

Are ideophones translatable? The case of translating isiZulu ideophones in DBZ Ntuli's short story *Uthingo Lwenkosazana (The Rainbow)*



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The meaning of words comes into play when words as units of translation are to be translated from one language into another. Lexical items that are extant in one language but not in others pose enormous problems for translators. The translation of ideophones – which feature very prominently in African discourse – is a case in point in this article. Translators faced with the translation of such forms are required to come up with strategies to aptly express their meanings in the target text. This article seeks to establish how CSZ Ntuli, in his English translation of an isiZulu short story *Uthingo Lwenkosazana* by DBZ Ntuli, has translated some of the ideophones used by the original author. Translation strategies used by CSZ Ntuli in his translation to express the meanings of the isiZulu ideophones will be brought to light in this article. It will be confirmed that CSZ Ntuli, using different lexical forms in the target language, has effectively changed unfamiliar isiZulu cultural notions to concepts that the English target reader can relate to. It will also be shown that the meanings of the isiZulu ideophones can be expressed in the target language using approximation and amplification as translation strategies provided that the translator has a good command of both source and target languages. The discussion will also look at how various translation scholars view the notion of equivalence at word level, and research on ideophones in isiZulu will also be reviewed.

Introduction

Culler (1976:21–22) assumes that 'if languages were simply a nomenclature for a set of universal concepts, it would be easy to translate from one language to another'. This statement is affirmed by Baker (2011:16) who asserts that 'languages tend to make only those distinctions in meaning which are relevant to their particular environment'. These observations are reinforced by Culler (1976:21–22) who posits that 'languages do not simply name existing categories, but rather articulate their own'. The implication here is that, in naming the categories they wish to articulate as their own, some languages select certain categories for inclusion in their lexicons while leaving others out. As mentioned above, lexical items that are extant in one language and not in others pose enormous problems for translators. The translation of ideophones, which feature very prominently in African discourse, is a case in point in this article. Translators working from African languages that include ideophones in their lexicons encounter problems with lack of equivalent forms in the target languages to express the meanings of such ideophones. Nonetheless, these translators are required to come up with apt equivalent forms to express the meanings of the ideophones in the source text. Baker (2011) states that:

... the choice of a suitable equivalent will always depend not only on the linguistic system or systems being handled by the translator, but also on the way both the writer of the source text and the producer of the target text, that is the translator, choose to manipulate the linguistic systems in question; on the expectations, background knowledge and prejudices of readers within a specific temporal and spatial location: on translators' own understanding of their task, including their assessment of what is appropriate in a given situation; and on a range of restrictions that may operate in a given environment at a given point in time, including censorship and various types of intervention by parties other than the translator, author and reader. (p. 15)

It is against this background that this article explores how CSZ Ntuli has translated ideophones used in DBZ Ntuli's short story, *Uthingo Lwenkosazana* in his English translation entitled *The Rainbow*. DBZ Ntuli (the author) and CSZ Ntuli (the translator) will henceforth be referred to as DBZ and CSZ, respectively. Scholarly works on ideophones will be reviewed. The discussion will be informed by the translation theory of equivalence.

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Related research

Scholarly works on the ideophone in the languages of Africa is extensive. Research on the ideophone in isiZulu includes that of Fivaz (1963) entitled *Some aspects of the ideophone in Zulu*. In this article, Fivaz examines the structure of Zulu ideophones. Von Staden (1977), in his article entitled *Some remarks on ideophones in Zulu*, discusses the syntactic feature of the ideophone. Msimang and Poulos (2001), in their article *The ideophone in Zulu: A re-examination of conceptual and descriptive notions*, look at other linguistic grounds for a re-classification of the ideophone in isiZulu and De Schryver (2009), in his article *The lexicographic treatment of ideophones in Zulu*, examines the challenges that are presented by ideophones in both monolingual and bilingual lexicography in a corpus-driven isiZulu–English school dictionary project.

The problem of defining the ideophone and its existence in world languages

Different definitions of the ideophone have been proposed by various scholars of African linguistics. Dingemanse (2011) points out that:

... some scholars define ideophones in relation to phenomena familiar to their investigations (onomatopoeia, adverbs, interjections); while others characterise their semantic functions (expressive, descriptive, intensifier); and yet others focus on morphosyntactic behaviour (indeclinable, radical) and so on. (p. 21)

Doke's (1935:118) definition of the ideophone – which states that an ideophone is 'a vivid representation of an idea in sound, a word, often onomatopoeic, which describes a predicate, qualificative or adverb in respect of manner, colour, sound, smell, action, state or intensity' – has been used by many African scholars as a basis for the study of ideophones. Dingemanse (2011:22) alleges that Doke's definition was of immense importance in systematising and unifying research on ideophones, and it remains the most widely cited definition of ideophones today. However, Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz (2001) are of the contention that Doke offered neither a syntactic nor a semantic definition, nor any criteria for identifying ideophones. Nonetheless, his definition has served as the basis of and inspiration for research on ideophones for many years.

Dingemanse (2012:654) briefly defines ideophones 'as marked words that depict sensory imagery'. He defines them as 'marked' on the grounds that they stand out from other words and that they are noted for their special forms, distinct grammatical properties and sensory meanings. Dingemanse (2011) argues that:

... ideophones are flagged as depictions in actual use, further alluding to the fact that depictions always make use of culture-bound (that is, socially mediated) representational conventions, and that to fully appreciate them a certain knowledge of these conventions is required. (p. 44)

There has been a lot of debate as to the existence of ideophones in all the languages of the world. The general perception is that ideophones are a widely recognised feature of African languages, comprising an important proportion of the lexicon of most of these languages (Noss 2003:41). Dingemanse (2012) concurs with scholars such as Diffloth (1972) and Voeltz and Kilian-Hatz (2001) who have claimed ideophony to be a universal – or near-universal – feature of human language, and with Liberman (1975) and Nuckolls (2004) who endorse the position that not all languages manifest it to the same extent. Samarin (1971) contends that:

... languages appear to differ considerably in the size of their ideophonic lexicon, but comparisons are difficult to make. There are at least two reasons: the investigation on the languages may have been superficial or biased in some particular direction; or the ideophones may have been classified as some other kind of word, for example, as interjections of an ephemeral nature. (p. 133)

Franck (2014:2) brings another dimension to the study of ideophones. She reckons ideophones to be a class of words that occur in many languages of the world but that are relatively uncommon in English. In the African languages, ideophones are commonplace, appearing frequently as elements of speech. They are a unique part of speech because they are aesthetic or oratorical devices in oral literature (Teilanyo 2001). Teilanyo further affirms that:

... ideophones are linguistic devices that feature prominently in African discourse and are part of the identity of African oral literature and that they are found mostly, although not exclusively, in African languages. (p. 217)

Childs (1994:178) argues that, 'although ideophones constitute a robust word category in African languages, they are relatively neglected and rarely integrated into linguistic descriptions of these languages'. He opines that ideophones have been neglected because of their intractability to analysis and that they can be highly variable and difficult to elicit away from the field, that they often need to be studied in situ, and that they have little in the way of morphosyntax and rely heavily on context for interpretation (Childs 1994:179).

The fact that ideophones are generally regarded as complex and difficult and that they occur only marginally in languages such as English is a fact that validates the assertion that they could pose problems of non-equivalence in translation. It is this assertion that has prompted their analysis in CSZ's translation of DBZ's short story, which is rich in ideophones.

On the notion of equivalence and approximation in translation

The notion of equivalence, although being central to translation, has been a controversial issue for a very long time. Leonardi (2000) advocates that although equivalence is central in translation, its definition, relevance and applicability have caused heated controversy in the field. She maintains that many different theories of the concept have

also been elaborated within this field in the past few years. Pym (2010) believes that the debates have been caused by people using the same term with different meanings. In identifying some of the challenges that accompany the concept of equivalence, Pym (2010) maintains that:

... newer paradigms, then emphasized various aspects or problems that the theories of equivalence somehow overlooked: namely, the translation's *Skopos* or purpose (challenging the dominant role of the source text), historical and cultural relativism (challenging any absolute equivalence equations), localization (deceptively blurring the divisions between translation and adaptation), and cultural translation (seeing translation in terms of interpersonal processes rather than an affair of texts). (p. 1)

Abdul-Raof (2001:6) believes that Baker (1992:6) gives a similar warning when she states that although equivalence can usually be obtained to some extent, it is influenced by a variety of linguistic and cultural factors and is therefore always relative. For Pym (2010:7), 'equivalence is a relation of "equal value" between a source text segment and a target text segment and can be established on any linguistic level from form to function', while Hatim and Mason (1990:8) advocate that 'complete equivalence is hardly an achievable goal since there is no such thing as a formally or dynamically equivalent target language version of a source language text'. Simms (1997) is also of the opinion that:

... interlingual translation is impossible in a pure form since, just as there is no such thing as pure synonymy within a language, there is also no such thing as pure lexical equivalence between languages. (p. 6)

A similar position is taken by Larson (1984) who maintains that:

... since the target language is spoken by people of a culture which is often very different from the culture of those who speak the source language, this will automatically make it difficult to find lexical equivalents. (p. 153)

According to Abdul-Raof (2001), the centrality of the notion of equivalence cannot be denied in translation theory. However, a translator who aspires to achieve total lexical or textual equivalence is chasing a mirage: total equivalence at any level is impossible, but relative equivalence at any level is possible.

Translation scholars have thus moved away from the concept of complete equivalence in favour of approximation. Newmark (1991:101) assents that because the concept of an ideal perfect translation is illusory, the concept of translation equivalence can only be approximation. Abdul-Raof (2001) maintains that:

... the notion of 'approximation' has now become the dominant criterion in translation studies, it is approximation rather than equivalence which the translator should be seeking to achieve because 'there are no such things as identical equivalents'. (p. 6)

Darwish (2008) contends that anything that can be humanly expressed is naturally transferable and eventually translatable. He further posits that:

... [it] is only a matter of time before a linguistic equivalent or match is found by some diligent, persistent and perceptive translator or linguistically superior thinker or communicator for some new or inscrutable concept or idea that is expressed in a particular language. (p. 24)

The translation of ideophones in *Uthingo Lwenkosazana* (*The Rainbow*)

Literary translation, like any other creative literature, is an art. It involves the process of change as the translator works through the original piece of work and strives to retain the sense of the original as closely as he possibly can. Teilanyo (2001:222) suggests that 'a literary translator should show responsibility and fidelity towards the language of the original'. He points out that this is particularly pertinent in literary translation because literary works owe much of their wealth and beauty to the subtle nuances of language use. He maintains that there is, therefore, a compelling need for a translator to be as faithful as possible to the original.

Di (2014:52) maintains that because the message of a text is conveyed by its words, it is therefore necessary for the translator to be sure of the meaning and function of each and every one of those words. Even more important is to be sensitive to the total effect this congregation of words produces on a receiver who shares the language and culture as a native speaker.

As the translator translates from source language to target language, he/she has to negotiate both the linguistic and cultural differences he/she encounters as the process of translation progresses. The translation of ideophones encompasses both linguistic and cultural negotiation. When translating, the translator has to consider the meaning expressed by the ideophone as a lexical element in the language concerned and also the cultural merits attached to it. Noss (2003:41) contends that, for research to be carried out on translated ideophones, there must be ideophones in the source text. The translated text may or may not contain ideophones.

DBZ, a Zulu author of note, uses ideophones, which occur in speech and writing, and which derives mainly from the art of storytelling, extensively in his writings. A few isiZulu ideophones used in the short story will be analysed and the strategies used by the translator in translating them examined:

(1) *Tibi! Ngofo! Yinyoka! Agxume* (Ntuli 1978:1)

Yeuch! Ouch! Mpiyakhe performed a curious combination of the high jump and the long jump – breaking all existing records in these events. (Ntuli 1997:21)

Ntuli introduces his short story by using ideophones one after the other, in this manner, *Tibi! Ngofo! Yinyoka!* The two ideophones are followed by a copulative construction, *Yinyoka!* 'It is a snake', which contextualises the use of the ideophones. The first ideophone can be broadly understood as expressing the idea of pressing on something soft. The

second ideophone expresses the idea of being pecked by something. The two ideophones, used in sequence, have no exact equivalents in the target language. Their use without the words that give them context, does not render meaning. The use of the copulative has thus given them meaning in that the soft thing that was stepped on pecked the person who stepped on it. In expressing the meaning of these ideophones, the translator has used lexical elements that are in the form of exclamations. The exclamation 'Yeuch!', which is an expression of disgust or strong distaste in English, has been used to convey the meaning of the first isiZulu ideophone. By using this exclamation, the translator is showing the disgust and strong feeling of distaste that the main character (Mpiyakhe) felt after stepping on a snake while he was on his way to kill his rival Sinqindi, a contender to his soon-to-come kingdom. He did not like the feeling.

The ideophones by which Ntuli opens his short story come in quick succession, *Tibi! Ngofo! Yinyoka! Agxume ...* which loosely translates as 'Something soft! A bite! It is a snake! He jumps ...' cannot be interpreted as meaning the character experienced fear but that he felt disgusted because of the cultural nuances that are often attached to snakes in isiZulu culture. Snakes are often considered to be representing ancestors. The appearance of a snake to a traditional Zulu is often interpreted as being a visit of an ancestor to his or her living descendants. Mpiyakhe is made indignant by the appearance of the snake. He thinks of the implications of its appearance. To him, the appearance of the snake implies some form of disapproval by the ancestors of what he was intending to go and do, that is, kill Sinqindi. The use of 'yeuch' in the translation, is therefore very appropriate in that it shows that Mpiyakhe understands the cultural ramifications of stepping on a snake while on his journey to 'do away' with Sinqindi. This understanding is especially relevant given that Mpiyakhe knows that the role of king – to which he is heir – was acquired by his father through deceptive means, when it was actually Sinqindi who was the rightful heir to the throne.

Ngofo! is another ideophone used in the original. It expresses the idea of being bitten. The translator has again used the interjection 'ouch' in the place of the ideophone. This interjection is used to express a feeling of sudden pain. The use of this interjection in translating the meaning of the isiZulu ideophone is apt. Although nothing about pain is expressed by the isiZulu ideophone, the idea of pecking does indicate the inflicting of pain and the English interjection expresses the idea succinctly.

Other ideophones used by DBZ in his translation are *du*, *nya* and *cwaka*. These ideophones could be viewed as virtually synonymous because they express the notion of being noiseless, silent, quiet or still. The following are examples of these ideophones in use. They are accompanied by CSZ's translation illustrating his versioning of them:

(2) *Kuthule du lapha endlini. Akukho namuntu okhwehlayo. Namanje ugobodisile uDunguzela. Namanje amehlo kaSinqindi athe njo kuMpiyakhe. Izinduna ezikhona zide zitapana ngamehlo, zinikine amakhanda ngokungathandi kodwa ukuba kubonakale. Kuthule kuthi nya endlini.* (Ntuli 1978:9)

The people in the house were silent. It seemed no one dared breathe, let alone cough, for fear of being heard. Dunguzela still hung his head and stared blankly at the floor immediately in front of him. Sinqindi's piercing eyes were boring through the dying man. The king's councillors exchanged brief embarrassed looks, occasionally shaking their grey heads. You could have heard a pin drop. (Ntuli 1997:30)

It is interesting to note that DBZ in his use of the first ideophone *du* has used the non-agreeing subject *Kuthule* with an ideophone in his construction. According to Buell (2005:211), such a construction serves felicitously as an answer to a question concerning an event, such as 'What is happening in the house?' to which the answer is *Kuthule du!* CSZ, on the other hand, has used a different construction from that used by DBZ. CSZ has used a simple subject–verb–object construction, 'The people in the house were silent', in order to express that which is expressed in isiZulu by means of a non-agreeing construction. His translation is straightforward but, nonetheless, expresses fully what is expressed in the source text.

The second sentence which contains the ideophone *nya*, *Kuthule kuthi nya endlini* has been translated using the phrase 'You could have heard a pin drop'. It is incredible to see how CSZ has used the target language to convey the message of the source text. The fact that he decided to use a completely different form to convey the notion of 'silence' in this sentence is highly remarkable: he has drawn from the idiom of the target language to concisely express what is conveyed in the source language. In addition, he has translated the sentences in the paragraph above in a way that makes the sentence, *Kuthule kuthi nya endlini* a complement, of the sentence one *Kuthule du lapha endlini* in this manner: 'The people in the house were so silent, that you could have heard a pin drop'. The translation has remarkably conveyed the meaning contained in the isiZulu sentences that have ideophones. It is impressive to see how CSZ has translated *du* used in another occasion in the narrative:

(3) *Kwabuye kwathula kwathi du. Kwaze kwakhuluma uDunguzela ngezwi eliphansi.* (Ntuli 1978:10)

No one spoke. After several minutes of awkward silence, Dunguzela spoke in a low voice. (Ntuli 1997:31)

In this example it can be seen that CSZ used a different construction for the same ideophone, his sentence is short but appropriate:

(4) *Kuthe cwaka lapha endlini.* (Ntuli 1978:7)

There was an audible silence in the house. (Ntuli 1997:29)

The non-agreeing subject (also referred to as the indefinite subject) has been used again in this example in a context that is very similar to the one mentioned in example (2). *Cwaka* is another ideophone used in the source text *Kuthe cwaka lapha endlini*, 'It was quiet in the house'. This expression has been translated as 'There was an audible silence in the house'. The translation has used words that are semantically not well-matched to convey the source text message. The strategy that the translator has used is paradox. The word *silence* as a noun cannot take the word *audible* as its qualifier. Silence is lack of

audible sounds. Therefore, the use of this combination successfully creates an image of the silence that prevailed in the house. The translator has conveyed this meaning as something that could be perceived.

Another ideophone used in the isiZulu text to indicate silence is found in the following sentence:

(5) *UMpiyakhe abuye athi gingqi phansi abheke phezulu. Aqale ukugquma. Kuthule. Akathi vu uSinqindi. Uthe njo kuMpiyakhe.* (Ntuli 1978:10)

Mpiyakhe lay down on his back again. He began to utter short, low moans. The moans were the only sounds in the house. Sinqindi still looked with a seething mixture of hatred, anger and contempt at the dying man, as if he would shoot him dead with those fiery eyeballs. (Ntuli 1997:32)

The ideophones that have been used in the example above are *akathi vu* and *njo*. *Akathi vu* literally means 'He did not say a word' and *njo* literally means 'to fix one's gaze on something'. CSZ has translated the two sentences containing the ideophones with a detailed description of how Sinqindi reacted to Mpiyakhe's request that he kill him. The translator describes the look and also what Sinqindi feels inside as he looks at Mpiyakhe who wanted to be killed by Sinqindi before dying as a coward from snake poison. It is evident that the translator did not use the sentential construction of the source language. He has, however, conveyed the message of the source text in a manner that clearly demonstrates that the only thing heard in that room were the moans of the main character. Other than that, Sinqindi just stared at him with eyes that showed anger and resentment. The translator has emphatically shown that silence can mean a lot.

Other ideophones used in the short story indicate 'to search' as illustrated in the following example:

(6) *Phangqu uDunguzela. Nabantu phandle bamangale ukumbona ezama ukuhamba. Uya kwenye indlu lapho ekhumbula ukuthi sasikhona isibiba senyoka. Midala njengoba kwayena engakaze ayibone isebenza selokhu bayothola. Mpu mpu mpu, imithi do. Makhathaleni asithole isishuqulwana.* (Ntuli 1978:5)

Dunguzela tottered out of his house. Everybody was surprised to see him walk. He went to another house where he remembered he had stored an anti-venom preparation some time back. He searched where he thought the little parcel should be, relying more on his sense of touch than on his eyes. He neither saw nor felt what he was looking for. Then he groped about again until, to his intense relief, he found the dark old package. (Ntuli 1997:26)

DBZ uses ideophones because they can be used to describe lengthy details concisely. DBZ has used the ideophone *phangqu* to describe the way in which Dunguzela, Mpiyakhe's father, rushed out of his house in spite of his own condition of feebleness. CSZ, on the other hand, uses the word 'tottered', which means to move in a feeble or unsteady manner, as an equivalent of the isiZulu ideophone. The use of 'tottered' suitably conveys the meaning of the isiZulu ideophones in describing the ailing Dunguzela's movements as he left the house to go and look for an antidote.

The use of two other isiZulu ideophones in the paragraph above is also purposeful. *Mpu mpu mpu*, which literally means incessantly researching, and *do*, which means without success, have been used in the original text to show the time taken and the large area covered in searching for the antidote. After using this repetitive ideophone, the use of *do* shows the feeling of disappointment that came over Dunguzela when he saw that his attempts had not been successful. In his translation, CSZ, uses the word 'searched' which is an exact equivalent of the isiZulu ideophone and he intensifies its meaning by using the verb *grobe* which means to search blindly or uncertainly by feeling with your hands. The translator has illustrated how Dunguzela has used his sense of feeling above all the other senses in locating the whereabouts of the antidote, but without success.

In this short story, DBZ has also used ideophones to describe sounds. This is illustrated by the following example:

(7) *Kubonakale ukuthi kuyabhoka manje ukucinana kuMpiyakhe. Kuzwakale kancane imvula ithi hwa phandle ibuye ithule.* (Ntuli 1978:12)

Mpiyakhe was now breathing with great difficulty. A soft shower pattered on the bare ground outside the house of death. (Ntuli 1997:34)

Sound is claimed to be another property of ideophones. DBZ uses the sound *hwa* to depict the sound made by rain when it falls. This ideophone has been translated as 'a soft shower'. The ideophone itself might have given the translator the idea of a soft shower that is to distinguish this type of rain from other types such as thunderstorms, torrents, hailstorms and the like. The use of a 'soft shower' as an equivalent for the ideophone *hwa* is therefore fitting.

Another ideophone used to depict sound and that has been used in the short story is *hl- hl-*, as in the example below:

(8) *Ahoshe kancane umkhonto ohlonywe ezintungweni kuzwakale kuthi hl- hl- ngenkathi ukudla kwawo kugudlana nekhwani elifulele.* (Ntuli 1978:11)

He raised his arm, and deliberately pulled the spear from the thatched roof. The friction between the blade and the dry grass produced a brittle crackle. (Ntuli 1997:33)

The ideophone *hl- hl-* is another ideophone used in the short story to depict sound. DBZ has used an ideophone to depict the sound made by the spear which Sinqindi was to use to kill Mpiyakhe. The sound made by the spear as it is pulled out from the thatched roof of the house is described by CSZ in detail. The use of this description paints a clear picture of the sound that was made by the spear which was supposed to kill Mpiyakhe, explaining the sound and detailing where such a sound is likely to be created.

Ping (1999) suggests that:

... from the sociosemiotic point of view, 'untranslatables' are fundamentally cases of language use wherein the categories of sociosemiotic meaning carried by a source expression do not coincide with those of a comparable expression in the target language. (p. 289)

It could therefore be insinuated that CSZ has used approximation and amplification to convey the ideophones used in DBZ's short story. Approximation as a translation strategy appears to be a way around the problem of translating elements that are regarded as untranslatable. CSZ's approximations have effectively changed unfamiliar isiZulu cultural notions to concepts to which the English target reader can relate. To Molina and Albir (2002:500), amplification occurs when the target language uses more signifiers to cover syntactic or lexical gaps. As advocated by Pym (2010:14), CSZ has amplified the source text by using more words than the source text to express the same idea that has been expressed by the ideophones.

Conclusion

There are linguistic and cultural differences between languages and different languages articulate or organise the world differently. Some languages have certain lexical forms while others do not. Ideophones are an illustration of such forms. Ideophones that feature prominently in isiZulu do not have equivalents in languages such as English. Scholars consider these forms as complex and difficult, and therefore problematic to translate. The notion of equivalence, which is considered central to translation, does not address the problems of lack of equivalent terms because complete equivalence cannot be achieved. What is suggested is that translators should rather free themselves from the shackles of equivalence and make every effort to achieve acceptable, informative and effective translations by observing the linguistic and cultural norms of the target language.

In the translation of the short story *Uthingo Lwenkosazana*, CSZ has not been hampered by the lack of equivalents for isiZulu ideophones in English. He has, however, shown that the meanings of the isiZulu ideophones, though cultural and have no exact meanings in the target language, can be effectively expressed in the target language by using the translation strategy of approximation and amplification. This allows for culture-specific isiZulu notions that are unfamiliar to the target reader to be changed into concepts to which the target reader can relate to even though different lexical forms are used in the target language.

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I declare that I have no financial or personal relationship(s) which may have inappropriately influenced me in writing this article.

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