A Linguistic Case for the necessity of Enculturation in Theological and Economic Teaching based on the 'Shape of Words':

including a case study comparing Sub-Saharan Africa with the West

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Abstract

Considering words and the areas of the mind that they impact as two-dimensional shapes forms the theoretical basis from which intercultural communication between the West and Sub-Saharan Africa are examined. Unique shapes of words are illustrated as arising from their meeting with equally unique 'impactible areas' of people's minds, and cultures, resulting in transmitted and received shapes differing in a way related to lexical content at both ends. Differences in overlap between word impacts, shapes of words and fit between words in different languages / cultures are shown to contribute to imprecision in translation, resulting in the recommendation that local policy be of local origin. The above is applied to Christian mission in Africa through diagrammatic representations of 'love' as a spiritual gift in comparison to fellow words, and by an inter-cultural consideration of public transport systems.

Keywords: language, linguistics, Africa, theology, translation, inter-cultural, Gospel, missiology, Christian, culture, context, pragmatics, love, economics, word-shapes, policy, public transport.

Introduction

Our perception of reality arises from our understanding of the workings of the world around us. Part of that world is the languages that we use. Assumptions that we make about language affect the ways that we think about things. If our assumptions are inaccurate, then so will be our 'reality'.

Languages are commonly assumed to be equivalent. That is, it is commonly assumed that what can be said in one language can be said in another. While perhaps less an assumption of scholars, this is very much taken for granted in day to day life. If they were not equivalent, then translation could never be accurate. In essence translation would be impossible. For translation to be inaccurate (or impossible) would be a great concern in today's multi-cultural international world. The changes arising in the process of translation tend expediently to be ignored.

In fact, a translated text cannot have the same impact as the original.(1) A translation, I suggest, is always an invention. This has major implications for communication. If translation is an invention and not a reproduction of an original, the difference between the two could be functionally, aesthetically, historically or in other ways of critical importance. "The debate on translatability is now frankly and thoroughly a part of epistemology" says Steiner.(2)

This would be expected to be the case especially in relation to science. Unlike 'religion', science's claims to objectivity require precision. Scientific assumptions hold true only if a scientific worldview is in place. In the absence of such a worldview science's claims will be interpreted religiously (or holistically). Science cannot be built on a religious superstructure, because then the necessary foundations are not in place to enable it's use.

I attempt to illustrate this in a very simple but also very practical way in this essay, by taking words that are used in language as two dimensional shapes. While doubtless a simplification of the full complexity of the nature of words and their role in communication, I suggest this provides a helpful demonstration of a complex reality.

I follow Sperber and Wilson in denying the code theory of language.(3) To say that words have or carry meanings is, I suggest, fallacious and misleading. Spoken words are sounds of certain wavelength and

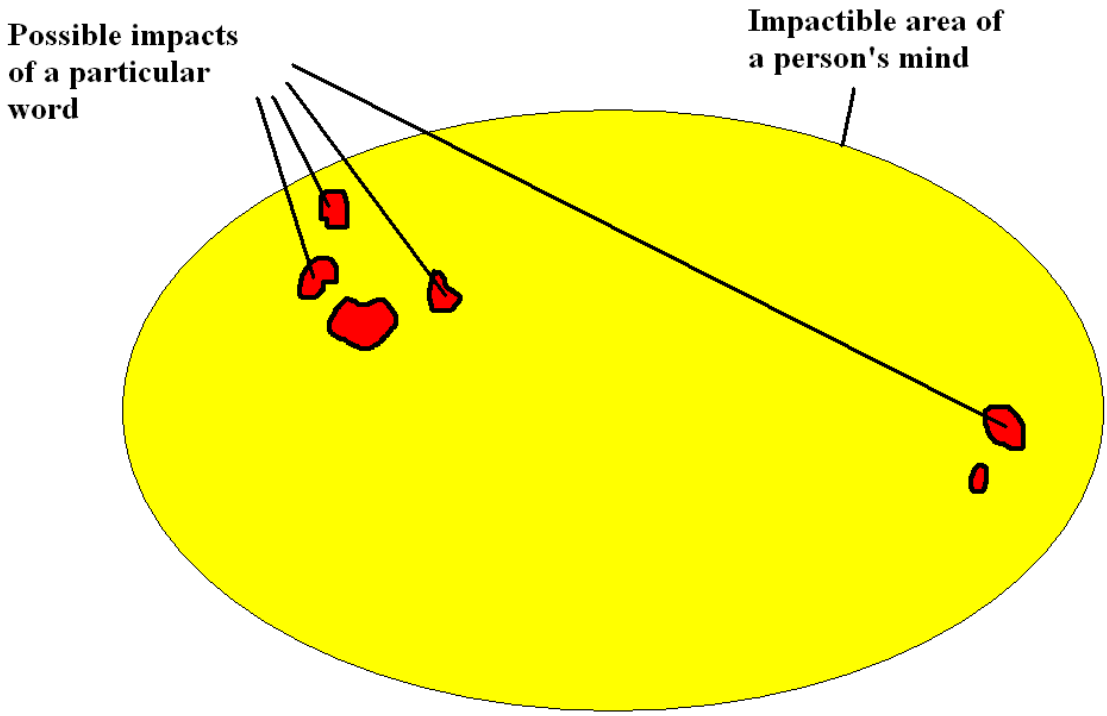
magnitude that strike the ears and then mind of the hearer. The hearer must make sense of those sounds. Neither ink on paper(4) nor varying wavelengths of sounds themselves carry either life, intelligence or 'meaning'. The meaning arises entirely from the reader or listener. Words have impacts on people's ears and minds, and those impacts by some means, perhaps akin to that described by Sperber and Wilson referred to as relevance theory,(5) result in people's intelligent acquisition of knowledge or response to a situation.

I apply this study by considering it in relation to Christian mission and development assistance from the West to Africa. I will ask whether and how communication across cultural boundaries can occur. I hope that my readers will, on realising what goes on in the process of cross-cultural inter-human communication, come to appreciate the importance of rooting the Gospel and other 'knowledge' into local contexts, and how difficult it is to try to run things in a foreign place (for example Sub-Saharan Africa) from contexts that are very different, such as Europe or America.

Shape Theory of Language

Any word in any language can be said to have a range of impacts. Such a range can be illustrated spatially by a diagram as follows, of a word:

Fig. 1. Range of impacts of a word



Because alternative impacts of a word tend to be related, word 'impacts' may be in clusters. For example if we take the word 'rule.' This can be the rule of a sovereign, or the rule of law. These impacts resemble closely, so are in a cluster. But words can also have apparently unrelated impacts, so to rule is also to draw straight lines on a piece of paper. Hence Fig 1. one has two clusters of impacts. These could represent ruling in the political sense, and ruling in the sense of straight lines.

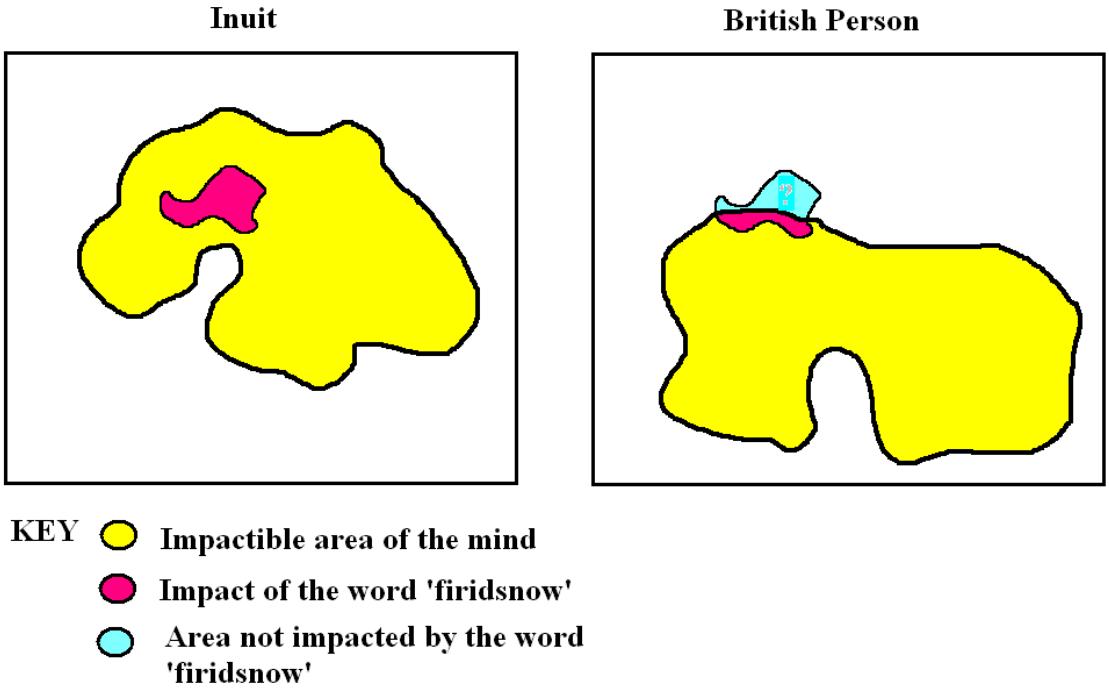
Each impact will have a certain, if unclear, influence on the other impacts.(6) That is, if we talk of the *rule* of a certain king this will be associated, even if obscurely, with drawing lines on paper. (Such associations are often a source of humour.) So we can say that the good rule of a king straightens out people's lives, as a ruler straightens out people's line-drawing. Hence different words are never absolute synonyms. A word that may seem to be a synonym of rule such as 'govern' is not a synonym in so far as it does not have the association with straight lines that 'rule' has.

I suggest that a word can helpfully be represented by a diagram such as Fig 2 below. In this case diverse impacts are collated to give a word a particular *shape* within the theoretical 'total range of impacts' of any word. Any word in a particular language can be represented as having a particular and unique shape.

Fig. 2. Diagramatic Representation of the Shape of a Word – including its lexemes

As the shape of words varies, so also does the shape of the impactible area of a person's mind. A word cannot have an impact if there is nothing for it to impact on in the mind of the listener. Often only a part of a word will 'impact'. A classic example often used to illustrate this is that of types of snow recognised by Inuits.(7) Let's imagine that a certain snow is called 'firidsnow'.(8) The impact of this word is given below, on an Inuit as against a typical British person:

Fig. 3. The impact of the term 'firidsnow' on an Inuit and on a British person

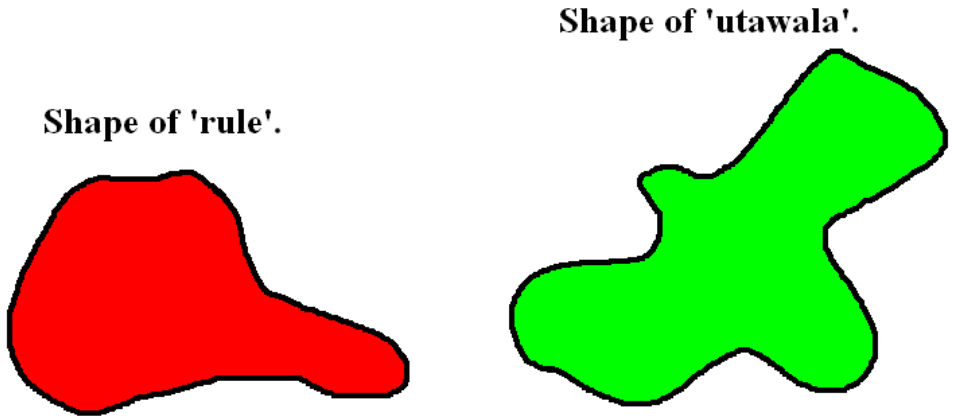


Because this British person has not had experience with different types of snow part of the impact of the term 'firidsnow' is lost (light blue) and thus the shape of the impact is different than it is for the Inuit (pink). In fact, the same word can never have exactly the same impact on people whose culture differs. The greater the cultural difference the greater also the likely difference in the impact of a particular word on a person. Hence the shape of words can vary greatly, as received as against as transmitted, according to differences in impactable area, as illustrated in Fig. 4.

Fig. 4. Transmitted and received shape of 'firidsnow' in Fig. 3 above

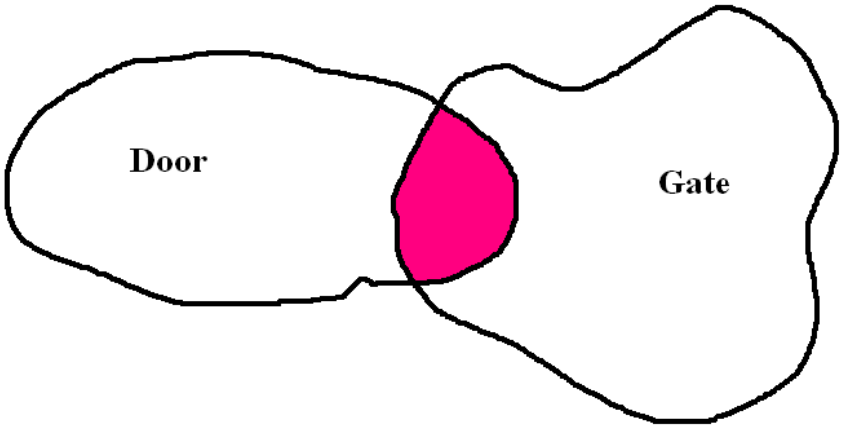
It is important to note also that words translated from one language to another will, at least to a large degree and sometimes totally, *take on the shape of the word in the language that is translated into*. The original 'shape' of the word is lost and substituted for a different one. For example if we translate 'rule' into '*utawala'* (Kiswahili), the latter has its own shape that is unconnected with the drawing of straight lines. (See Fig. 5.)

Fig. 5. The Shape of 'Rule' as against the shape of '*Utawala'*



Words that are taken to be synonyms, can only be such in certain cases. Let us take the example of 'door' and 'gate'. On some occasions a gate is also a door, or a door is also a gate. Fig. 6. illustrates the relationship between door and gate 'shapes'.

Fig. 6. Diagramatic Representation of 'Shapes' of 'Door' and 'Gate'

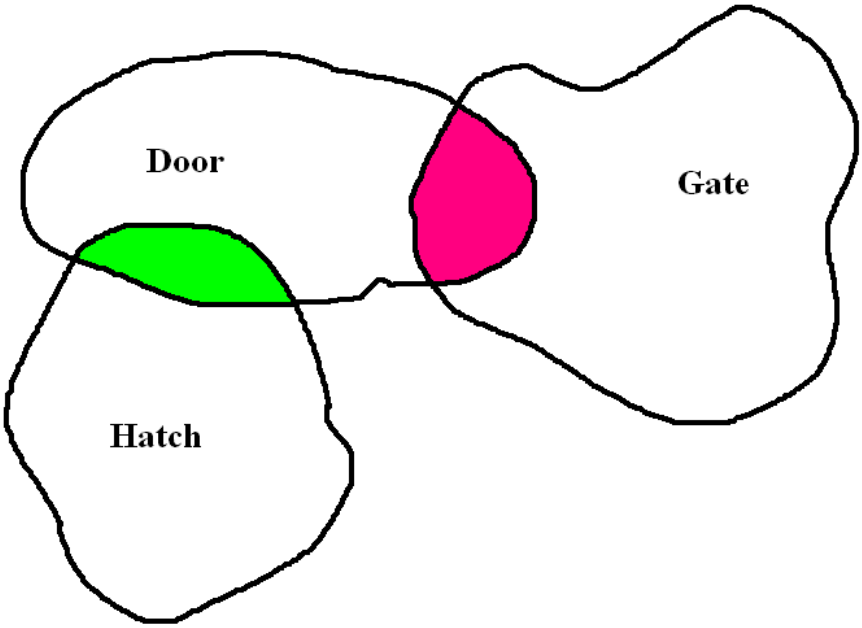


It should be clear that this diagram is unique to English. No other language will have the same range of impacts of translations of 'door' or of 'gate' as in English. Clearly even English used in different places will not be identical. Hence no word in any other language will precisely translate the precise range of meanings of the terms 'door' or 'gate'. The types of doors that are also gates is another set of impacts that is unique to, in this case, English.

Note that these words are synonyms only if used in the overlapped section, here coloured pink. While some doors are clearly not gates, and some gates are just as clearly not doors - there are also some doors that could be called gates, and gates that could be called doors.

Fig. 7. illustrates what happens when we add another word 'hatch' to our diagram:

Fig. 7. Diagramatic Representation of 'Door', 'Gate', and 'Hatch'

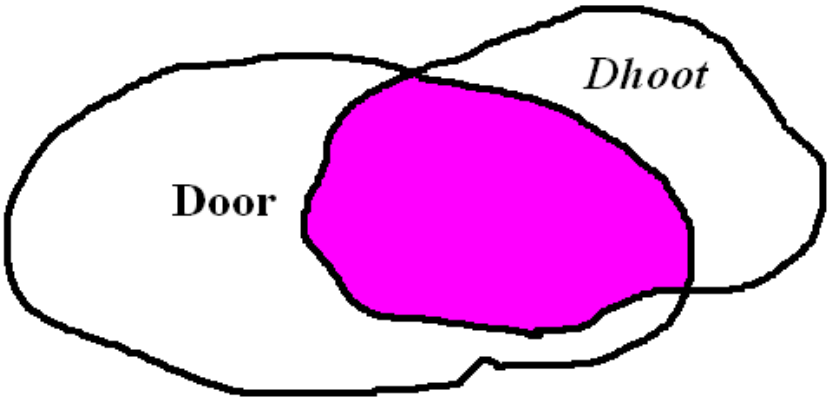


I here assume (I believe correctly) that although some hatches may be doors (green above), and some doors may be gates (pink above), a door that is a hatch cannot be a gate, and a door that is a gate cannot also be a hatch. If a 'door' is mentioned in a text or discourse then it is of course normally the context that will indicate the kind of door being referred to (a hatch-door, a gate-door, or a door, that is neither a gate or a hatch).

This nature of synonyms of course applies inter-lingually as well as intralingually, so whereas a word in Dholuo (the language of the Luo people of Western Kenya), *Dhoot*, that can be used as the translation for

'door', this translation will only be accurate in certain circumstances. *Dhoot* literally being 'mouth of the house' may not, for example, necessarily be a good translation for a door in an outside wall. The correspondence of *door* and *dhoot* will be only partial, as illustrated by Fig.8.

Fig. 8. The Overlap in impact found between two of the same words in different languages



To tell someone that *dhoot* translates *door* is therefore going to be only partially accurate, or correct only in certain circumstances.

This is obviously a difficulty that translators frequently run into. One word in one language will not correspond exactly with a word in another language. This means that one word may need to be translated in different ways, even in the same text or discourse. For example the English word 'door' could be translated into Dholuo as '*dhoot'* in some circumstances, *dhorangach* in others, and *thuolo* in others. The question "what *is* a door in language x" (where x is not English) has no clear answer, because it will depend on the context (historical, literary, textual, social, academic, discourse, environmental and so on).

The peculiarity of the shapes of words is added to by the ways in which words are used in relation to their companion words. For example 'the door is open' translates into Dholuo as '*dhoot oyawore'* but as well as doors in *Dholuo* the world (*piny*) also opens (*oyawore*). The same term *oyawore* can in *Dholuo* be used in place of 'good morning' – as a greeting to be used early in the day. So then *oyawore* refers to the openness of a door and is used as a greeting at the start of a day, but 'good morning' is very different in impact from 'is open' in English. Words are interrelated in an exceedingly complex web.

Native language speakers are accustomed to using words in context of a web more complex than can be any written account of their language. Dictionaries are mere rough guides to language uses, that must be learned in detail by observation and participation with native speakers. That is, a full lexicon of the words of a language would be infinitely large, yet the human mind copes and constantly adds to its personal lexicon, and to its understanding of the social lexicon of its community. Almost any experience will cause someone to add to their implicit lexicon.

It should be clear that lexicons are derived from the ways that words are used in contexts. These may be social contexts, physical contexts, spatial, discourse, and of course linguistic contexts. Lexicons are infinitely large because contexts are infinitely diverse – a full lexicon would need to describe how every word could be used in every possible context – in practice an impossibility.

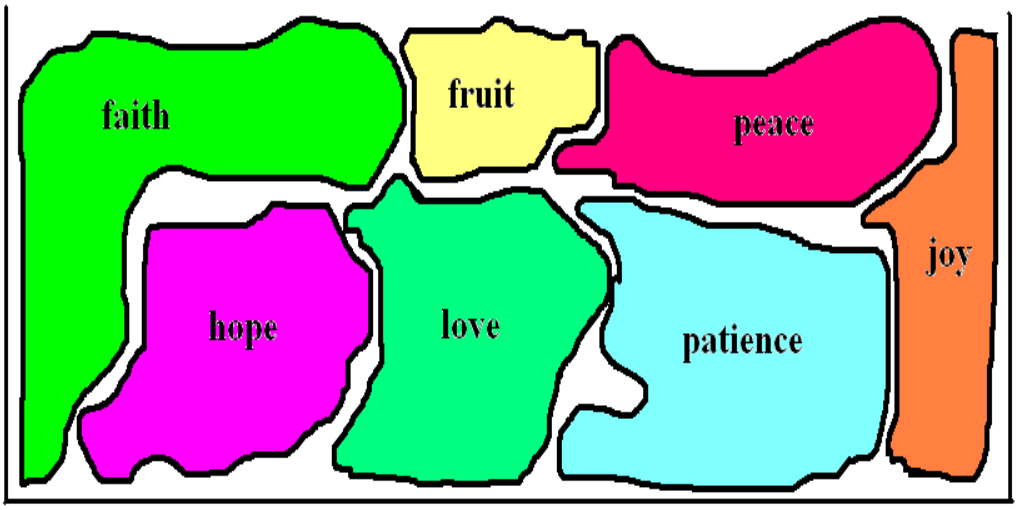
What is often not sufficiently appreciated by scholars, I suggest, is that members of a community that share a language are enabled to communicate successfully with it only in so far as they share also the context (and/or assumed context) of its use. The words and impactible areas of communities with different contexts (physical, social, historical, linguistic and other) will vary in shape (see above).

For a British person assuming it is winter to say 'it is *cold* outside' means something different to another British person who says 'it is cold outside' while assuming that it is summertime. 'She is my friend' in reference to a certain woman means something different said about her to her husband by a man, than by a

lady about her to a child. Saying 'I own a computer' meant something different in 1970 to what it does today. To say 'I really must go' after being offered a cup of tea is different from 'I really must go' after being asked if one can forego a visit to the bathroom for another ten minutes.

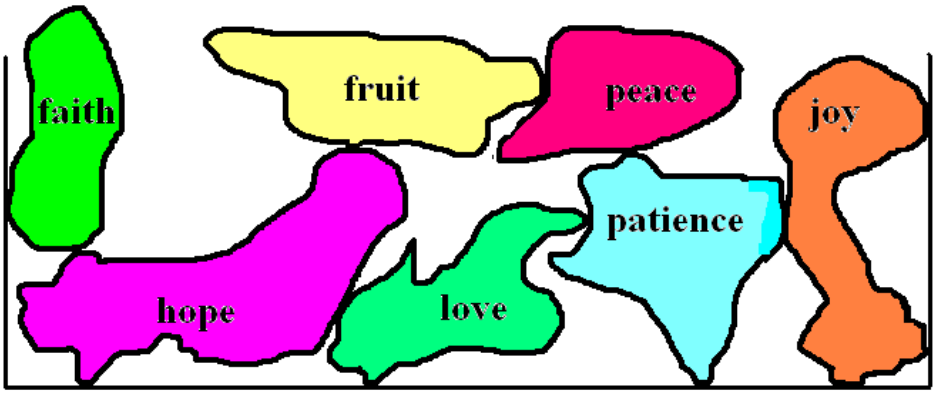
The importance of shape in forming a strong structure socially can be illustrated by comparison with a physical structure. Fig.9. is a 'wall' built with 'bricks' that are the words of a particular language.

Fig. 9. A Language Wall: Combinations of Words that Fit Together to give Appropriate Teaching in a Language



The words in Fig. 9. fit together well, so that the wall that they build is strong and regular in shape. But what happens if we attempt to use the same arrangement of words, when translated to a different language? I have attempted to do this in Fig. 10. Note that the words are arranged (roughly) in the same positions as in Fig. 9., so fruit comes above love and to the left of peace, and faith is on the far left and above hope.

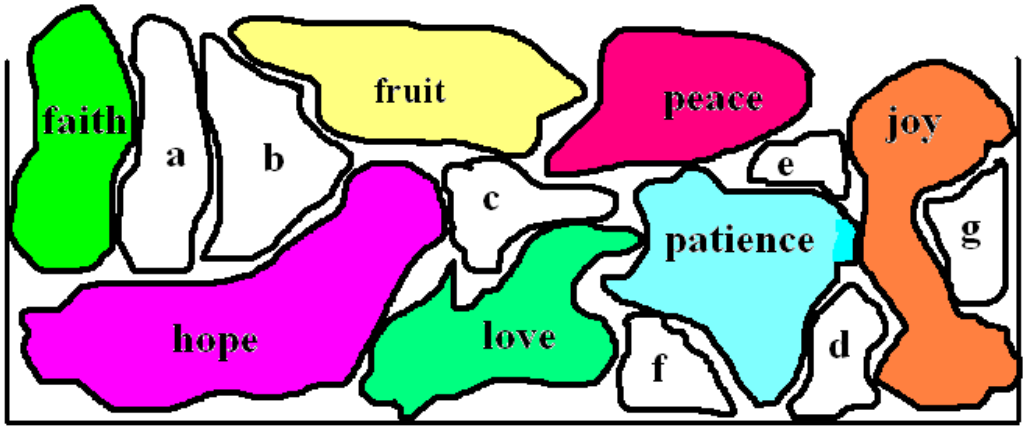
Fig. 10. Words of a Different Shape put Together according to the Same Arrangement as in Fig. 9 above



It should be clear that the wall in Fig. 10. will not be as strong as the wall in Fig. 9, if the 'words' (bricks) are positioned in the same way relative to one another, because massive gaps remain between them. A much better arrangement may rather be found by re-fitting the differently shaped words in different sequences and

arrangements. Or alternatively other words need to be found to fill the gaps if the same arrangement is to be maintained. Fig. 11. gives an example of the latter.

Fig. 11. The Case of Misfit Due to Missing Words



The missing words a-g may be such as the English words kindness, impartiality, congeniality and forgiveness, the content of which may in another language be included into other words.

An alternative would be to alter the sequence and arrangement of the 'words' so as to enable them to fit together better.

Producing helpful sequences and arrangements of words and impacts is of course the essential task of education. (Classroom education is a process of re-arranging pre-existing knowledge so as to form new knowledge.(9)) Appropriate education is that which so arranges the contents of the mind so that given combinations of words have particular desired impacts. It should be clear that this will depend on a context. ('Context' must be understood to mean all types of 'context' (see above).) The instructions needed to guide the placing of the 'bricks' of language is the teaching that is appropriate for a given community. In so far as this analogy is correct, then education that is appropriate for a community will depend both on the shape of its words, and the context of their use. In other words, the content of education for one community (if it could in some way be 'translated') may not be appropriate for another.

The above brings problems especially where there is a 'language of education'. In much of Sub-Saharan Africa formal education is conducted in non-indigenous European languages. A child learning such languages in school will clearly learn by relating the new language to the language with which he or she is already familiar. The 'shape' of a word will therefore be determined primarily not by it's shape amongst the original users of that language (for example English people in the case of English) but by the choice of indigenous words with which it is considered to be equivalent. For example if 'house' is assumed to be '*ot*' by a *Dholuo* speaker learning English, then s/he will assume English uses of 'house' to be the same as Luo uses of *ot*. Even advanced learning of English will never entirelly eradicate this association from their mind.

I will consider this situation by looking at an example of Christian life (relating to Christian mission work), and then an example of economic life (relating to a development project's impact on Africa).

The Christian Life

I will take the word 'love' by way of example. In Christianising people, should they be taught to have love that is the 'right' shape, or that has the best fit? If there is a 'correct' shape for love, then it may well not fit into a person's context. According to the rules of contextualisation a person must learn to love in such a way as is appropriate for their context. So it is the fit that is important rather than the shape. Then should a Western missionary to Africa attempt to impart the kind of love that Western Christians have, or the kind of love that is most appropriate for African Christians? How can they know the shape of love that is appropriate for African Christians until they have immersed themselves into the African way of life?(10) Love cannot be communicated in a contextualised way in the absence of a knowledge of the culture concerned.

A prominent term that in my experience often takes the role we consider ought to be of love in African contexts is 'respect'. People act out of respect for others, rather than love for others. The space remaining for (or need for) 'love' can therefore be said to be smaller.

Fig. 12. Two shapes of love and their respective overlaps

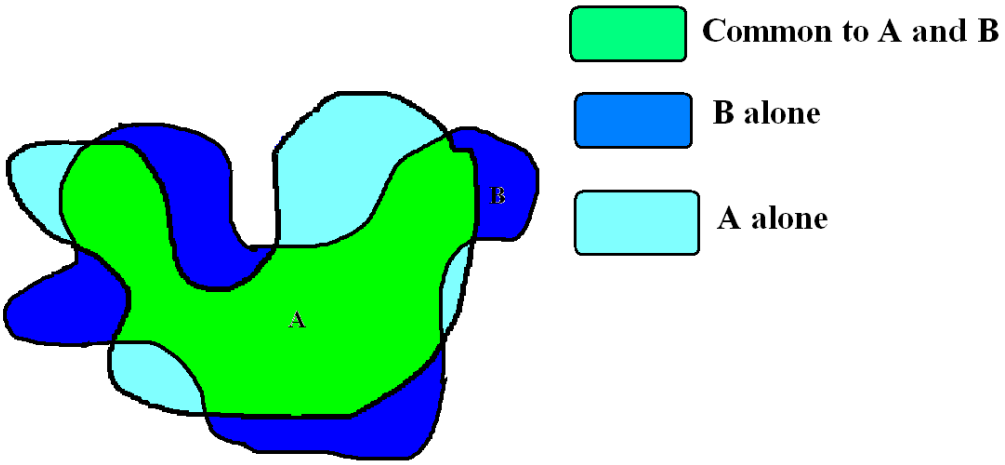
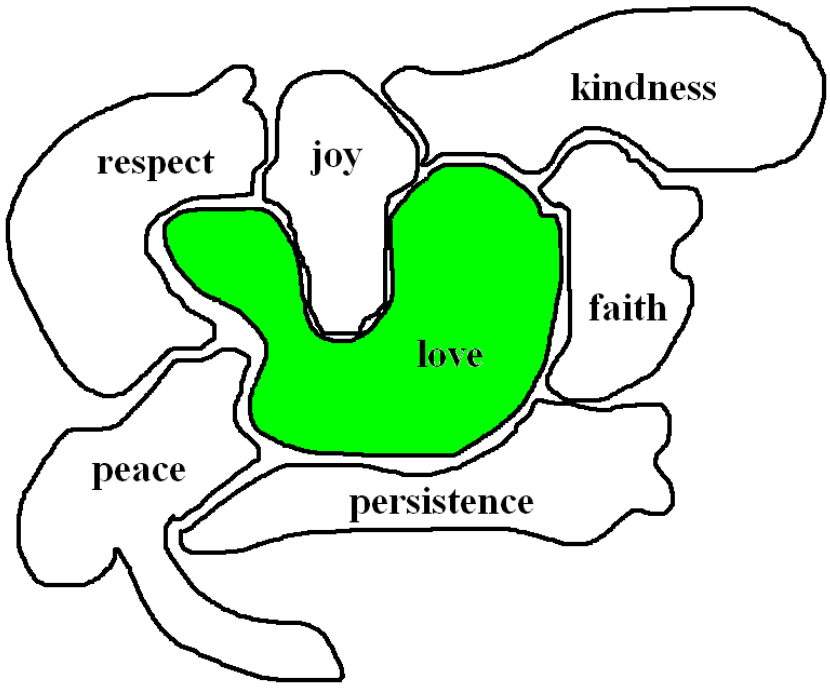


Fig.12 illustrates two 'shapes' of love. Let us assume that A represents a Christianized people who are guiding people B into knowing the form of Christian love. According to this model there are parts of the understanding of love of people B that are the same as A (given in green), other parts that are missing (light blue) and need to be put into place, and other parts that are apparently non-Christian and need to be removed (dark blue).

The predominant way in which education and mission by the West to Africa is done today, is by trying to change the shape of African words to fit an assumed European ideal. The ideal shape of a word is constructed in the context of the Western people and culture, and then is exported for appropriation by the non-Western (African) people. Hence African people are through formal education taught to understand and use words in a way that is appropriate *as if* they were in a Western context.

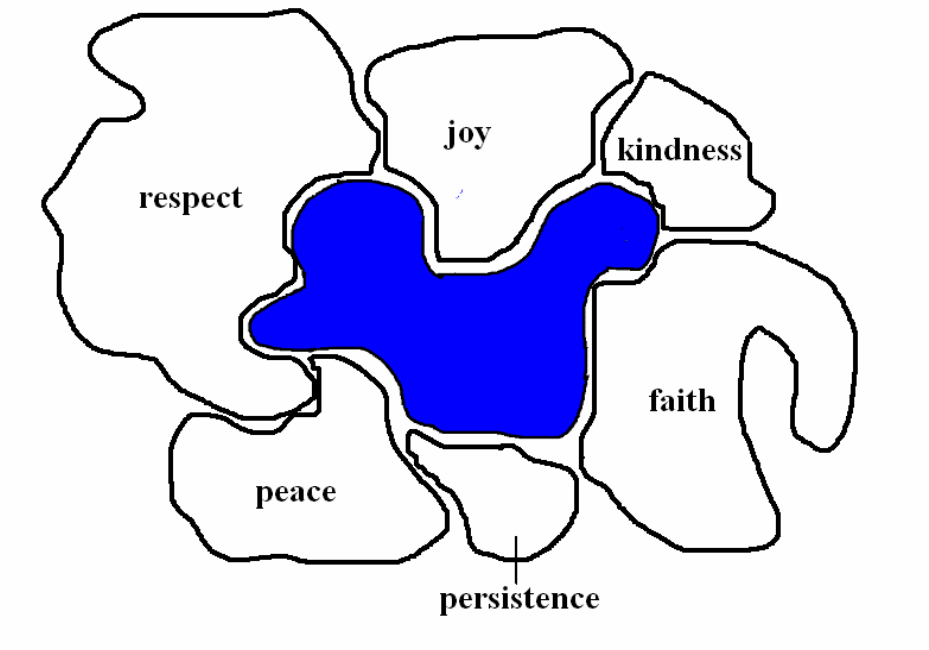
But is this the correct way in which to understand words cross-culturally? Let us take a different model, and consider a word in relation to its fellow-words, and of course broader context, in Fig. 13.

Fig. 13. The shape of the word love in relation to its fellow words (people A)



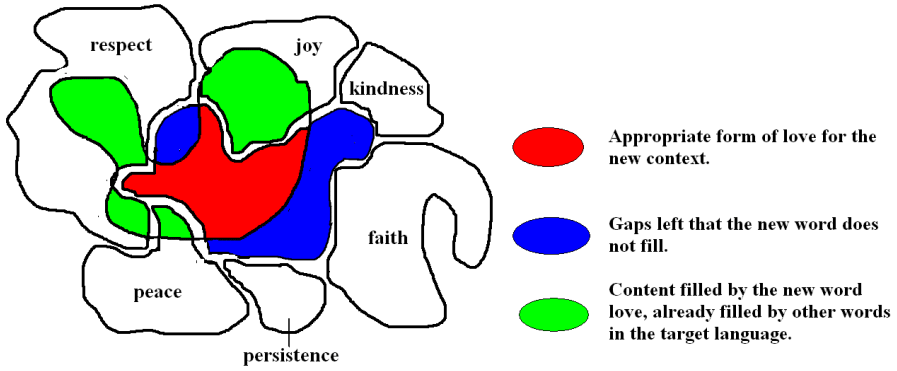
The shape of love is in this case clearly contextually appropriate. This simplified diagram illustrates it in the context of certain other related terms. (The full reality would of course be far more complex, but this diagram illustrates our point.) We see that 'love' has very effectively filled the space left for it by surrounding words (and we assume the broader context of people's lives). But this has of course only happened because surrounding words have a particular size, position and shape. Let's consider that the shape of 'love' for people B is as follows:

Fig. 14. The shape of the word love in relation to its fellow words (people B)



Sure enough if we try to fit the 'love' of people A (see Fig. 13) into the space left in the lives of people B; then there is a problem, as shown in Fig. 15.

Fig. 15. A shape of love of one culture fitted into another



In Fig. 15 red represents appropriate teachings of love, whereas blue represents gaps where love ought to be but according to Western teaching won't be. Green represents areas where love is taught in an area that is really the domain of another word! The amounts of the various overlaps of course depends on the size of the 'love' shape that is inserted.

Despite their being a gross simplification of reality, the above figures do illustrate some important points. An example of a contextual difference that affects 'love' as found between husband and wife is the context (societies) in which polygyny is a norm. (This is *not* to say that polygyny is a right Christian practice. But it is to recognize that such a long-held deeply seated institution has an important effect on its contexts (social, linguistic, behavioural etc.) and will not disappear over-night.) The need for a man to be intimate with two women makes him prone to lying, as both will want to be assured that they are 'most loved'. The legitimacy of polygyny forces a woman to accept sharing her husband. The risk of the second woman gaining an unfair share of the husband's attention can result in a woman's devotion to her husband being motivated by rivalry instead of love. The risk of suspicion on the side of one wife of what a man is doing if he spends a lot of time with the

other wife bringing envy, wrangling and discord, puts the man under pressure to spend more time alone or with male company, and so on. The tradition of polygyny and risk of polygyny will affect a monogamous household in a polygamous society. It should be clear that the 'shape' of love between men and women, as against respect, self-interest, competition, fear and servitude will be different in a society that allows polygyny as against a monogamous society. This needs to be reflected in Christian teaching on love in order for that teaching to be appropriate (i.e. contextualised).

Economic Life

Where love is advocated by Christian missionaries, entrepreneurship is often advocated by economists. This includes (in the present era) encouraging the free-market as against interventionary behaviour.

I will take the road public transport system as my case study. This is frequently relatively minimal in Western nations where there is widespread private vehicle ownership. Buses form a much higher percentage of vehicles on the road in Sub-Saharan Africa.

Pre-existent values in Western countries determine the parameters for an acceptable public transport system. For example, it must be time oriented - thus precluding the system of waiting and then leaving only when a vehicle is full. Effective functional beaurocracies make fairly certain that only licensed companies will operate in the West. Functional speed cameras help to ensure that speed limits are not broken. The confidence of the public and the absence of widespread witchcraft fears means that people are ready to report on those who engage in misdemeanors. The small-scale of corruption means that police will uphold the law, and so on.

The picture is very different in many African contexts. Many of the above may not apply. Owners of vehicles can pay drivers and conductors at such a rate that they will not make money unless they break speed limits and overload their vehicles. Profit-maximizing behavior in the absence of sufficient controls can result in a chaotic system benefiting fat-cats, with an extremely high mortality rate due to poor vehicle maintenance, overloading and speeding causing accidents. The shape of 'free market' public transport becomes very different to that in the West.

A parallel question arises as to that of the Christian life above; is it appropriate to alter the 'shape' of public transport to make it 'correct', when this will make it into a misfit with its context – i.e. it won't work? In other words – is someone familiar with the public transport network in a Western country qualified to advise on changes that need to be made in an African country? The task of rectifying a public transport system is actually, I suggest, much more complex than this and requires a knowledge of contextual factors. Simply taking one contextual factor ('brick') and trying to change its shape from 'as it is in Africa' to 'as it is in Europe' is insufficient means for providing a remedy for a complex situation.

Summary and Conclusion

Western scholarship frequently assumes that discourses and texts translate between languages and cultures. Translation is here discovered to be invention of something new. This is particularly significant for scientific texts and those whose value depends on the existence of a certain rationality in the target language / culture. This is because language alone does not transform someone's worldview from a non-scientific to a scientific one. Words are found to have impacts on existing mental structures. They do not 'carry' meanings. The existence and nature of the impacts of a language arise from the nature and impactability of the mind of the hearer as well as the word itself. The impact of a word is different for every person and context, and especially different between people of diverse cultures and contexts (such as European verses African).

Both words and impactible areas can be considered to have particular shapes. The nature of the impact of a word will depend on the shape of both, and the point of impact. Words are never true synonyms, as they vary in 'shape'. The impact of a word will depend on its alternative uses as well as the context of its use. All the above mean that lexicons are infinitely large.

As well as particular shapes, words in a language / culture also have arrangements and fits with other words. Such arrangements and fits are unique to a language. Imposing either a shape, fit or arrangement of words from one language onto another is invariably problematic. Hence education from one 'language/culture' cannot have a good fit in another. Examples given above illustrate in practice how teaching on Christian love and on economics in Africa must be foundationally different from what is appropriate teaching in native English speaking countries. Helpful education is, by implication, homegrown and in native tongues.

Notes

1 "The … claim … that the lexical items of languages stand in a one to one correspondence across languages … is very obviously false." Kempson, Ruth. M., 1977, *Semantic Theory*. Cambridge Textbooks In Linguistics. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. 97.

2 Steiner, George, 1998. *After Babel. Aspects of Language and Translation*. Third Edition. Oxford: Oxford University Press. 279.

3 Sperber, Dan, and Wilson, Deirdre, 1995, *Relevance: communication and cognition* (second edition). Oxford: Blackwell. 13.

4 Sperber. *Relevance*. 1.

5 Sperber. *Relevance*.

6 This is known as polysemy, as against homonymy in which meanings of words are assumed to be unrelated. (Kempson, *Semantic*. 80.)

7 Venus, nd. 'The Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis.' http://venus.va.com.au/suggestion/sapir.html (accessed 30.03.02)

8 Firidsnow is a word that I have invented. Inuits have many words for many different kinds of snow, one of which I am assuming to be 'firidsnow'. An Inuit will immediately know what is described by this term, but an English speaking Brit. who cannot distinguish types of snow will not know how to distinguish 'firidsnow' from 'snow'.

9 There is an epistemological difficulty in saying that students learn new things in a classroom through the use of words alone. How can mere sounds (of language) provide what is entirely new? They must instead be re-arranging existing knowledge. Particular re-arrangements of pre-existing knowledge can be considered to be new knowledge. Some implications of these suggestions go beyond the scope of this paper, so I mention them only in passing.

10 The reader may think it is clear that 'love' should fit the context. But this can clearly only happen once the context is known, and if 'teaching' is based on that knowledge. This in practice is very rare in formal education in Sub-Saharan Africa because languages and texts used in formal education are not indigenous and are not of local origin.

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