

# TRANSLATION, LEXICOGRAPHY AND THE TSWANA CONNECTION

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*'Sometimes I get tired or enraged, but it's exciting, perhaps more exciting than seeing it published ... It's going to be the best dictionary ever!'*

This sentiment was expressed by one of the dedicated compilers of a great new trilingual dictionary for speakers of Tswana, English and Afrikaans in southern Africa. The man who instigated the project ('I was stupid enough to start it, yes'), and who has directed its progress over the last fifteen years, is Professor J.W. Snyman of the Department of African Languages at the University of South Africa.\* The last Tswana dictionary to be published was the venerable *Secwana Dictionary* (Secwana-English, English-Secwana) compiled in the last century by the Reverend J. Tom Brown of the London Missionary Society. It was issued in revised editions in 1895 (second edition) and in 1925 (third). The current trilingual dictionary project is therefore the first attempt at a new Tswana dictionary since 1925.

The task of compiling even a unilingual dictionary is a daunting one; but the value of cross-cultural communication in our multi-lingual society, and the inadequacy of existing lexicographical resources in this country, convinced Professor Snyman that the compilation of a comprehensive Tswana-English-Afrikaans dictionary had to be undertaken. In admiration, one recalls Hamlet's

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observation on man: 'How noble in reason, how infinite in faculty'. To this, however, the Professor would demur. Dictionary makers are sufficiently chastened by their work to acknowledge their limitations. Complete command of a single language would be a miracle; trebling the challenge reflects a nobler aspiration, perhaps, but not necessarily an enhanced capacity to meet the challenge to perfection. As Professor Snyman has remarked:

'The biggest problem with a dictionary of this kind is, of course, that the people working on the project are never as talented as the project ideally requires. Who is there who knows all the words of his own language? There is no such person - and bilingual experts are very scarce. So we are working with a limited force, and in that sense the dictionary will have its defects, I'm afraid'.<sup>1)</sup>

The awareness of human fallibility highlighted here has long been remarked upon by lexicographers and translators. For example, in a lecture at Oxford in 1931, entitled *On Translation*, Hilaire Belloc warned his audience to 'remember that all dictionaries are made by translators and that every translator is like yourself, an imperfect being.'<sup>2)</sup> Yet Belloc did not intend to belittle the skill of the translator or lexicographer. Being aware of the peculiarities of idiom, subtleties of nuance and unique expressiveness of a language, Belloc knew that the goal of recasting it without loss in another form would defeat the most skilled of linguists:

...when I say that a translator must 'know' each of the two languages involved, that word 'know' signifies much more than a supposed precise meaning attaching to each term in each tongue; for not only is there no such possible exactitude of definition, but in one tongue the connotation even of a simple word simply representing a concrete object will be different from the connotation of the corresponding word in another tongue. Its historical and social connexions will be different; its effect upon the rhythm of the sentence and therefore upon the emotion produced will be different - all that!<sup>3)</sup>

Another writer, T. Tymoczko, makes the same point, giving more emphasis to the socio-cultural knowledge a translator must command: 'Knowing the semantic structure of a language', he argues, 'depends upon knowing about the speakers, their environment, their society and their beliefs.'<sup>4)</sup>

This problem is certainly familiar to the compilers of the new Tswana dictionary. Professor Snyman confessed to having been 'a bit at a loss' at times over how certain words should be

translated, especially when the concepts are not familiar to European languages. Such semantic blind spots lend further support to the argument that exact translation is unattainable in practice. As E. Keenan states, 'there are numerous areas of human activity which are not shared across certain language groups.'<sup>5)</sup> According to C. Rabin, such semantic items for which no referents exist in one of the languages will have to be represented by 'approximation':

This consists in the selection of words whose area of meaning bounds upon the blank space, and which by insertion into the context of the word they are made to translate will suggest to the reader the associations of that word.<sup>6)</sup>

This is, of course, a very challenging procedure which (as the opening lines of this article suggest) can be alternately exciting, tiring or enraging. Even when areas of experience are shared across the language groups, correlative terms may be very elusive. As Professor Snyman has observed, there is 'a percentage of the vocabulary where you have a one-to-one correlation, but that is small; the moment you have exhausted that, you have to resort to lengthy explanations - some of them very, very long.'\* This coincides with Belloc's observation that, lacking an exact equivalent, one is compelled to 'expand' in translation:

In each idiomatic term a whole phrase is packed, and the term must be unpacked if we would put its meaning into our own tongue, when there is no general close corresponding single term by which to express it.

This is particularly true of translation from almost any other language into English, for English has less inflexion than the generality of languages.<sup>7)</sup>

Idiom is, of course, the crucial factor. It is also a particularly teasing one, incorporating both regularity and peculiarity; adumbrating a norm within the language, yet apt perversely to defeat the expectations of the inexperienced. It is in this sense that idiom has been described as 'Janus-faced', reflecting both 'a particular organization of thought, the mental design of a language'<sup>8)</sup> as well as 'the idiosyncrasy of permutation which a given language exhibits in contradistinction to all languages'.<sup>9)</sup> The need of the lexicographer or translator to pass with ease from one language to another therefore demands the utmost skill. Mastery of the idiom of one's native tongue, especially in a heterogeneous language community, requires constant vigilance; and

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\* It is hoped that an article illustrating in detail the peculiarities of translation from Tswana into English will be included in a future issue of this journal.

an effort to 'annex' the relatively unknown territory of another idiom entails exceptional sensitivity for the purity of each tongue to be ensured. The faculty that promotes this rapport has also long been a subject of speculation. Belloc, for instance, poetically avers the presence of 'a sort of shadowy tongue, the wraith of a composite language, a mysterious idiom which combines the two, acts as a bridge, and permits [the translator] to pass continuously from one to the other.'<sup>10)</sup>

Language diversity is clearly an expression of collective human diversity. Linguistic differentiae are co-ordinates of distinctive modes of perception which define and reflect the grain of identity. An articulate explorer of this nexus of language and identity is George Steiner, whose paper 'The Language Animal' contains some imaginative and pithy observations on this subject<sup>11)</sup>:

'All identity is active statement.'

'Man's "manness", human identity as he can state it to himself and to others, is a speech function... Language is his quiddity and determines his preeminence.'

'Our language is our window on life. It determines for its speaker the dimensions, perspective and horizon of a part of the total landscape of the world.'

'Speech is the systole and diastole of sustained being... We do not speak *to ourselves* so much as *speak ourselves* ... All dialogue is a proffer of mutual cognizance and a strategic re-definition of self.'

In Steiner's view, any general diagnosis of human consciousness has to account for the array of languages spoken the world over. Language may indeed reflect principles of a universal grammar, but, asks Steiner, 'Why this fantastic diversity of human tongues, making it difficult for communities, often geographically proximate and racially or culturally similar, to communicate?'<sup>12)</sup>

The question is pertinent now when interlingual contact is more widespread and imperative than ever, particularly in southern Africa. This issue is placed eloquently in perspective by Belloc:

...the social importance of translation has always been great, and ... is today greater than ever. The moment one society has intercourse by commerce, policy or arms with a society of another idiom, translation is an imperative activity, you cannot carry on without it. It commands the value of treaties and of commercial contracts and of military capitulations. In a wider field, it is a condition of order between nations and

therefore of peace. In a still wider field, it is the condition without which a common culture cannot exist.<sup>13)</sup>

Belloc's observations pertain largely to international relations but have implications for human relations in any multilingual society. The challenge has long been experienced through the whole of Africa, as is evident from the papers of the Ninth International African Seminar held in 1968. In the introduction to the volume, W.H. Whiteley writes:

Africa presents many challenges of a sociolinguistic kind... At the national level many states are preoccupied with problems of accommodating their multi-ethnic and multilingual components within a single political framework. One aspect of this preoccupation is the formulation of specific language policies... Among the most powerful devices for implementing a language policy is the educational system... Some of the more accessible - as well as the more important - sociolinguistic problems of multilingualism are exemplified by the educational system.<sup>14)</sup>

In South Africa the recent HSRC Investigation into Education illustrated this continuing concern. In its report the Main Committee acknowledged the centrality of language, calling for greater recognition of mother tongue diversity in this country, and recommending that allowance be made for any group to develop an indigenous language as the medium of instruction instead of only English or Afrikaans.<sup>15)</sup> In this context of concern for mutual understanding, the new trilingual dictionary is especially relevant. It will be of real value to the Tswana community, as the Bophuthatswana government has elected English, Afrikaans and Tswana as official languages. The dictionary will certainly be widely used by scholars as well as translators in the public service. A number of Afrikaans and English schools are also offering courses in Tswana, and degree courses are offered at five universities - those of the University of the North, the Witwatersrand, Potchefstroom, Bophuthatswana, South Africa (Unisa) and Botswana.

The importance of dictionaries in this country is also reflected in the Lexicography Project recently initiated by the HSRC's Division of Lexicology. From this designation one rightly infers that lexicography and lexicology are cognate subjects; the distinction between them, according to S.M. Katre, is that between an art and a science. Lexicology rises above individual languages, being 'the science which directs the manner in which lexicography is to be attempted'; while lexicography entails the application of lexicological procedure in a specific instance, being the art of manufacturing handy information.<sup>16)</sup> (One presumes that the wraith-

like syncretic faculty posited by Belloc as the translator's creative bridge between two languages plays a significant part in this manufacturing activity.)

As lexicographers, the compilers of the new trilingual dictionary have manufactured the entries in their lexicon imaginatively yet objectively, retaining an awareness of how the access terms are really used by native speakers. Their touchstone has been the norm already established and accepted by the language community. Although Tswana is quite richly diversified, dialectally, it is a very formalised and extensively developed language, according to Professor Snyman (grammars have been written for over a hundred years now, and the Bible was translated into Tswana as early as 1857). A standard orthography, *Tswana Terminology and Orthography*, was issued by the Department of Bantu Education in 1976. However, when options for certain words appear to be equally prominent in use, they are both represented in the dictionary; thus the compilers have tried not to be autocratic in their choice of terms for inclusion, or in their explanations. The danger in being prescriptive is that natural selection in the speech community might contradict and displace the lexicographer's choice. (One thinks, for example, of the Afrikaans word 'komper' for 'computer', which has been displaced in use by 'rekenaar'.)

An interesting facet of the challenge faced by the lexicographer is that of modernity - the manufacture of new terms for which no counterparts exist in the vernacular. According to Professor Snyman, speakers of Tswana have not been slow to coin new terms, adapting the phonological structure of modern nomenclature, with minimal change, to that of their own language, so that the meaning of the vernacular coinage is easily recognizable to speakers of other languages. This process of relatively straightforward assimilation minimises the typological difference between the languages, albeit superficially. The congruence of signifier and signified in each language makes translation very easy: speakers readily perceive the true referent and command the appropriate symbol in the respective languages. Thus, comprehension and expression - the two 'acts' involved in translation, according to Rabin - are greatly enhanced.<sup>17)</sup>

However, Rabin also rightly observes that most semantic items in different languages are 'incommensurate'; so the dictionary maker normally resorts to several proximate definitions incorporating appropriate qualifications. However, the languages of communities in close translation contact with each other may acquire what are known as 'translation stocks':

After a certain length of translation contact [with language A], language B acquires a stock of words with perfect translation

fit, forming a semantic field of their own, which considerably eases the task of the translator. It similarly acquires a stock of grammatical constructions which by experience are known to be convenient equivalents of typical constructions of language A, though in language B they may not be in common use... it often happens that a number of languages translate intensively from one and the same A-language and thus build up translation stocks of parallel structure, which will eventually serve the purposes of mutual translation between all these B-languages.<sup>18)</sup>

This procedure is greatly stimulated by the challenge of modernity - by new words or expressions arising from scientific developments. On this point Rabin adds: 'International contact plays such an important role in the development of the natural and social sciences that we can without exaggeration say that their entire linguistic material is translation stock.'<sup>19)</sup> Rabin envisages an eventual repertory of 'world-wide translation stock, a kind of international language' - a notion that recalls Belloc's earlier reference to the creation of 'a common culture', and holds the promise of interesting developments in the language of our own multilingual country.

However, these are at present just possibilities with intriguing implications for society in the future. For now, one must contend with cultures and languages that differ to greater or lesser degrees. Notwithstanding what is universal in the human pageant, the following observation by George Steiner is salutary:

To learn a language beside one's native idiom, to penetrate its syntax, is to open for oneself a second window on the landscape of being. It is to escape, even if only partially, from the confinement of the apparently obvious, from the intolerant poverty ... of a single focus and a monochrome lens.<sup>20)</sup>

A man who perceived this very clearly was Solomon Tshekisho Plaatje (1876-1932), an eminent South African and a writer of distinction. Despite a limited formal education (up to standard three), Sol Plaatje attained an enviable breadth of experience and vision, and a remarkable command of the Tswana and English languages. During his varied career he was a court interpreter and editor of a Tswana-English newspaper in Mafeking, a notable linguist (co-author of the first Tswana phonetic reader), a diarist (his *Boer War Diary* has been published), a translator (he translated five of Shakespeare's plays into Tswana) and author of fiction and non-fiction works in English (the most notable being *Native Life in South Africa* and *Mhudi* - a novel written in 1917 but first published only in 1930). He also collected and recorded Tswana proverbs, published as *Sechuana proverbs and their European*

*equivalents*.\* (Unisa's Tswana-English-Afrikaans dictionary does not include proverbs, but these are being recorded for a separate publication in the future.)

The reason for Sol Plaatje's use of English as a medium can probably be found in his preface to *Mhudi*:

This book has been written with two objects in view, viz. (a) to interpret to the reading public one phase of 'the back of the Native mind'; and (b) with the readers' money, to collect and print (for Bantu Schools) Sechuana folk-tales, which, with the spread of European ideas, are fast being forgotten. It is thus hoped to arrest this process by cultivating a love for art and literature in the Vernacular.<sup>21)</sup>

Plaatje's aim was thus two-fold: to promote insight into the mind and being of the native inhabitants of South Africa, using English as the 'lens' through which this traditional, yet (to the reading public) new, 'landscape' could be discovered; and to foster the literature of the indigenous languages, preserving its unique distillation of experience and nursing its peculiar idiom of being - in short, cherishing what will enrich those who seek to discover it.

In this respect, the English novelist and poet, D.H. Lawrence (a contemporary of Plaatje), makes the following suggestive comment in his essay, 'Books':

Man is a thought-adventurer. He has thought his way down the far ages. He used to think in little images of wood or stone. Then in hieroglyphs on obelisks and clay rolls and papyrus. Now he thinks in books, between two covers... But by thought we mean; of course, discovery.<sup>22)</sup>

No doubt Professor Snyman and his intrepid co-travellers understand better than most what Lawrence means. Their current adventure in compiling the new trilingual dictionary is coming to an end, and they may well feel that it has constituted 'enough punishment for a lifetime' (as the Professor wryly remarked); but for many people the lexicon will greatly ease their venture into new realms of consciousness.

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\* I am indebted for the information on Sol Plaatje to Tim Couzens' introduction to *Mhudi* (African Fiction Library edition).  
Johannesburg: Quagga Press, 1975.



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19. *Ibid.*, p. 145
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21. Sol T. Plaatje, Preface to *Mhudi* (African Fiction Library). (Johannesburg: Quagga Press, 1975) p. 17
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## A CAREER IN TRANSLATION

Opportunities for a career in translation exist in the State Language Services (a directorate of the Department of National Education) and in the Language Services of the Provincial Administrations of the Cape, Natal, Transvaal and Orange Free State.

All official publications as well as foreign language documents are translated into the official languages. These publications cover a variety of subjects, as wide ranging as the Public Service itself - economics, law, education, the social sciences, public administration, agriculture, and many other technical and scientific fields. Apart from an excellent command of languages, a language practitioner should have a versatile mind capable of switching from one field of knowledge to another, and of grasping complex and subtle concepts in one language and conveying them in another language at the level of the expert.

Courses in Translation are offered at several South African universities: a degree course at Rhodes University, a post-graduate diploma course at Stellenbosch and the University of South Africa, and a Master's degree course at the University of the Witwatersrand.

Further information on translation as a career may be obtained by writing to the Director, State Language Services, Private Bag X195, Pretoria 0001.

## *ERRATUM*

On page 30 of our previous issue (Vol. 15.2) it is stated that degree courses in Tswana are offered at five universities — those of the University of the North, the Witwatersrand, Potchefstroom, Bophuthatswana, South Africa (Unisa) and Botswana. To this list a sixth should be added, namely Vista University. According to Professor Elwyn Jenkins, Director of the Mamelodi campus, Tswana has been offered for degree purposes at Vista University since the beginning of 1983. The University should produce its first graduates in Tswana at the end of 1985.