

Malapropism as Portrayed in the Novel N'waninginingi Ma ka Tindleve

M. T. Chauke¹ and M. T. Babane²

*M.E.R Mathivha Centre for African Languages, Arts and Culture, University of Venda,
P/Bag X5050, Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa*
E-mail: ¹<mkhacani.chauke@univen.ac.za>, ²<babane@univen.ac.za>

KEYWORDS Malapropism. Slip of the Tongue. Mishearing. Novel. Humour. Error

ABSTRACT This paper investigates the use and significance of malapropism in the novel *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve* (The one who does not listen). Thuketana makes use of malapropism as a comedic literary device to bring some great comic effect to the readers. The paper also explores the fact that the use of malapropism does not compromise the message the author is trying to put across. The method used in this paper to elicit all the data required is the documentary method, whereby a variety of written sources such as theses, dissertations and journal papers will be consulted.

INTRODUCTION

In this paper, the researchers give an account of the use and significance of malapropism in the novel, *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve*. In *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve*, the author makes use of malapropism to paint a negative but intriguing picture of characters. The use of this literary device in this novel is not intended to vilify the reputation of the character but provide insight into the character's life. Furthermore, malapropism plays a very important role in helping characters in tensions or disputes to settle their differences with ease. Through the employment of this device, tensed situations turn into funny and humorous ones.

Objectives

The main objective of this paper is to show that the use of malapropisms in a literary text intends to test the linguistic competence of the reader. It helps the reader easily understand the wrong use of a word due to the confusion with a similar word or phrase. The reader will be able to know that the use of malapropisms in a sentence alter the intended meaning and generate comedy. The reader will ultimately avoid using malapropisms in both formal and non-formal situations.

Literature Review

Garnham et al. (1981:807) assigned slips of the tongue or errors to four categories, depend-

ing upon the kind of linguistic unit involved, namely:

- (i) Segment errors that involve phonemes or phonological features.
- (ii) Syllable errors that which have been grouped with morphological errors involving grammatical morphemes, such as tense and number.
- (iii) Word errors that may involve the substitution of either a semantically or a phonologically similar word.
- (iv) Errors involving larger units that are mainly blends of phrases.

Vitevitch's (1997:226) investigation of the neighborhood characteristics of malapropisms clearly demonstrated that phonological similarity neighborhoods influence speech production. The study concluded that the likelihood of a word being involved in a speech error, specifically malapropism, is influenced to some degree by the frequency of the word and by the sparseness of its phonological neighborhood. Crystal (2006:72) and Yule (1996:167) state that a slip of the tongue is a slip of the phonological part of the brain. In addition, to the conclusion made by Crystal (2006) and Yule (1996), Naiyf (2010: 150) maintains that malapropism is generalized from its main concept as speech errors produced out of ignorance to include all speech errors whether intended for a humorous effect or as a result of psychological or pathological reasons. Brock (2014) explores the use of alternative methods of correcting malapropisms in sentences input to Artificial Intelligence Markup Language (AIML) Conversational Agents (CAs) using

measures of Semantic Distance and tri-gram probabilities. The addition of the tri-gram based pre-classifier did indeed improve the CAs ability to correct malapropisms. Raaman (2015:2) reports that inappropriate utterance or malapropism is noticed very quickly, especially if the speaker is a public figure and is disseminated worldwide by the print and electronic media. He adds that malapropisms contribute to laughter and humor, although they diminish the stature of the person using the inappropriate words.

METHODOLOGY

Given the magnitude and complexity of the term malapropism, the researchers thought it convenient to use a documentary method to elicit the information required. In the documentary study, a variety of written sources, such as theses, dissertations, extended essays, journal papers and books were consulted.

OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The results of the study can help the readers have a better understanding of the term malapropism. Readers will also be in a position to differentiate between malapropisms and ordinary grammatical errors.

The paper discussed, inter alia, definition of malapropism, origin of the term malapropism, slips of the tongue, hearing the word incorrectly and examples of malapropisms from *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve*.

Definition of Malapropism

The term malapropism refers to the use of language in a wrong context. This scenario occurs when a person pronounces words which seem similar in form but generally mean different things when compared to what he actually intended to say. Hirst and St. Onge (1995:1) define the term as follows:

“A malapropism is the confounding of an intended word with another word of similar sound or similar spelling that has a quite different and malapropos meaning.”

Hirst and St. Onge are of the opinion that the speaker is not well conversant with the correct word he/she is referring to hence he/she ultimately makes sound similar to the word. To be more precise, the speaker confidently pronounces

the word with no hesitation to show that he/she is very certain of what he/she is speaking of, whereas Bollinger and Sears (1981:243) do not hesitate to say that:

“Malapropism is a special kind of uneducated blend.”

To them (Bollinger and Sears), only people who claim to be educated make such ‘uneducated guesses’ when they speak. In other words, the speakers do not see any difference or notice any mistake. That’s why Cowie (1989:754) is more direct when he gives the following definition:

“The term malapropism is a comical confusion of a word with another similar sounding word, which has a quite different meaning.”

The use of the words ‘comical confusion’ makes it clear that the speaker does not realize that he is making a grammatical error. It is the reader or the hearer who is able to notice the “comical confusion” and ends up in great laughter. Finally Holman (1992:37) comes up with a clear-cut definition when he says:

“Malapropism...an inappropriate use of one word for another, which resembles it.”

The above definition puts it clearly that the speaker uses an inappropriate word which resembles the correct one. This infers that the speaker, in this instance, is also not aware that the word he/she uses is not appropriate because it resembles the actual word. This scenario brings laughter and amusement to the reader and the hearer. In addition to the above definition, Vitevitch (1997: 211) says that malapropisms are whole word substitutions that are phonologically, but not semantically related. This means that the words substituting each other just look alike but convey different meanings.

The Origin of the Term Malapropism

The origin of the term malapropism is traced back to the character named Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Sheridan’s play *The Rivals* (1775), who habitually misused her words, generally with a humorous effect. This character, pretended to be a genius, who knew everything. She would pronounce words not appropriately. This is humorous misuse of a word, especially by confusion with one of similar sound. An instance of incorrect speech is called a malapropism when:

- (1) The word or phrase means something different from the word the speaker or writer intended to use;

- (2) The word or phrase sounds similar to what was intended; and
- (3) The resulting utterance is nonsense

The following reasons are attributed to the origin of the term malapropism, namely:

(1) *Slips of the Tongue*

Malapropism happens when the speakers make a wrong choice of words. In addition to malapropism, there are slips of the tongue. Slips of the tongue are cases where the speaker produces what is not intended for. Naiyf (2007:143) maintains that when one makes a slip of the tongue, one mixes parts of two successive words, substituting one sound for another. To be precise, a slip of the tongue translates to a situation where the speaker knows very well the right word but ends up picking the wrong one. Furthermore, Naiyf (2007:150) is of the view that what is referred to, as slips of the tongue are originally slips of the phonological part of the brain. Slips of this kind are the result of a slip in the order sent by the brain to the organs of the speech, which results in errors in speech production. Following Naiyf (2007:143), it is clear that a slip of the tongue results in the distortion of the intended word or message. Malapropisms therefore do not occur only as comedic literary devices but as a kind of speech error in ordinary speech (Fay and Cutler 1997).

(2) *Hearing the Word Incorrectly*

Malapropism can also take place when the speaker pronounces a misheard word or phrase. This type of malapropism happens when there is mishearing or misinterpretation of a phrase as a result of being unable to clearly hear the speaker, substitute words that sound similar, and make some kind of sense. In this instance, the speaker confidently and incorrectly uses the misheard word or phrase.

In short, the novel *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve* is characterized by different kinds of malapropisms, which ultimately leave the reader in a great state of laughter. Furthermore, one can say that malapropism is a situation whereby a character engages in a conversation without adequate knowledge of the language concerned. In some other instances, the readers find that a character uses foreign words, which are in essence inappropriate or incorrect in Xitsonga.

Examples of Malapropisms from N'waninginingi maka tindleve

Khegu is one of the characters that often uses malapropism when in the company of other characters. To be precise, Khegu is portrayed as an uneducated person who likes to express herself in English. She hardly utters a sentence without employing malapropism. She is also portrayed as a crook who cohorts with a group of male criminals. They hatch out a plan to rob one of the successful rich men in their area, Petros Maluleke. As indicated above, Khegu always likes to use English words or phrases whilst in the company of Galachana, Manghezi and Phatimana:

Phela van'wana vavanuna ho va vona ku famba, vununa bya

vona byo va ka sweswi va nga ambala maburuku

"they are men by trousers", xivindzi xa vununa va hava.

(Truly speaking some men we only see them when they walk;

Their manhood can only be noticed because of the trousers they wear

"They are men just because of their attire", they are lily-livered.)

The expression "They are man by trousers" shows very well that Khegu did not attend school at all. Despite her lack of formal schooling, Khegu always prefers to express her ideas in English. The author supports this view when he asserts that:

Xinghezi xa kona a xi ri xo famba xi rholeriwa emakhixini

ya Valungu hikokwalaho a xi tshoveleliwa hi ndlela yo vavisa.

(Her English was learnt at the White men's kitchen, which is why it was very broken).

Through her utterances one understands the kind of personality that Khegu has. Despite her little education, Khegu claimed to know everything. Due to her curiosity to express her thoughts in English, she ends up making use of malapropisms in all her endeavors. Whilst discussing the abduction of Pitorosi Maluleke's daughter, Khegu utters the following statement:

Ndzi na n'wina entirhweni lowu, it can dies I don't carry about (p.27).

(I'm part of this scheme, and despite the dangerous nature of the work, I do not worry).

The words "...it can dies I don't carry about" in the above quotation clearly indicates that the author likes to use malapropism to capture the imagination of the reader. Through the use of this literary device (malapropism), one understands what kind of a person Khegu is. A further example of malapropism can be seen when Khegu is depicted as a very excited person and eventually offers her cohorts free drinks:

You drink me today; I don't pays you boys because I am so appy.

You pays not any cent, never mine liquor is expensis this our days (p.28)

(Today I offer you free drinks. Please do not pay me, guys. I'm just happy.

Please do not bother yourself. I know very well that liquor is very expensive these days, you don't have to worry).

When the readers look closely at the above quotation, they notice that Khegu employs the word 'expensis' instead of 'expensive'. So, this is an example of another kind of malapropism most authors use in their creative works. This infers that the speaker has misheard the word or phrase and it makes the reading more inviting and exciting, and leaves the reader in stitches.

The author further gives a very interesting encounter when Khegu wanted to know how they would be paid their loot. The readers hear Khegu asking the ringleader, Galachana the following:

How shall us get it this money, that is me want to know (p.67).

(How are we going to get paid? It is me who wants to know).

The manner in which Khegu expresses herself leaves the reader with so many questions. The reader ends up filling in the missing words. Another interesting encounter is when Khegu wanted to threaten Mr. Maluleke. Khegu indicates that she will speak to him in the following manner:

I shall afraid him very much (p. 67).

(I shall threaten him very much).

The use of malapropism makes the reader curious to read the novel further. Malapropism is also produced when Khegu wanted to sleep. Instead of saying that she was exhausted, Khegu says the following to Manghezi:

Oh I'm so exhauspipe (p. 99)

(Oh, I'm so exhausted).

With the abduction of Khensani making the headlines, Khegu commented, "you know this children is very famous" (p. 70). By the phrase

"this children," she was trying to say "this child". When Khensani was crying uncontrollably, Khegu tried in vain to calm her down by saying:

... *miyela Khensi, shut quite, miyela ntombhi, shut quite my girl* (p119)

(... Stop crying, Khensi. Keep quiet, stop crying girl, keep quiet girl).

In a desperate attempt, she goes on to beg to Khensani to stop crying by requesting her to sleep: "*Etlela Khensi, etlela ntombhi ya mina, sleep good my girl*"(p133)

(Sleep Khensi, sleep my girl, sleep well my girl).

The Table 1 shows some of the malapropisms, misheard or misspelt words extracted from the novel, *N'waninginingi ma ka tindleve*:

Table 1: Malapropism vs The Correct Word

<i>Malapropism/misheard or misspelt word</i>	<i>The correct word</i>
expensis (p.28)	expensive
go in pieces boss (p91)	go in peace, boss
good lucky (p91)	good luck
dangerose (p27)	dangerous
come on teach (p186)	come on, teacher
Gadaliyele (p11)	Gabriel (referring to the Biblical angel)
Thensani (p.56)	Khensani
delirious (p.27)	delicious
untorfonately (p.27)	unfortunately
appendix (p.27)	appetite
amelluya (p.47)	alleluya

The Function and Significance of Malapropisms

The term malapropism, as defined in the beginning, is derived from Richard Brinsley Sheridan's character Mrs. Malaprop in her play *The Rivals* (1775). Her name is taken from the French word "malapropos" (inappropriate) and is typical Sheridan's practice of concocting names to indicate the essence of a character. Vasquez (2001: 296) maintains that the main function of the malapropism is to generate hilarity in the audience or readers and make clear that characters use language beyond their strength. The above view is collaborated by Gerson (1965) in Vazquez (2001: 281-296) when he mentions that beyond the comic effect inherent to malapropism, a deeply significant artistic purpose exists. It is a literary device that adds to the reader's understanding of the speaker's character, and to the reader's comprehension of the novel as a whole. As a result, malapropisms constitute a

class of cases where standard interpretation and intended interpretation diverge. Such divergence leads to a puzzle regarding communication (Reimer 2004:317).

CONCLUSION

Thuketana has demonstrated a clear ability to produce a humorous effect on the reader by the use of malapropism. It is obvious that he has employed this literary device primarily to generate hilarity and great laughter. Thuketana's manipulation of language in search for the depiction in his literary texts, especially in *N'waninginingi maka tindleve*, makes him one of the rarest literary breeds among Xitsonga fiction writers.

RECOMMENDATIONS

It is recommended that Xitsonga fiction writers should use malapropism as one of the literary devices to help characters in tensions and disputes settle their differences with ease. This is mainly due to the fact that through the employment of this device, tense situations turn into funny and humorous ones.

REFERENCES

- Bollinger D, Sears AD 1981. *Aspects of Language*. Harcourt College Publishers: New York.
- Brock WA 2014. Alternative Approaches to Correction of Malapropisms in AIML Based Conversational Agents. *GSCIS ETDs. Paper 20*.
- Cowie AP 1989. *A Dictionary of Modern Critical Terms*. London: Routledge Publishers.
- Crystal D 2006. *How Language Works*. England: Clays Ltd.
- Fay D, Cutler A 1977. Malapropisms and the Structure of the mental lexicon. *Linguistic Inquiry* 8(3): 505-520.
- Garnham A, Shillcock RC, Brown GDA, Mill AID, Cutler A 1981. Slips of the tongue in the London-Lund corpus of spontaneous conversation. *Linguistics*, 19(7-8): 805-817.
- Hirst G, St-Onge D, 1995. *Lexical Chains as Representation of Context for Detection and Correction of Malapropisms*. Cambridge: The MIT Press.
- Holman ED 1992. *A Handbook to Literature*. United States of America: MacMillan Publishing Company.
- Naiyf S 2010. Malapropism as a slip of the tongue. *Iraq Academic Scientific Journals*, 92: 142-151.
- Official Home Page of Malapropism 2013. From <<http://dictionary.reference.com/browse/malapropism>> (Retrieved on 21 February 2013).
- St.Onge D 1995. *Detecting and Correcting Malapropisms with Lexical Chains*. MSc Thesis. Manchester: UMIST.
- Thuketana FA 1986 *N'waninginingi maka tindleve*. Braamfontein, South Africa: Sasavona Publishers and Booksellers.
- Vazquez ALS 2001. Shakespeare's use malapropisms and their translation into Spanish. *Revista Alicantina de Estudios Ingleses*, 14: 281-296.
- Vitevitch M 1997. The neighborhood characteristics of malapropisms. *Language and Speech* 40(3): 211-228