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# Illustrative Examples and the Aspect of Culture: The Perspective of a Tshivenda Bilingual Dictionary

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## Abstract

Few Tshivenda dictionaries make use of illustrative examples to define lexical entries. Among those which use illustrative examples to define lexical entries is *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English*, which makes use of simple sentences, idioms, riddles and proverbs. Through the use of illustrative examples lexicographers show the headword in use in typical contexts (Katzaros 2004). In many instances illustrative examples in *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda -- English* reflect on the culture of the Vhava; information which is valuable to Tshivenda learners. Learners of a foreign language find it difficult to understand meanings of cultural words. Bartholomew (1995:4) writes that a cursory reading of the illustrative sentences not only helps the reader to understand the entry word, but it also gives him a feel for the kind of life led by the speakers. This paper seeks to highlight the importance of illustrative examples in familiarising dictionary users with the culture of the Vhava. Data from *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English* will be used to facilitate the discussion of illustrative examples and the aspect of Tshivenda culture.

**Keywords:** Culture; illustrative example; phrase; proverb; idiom

## 1 Introduction

Bilingual dictionaries deal with the translation of entry words from the source language into the target language. In addition to the provision of words with equivalent meaning in the target language, a bilingual dictionary defines the entry word in order to make the meaning clearer to dictionary users. Sometimes such a definition of the entry word will be difficult to comprehend unless it is explained in context. This poses a challenge to dictionary users, especially those who are learners of the language, who may not find the meaning they are looking for. In order to avoid such misunderstandings, some lexicographers make use of illustrative examples to make the meaning of a word clearer. As Kavanagh (2000:101) writes: “We need to know about words and their meanings, but we also need to know about attitudes, manners, and social norms”. The functional inclusion of examples, illustrating actual everyday language usage, is of prime importance because it adds to the quality and user-friendliness of a dictionary (Prinsloo & Gouws 2000:139). Illustrative examples give dictionary users the opportunity to learn more about the way of life of the source language community, including its cultu-

ral aspects. Such knowledge of the community's culture provides a key to understanding the meaning of lexical entries. Illustrative examples may serve as vehicles that clarify the meaning of culturally specific words.

An examination of the cultural setting and the equivalence in bilingual dictionaries reveals that language does not exist in a vacuum but occurs in context. Hence, relationships between the various languages as well as within a language become clear. One of the important aspects is the cultural context in which a word is used. (Gangla-Birir 2005:40)

The inclusion of cultural aspects in the definition of a lexical entry in a dictionary would be of great benefit to language learners in South Africa, a country with many racial and ethnic groups. Kavanagh (2000:101) asserts: "In South Africa, a country where people are being positively encouraged to learn another language and to communicate across cultures, the need to develop cultural as well as linguistic awareness should be emphasised".

The purpose of this paper is to highlight the importance of illustrative examples in familiarising dictionary users with the culture of a community. As Whitcut (1995:255) argues: "... it is in the use of examples that our cultural presuppositions become most obvious". Examples from the *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda - English* will be cited to illustrate how learners of Tshivenda can be helped to acquire information on cultural aspects of the lives of the Vhava.

## 2 Illustrative Examples

Illustrative examples can take the form of sentences or phrases. On the use of sentences as illustrative examples, Bartholomew (1995:3) cites Bernard and Salinas Pectraza (1989) who state: "The dictionary sentences provide a series of snapshots of the daily life of the Mezquital Otomi Indians. They don't constitute ethnography as such but the information they supply is consistent with a fuller ethnography written by an Otomi speaker." The message in this quotation applies not only to Mezquital Otomi Indians but to all communities. Good illustrative sentences help to define the entry word by using it correctly in a typical context (Bartholomew 1995:3). When dictionary users read illustrative examples they can imagine the kind of life led by the source language community. Learners get to know how the example works and how it collocates (Katzaros 2004). Language has a close connection to the culture that produced it.

A language is not solely composed of words interacting with one another; it has a close connection to the culture that produced it. Thus, learning a language is also getting to know the particular aspects of the culture behind it. Examples can play an essential part in showing culture by illustrating words that have a specific cultural dimension. (Katzaros 2004:491)

A bilingual dictionary with illustrative examples is user-friendly because such examples show the entry word in context, and distinguish one meaning from another, illustrating grammatical patterns and typical collocations, and indicating appropriate registers (Drysdale 1987 cited by Al-Ajmi 2008:16).

### 3 Illustrative Examples and the Aspect of Culture in Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English

Illustrative examples in the *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English* take several different forms. Some of the examples are in the form of proverbs, whereas others are in the form of phrases, riddles and idioms. This discussion will focus on proverbs, idioms and phrases as they are used to highlight cultural information about a language community. Illustrative examples in the *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English* are informative because they illustrate the use of the word and enhance the dictionary user's understanding of its semantic range and the culture of the Vhavaṇḁ (Mafela 2008:31). Kavanagh (2000:112) comments thus on the presentation of cultural items in the definition of a lexical item in Van Warmelo's dictionary: "In the *Tshivenda – English Dictionary* edited by Van Warmelo cultural snippets follow the translation". Through these illustrative examples, dictionary users learn more than the mere meaning of a lexical entry.

#### 3.1 Phrases

Van Warmelo (1989) has a tendency to use phrases to present the lexical entry in context. However, only those entry words whose meanings are figurative or cultural are explained in context. One such word is the lexical entry *-bva*. This entry is partly defined as follows:

- (1) *-bva* 1 go out, come out, emerge, issue, come from. -- *malofha* bleed. -- *ngomu* escape. -- *phaḁi* get scabies (which come out of the skin). *Nḁila i* -- *nga vḁukati ha tsimu* path goes right through the garden. –  
*ḁhangu* go to consult a diviner.

The lexical entry *-bva* can be defined in three senses, i.e. going out or coming from, persevere, and pass. However, the English equivalents of *-bva* in the sense of going out or coming from are: go out, come out, emerge, issue, and come from. A number of illustrative examples in this regard have been provided to show its use in context: *-bva malofha* (bleed), *-bva ngomu* (escape), *-bva phaḁi* (scabies coming out of the skin). Only the last of these, *-bva ḁhangu* (go to consult a diviner) reveals an aspect of culture. The phrase *-bva ḁhangu* has been used as an illustrative example to distinguish its meaning from any other. According to the Tshivenda culture, if a member of a family dies, his/her relatives go out to consult a diviner to find out the cause of the death. This is a popular belief among the Vhavaṇḁ, as it is in some other African communities. These groups believe that people do not die of natural causes; they believe that death is brought about by another person or by the ancestors. This action is taken not only when a death takes place, but also when the family encounters misfortunes. A diviner is an important person in the lives of the Vhavaṇḁ in particular, and in African communities in general. Through this

illustrative example, learners of Tshivenda come to understand some of the cultural beliefs and religious activities of the Vhavenda.

The use of a phrase as an illustrative example to reveal the culture of the Vhavenda is also realised in the definition of the lexical entry *dzekiso*; which is defined this as follows:

- (2) *dzekiso* 5 bride-price for a wife, (or, usually, one animal towards it), given by one's father or other close relative, see *-dzekisa*. *Musadzi wa --* great wife, whose son will be heir (Van Warmelo 1989:35)

There is only one English equivalent for the lexical entry *dzekiso*, and that is bride-price of a wife. However, this is not an ordinary bride-price; it is the price paid for a wife who is highly regarded in the family. Polygamy is not a foreign practice among the Vhavenda and it is perfectly acceptable to the community for a man to marry more than one wife. However, a woman whose bride-price is paid by the father of the husband or a close relative in the family is known as *Musadzi wa dzekiso* (the great wife). This woman is the one who gives birth to the heir in the family. In the case of the royal house, *Musadzi wa dzekiso* (the great wife) gives birth to a future king/chief. Normally, *dzekiso* (bride-price) will be paid in the form of animals. This knowledge, beliefs, and practices of a particular society are reflected in a language (Kavanagh 2000:103).

The definition of the entry word *-kuvha* shows, too, how supplementary information regarding the meaning of a word can be provided through the use of illustrative examples:

- (3) *-kuvha* 1 wash, as clothes. 2 (Kar. Idem) stop bearing (of trees at end of season), cease to be in season (of fruit). *Mapapawa a vho -- zwino pawpaw* are coming to an end. 3. finish payment, make up the balance outstanding, pay in full. -- *misho* pay all the presents due to bride's parents. *Ndi do -- dzothe* I shall take all. *Engedza thanu uri dzi kuvhe zwothe* pay a further five to make up the total

*Muthu o felaho kule na haya u a kuvhiwa*. If a man dies far from home and cannot be buried there, a sheep is killed and its head buried near his ancestors' graves by a doctor and the family. This is a substitute, and they say: "Mudzimu o vhuya hayani" (Van Warmelo 1989: 122).

Four meanings of the lexical entry *-kuvha* have been identified in the definition above. Meanings 1, 2 and 3 are clearly spelt out. However, the illustrative example in 3 is accompanied by information on a cultural aspect. The example *-kuvha misho* and the word *misho*, in particular, means to *pay all the presents due to a bride's parents*. Through this illustrative example, dictionary users learn that a bride-

groom is expected to produce all the presents before he is allowed to take his bride. If not, the bride will not be given permission to join the in-laws. *Kuvha* in this instance means pay.

Another interesting aspect of culture is revealed in illustrative example 4 (*Muthu o felaho kule na haya u a kuvhiwa* - If a man dies far from home and cannot be buried there, a sheep is killed and its head buried near his ancestors' graves by a doctor and the family). This illustrative example is not numbered and the meaning of the entry *-kuvhiwa* is not easily identified. Its use in this context reveals a cultural aspect of the lives of the Vhavanḁa. The Vhavanḁa believe that when a man dies far from home, he should be buried with his ancestors. This is not possible if the corpse is not brought back home. Instead, family members and the doctor will kill a sheep as a substitute. If this does not happen, something bad will befall the family. This is the reason a sheep is killed and buried near his ancestors' graves. In this regard, the Vhavanḁa say "Mudzimu o vhuya hayani", which means "God has come back home". Through this illustrative example, dictionary users are shown an aspect of Vhavanḁa culture they may not have realised if the example had not been provided. *Kuvhiwa* in this regard can be explained as: a sheep is killed and its head buried near the graves of the deceased's ancestors. *Kuvhiwa* in means replaced. The vocabulary of a language can provide some evidence of what is considered culturally important (Kavanagh 2000:103).

### 3.2 Idioms

Van Warmelo uses not only simple phrases to illustrate the meaning of lexical entries. He also makes use of idioms. In defining idioms Guma writes:

Idioms are characteristic indigenous expressions, whose meanings cannot be ordinarily deduced or inferred from a knowledge of individual words that make them up. They are native to a language, and have the stylistic effect of giving it a typical native ring that is characteristic of its mode of expression (Guma 1977:66).

Many idioms in Tshivenḁa depict the way the Vhavanḁa live, including their cultural beliefs. Even if their meanings cannot be ordinarily deduced from the knowledge of individual words that make them up, a number of idiomatic expressions have been used to supplement the information on the meaning of a lexical entry in a definition. Some idiomatic expressions used by Van Warmelo are *u bva dzimamuḁi* (go out of the village) and *u tevhele maḁamu* (collect fees due to a chief for Vhusha rites). The lexical entry *dzimamuḁi* is defined as follows:

(4) dzima-muḁi (or dzimu-muḁi, dzimuḁi) in -bva -- go outside the village (sc. to stay there during an illness, to get fresh air, to be undisturbed, or for other reasons); vha mu bvisa -- they are taking the patient outside the village, away to relatives (Van Warmelo 1989:40)

*Dzimamuḍi* is a compound noun meaning “going outside the village”. One may go outside the village for various reasons, such as to stay away during an illness, to get fresh air, or to be undisturbed. However, the Vhavenḍa believe that when one is ill, one is more likely to get better if one goes outside the village. The illustrative example that serves as a vehicle to teach the traditional way of doing things is *vha mu bvisa muḍi* (they take him/her outside the village). According to the Vhavenḍa, when a person is seriously ill, he/she will not be healed if kept in the village. This is attributed to many factors, among them witches that might live in the village. The Vhavenḍa believe that a person is bewitched by someone closest to him/her, i.e. a relative. When he/she leaves the village, relatives will not have the opportunity to exacerbate the illness. The Vhavenḍa even have a proverb to support this belief: *Mutsinda ndi khwine shaka ndi bulayo* (A stranger is better than a relative; a kinship may be the death of one). This means that one will be safer outside the village than within it. The Vhavenḍa trust strangers more than they do kinsmen.

Another example of an idiomatic expression used as an illustrative example to supplement the information in the definition of a lexical entry is *U tevhela maḍamu* (collect fees due to a chief for Vhusha rites). The lexical entry *ḍamu* is defined as follows:

- (5) *ḍamu* 5 1 udder, female breast, hence e.g. *thungo ya ḍamuni* the mother’s side (of family, of one’s relatives). 2 node or hand of bananas, i.e. those growing from the same level on the stem of the bunch. 3 -tevhela maḍamu (follow the breasts) collect fees due to a chief for Vhusha rites, from girls who have gone through these rites elsewhere. 4 -vha na -- be in calf, in foal (ruminants, equines) (Van Warmelo, 1989:20).

The English equivalents of *ḍamu* are udder and female breast. However, the word can be used in different contexts to mean different things. Our concern in this discussion is with the context in which it has been used in meaning 3. -tevhela maḍamu, loosely translated as follow the breasts. This reveals a cultural aspect of the life of the Vhavenḍa. When Vhavenḍa children grow up they undergo various rites to prepare them for the challenges of adult life; in this case it is the *Vhusha* rite. *Vhusha* is a puberty rite for girls. In order to attend this rite, girls must pay a fee. *U tevhela maḍamu* means to collect fees due to the chief for the *Vhusha* rite from those girls who have undergone these rites elsewhere. Girls who attend these rites in other villages are made to pay a fee to their chief, which is referred to as *maḍamu*. The most important point here is that learners of Tshivhenḍa learn about this cultural activity through the definition of the lexical entry *ḍamu*. Besides the meanings given, a learner receives this added information.

### 3.3 Proverbs

Proverbs express a community's commonly held ideas and beliefs. They are concerned with those things that the people know in their daily lives, and not with things that fall outside the scope of their experience (Guma 1977:66). However, proverbs are found in various communities of the world. Comparisons of proverbs found in various parts of the world show that the same kernel of wisdom may be gleaned under different cultural conditions and languages (McHenry 1992:749). As indicated above, many proverbs have been used as illustrative examples in *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English*. Some of these are discussed below.

(6) -vhanga 1 wrongfully lay claim to what is another's inherited right or entitlement, as *vhukoma* chieftainship, headship of family, *ifa* inheritance; dispute, challenge or fight over such right. 2 make oblique cut with axe, as to facilitate straightening a pole; make oblique cuts towards one another to remove wedge & get at inside of wood (*Mbani i vhangwa mitandani* the *mbani* bee is got out of wood with oblique cuts); hammer and flatten to make thinner, as wire. 3 cause, bring about, aggravate, as sickness or accident. *Goloi yo mbangela khombo* the cart did me a mischief (as by overturning). *Zwi mbangela mushumo* this makes work for me (that I don't want)

Prov: *Ha sa vhangwa, a vhu lalami* "Unless a chief has had to fight for his position, he does not keep it long" (Van Warmelo 1989:451)

The lexical entry *-vhanga* has three meanings. All these meanings have been well defined; they do not confuse the dictionary user. The lexicographer has gone a step further by explaining meaning 1 by providing an illustrative example in the form of a proverb. The proverb comments on chieftainship, that is, if his position is not fought for, the chief will not keep it long. It is a well-known fact that among the *Vhavanḁa* a chief is born into the position. However, according to *Vhavanḁa* culture, the heir should fight for this position. This is why, before the installation of a chief/king, there will be conflicts where different groups will fight for their favourite to be installed as chief/king of the people. Such conflicts make the winner a stronger person. According to Van Warmelo (1989:151), "No chieftainship that succeeds, has not survived the test of force at its inception. This quarrel over the succession forces the leading spirits to show their colours, and the victor can then eliminate his enemies. His victory convinces the passive majority that he is indeed the right man. He has "got something", and his ancestors clearly support him." At the end of the quarrels the rightful person is the victor, and his reign lasts a long time.

Another illustrative example which takes the form of a proverb is *Wa kokodza luranga, mafhuri a a tevhe-la* (You pull at the calabash creepers and the calabashes follow). This illustrative example is used to add meaning to the lexical entry *luranga* which is defined as follows:

- (7) luranga 11 (pl. thanga 10) cultivated cucurbit, plant of any var. of pumpkin, calabash, melon  
Prov. Wa kokodza luranga, mafhuri a a tevhela “You pull at the calabash creepers and the calabashes follow,” i.e. to get at the important facts of a case one discusses irrelevant details (Van Warmelo 1989:151)

This proverb makes a comment on the importance of details that may seem irrelevant but that can be valuable in supporting the important facts. Irrelevant details are not supposed to be ignored when one is discussing important facts. This proverb is usually used by the Vhavenḁa to comment on the actions of individuals, mainly men. In Tshivenḁa culture when a man gets married to a woman who has children by another man, he is expected to take all her children as his. These children are not to be ignored or left behind with the in-laws; they are to be treated as his own and they in turn should address him as “father”. He is not called “stepfather”, nor are the children called “stepsons/daughters” because the concepts of “stepfather” and “stepson/daughter” do not exist among the Vhavenḁa. This is such an important aspect of the culture that the children change their surname/ last name and adopt that of their new father.

Among the Vhavenḁa women are traditionally regarded as minors. This is supported by some of the proverbs in use in their daily life. In the definition of the lexical entry *tsadzi*, a proverb *Khuhu tsadzi a i imbi (ambi) mutsho, i imbaho (ambaho) ndi ya nduna* sums it all up. The entry word is defined as follows:

- (8) tsadzi 9,10 of -sadzi female; of female nature, origin. O dzula thaka -- (= ya tshisadzini) he inherited from the female side, i.e. from his mother.

Prov: *Khuhu tsadzi a i imbi (ambi) mutsho, i imbaho (ambaho) ndi ya nduna* “A hen does not announce the dawn, it is the cock that crows” i.e. a woman is a minor and may not discuss matters in public proceedings (Van Warmelo 1989: 385)

As women are considered minors, they are not usually allowed to participate at the *khoro* where public discussions are held and cases heard. Only men participate in such gatherings and they decide and hear cases on behalf of women. Women, on the other hand, accept this cultural aspect and abide by all decisions made by men.

## 4 Conclusion

The above exposition has shown that the *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenḁa - English* has a wealth of illustrative examples which have been used to convey cultural information to learners of the language. Cultural words exist in context. The knowledge, beliefs and practices of a society are revealed in the defi-

nitions of lexical entries. As a result, when looking for meanings of lexical entries, users of this dictionary also learn about the beliefs and practices of the Vhavenḁa. Cultural information merits inclusion in dictionaries and this can be achieved through the use of illustrations (Gangla-Birir, 2005:39). Prinsloo and Gouws (2000:139) have this to say: "Illustrative examples play a vital role in dictionaries, and the dictionary conceptualisation plan of any new lexicographic project should make provision for a systematic presentation of this data type in the data distribution structure". Bilingual dictionaries, as tools for learning foreign language and culture should include illustrative examples for the purposes of enhancing users' understanding of cultural words.

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