

The Study Group on Language at the United Nations
in cooperation with
The Centre for Research and Documentation on World Language Problems
and the **Center for Applied Linguistics**
invites you to a symposium on

Language, the Sustainable Development Goals, and Vulnerable Populations

on Thursday & Friday, May 11 & 12, 2017
at the Church Center, 777 United Nations Plaza, New York, NY 10017
(First Avenue at 44th Street)

Abstract

Cultures that use indirect language today face the challenge of being misunderstood. Indirection is often associated with lack of self-esteem, zeal, truthfulness and sincerity. Yet, it is for some, a style of language communication intended to save face and keep peace. As such, people who use indirection may be misunderstood to the extent of being excluded, undermined, and dismissed as unsophisticated and disregarded by those who “speak straight to the point.” A case in point is the Basoga in the Eastern part of Uganda, whose language of communication is dominated by riddling and proverbial. Defined by colonialists and neighbours as “*abempwitu*” meaning belligerent, their educational and economic performance is comparably dismal and deteriorating by the year largely because of language. Although many Basoga have served in high positions of power, authority and influence since 1910, their power of negotiation and influence has been low because their language of articulation of the matters of Busoga is engrossed in imagery. An understanding of such a people’s language and what it seeks to communicate calls for specific attention to language diversity. The Basoga, like many indigenous and African people, continue to lose out on many opportunities, because they are misunderstood by their partners in development also because they have a low self-concept. I have found out that the economic stagnation and social frustration of the people in Busoga is largely due to low levels of Lusoga language appreciation. Hence, their detached duty to and use of their direct resources both material and human.

BIO

Cornelius Wambi Gulere, Ph.D., has researched widely on Lusoga language and culture, and published many books in Lusoga. As a teacher and development worker, he has pioneered the teaching of Lusoga language and Literature at Secondary and tertiary levels. His recent publication is on “nomenclature and the authenticity of translated texts”.

1:10 Session 2: Non-State Languages

CULTURES THAT USE INDIRECT LANGUAGE TODAY FACE THE CHALLENGE OF BEING MISUNDERSTOOD

- Cornelius Wambi Gulere, Ph.D.,
(Teacher and Development Worker, Uganda)
E-mail: gulerefoundation@gmail.com
Cell Phone: +256 776 530 512

Introduction

In this paper, it is argued that, cultures that use indirect language, face the challenge of being misunderstood by those that speak straight to the point. Straight talk is today emphasised and indirection is discouraged. Indirection is often associated with low esteem, lack of zeal, unreliability and insincerity. Straight talking is generally perceived as positive, confident, well informed, and estimable.

However, some people, the Lusoga language speakers to be precise, use indirection as a cultural style of language communication, intended to save face and keep peace. It is regarded as an act of respect, decorum, empathy, intelligence, humility and many such positive values among the Basoga. Straight talk, on the other hand, is perceived as rude, daring, impolite and disrespectful.

As such, the use of indirection in proverbs, riddles, stories, idioms, gestures, costume and the like may be cause for misinterpretations. This puts entire communities on edge to the extent of being excluded, undermined, and dismissed as unsophisticated, corrupt and undependable. Most people of African descent and other indigenous peoples face this challenge of being disregarded by those who are the “masters of the word.” This happens because their orality and oracy has not exhibited equal complexity of life in the eyes of the ‘developed cultures’. What their genius hides or stores behind the unwritten signs and symbols that can neither be transcribed nor translated is cause for anxiety.

Riddling can offer a range of “vantage points on how language can be structured and what roles it can play in social life”. My study makes “more reliable use of native speakers’ meta-level discourse on language ... to illuminate issues of central concern” (Bauman and Briggs 1990:61). No computer programme has yet been developed to successfully interpret or recreate the silent gestures of many indigenous people whether in times of joy or sorrow, courtship or death, working or caring for the family. We know pretty well that in these situations, people use deep symbolism to communicate.

The spoken words are not necessarily what is meant, but only for those for whom it is intended do they communicate. That allows for the bystanders, the unintended audience, to benefit at their own levels, from the message being communicated, without physically being excluded. So when native people are talking, and when they are interviewed by outsiders, they do not allow foreigners into the wisdom of the land to the full measure. Everything is done in riddles, proverbs, idioms, signs and symbols best known and interpreted by the natives themselves; especially those who have the knowledge and power of observation to do so.

What is the problem?

Language study is quite a neglected trade, yet, it is the center of human development. In particular, riddling, that “offers taste, quality and splendor ... through its multi-layered appropriation of space, imagery and style” (Gulere 2016:159) is generally ignored. For that matter, riddling as the poetry of

persuasion in the everyday living mimics the way “audiences organize, agree and disagree in building consensus” (Gulere 2016: 43). The underlying language structures of meaning and meaning-making, especially the interaction between people and context have artistic power that create life and longevity.

Whereas the use of non-verbal language is common, all meaning depends on a structure which lies behind every sign and purpose together in creating meaning. Also, the use of complex metaphor in everyday discourse serves to sustain the riddle quality (unknowability) of a people. There is usually a fascinating blend of alliteration, repetition, and consonance that strike the audience at metaphorical levels. Social transformation from one known sign to another creates the multilayered meanings in any communication.

On the other hand, western education has robbed many indigenous people of their power to innovate and create knowledge as it has disregarded indigenous languages as vernaculars propagating witchcraft and nonsense. As a result, the young people, uprooted and taught in foreign languages, have neither mastery in their indigenous languages nor confidence in foreign languages. By that, they lose out on sharpening their brains to decipher the deeper knowledge from their surroundings and cultures.

These are the people that speak for Africa and their communities in national parliaments and cabinets and negotiate sophisticated contracts in world fora. They are disconnected from the reality of life of their people and they are not inculcated in the new culture of their education. No wonder, their negotiation skills have remained wanting. The connection between the elite mind on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and that of the indigenous or ordinary persons has been one of suspicion, fear and neglect. The nonstarter mentality termed as *empwitu* or belligerence among the Basoga, is a desire to re-assert their will. (See the colonial reports on Busoga Province).

Be that as it may, the current trend of development becomes even more complicated when people of diverse language and culture are put on the same negotiating table with common agenda and are expected to arrive at a consensus on matters of mutual benefit. In such cases, caucuses are formed to bridge the communication gap. What has not been discovered till now, however, is that “*naasirika alira inhinha* -- even the quiet one can mourn their mother.” This simple statement is quite loaded and full of ideas for our discussion on language inequalities.

The silent African speaks volumes as the vocal American but in different ways. While the American culture encourages outspoken daring talk; Kisoga culture encourages quiet dispositions, silent and downcast eye contact sometimes when it comes to speaking with leaders and elders in public.

The Africans in Africa find their brothers, the Black Americans strange because of their different cultural orientation. That explains why many Black Americans have been unable to change or influence Africa. Those who migrate find it difficult to return home too because they consequently get enculturated and lost into the new culture that no longer welcomes or tolerates the former.

Whereas it is admirable to be fast, work on time, stand on principles etc. generally, the Musoga will find justification for doing otherwise basing on riddle-proverbial statements like, “*eteesenda tefula* – what does not step back does not hit hard”, “*naatambula empola atuuka ewala* – even the one that walks slowly reaches afar”, “*kyakwise kikwitira irala* – what will kill you will kill you completely”, ... These proverbs are commonly used in society to teach and police the people. The wide use of riddles and proverbs in oral communication and much less in the written is an inequality that stems from education

orientation. My case study of Busoga reveals that, the economic stagnation and social frustration of the people in Busoga is largely due to low levels of Lusoga language appreciation.

What has riddling got to do with it?

Here, I discuss very briefly, an ethnographic record of a riddle discourse captured at Nsinze village in Namutumba district at Mpolyabigere community library in 2009. The conversations touched on transport, sexuality, health and religion in metaphorical ways. I will discuss 5 riddle precedents: 19, 20, 23, 24 and 25 focusing on the health interpretation.

The Riddle precedent 19: "*Nsamba kalakita / tulakita* -- I kick a tractor" meant that men who were without self-initiative needed to be helped mechanically; while Riddle 20: "*Dawudi muleeyi* -- David is tall" referred to David's genitals as "*oluguudo* -- a road" through which life comes. Note that, "*Dawudi*" sounds like 'get to the other side' which 'David' does not do. These complex thoughts and feelings of the language community are socially charged and potentially loaded.

Any direct interpretation of these two precedents is minimally rewarding. It could be that, the use of "modern tractors helps in constructing long kilometers of better road", which is an ordinary fact. On the other hand, the indirect message says, "weak men are (like) poorly constructed roads". In the mind of the riddling community, weakness is directly associated with poverty. It is not just about mechanization and efficiency as construed in direct messaging. Human weakness undoes mechanical efficiency.

It is little wonder, therefore, that many construction and agricultural mechanization projects have failed in Uganda partly because efficient (strong) drivers cannot be found to operate these culturally foreign machines. The belief that men could lose their manhood while in such business is overlooked during contract negotiations. The employees and their spouses need to be assured that the business is safe and the community members who are the most prolific in articulating this matter must be made aware of, not only the economic, but the health benefits of the tractor or mechanisation.

It is not possible to de-associate riddling from everyday discourse for whatever purpose. Another example is the meaning construed in Riddle 23: "*Katonda mu kikebe* -- God in a tin", unraveled as "a jigger in a foot". It pits faith against religion by raising the question how God could be a jigger. Nabirye Cissy, the protagonist of the riddle precedent explained that, "small jiggers are so wise so that they burrow into the feet of humans and even cause death. Such power belongs to God alone."

At the time of this study, jiggers were rampant in Busoga. A very old song is sung telling of one Mpaata who had been eaten up by jiggers to the extent that he could no longer walk. This song is part of the *otamenhaibuga* courtship dance ensemble of the Basoga. The riddle message then, is not so much about the confinement of God in limited spaces of religious belief, here conceived as a tin; as it is about the prevalence of micro-organisms causing diseases like AIDS. The disease causing germ is seen as "God" and the human body as "tin". This is contrary to religious belief that God is life, love and peace, and, according to Nabirye Cecilia, "God inflicts pain even to those he loves including His own Son Jesus Christ simply because He is powerful like a jigger" (Gulere, 2016:136). Such reasoning could be regarded as blasphemous and that is why riddling is much suppressed among adults and left mostly to the children. However, the point is made that, freedom of speech and freedom of thought are founded on a culture of language communication and that needs to be studied and understood.

Relatedly, Riddle 24: “a little short man wearing a short coat that reaches here <showing the waistline>” refers directly to a “padlock”, yet deeply, it refers to the condom that locks the Human Immune Virus (HIV) from entering the human body. The “little short man wearing a short coat” is the penis meaning that the female condom had not been put into consideration. The allegory of the padlock as a tool for security informs our guard against life’s dangers. Straight talk messages that say, “Wear condoms” do not share the depth of meaning in the face of this terrible HIV/AIDS disease. Paying particular attention to the ‘little things’ in life heals the stigma attached to HIV/AIDS.

The idea of being guarded is further developed in Riddle 25: “*Oyandhaire obwaala oyenda ki?* -- You have spread out your fingers what do you want?” Here, the play on the words “*bwaala*” (fingers) and “*buwala*” (girls) reflects the structure of the cassava leaf. Cassava is a staple food in Basoga. Its leaf structure is used to question the girls (*obuwala*) with exposed or laid open (*bwaala*) genitals (*buwala*); what do they want? The message directly describes the cassava plant leave that opens to the sun to make food. More deeply, it is questioning why the young girls in Busoga should live loose lives.

What are the missing links?

Regarded by colonialists and neighbours as “*abempwitu*”, meaning belligerent people, the Basoga have their social (educational, health) and economic (trade, investment) performance becoming dismal and deteriorating by the year largely because of language inequality. One Muganda friend told me that, “Basoga were not serious. They talk like children.” I subsequently learnt that this mindset was a result of the false notion that riddling was the game of children and yet, the Basoga gave much time to it. In the same vein, although many Basoga notables have served in high positions of power, authority and influence since 1910s, their power of negotiation and influence has been insignificant. This could be attributed to their poor language articulation that puts matters of Busoga in imaginings. The Basoga face the challenge of thinking that the other person will see their point of view without them having to make the point in clear arguments.

The old adage, “*omwami kyakobye zeena kyenkoba* – what the boss says is what I also say”, often associated with Basoga women and the Basoga generally, means that the whole community depends on mutual agreement with *omwami* or the precedent setter or leader. But who is this leader? Is it the book or the culture trained leader that the people must look to? Certainly, a good leader must be a good negotiator. And a good negotiator must be well trained in the language and culture of the people and subjects of the negotiation. Disparity between the languages and cultures of the negotiators yield negative results for the development partnerships. How could a Musoga technocrat, for instance, whose literacy in Lusoga is far below standard, negotiate efficiently in a foreign language and culture and achieve leverage for his or her subjects?

For the contemporary society, it is thought that, “money works-- *esente nekola*”, but the reality is that money has not propelled people out of poverty. It has instead entrenched deeper division, hatred and conflict. Local leaders who are well entrenched in their cultures often say, “*kyoyenda kikuseeza, bwoyenda okuseka ofungiza matama*—what you like often costs you, when you like to lough you tighten the cheeks”. Meaning that, working hard is the basis for success and not money or academic qualification as it’s often thought. As such, many people still regard formal education with contempt since it tends to delink learners from their language and culture. As proof, the opportunities that were given by the British colonial government to local chiefs to educate their princess and princesses were instead given to children of “less loyalty” as this would keep the loyal class intact.

Conclusions

Since communities have become more heterogeneous, an understanding of a people's language and communication calls for specific attention to language diversity in specific communities. Leaders working hard enough to get their people out of poverty should speak and identify with the people in their language and culture. Although most people are multi-lingual, continued loss of touch with individual mother tongues affects many opportunities with the partners in development. Thus, economic stagnation and social frustration is largely due to low levels of language appreciation leading to low self-concept, mis-identity and confidence crisis. Hence, the dismal use of language affects resource use, both material and human.

In this way, society continues to lose out on many opportunities because of being taken for granted by the partners in development. Having officers appending their signatures to agreements is not always a symbol of community consent. As known in riddling, delegates could sign for various reasons, say, monetary, prestige, saving the face and the like. When it comes to the real meaning making, one has to look at the gestures on the face, and the statements made during and after the meetings. Interpreters of the unspoken unwritten word are needed now more than ever before to always make sure that the correct message has been advanced and decoded.

References

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