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What have the breasts of a running woman got to do with relevance?

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The running woman holds her breasts for beauty's sake, not because she thinks she'll lose them. (Twi proverb)

Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate, through the analysis of interpretations of African proverbs, how different audiences in different sociolinguistic contexts may interpret 'hybrid texts', i.e. texts written by authors of a particular cultural and linguistic background in a language of a different culture, which, therefore, raise the question of how cultural experience is, or can be, communicated in an 'alien' language. The data were collected from twenty subjects by means of a questionnaire.

In hybrid literary texts, along with riddles, dirges, praise names and different forms of address, one relatively often encounters proverbs. These constitute what Zabus calls the ethno-text, 'which is grafted on the European-language narrative, in an attempt to recapture traditional speech and atmosphere' (Zabus 1991:133). As the relexification, defined by Zabus as 'the making of a new register of communication out of an alien lexicon' (1991:102) and operating 'from one language to the other within the same text' (1991:106), of proverbs and idioms is one of the devices of nativizing rhetorical strategies (see Kachru 1987), proverbs are part of the linguistic realization of distinctiveness, and as such are convenient for the study of how the reader makes sense of a text which has more than one interpretative context: 1) the surface meaning of the second language (English); and 2) the underlying meaning of the first (indigenous) language.

The framework chosen for the analysis of proverbs below is that of Relevance Theory, because, as is successfully proven by Regina Blass in her book *Relevance Relations in Discourse*, 'although there may be enormous variation in cultural backgrounds, the principles by which hearers use contextual information in interpreting utterances in discourse are universally the same' (Blass 1990:1).

Let us, then, recall how Sperber & Wilson formulate the Theory of Relevance:

The First (or Cognitive) Principle of Relevance
Human cognition tends to be geared to the maximalisation of relevance.
(Sperber & Wilson 1995:260)

The Second (or Communicative) Principle of Relevance
Every act of ostensive communication communicates a presumption of its own optimal relevance. (Sperber & Wilson 1995:260)

Presumption of optimal relevance (revised)

a. The ostensive stimulus is relevant enough for it to be worth the addressee's effort to process it.
b. The ostensive stimulus is the most relevant one compatible with the communicator's abilities and preferences.

(Sperber & Wilson 1995:270)

Relevance to an individual (classificatory)
An assumption is relevant to an individual at a given time if and only if it is relevant in one or more of the contexts accessible to that individual at that time. (Sperber & Wilson 1995:144)

Relevance to an individual (comparative)

a. *Extent condition 1*: an assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the contextual effects achieved when it is optimally processed are large.
b. *Extent condition 2*: an assumption is relevant to an individual to the extent that the effort required to process it optimally is small.

(Sperber & Wilson 1995:145)

Information, then, 'is relevant to somebody if it interacts in a certain way with his existing assumptions about the world: ...if it has *contextual effects* in some context that he has accessible' (Blass 1990:44).

The data were gathered from twenty people who come from fairly varied backgrounds (1 Ghanaian; 1 Swazi; 1 German; 2 Hungarians; 1 South African Greek; 1 Italian — has lived in the USA for the past 10 years; 1 Singaporean-Chinese; 1 Singaporean-Indian; 6 British — one lived in Africa for 10 years, another in Japan and Malaysia for a considerable period of time; 1 Canadian — has lived in Japan for the past 9 months; 1 Australian — has lived in Japan for almost 4 years; and 3 Americans — all have been living in Japan for more than 7 1/2 years). The subjects were given nine African proverbs (of which only six are included in the following analysis) and were asked to interpret them providing the first accessible meaning without discussing the proverbs with others or thinking about them too long. The only information given to the subjects was that they were asked to interpret proverbs. Neither the origin of the proverbs was disclosed to them, nor the specific context in which the proverbs in question acquire their meaning was provided in the questionnaire. It was hoped, however, that letting them know that they were interpreting not just any utterance but proverbs would bring into play their encyclopaedic entry for proverbs and would allow them easy access to the assumptions one is supposed to have about proverbs (i.e. that proverbs are short sayings embodying traditional pieces of wisdom; that being attributable not to a specific person but to a people, they form part of that people's cultural heritage; and that as such, they function deeply embedded in a social and cultural context, not only confirming societal norms and values but also giving credence to their users), thus creating a 'quasi-context' for interpretation. This expectation seemed to be supported by the suggestion that

> perhaps the majority of contextual assumptions are retrieved or derived from memory. In other words, the context for comprehension is drawn not only from the physical environment, but from what Sperber and Wilson ... call the speaker's and hearer's *cognitive environment*: the set of assumptions that are manifest to them. (Blass 1990:31)

It does not, of course, mean that physical, social and cultural factors do not play a role in utterance interpretation. They do, but 'they affect interpretation by affecting the individual's assumptions about the world' (Blass 1990:31).

Understanding proverbs has a number of complications. First, most proverbs can be understood both literally and metaphorically. Second, proverbs are so-called echoic utterances echoing the thought, or if you like wisdom, of a people, so a proverb can achieve relevance simply by demonstrating that someone finds it wise to quote in the circumstances. Third, by representing popular wisdom 'in a manifestly sceptical, amused, surprised, triumphant, approving or reproving way, the speaker can express her own attitude to the thought echoed, and the relevance of her utterance might depend largely on this expression of attitude' (Sperber & Wilson 1995:239). These complications are, however, taken into consideration only as far as it is required by the purpose of the analysis.

Let us start examining the data by taking the proverb **The pain of women is on their hips** (Appendix: Proverb 4). In order to fully understand it as it is meant in its original context, the following assumptions must be provided:

a. Women carry their children on their hips.

b. Women sometimes irritate their husbands by persistent fault-finding or continuous urging.

c. When they do this, they use their children as an excuse.

d. Men find such nagging a nuisance.

It is obvious that the greater the number of assumptions provided is, the closer to the intended meaning we get. Two of the subjects, K and P, have been able to provide one of the assumptions, i.e. the assumption that women carry children on their hips. However, they, like all the other subjects except for A, whose interpretations show a strong ideological bias, fail to interpret 'pain' as 'nuisance' and remain within the traditional habit of associating the 'pain-women-hips' chain with childbearing, childbirth and raising children.

Proverb 1, while interpreted as is meant by subjects G and M, seems to trigger off the association of 'woman - breast - beauty' with vanity, enticing ploy and dignity (B, C and I, respectively). Though K and L do not explicitly express the same idea, their association of ‘appearance’ with the woman’s outlook rather than with the appearance created by the situation is obviously influenced by similar thinking.

In the case of Proverb 2, the respondents more or less make the association between the top of the tree with its rather thin and shaky branches and the uncertainty, precariousness and lack of safety implied. A variation associates height with a better view, broader perspective and larger horizons (O and K). At the same time, subject E’s interpretation recognizes the danger and discomfort involved, but it reverses the meaning by foregrounding the trunk and the thick steady branches of the tree. Knowledge of the fact that E is a person who started making a living away from home at quite an early age and has never had family support makes it easy to see that such an interpretation projects wishful thinking.

Proverb 3 yields an interesting pattern. Subjects C and K come up with one of the expected contextual assumptions, i.e. with identifying ‘pot’ with ‘cooking pot’ and associating it with the kitchen as women’s domain. C, however, seems contented with the literal meaning and does not move on to the metaphorical level (‘everybody has their duties’). K appears more hesitant in identifying the literal meaning, and gives the interpretation a different, only remotely related, direction. The rest of the subjects all interpret ‘man’ as ‘human being’ instead of ‘man’ as ‘male’ and thus miss the implied man - woman opposition. The identification of ‘pot’ with a ‘container that can contain an explosion’ coupled with the negation of ‘kill’ leads to identifying the signified as an insignificant matter not to be worried about. Subject R, however, clearly associates explosion with letting off steam and consequent relief.

The literal meaning seems to come through the various interpretations of Proverb 5. It is speculated that the metaphorical meaning is not accessed because the contextual assumptions to be supplied are too specific and involve a fair amount of ethnographical knowledge.

Proverb 6 yields three distinct patterns of interpretation. Subjects N and F clearly come up with the intended meaning, whereas T, L and O associate the image created by the literal meaning with a destructive force within the self. Most striking, however, is B, C and E’s association of the ‘bean - destroyed - insect’ chain with environmental protection, a concept that unmistakably points towards a western mind set.

In addition to the patterns of interpretation emerging for each proverb, there is yet another pattern cutting across the proverbs: subject A’s feminist trait, strongly discernible in Proverbs 4, 5 and 6.

The various physical, social and cultural factors affecting the assumptions that have lead to the interpretations detailed above are not addressed in this paper. There is, however, an attempt to investigate how and what meaning is communicated in these proverbs, and what implications this process has for hybrid, or if you like relexified, texts.

To answer these questions it necessary to consider the relationship between the thought that is to be communicated and the propositional form of the utterance (where ‘utterance’ is understood to refer to any linguistic utterance, both written and spoken) which is used to represent this thought. For the proverb **Hail has shown the strong man the way home** (Tshiluba, Zaire; oral source: Betu Ku-Mesu) this relationship can be represented as follows:

Level 1: *The thought*

Misfortune will drive you to seek support from the very people (usually your family) whom you have ignored.

Level 2: *Representation of the thought in L1*

MVULA	WA	MABUE	WA KALEJA	KALUME		KUABO
rain	of	ice	has shown	strong	man	home

Level 3: *Relexification of Level 2 in English*

Hail has shown the strong man the way home

According to Relevance Theory an utterance is strictly literal if its propositional form (Level 2) is identical with the propositional form of the thought it is used to represent (Level 1). However, what a communicator often aims to achieve is not literal truth but optimal relevance, as is the case when quoting a proverb. In order to achieve optimal relevance, the utterance 'should give the hearer information about that thought which is relevant enough to be worth processing, and should require as little processing effort as possible' (Sperber & Wilson 1995:233). As is illustrated above, this can be achieved if the propositional form of the utterance shares some, but not necessarily all, the logical properties of the propositional form of the thought whose interpretive expression it is (see Sperber & Wilson 1995:233).

In hybrid texts, which are characterized by the absence of the original, the reader has to make do with the English version of Level 3 relexified from the indigenous language. As it has been illustrated by the various interpretations of the proverbs, the surface meaning of the second language does not always yield the underlying meaning of the first language. It seems that, in addition to Relevance Theory, some semantic considerations may provide a helpful insight into this.

First of all, 'it seems to be an incontrovertible principle of semantics that the human mind abhors a vacuum of sense; so a speaker of English faced with absurd sentences will strain his interpretative faculty to the utmost to read them meaningfully' (Leech 1974:8). From this follows that an audience whose sociolinguistic context is different from the communicator's will, by rule, attempt to make sense of the communicator's utterance, and that in this attempt the members of this audience will inevitably rely on their *existing* assumptions about the world. This is well illustrated by the environmental protectionist interpretations of Proverb 6. These assumptions may, or may not, coincide with the assumptions necessary to arrive at the intended meaning of the communicator. The diversity of the interpretations of the proverbs shows that even if the assumptions of the communicator are different from those of his audience, the audience embarks on constructing a context in which the utterance becomes meaningful *to them*.

Second, it is assumed by semanticists that 'the same basic conceptual framework is common to all languages, and is a universal property of the human mind' (Leech 1974:15). Connotative meaning, however, is open-ended, embracing objectively and subjectively identified characteristics of the referent, and as such may be considered, among other things, culture related. While the intended meaning of the proverb **Hail has shown the strong**

man the way home may be guessed by the non-Muluba, English-speaking reader without difficulty (subject F: "Hardship always reminds you of home/relatives/those closest to you as a source of help and shelter"), such interpretations as the following point towards differences in connotative meaning:

> "A determined personality succeeds even in the light of unsurmountable difficulties"
>
> "Difficulty can lead to success/achievement if one is determined and doesn't give up" and
>
> "In order to accomplish goals or get anywhere in life, you have to persevere through many hardships"

The Tshiluba word *kalume* connotes the rather negative image of a braggart boasting about his strength, success, achievements and victories over people. At the same time, in the above interpretations the English collocation *strong man* is associated with the positive values of determination and perseverance. Similarly, *home,* or *the way home,* is associated with goal, success and achievement, a meaning that the Tshiluba *kuabo* (whose literal meaning is better represented by the French *chez eux*) does not have. Further modification of meaning may result from English being a second/foreign language for the audience as well. It is not unlikely that the connotative meaning of an English word should become influenced by the connotations attached to the reader's mother-tongue equivalent of that word.

What have the breasts of the proverbial woman got to do with relevance, then? They pertinently demonstrate how 'otherness' expressed through the medium of English (paradoxically, itself the 'other' tongue as opposed to mother tongue; see Zabus 1991:1-10) inherently possesses the potential for Janus-faced relevance: 'mother-tongue relevance' on one side and 'other-tongue' relevance on the other.

'Other-tongue relevance' results from the reader building up a context by providing assumptions derived from the propositional form of the (Level 3) other-tongue representation of a thought, violating the underlying meaning of the invisible but discernible mother-tongue original. For this process of reading as construction I suggest the term 'creolization of meaning'.

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Appendix

The appendix contains the following:

- in **bold** character: the proverbs;
- in brackets: the name of the language in which they are originally used and their country of origin;
- in *italics*, after = : the meaning they are intended to have when used in their specific social and cultural context;
- after * : the source of the proverbs;
- marked by the letters of the alphabet: a selection of the interpretations given by the subjects.

1. **The running woman holds her breasts for beauty's sake, not because she thinks she'll lose them.** (Twi, Ghana)
   = *'Appearance may make you think that a person is in difficulty. It may not be the case. There may be a perfectly normal explanation. Appearances may be deceptive.'*
   * Source: Schipper, Mineke. 1991. *The Source of All Evil: African proverbs and sayings on women*. London: Allison and Busby, p.55 < oral source: Cameron Duodu, Ghana.

   B: "Females may strike a demure pose as an enticing ploy, not out of modesty or 'morality'."

   C: "Vanity is stronger than logic for most people."

   I: "Women always want to preserve their dignity."

   K: "Women are more concerned about appearances than practical matters."

   L: "Appearance is more important to a woman than practicality."

   G: "Appearances are deceptive."

   M: "Easy to misjudge appearances."

2. **Away from home is like living on top of a tree.** (Tshiluba, Zaire)
   = *You can be safe and secure only at home.*
   * Oral source: Betu Ku-Mesu, Zaire.

F: "There is no warmth in being away from home - it's lonely."

G: "You feel lonely when you are not surrounded by friends and family."

M: "Being lonely and isolated because one lacks close company. Also: 'Being on top of a tree' could mean freedom, away from crowds, privacy."

T: "There's no place like home. A man's peace and pleasure is in his own home."

O: "Living away from home is just as difficult and uncomfortable as trying to find room by staying on the top of a tree."
Also: "The top of the tree ... means also to be able to view the world with a broader perspective and larger horizons ..."

K: "Because you see so much and so much further than you ever see at home. Alternatively, you have to look much further, and all around you when in strange circumstances if you want to survive."

E: "Away from home means being independent and having to cope alone. It can be scary and make one feel exposed to the world, but still underneath the tree supports us. Therefore, no matter how far from home you are the support of one's family is always there."

3. **What explodes in the pot won't kill a man**. (Rwanda, Rwanda)
= *"Cooking matters are women's concern. Men should not worry about them. Everybody has his duties."*
* Source: Schipper, *op.cit.*, p.73 < Crépeau, Pierre and Simon Biyimana. 1979. *Proverbes du Rwanda*. Tervuren: Musée Royal de l'Afrique Centrale, p.44.

T: "This is an insignificant matter which does not deserve your worry."

S: "Storm in a teacup."

L: "You shouldn't worry about a small problem."

G: "No need to make a huge fuss over small matters."

B: "If the problem is containable, it's not a big problem."

E: "A pot is a confined space, so the effect of an explosion in one is small. Therefore, the minor upsets in life can be survived."

R: "If you have a problem that's troubling you, it's better that it comes to light as soon as possible even if it's unpleasant at the moment, but at least it won't cause further and bigger problems."

C: "Women are usually in the kitchen working, not men."

K: "But it will kill a woman? Or domestic battles won't kill a man, only battles outside the home will do that?"

4. **The pain of women is on their hips**. (Swahili, East Africa)
= *"Muttered by a vexed husband against a nagging wife. Women [Thus a husband*

told me] will use the children as an excuse for quarrelling and complaining. Women carry their children on their hips."
* Source: Schipper, *op.cit.*, p.78 < Scheven, Albert. 1981. *Swahili Proverbs: Nia zikiwa moja, kilicho mbali huja.* Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, p.489.

A: "Hips are the strongest and can carry the most weight, and since women get so much pain largely based on highly sexist traditions like obnoxious proverbs, we damn well better carry it on our hips."

C: "Women are burdened by being the sex of the species which gives birth."

M: "Women suffer because they are the ones to bear children and have the responsibility of raising them."

K: "Because of what they carry, i.e. their children. And this is more than just physical pain, as the sufferings of a person can be the mother's pain too, i.e. the mother can be caused pain by her offspring's action, or alternatively the mother feels the pain of her children as much as they do."

P: "This is probably associated with child-bearing and childbirth ... this can also be associated with carrying the child around when it is older — it balances on the hips."

5. **Women's strife will cost no sheep**. (Kikiyu, Kenya)
= *"According to Kikuyu custom, the one who wounds another in a quarrel must pay a sheep as a fine. The proverb means that in women's strifes nobody incurs such a fine, for their quarrels are usually words only. Words are for women, actions for men."*
* Source: Schipper, *op.cit.*, p.78 < Barra, G. 1939, 1984. *1000 Kikuyu Proverbs.* Nairobi: Kenya Literature Bureau, p.48.

A: "??? — well, obviously anything women would argue about would be petty, so don't worry your muscular little brain about it."

E: "Women are not a valuable part of society, therefore their sufferings are of no importance."

G: "Women's quarrels are unimportant because they have no socio-economic power."

O: "Women's quarrels are harmless, so they will not cause any loss or damage (represented by the cost value of a sheep)."

6. **The bean is destroyed by the very insect that lives in it**. (Tshiluba, Zaire)
= *You will be harmed by the very person who is closest to you.*
* Oral source: Betu Ku-Mesu.

A: "Be careful of what you let into yourself."

B: "People are living irresponsibly in a natural environment which they should be looking after (for its own sake and their own)."

C: "People often don't take care of their own environment; like the Joni Mitchell song says, you don't know what you've got 'til it's gone."

E: "We are responsible for the environment (its destruction, or preservation) in which we live."

T: "Man is his own enemy."

L: "It is not only from outside that a person can be hurt. He might have something destructive within himself."

O: "No matter how strong physically or emotionally we are, the moment an insidious thought or feeling or disease enters our mind, heart or body, it can slowly destroy all our strength and energy or enthusiasm."

N: "We/something can be brought down/ruined by that which we/something sustains. ... A traitor from within."

F: "You are let down by your very own."