Church Interpreting: Its Sociolinguistic Challenges in Some Vatsonga Charismatic Churches

Babane Morris Thembhani

*MER Mathivha Centre for African Languages, Arts and Culture, University of Venda,
P/Bag X5050, Thohoyandou, 0950, South Africa
E-mail: babane@univen.ac.za*

ABSTRACT Language is a human phenomenon that plays a significant role in one's day-to-day activities. It is a powerful tool used to facilitate communication between individuals and groups of different linguistic and cultural backgrounds. The main aim of this paper is to explore the problems surrounding the interpretation of church sermons. This paper presents observations and findings of the challenges faced by church interpreters in some charismatic churches in Vatsonga communities. With South Africa becoming increasingly multilingual and multicultural, church interpreting is essential in the churches. The descriptive design was used to collect the data in which both the participant observation and interview techniques were used. The study concluded that there are a number of challenges such as linguistic competence, tempo of the preachers, abandonment of messages, skipping and incomplete sentences facing church interpreters. This study will be important to the preachers, interpreters and the church congregation.

INTRODUCTION

South Africa is a multilingual and multicultural country, with a growing number of people converging from diverse lingual and cultural backgrounds. Since the dawn of democracy in 1994 waves of immigrants have converged mainly from southern and central Africa. This multiethnic and multilingual situation has resulted in an increase in the demand for church interpreters especially in charismatic church services. This study examines the consecutive interpreting in some charismatic church sermons in Vatsonga communities.

There is a need for interpreting church sermons because of the language preference and choice by the preachers, which transcends the marked cessation of colonial dominance, and crevices its way through to the neocolonial realities of African-to-African linguistic disapproval and suppression. The fact that languages are ranked nationally, officially, internationally, recognized minority and/or unrecognized minority is a reality, which is not linguistically-founded on empirical outcomes, but on tribally devised strategies to expedite the insensitive domination of one language by another. In this regard, Crystal (1997) warns against skewed attitudinal notions of weighing languages on no empirical grounds on this note:

It comes near to stating the obvious that all languages have developed to explain the needs of their users and that in a sense all languages are equal... All languages meet the social and psychological needs of their speakers, are equally deserving of scientific study and can provide us with valuable information about human nature and society.

The aim of this research was to identify problems faced by church interpreters and provide solutions to these issues. About the concept interpreting, Nolan (2012:2) says, *"It can be defined in a nutshell as conveying understanding... An interpreter listens to a spoken message in the source language and renders it orally, consecutively or simultaneously, in the target language"*. Pochhacker (2004:11) share the same sentiment by indicating that interpreting as a translational activity refers to *"a form of translation in which a first and final rendition in another language is produced on the basis of a one-time presentation of an utterance in a source language"*. The definition by Pochhacker shows that for effective and efficient interpreting to take place, two languages are involved. What is language? In a nutshell, language refers to a system of communication that is used and understood by a particular group of people (Lyons 1981).

Interpreting can take different forms including conference interpreting, sign language interpreting, court interpreting, media interpreting, church interpreting and many more (Pochhacke 2004). This research focuses mainly on church interpreting, which is nowadays a very common

phenomenon among the charismatic churches. In these churches almost all of the sermons are preached in English interpreting in Xitsonga or vice visa. Charismatic Christianity is the type of Christianity, which is practiced in fashionable way, and is sometimes known as spirit-filled Christianity. These are churches that put more emphasis on the work of the Holy Spirit. Followers are often called Charismatic Christians and are divided into three groups, namely, Pentecostalism, the Charismatic Movement, and the Neo-charismatic Movement.

This research was conducted in the Neo-charismatic Movement churches among the Xitsonga speaking communities. These are new churches and denominations that emerged amongst Vatsonga since 1980. They are churches, which do not belong either to the Pentecostal nor Charismatic Movement. However, all these groups share a common emphasis on the Holy Spirit, spiritual gifts and miracles.

The study was conducted in the Limpopo Province of South Africa where according to South Africa's 2011 census, the speakers of Xitsonga constitute 4.5 percent of the total population of South Africa. This language is a cross-border language because it is also spoken in Mozambique, Zimbabwe and Swaziland (Halala and Mtebule 2014:1). Although Xitsonga is one of the official languages of South Africa, in practice, the English language is the language widely used in various aspects of life, including conducting church services in charismatic churches. In contrast, not every member among the churches, which participated in this research, can use English to communicate.

The sermons in all the selected churches were preached in English and consecutively interpreted into Xitsonga. The problems during the interpreting are many and make it difficult for the congregation to get some of the intended meaning of the sermons. It is normal for instance that when the preachers are preaching, other members of the congregation participate actively by clapping hands, shouting, and a call-and-response (Odhiambo et al. 2013).

Literature Review

Study on interpreting has been conducted by many scholars and researchers. The main focus of these studies is usually on court interpreting, sign language interpreting, and media interpreting. For the purposes of this research, church interpreters are facing multiple challenges and little research has been carried out to address these problems. Obviously, without empirical data and in-depth analysis, it is impossible to systematically identify what problems these church interpreters face. The aim of this section is to present some of the research work done by other scholars with the aim of showing how this research will close the existing gap.

In Taylor-Bouladon's (2011) *Conference Interpreting: Principles and Practice*, the main focus was on the role of conference interpreters in Australia. Consecutive interpreting and simultaneous interpreting were discussed. Moreover, Taylor-Bouladon focused on the principles involved in the interpreting practice in conferences. Although the book was written specifically for Australian conference interpreters, the information is also relevant to all interpreters including church interpreters.

Other scholars who have contributed enormously on interpreting include Stewart et al. (2004) in their book titled, *Sign Language Interpreting: Exploring Its Arts and Science*. The authors' main focus was on the exploration of some of the factors, which are important when doing sign language interpreting. The book further discusses the models of interpreting with sign language interpreters should be familiar including business, educational and many more.

A scholarly work was also done by Pochhacker (2004) on the book titled *Introducing Interpreting Studies* where the focus was on different aspects involved when performing interpreting. In this work, Pochhacker discussed aspects of interpreting including its evolution, approaches, paradigms and models. In this book nothing has been discussed about the problems faced by church interpreting.

Other important study is the one by Musyoka and Karanja (2014) titled *Problems of Interpreting as a Means of Communication: A Study on Interpretation of Kamba to English Pentecostal Church Sermon in Machakos Town, Kenya*. In this study, the researchers established that there are problems, which interpreters in churches are faced with when performing their duties. The study found that the challenges faced by the church interpreters include among others, linguistic competence, communication competence, religious discourse, social and cultural context and the professionalism of the church interpreters.

Biamah (2013) in her journal article titled, *Dealing with Communication Challenges during Interpreting of Church sermons in UASIN GISHU Country, Kenya*, found that there are multiple problems faced by church interpreters while performing their duties. Some of these problems included the preacher's speed, interpreter's languages competence, communication systems challenges and interpretation by using word for word method. In her paper, she recommended that church interpreters should be competent in their job for the benefit of the audience who do not understand the source language.

Another research on church interpreting, which was conducted in Kenya was done by Odhiambo et al. (2013). The title of the journal article was, *The Impact of Consecutive Interpreting on Church sermons: A Study of English to Kamba Interpretation in Machakos Town, Kenya*, and the purpose of this paper was to examine the impact of the consecutive interpreting in Pentecostal church sermons. The researchers found that church interpreters use strategies such as message abandonment, skipping, approximation, incomplete sentences and flittering as a way of solving some of their interpreting challenges.

In this research it was established that some of the communication strategies used by church interpreters found by the above researchers and scholars are also used by interpreters in the present study.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This research employed the qualitative approach, which according to Creswell (1994:2), is a research method in which *"an inquiry process of understanding a social human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words, reporting detailed views of informants, and conducted in natural settings"*. For the purposes of this research, both the observations and interviews techniques were used. Of the two techniques, an observation was the dominant means of data collection. The interviews technique was used with the view that the participants have more control and flexibility over what life experience they were to relate. The interviews were conducted to all the fifteen participants.

Data Collection and Analysis

The data for this study was collected personally by the researcher using both the participant observation and interview techniques. The data was collected between May 2015 and July 2015 where ten (two in each church) church sermons were observed. Furthermore, data was collected through an interview schedule, which was conducted in August 2015. In order to capture the provided data, during the interviews schedule permission was requested to use the tape recorder and was obtained from all the participants (De Vos et al. 2006).

Furthermore, data was collected through the recorded CDs, which were sold in these churches. The sample population was drawn from Malamulele area in the Limpopo Province of South Africa. This area was used because it is dominated by the speakers of Xitsonga (one of the official languages of the South Africa) but with a minimal number of speakers of other languages. Therefore, in collecting the data, the participants provided their experience regarding the challenges of interpreting from English to Xitsonga or vice versa. It is important to note that the subjects in this research did not represent all the church interpreters in the charismatic churches.

The questions asked during the interview proceedings included,
- What are the challenges faced by church interpreters?
- Which communication strategies are frequently used during church interpreting?
- How do you deal with communication challenges during church interpreting?

This study made use of the qualitative thematic content to analyze the collected data. In fact, this is the method in which the themes are identified and then grouped according to their similarities (Cohen et al. 2000). The narrated data from the interviews schedule was analyzed qualitatively by using the open coding method as described by De Vos (1998). The data obtained from the CD recorded were transcribed verbatim, interpreted by listening to all the CDs. All the recorded data was read carefully with the aim of getting the sense of what the data was all about. Field notes written during observations and interviews schedule were also read and compared with the recorded data to verify the information.

Participants

There are many charismatic churches among Vatsonga communities where the preaching is in English and interpreting is done in Xitsonga or vice versa. For the purposes of this research purposive sampling was used to select only five churches, which participated in this study. Furthermore, this sampling technique was employed to select the fifteen participants. The participants consisted of five preachers and ten interpreters. From each church, one preacher and two interpreters were purposively selected. Of all the ten church interpreters who participated in this research, no one had formal training in interpreting skills. Out of the ten interpreters, three had tertiary diplomas, which were irrelevant to interpreting. Two of the ten interpreters had only completed secondary school education. Five of them did not complete tertiary education.

Purposive sampling is a qualitative method where the researcher selects a small number of participants on the basis of their special attributes and to inform an understanding of the research. Moreover, this technique was used based on the judgment of the researcher regarding the characteristics that were of interest to the research (Smith 2003; De Vos et al. 2006). In this research, participants were selected on the basis of their religious beliefs, role in the church, namely, interpreters and preachers, and their readiness to take part in the research.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The results presented in this section are based on a qualitative approach study conducted among the charismatic church interpreters in Xitsonga. The sermons that are analyzed were preached, interpreted and recorded on CD and sold in church offices. Thus, it was necessary for the interpreted message to be accurate for the benefit of the audience. The researcher in this study observed that there were a number of problems, which church interpreters encountered during the sermons.

Linguistic Competence

The importance of linguistic competence, for both the source and the target language in church interpreting cannot be overemphasized. Taylor-Bouladon (2011: 48) concurs by indicat-

ing that the interpreters "*must have perfect mastery of their active languages (into which they interpret) and an in-depth knowledge of their passive languages (from which they interpret)".* The same views stated by Taylor-Bouladon was also shared by Shandu (2014: 180) by indicating, "*Interpreting, therefore, requires an impeccable knowledge of the two languages in question, the source language, spoken by the one delivering a speech, to be interpreted from, and the target language, spoken by the receptors, to be interpreted into".* The languages of importance for the purposes of this research were English and Xitsonga. This research reveals that insufficient linguistic knowledge especially of the source language by the interpreters is very high and causes a serious problem. All the observed church interpreters did English as a second language in their primary and secondary education. Those who proceeded to tertiary did not do English in their diploma or degree.

One of the problems faced by the church interpreters as noticed during the observation is that some of the technical terms that are used in religious discourse are very difficult to interpret in a manner that their meaning is relevant. The following is an example:

Preacher: The spirit of the Lord requested me to tell you that all brethren must practice strict self-control all the time.

Interpreter: Moya wa Xikwembu wu ndzi komberile ku mi byela leswaku vapfumeri hinkwavo va fanele va practice strict self-control mikarhi hinkwayo.

From the quotation above, it was clear that "*practice strict self-control" (Ku titoloveta ku tilawula hi xiyimo xa le henhla)* was not interpreted. The failure to interpret this phrase was caused by poor linguistic competence by the interpreter. The researcher also found that more than eighty percent of the observed and interviewed church interpreters lack self-confidence and relevant religious terminology in the English language. The following serves as an example:

Preacher: My church, Jesus Christ is coming back again not immediately, not soon, but now.

Interpreter: Kereke, Yesu Kriste wa vuya.

The extract above shows that there are closely related words that the interpreter was not familiar with in the source language. The interpreter did not know how to interpret words such as *"immediately"*, *"soon"*, and *"now"* because

of their relatedness. Instead of interpreting the whole phrase, she only reduced the sentence to *Jesus Christ is coming back*. The researcher further noticed that at times the interpreters kept quiet when they had to interpret from Xitsonga to English and only joined when they were expected to interpret from English to Xitsonga. The following serves as an example:

Preacher: Ripfumelo ra wena ri ta ku avanyisa hi siku ro avanyisa (Your faith will judge you on the judgment day).

Interpreter: Amen! Amen! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

In fact, instead of interpreting when the preacher code-switched to Xitsonga, the interpreters kept on saying, *Amen! Hallelujah*! However, on the issue of the interpreters correcting themselves, Stewart et al. (2004:111) argue,*" The interpreter is not bound and should not even attempt to correct poor grammar, badly chosen examples, and other slovenly expressions"*. The researcher does not concur with this view because if incorrect interpretation is done, the distorted message will stay with the brethren forever. Sometimes when the interpreter is failing to interpret the technical terms he/she ends up using the approximate term of the word, for example:

Preacher: Believe it not; I am saying to you by the power of the anointing spirit of my one and the only God, every yoke shall be broken.

Interpreter: Wa kholwa kumbe a wu kholwi, ndzi ri eka wena hi power ya anointing spirit ya Xikwembu xanga, yoke yin'wana ni yin'wana yi ta tshoveka.

Obviously, this scenario created problems with the audience who are only the speakers of Xitsonga. There are words such as *"power"*, *"anointing spirit"* and *"yoke"*, which the interpreter failed to access in the target language. The researcher found that the problem was not because of the lack of equivalence, but the poor linguistic knowledge of the interpreter. The interpreter should have interpreted these words as, *power-matimba*, *anointing spirit-ntoto wa moya*, *and yoke-joko*. It is worth mentioning that the truth of the matter is that the English language is more advanced in technical vocabulary than Xitsonga, hence this becomes a challenge.

Apart from the problem of not understanding and being fluent in the source language, the church interpreters were also found to be not well acquainted with the culture of the English language. Brunnlehrman (2000: 6) is of the view,

"Fluency in the language of the subject you will interpret is not nearly as important as understanding the cultural context of the text you are interpreting". This was also a serious challenge to all the church interpreters observed.

Much as understanding English might be difficult for a person who has learnt it as his/her second language, it was surprising that this research found that the interpreters were also not competent in the target language, which is their mother tongue. Obviously, for effective communication to take place the competence in the target language was essential. On this note Taylor-Bouladon (2011:49) is of the view that, *"it is essential that conference interpreters maintain the purity of their mother tongue, which must not be tainted by the influence of another language"*. Although the quotation was referring to conference interpreters, the same point was true to church interpreters.

Although the focus of this section was on the church interpreters' linguistic competence, it was, the researcher strongly felt that even the preachers' linguistic competence of the source language should be taken into consideration. The participatory approach to the research enabled the researcher to observe that when the preachers make morphological or phonological mistakes it affected the performance of the interpreters. Here the interpreters misinterpreted the preachers.

However, it was further observed that some preachers were well grounded with the source language such that at times when their interpreters make mistakes they came in to serve the situation by correcting the interpreter. Biamah (2013: 156) concurs by alluding that, "*the preachers would take his time to correct the interpreter, all these were meant to strengthen communication*". The following extract serves as an example:

Preacher: You alone are my God, my savior, my king, my messiah, my redeemer, my shepherd, my everything and I will always adore you.

Interpreter: Wena ntsena Xikwembu xanga, mukutsuri wanga, hosi yanga, messiah wanga, redeemer wanga, murisi wanga na hinkwaswo wa mina.

Preacher: redeemer (mulondzovoti)... messiah (mukutsuri)

Obviously in cases where the preacher fails to realize that a mistake was committed, the au-

dience could get the wrong message and would live with it for the rest of their life. This of course is a serious problem for interpreters.

Speed of the Preacher

This research established that one of the problems faced by the church interpreters is the preacher's tempo. The researcher noticed during the observations that there is no clear recommended speed of speech during preaching (Biamah 2013). The researcher observed that the effectiveness of the interpreting was sometimes failed by the fastness of the preacher because the interpreter would not be able to keep up. The interviews revealed that the preacher's tempo increased when possessed by the Holy Spirit. This was confirmed during the observations as the researcher noticed that even when the preacher was aware that the interpreter was lacking behind with his/her interpreting, they continued preaching.

Taylor-Bouladon (2011: 61) alluded to the fact, *"For a message to be interpreted it must first be perfectly understood so that it can be removed with all its shades of meaning from its verbal wrapping and reconstituted intact in another language"*. The same sentiments were shared by Munday (2012: 67) by indicating that, *"the message has to be tailored to the receptor's linguistic needs and cultural expectation and 'aims at complete naturalness of expression"*. This could only happen when the tempo of the preacher is not faster than that of the interpreter. That is the reason why Musyoka and Karanja (2014: 202) are of the opinion that, *"interpretation is successful when the input from the source language is enough, clear and understood by the interpreter"*. There is no way in which the message from the source language could be understood when the preacher's tempo is high. Due to the preacher's tempo, which sometimes is very high, the interpreters face a problem of not interpreting some of the message. The following is an example:

Preacher: It is time that all of us as Christians must lift up our hands and kneel down on our knees and start shouting out the name of Jesus Christ from the rooftops.

Interpreter: I nkarhi wa leswaku hinkwerhu ka hina tanihi Vakriste hi fanele…hi sungula ku huwelela vito…

The preacher's tempo was too fast, so much so that the interpreter could not interpret phrases such as *"lift up our hands and kneel down on our knees…"* The interpreter only joined the preacher in the middle and did not interpret the last part of the extract starting from *"…of Jesus Christ from the rooftops"*.

Therefore, it can be said that together with the problem of the preacher's tempo, this research observed that the issue of time spent during church interpreting is also a problem for church interpreters. Normally the concentration and effectiveness of the interpreter cannot last for more than three or four and a half hours. It was observed that in some of these churches the preacher spends close to four and half hours preaching. On the issue of time of interpreting, which is three to four and half hours, Taylor-Bouladon (2011:50) says, *"After this period of time the interpreter's efficiency drops rapidly, fatigue takes over, there are hesitations and then errors"*.

Professionalism of the Interpreter

Interpreting is a profession, which needs a qualification. It could be in the form of a certificate, diploma or degree. All the church interpreters observed and interviewed in this research did not undergo professional training. Meanwhile, Biamah (2013:328) is of the view that *"before any interpreter starts their work, they undergo training in relation to their field of work. Upon employment, this exposure enables the interpreters to perform their work better, regardless of whatever the field"*. As one of the requirements, knowledge of two languages is necessary in order to be a good interpreter. This is a serious problem since to be efficient and proficient in one's job one needs to have undergone some form of training. From the interviews conducted, the researcher found that these interpreters do not even attend workshops or seminars to sharpen their interpreting skills. One preacher alluded to this point by saying that, *"We do not have experts to workshop our church interpreters. They are all on their own in as far as that area is concerned. But we value the service they are rendering to the church"*.

Abandonment of Messages

The researcher observed that the demands on interpreting are sometimes so high that the interpreter may start interpreting but fail along the way. This may be due to several problems

such as shortage of equivalent words or phrases in the target language. On this note, Baker (2011: 18) says, *"Non-equivalence at word level means that the target language has no direct equivalent word for a word, which occurs in the source text"*. When faced with this problem, the church interpreters abandon some words or a whole phrase or paragraph.

Preacher: As I am talking to you right now, I feel that there is spirit of the Lord here. Freedom reigns in this church today. I feel His presence and showers of mercy and grace. Amen.

Interpreter: Sweswi ndzi nga le ku vulavuleni na n'wina, ndzi twa moya wa Xikwembu wu ri kona laha... Ndzi twa vukona bya Yena...Amen.

From the extract the interpreter abandoned the whole phrase *"freedom reigns in this church today"*. She further abandoned the last part of the extract *"and showers of mercy and grace"*. It could therefore be argued that the purpose of interpreting in this case is meaningless since the purpose of interpreting is to reach those Christians who do not understand the English language (Biamah 2013). In this study, the researcher further observed that in some cases as when the preachers allow the audience to interject with utterances, the interpreters abandon some of the utterances. This was due to the noise, clapping of hands and shouting by the congregation.

Preacher: Everybody shout after me and say the Holy Spirit is in our mist today.

Audience: (audience responds to the preacher's request) The Holy Spirit is in our mist today.

Interpreter: Hinkwerhu...

The researcher also observed that at times the church interpreters disadvantaged those who did not understand the source language by abandoning parts of the sermon. Sometimes interpreters repeat what the preacher has said, which was also noted by Biamah (2013: 331) when she says, *"They would repeat those words as they were in the source language without interpreting on the said words"*. It could be said that here the interpreter's problem was caused by both the preachers and those who understood the source language. When this happens, the participation of those who only knew the target language became minimal. In fact, they only participated by saying *"Amen"* and *"Hallelujah"*, but with the rest of the utterances they had challenges. The following serves as an example:

Preacher: Follow me once more on this one, buy the truth and never sell it.

Audience: Amen! Amen! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Interpreter: Ndzi...

During the interview schedule, Participant 5 has hinted beyond doubt that the interjection by the audience made her to resort to the strategy of abandoning.

Skipping

Skipping is one of the interpreting strategies, which was used by almost all the church interpreters observed in this study. For the purposes of this research, skipping refers to a situation where an interpreter skips or avoids interpreting single words or a group of words. The interpreters intentionally skip these words or phrases because they could not get the equivalence in the target language. Odhiambo et al. (2013:196) concur by indicating that *"Interpreters... resorted to skipping such words since they could not easily come up with appropriate words and ended up leaving them out in the interpreted text"*.

For example:

Preacher: After knowing the God of the Bible, start knowing the God of your personal life. You must experience who He is in your life especially during difficult times.

Interpreter: Endzhaku ka ku tiva Xikwembu xa le Bibeleni, sungula ku tiva Xikwembu xa... U fanele u...n'wi tiva leswaku i mani evuton'wini bya wena ngopfu hi mikarhi yo tika.

From the above example, the words *"of your personal life"* are skipped by the interpreter and it ended up no longer communicating the intended message of the source message. The truth of the matter is that the interpreter avoided constructing sentences with the equivalent skipped words in the target language. According to the participants, there is no doubt that because of skipping of words or phrases by interpreters, the audience of the target language ended up getting a different meaning of the message from the audience of the source language.

Further, the researcher found that in general, interpreters used the word for word interpreting strategy in almost all their interpreting processes.

CONCLUSION

The goal of this paper was to discuss the problems faced by church interpreters in some

of the charismatic churches in Vatsonga. Many of these problems were as a result of all the church interpreters that were observed and interviewed not being trained for the work they did. This common practice of interpreting in church was due to the multilingual and multicultural nature of the charismatic churches in Vatsonga communities. However, it was further established that in some instances church interpreting is used even when the congregation is all Xitsonga speaking. Although the preachers and the interpreters found it interesting to use English and Xitsonga, the extent of language competence in both the languages was found to be very challenging to the interpreters. Obviously, the only alternative interpreting strategies, which were found and used included skipping, abandonment of messages and approximation. This study has also shown that interpreters faced a challenge in keeping up with the high tempo of the preachers. All the problems faced by the interpreters make them to be ineffective, and hence, the main purpose of church interpreting was not sufficiently achieved.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This study recommends that training of church interpreters should be done and in accordance with religious discourse in order for the interpreters to perform their interpreting duties well. The study also recommends that preachers or the church board should organize workshops and seminars to equip their church interpreters. It is further recommended that the Vatsonga use their language when preaching in church sermons especially in cases where the congregation understands the language so as to assume the use and maintenance of their language. It is recommended that church interpreters should keep themselves up to date with new expressions in both English and Xitsonga. This is important because language is dynamic and keeps on changing all the time.

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