Bible into isiXhosa started in earnest among the Wesleyan missionaries, in particular Shaw, Shrewsbury and Boyce. But it was the Rev J. W. Appleyard who brought the project to a conclusion in 1864. In addition to speaking Hebrew, Appleyard knew Greek and isiXhosa, and might well have drawn on this knowledge. However, from his division of chapters it is apparent that he worked from the King James English translation, and not from the original languages. The scholars of the time had some reservations about Appleyard’s version, the main objection being that Appleyard spoke *Mfengo*, which is more colloquial than the “King’s” Xhosa. The amaXhosa, however, liked it, used it, and with the passing years it was revised repeatedly.

Only in the early 1900s did the Bible Society in London commission a new translation which was completed in 1927 and named *The Union Version*. Subsequent to this, other new versions followed according to need, and included a new Xhosa orthography in 1942. During the apartheid era, in line with the government’s notorious “separate but equal” social development programme, there was an attempt to explore and develop the orthography of all ethnic groups in South Africa in order to preserve the wealth of their oral literature in writing. As the new orthography became compulsory in all schools, the *Revised Union Version* had to be rewritten according to the rules laid down by apartheid’s Department of Education.

In the late 1960s isiXhosa-speaking people themselves played a role in translation. Three new letters were introduced into the alphabet in an attempt to solve some of the problems, viz. one that looks like the Greek *gamma* and sounds like *het-* in Hebrew; an implosive *b* that looks like the letter *b*, but with the vertical line bent to the right; a slightly elongated and narrowed *s* for *ch*, like the Hebrew *shin*. Still more revision was needed, however, and on June 6 1996, the most recent isiXhosa translation of the Bible was published, having taken 21 years to complete. Whereas the previous translation was called *Izibhalo*

Ezingcwele (The Holy Scriptures), the new one is *Ibhayibhile* (The Bible) and sells at a range of prices, making it accessible to a large number of followers. The dialect chosen for this version is Ciskei isiXhosa, and the mode of expression is that of the manner of speech of thirty-year-olds. But it is not directed exclusively to this group. In fact, the hope has been expressed that through this Bible a more unified Xhosa will take shape, in which splinter peripheral dialects will be drawn into the centre.

One important advancement in this translation over most previous ones has been the increasingly active involvement of isiXhosa-speaking translators, so that evidence of patronising attitudes is not as marked as it was in the earlier versions. Yet, it is this author's contention that the patronising attitude is still present.

Philosophy of Translation and the isiXhosa Bible

There are many philosophies regarding the "art" of translation (Nida and Taber: 1974; Crafford:1997). Some translators advocate total loyalty to the original language, while others advocate total clarity in the recipient language. Yet others emphasise poetic and linguistic features (Van Niekerk: 1999; Hermanson:1995). The earlier translation *Izibhalo Ezingcwele* emphasised the accuracy of words. But it is a stilted work, almost as if it had been translated word for word from a dictionary, reminding us of Aquila's translation of the Bible into Greek. The amaXhosa themselves apparently understand it clearly, but it is not easy to read, and is definitely not appreciated for the beauty of its language.

The new version follows the Dynamic Equivalence Principle (Nida and Taber: 1974). Before starting with the actual translation of a work, translators study its general meaning, context and philosophy. They then divide the text, first into larger, and then into smaller structures (one verse or a few verses together). Finally, they translate the meaning into the recipient language. To illustrate this process, here is an example given by the translation supervisor of the new version, Ds. J.C. Oosthuysen⁴:

"I caught a cold" is understood to mean "I am sick, with a fever", then the idiomatic isiXhosa translation is inserted, viz. "I was entered into by a cold".

Where there is ambiguity in the original language, the translators decide which is the more accurate meaning and present their choice in terms of that meaning alone. Only in special cases where the text allows for a dual reading, that is, where the one meaning is as likely as the other, is the selected reading cited in the main body of the text and the alternative presented as a footnote. This is

not often done, however, as the principle behind this latest translation is to make the Bible easy to read, rather than to confuse the reader.

In the latest translation of the Bible, following the theory of Eugene Nida (1974), the tendency is to consider the recipient language as more of a priority than the original wording. Metaphors, coinages and images are reviewed, and while keeping their meanings intact, examples more familiar to the recipient people, the amaXhosa, are used. Sometimes original images have appropriate, if not identical, meanings. Yet, for ideological reasons and because they betray a patronising attitude, these are censored. For example, in Psalm 68:30, God is to summon His might and "Rebuke the beasts that dwell among the reeds, the herds of bulls ..." The reference is to Egypt, but these words could also conjure up the monster-like creature in traditional Xhosa cosmology, the Tikolosh, who inhabits riverside reeds. Because the Tikolosh was not acceptable in Christian circles, however, the translation was adjusted and the image was dropped.

Sometimes the translators felt that additions were necessary. For example, when a custom or a concept cited in the biblical text was foreign to Xhosa culture, the policy was to elaborate on the meaning within the text. Where longer explanations were necessary, they were given in a footnote, thus making *Ibhayibhile* noticeably longer than the King James Version on which the translation was based.

Some aspects of the translation have been easy, however. For instance, isiXhosa is a language rich in words describing cattle, since historically the amaXhosa were a pastoral people with strong rural ties. Consequently, it is easy to relate the stories of the patriarchs, who were shepherds, and there is no vocabulary problem translating even what seems to be the complicated narrative of Jacob breeding with Laban's flock. (Genesis 30: 31-43). Furthermore, naming is as serious an event in Xhosa tradition as it is in the Bible. The isiXhosa translation likens biblical names to isiXhosa names, for example, not only are the names of Joseph's sons, Manasseh ("for God made me forget all my hardship and my father's house") and Ephraim ("for God made me fruitful in the land of my affliction") in Genesis 41:51-52, retained, but *uPumizile* and *uNzaliphindiwe*, which are semantically similar to these biblical names, are added. The multiplicity of names has been a pervasive practice among traditional amaXhosa, with one name being given in childhood, and another on marriage, for example, so that the change of biblical characters' names as in the case of the change of Jacob to Israel does not pose a problem (Koopman 1976).

The prohibition against pronouncing aloud the divine name of God, and of its replacement with *Adonay* (*My Lord*) while at the same time visually reading YHWH, also has a useful parallel in the *blonipha* language which is part of Xhosa tradition. The *blonipha* custom requires that in-laws not be addressed by their names, but in a roundabout way, to protect them from familiarity and contempt. If their names are similar to everyday words, these must be avoided and replaced

with synonyms or explanations. In the earlier translation of the Bible, God's name was specified as *Yehove*, whereas in the new translation it is *Nkosi*⁵, and only when God is asked what His name is and He explicitly says: "I am what I am" (Exodus 3:14) is it written as *uNdikhoyo* (the one which is present).

The linguistic features of isiXhosa lend themselves easily to the poetry of the Old Testament and to the expression of emotion. The Psalms are particularly beautifully translated, with puns and isiXhosa's inherent rhyme exploited (Schneider:1992), and particular use is made of intonation to enhance musicality. Riddles as a form of cultural socialising are familiar in Xhosa tradition, so these devices in the Old Testament also resonate.

Where Biblical and historical Xhosa pastoral and family traditions are similar, it obviously makes the translation of concepts and incidents that much easier. While on the one hand these resonances make certain aspects of the translation of meaning relatively easy, on the other hand, as the amaXhosa are traditionally a pastoral people, isiXhosa has a very limited vocabulary as regards sea-faring. As a result, where in the Biblical text anchors or shipwrecks are used as metaphors, the isiXhosa translation ignores these and replaces them with other images. Where in the Bible it says, for example, "he came to a shipwreck", meaning he met with a disaster, this image in translation is rendered as "he came to a calabash of milk, which fell on the ground". For the same reason, where in Paul's letter to Timothy it reads "Hope is an anchor of life", this image is replaced with "hope is the centre pole which keeps the hut up". This replacement of metaphors sets a potentially dangerous precedent, as we do not know for certain what aspect of the particular image Paul, or any other biblical speaker, wanted to emphasise (Brettler 1989). Shipwreck does not only invoke the destruction and loss that is rendered in the image of spilt milk. It is possible that the image of the anchor was used to invoke an element beside that of being securing in one place, preventing one from straying. Perhaps an additional idea of depth was suggested which is lost in the hut centre-pole image.

Similarly, the names of non-indigenous trees, which are unfamiliar to the amaXhosa, were replaced with those of local trees in, for example in Jeremiah (1:1-12): "And the Lord came to me, saying, 'Jeremiah, what do you see?' And I said, 'I see a rod of almond'. Then the Lord said to me, 'you have seen well, for I am watching over my word to perform it'". First of all the name of the tree is changed to familiarise it, then the pun *shaked*, *shoked* is explained in a footnote.

Pitfalls: The Sabbath Trap

Apart from having to make the new translation of the Bible appeal to the varied groups of Bantu whose languages differ slightly in vocabulary, there are also certain Hebrew words having Xhosa homophones which have caused translation problems. While working on the new version, the translators became aware

that the word Sabbath was similar to the isiXhosa word for a trap (*izibata*). Rather than cause confusion when the text was read aloud, "the day of rest" was substituted in the new translation for the word Sabbath in the old translation.

It is admirable to attempt to make the Bible text clear and accessible in this way, but, as with the Sabbath example, the translators are aware that there can be pitfalls. What may appear on the surface to be the same, may actually differ in details. The inheritance laws accepted by the amaXhosa, for example, appear on the surface to be the same as those in the Bible, but some investigation shows that they are not. On closer examination, one can see that there are differences in detail, which if not emphasised, may lead to an unnecessary corruption of meaning. This is particularly so for a culture so far removed in time and space from that of biblical Israel.

This leads us to one of the biggest problems, or as we have termed them, pitfalls, in the latest translation, i.e. that of the translation relating to the practice of circumcision. Ds. Oosthuysen regrets that the problems encountered in using the word "circumcision" had not been anticipated as had those associated with Sabbath. Biblical circumcision is a *brit*, a sign of covenant, and the Israelites were circumcised when they were eight days old. In Xhosa tradition, however, exactly the same operation - the removal of the foreskin - is not regarded as a covenant, but is part of an initiation ceremony practised by late adolescents symbolising their rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. In other words, whereas amongst the Israelites an uncircumcised male is an *arel*, among the amaXhosa he is a nobody, a socially insignificant minor.

When Paul tells the Galatians (5:1-6) that circumcision is not important, he may lose credibility amongst amaXhosa readers for whom circumcision is essential in the process of becoming an adult. In order not to isolate Paul and his teachings, the preachers have to try to explain that what Paul meant was that only Israelite circumcision is not important. Such confusions could have been avoided if the isiXhosa words for circumcision had been differentiated, one as meaning *brit* (covenant), and the other referring to the Xhosa rite of passage.

In Conclusion

The recent translation of the Bible into Xhosa is easily accessible to the Xhosa speaking people, and it is widely used and liked by the readers. It is this author's contention that a patronising attitude prevails throughout the book. It undermines the ability of the readers to comprehend concepts which are not part of their daily life and in future translation one should take care not to repeat this error.

One should congratulate the translators for their anticipation of potential ambiguities caused by the pronunciation of similar words and avoiding this pitfall by replacing them with other terms. The same policy has to be applied

when dealing with the translation of the biblical term "covenant" (*brit*) in order to prevent confusion with the traditional Xhosa rite of passage from childhood to adulthood. It will save the preachers a lot of confusing explanations regarding Paul's writings concerning circumcision.

Notes

- ¹ This research was made possible thanks to a special award from the CSD.
- ² It is the mother tongue of Nelson Mandela, the first President of democratic South Africa.
- ³ As emerges from the population census in South Africa, 1997.
- ⁴ This procedure was recorded in detail in an interview with Dominee J. C. Oosthuysen, 7 August 1996. As the son of a missionary, Ds. Oosthuysen grew up in the Transkei (now part of the Eastern Cape) where he spoke isiXhosa in the street, Afrikaans at home, and listened to his father talk to traders in English. He studied isiXhosa at school as a first language until Standard 2 when his family moved and thereafter went to an Afrikaans medium school in Umtata. He later completed an MA in theology, one year of which was spent at Yale. His first congregation was in Mbekweni, near Paarl (in the Western Cape) where he still works. Ds. Oosthuysen belongs to the united Reform Church, one of the major Afrikaans-speaking churches in South Africa.
This translation project was started in 1974 with Ds. Oosthuysen assigned as coordinator by the Bible Society of South Africa, together with a large committee comprising groups of translators, advisors on languages (Hebrew, Greek, etc), the Review Committee, and the fifty readers who met at regular intervals, including an Annual Convention and workshops on the philosophy of translation. Other major personalities were Professor Odendaal, a Biblical Hebrew scholar from Stellenbosch, and Mr Pahl, Chairman of the Xhosa Language Committee.
- ⁵ This word also generally translates as a term of respect and also means "king" or "chief"

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