

Note

Pleonasms, Ideophones, and the Song of Songs

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Abstract

In response to two articles by Izaak de Hulster in *The Bible Translator*, this note describes ideophone use in the Gbaya translation of the Song of Songs as a type of pleonastic translation.

Keywords

ideophone, Song of Songs, Gbaya, Izaak de Hulster, pleonastic translation

The April 2020 issue of *The Bible Translator* offered its readers the first part of an enticing study entitled, “The Challenge of Hebrew Love Poetry: A Pleonastic Approach to the Translation of Metaphor,” by Izaak J. de Hulster (2020a). The author proposes the use of pleonasms to express the meaning of noun metaphors intelligibly in translation.

The second part of de Hulster’s study (2020b) appeared in the August issue of *TBT*. Using a short selection from the Song of Songs as a sample text (7.2-6 [English 7.1-5]), the author discusses his pleonastic approach to translation. In his dynamic equivalent rendering of body-description metaphors, he demonstrates the addition of “synonymous adjectives” to clarify the meaning of biblical poetry for an audience of English readers today.

Izaak de Hulster’s treatment of pleonasms refreshed memories in this *TBT* reader’s mind of an interconfessional translation program launched in 1971 in the heyday of dynamic equivalence. The primary goal of this initiative was to translate the Bible into the Gbaya language spoken in Cameroon and the Central African Republic.¹ Translating the first Bible in a primarily

¹The translation of Psalms was published in 1974, the New Testament in 1982, New Testament with revision in 1985, the Bible in 1995, and the Bible with Deuterocanon in 2011.

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oral context, the team of mother-tongue translators adopted an oral perspective that would have significant implications for the rendering of poetry like the Song of Songs in writing.

The corpus on which the translators based their translation style was comprised of “oral tradition,” namely, riddles, proverbs, parables, folktales, and narrative. Songs were included as poetry, i.e., lullabies, working bee choruses, hunting and war songs, laments, and many others, together with songs for audience participation in folktale performances. Folklore was the primary source of the linguistic-literary features that Ernst Wendland has named “literary-rhetorical devices” (2004, 166).

The ideophone is the most powerful verbal device available to Gbaya oral artists. Based on the sound symbolism of language and culture, ideophones are expressive words that replicate human experience as perceived through the five senses. They express sights that one sees, sounds that one hears, flavors that one tastes, scents and odors that one smells, and the feel of things one touches physically or that one senses, like hunger and pain. They also express inner feelings of emotion (Noss 2019, 503).

The ideophone lexicon generally obeys the rules of Gbaya phonology. Unique sounds, combinations of sounds, internal rhyme, repetition, lengthening, tonal modification, and vocal emphasis offer potential for dramatic exploitation by speakers. Languages differ on the grammatical function of ideophones, but in Gbaya, they may be adopted to function as adjectives, substantives, verbs, in place of a verb, or as frozen adjectival and adverbial modifiers.

Ideophones are an inherent feature of most African languages, and their prominence in expressive language has been acclaimed. But Bible translators have tended to avoid using them. This may have been because they appear to be supplementary lexical items, optionally used by speakers for emphasis, or by artists for drama. Perhaps they seemed to belong to a speech register that was not deemed fitting for written text and definitely not for sacred text.

However, they did feature in the translation of the Bible into the Gbaya language (Noss 1976). The original translation team was composed of two secondary-school graduates, Amadou Sarkao and Kombo Samuel, and a theologian, Rev. Darman Paul. Over the years, other translators joined, or replaced, members of the team, among them, Beka Wah Paul, Kourine Darman, and Dogobadomo Béloko. Subsequent to those days a half-century ago, ideophones have been gaining recognition and acceptability in wider Scripture translation circles.²

² For early recognition of ideophones, see Wendland 1981. For presentation of ideophones in translator training materials, see Barnwell 1986; Wiesemann 1986; Zogbo and Wendland 2000; Wendland 2004. “Ideophone” was introduced into the UBS glossary of technical terms with the publication of the Esther handbook (Omanson and Noss 1997).

“Synonymous adjectives” were used by de Hulster “to convey the most essential associations from the source text’s cognitive environment” (2020a, 101). Similarly, ideophones served the Gbaya translators as “synonymous qualifiers/modifiers” to convey details of perception from the source text to the new receptors. However, as insertion of implicit information in a translation can detract from the text itself, likewise, in the performance of a folktale, an ideophone may overpower the story. In the rendering of a biblical psalm, the ideophone must complement without overshadowing the psalmist’s message (Noss 1985; 2000). Given the subject matter of the Song of Songs, ideophones could easily have been introduced too generously by the translators.

In the following paragraphs, I will describe ideophone use in the Gbaya translation of the Song of Songs, without considering pertinent background and related issues touched on by de Hulster. There are thirty ideophone occurrences in the eight chapters of the Song. Twenty-four of the ideophones occur only once.³ Beginning with the three description songs identified by de Hulster (2020a, 114), I will demonstrate the scope of ideophone occurrence in the Song of Songs that extends beyond the metaphors of body description.⁴

The first description song (4.1-5) is by the lover, signaled as “The Man” or “He” in some versions. He is praising the beauty of his beloved with a variety of metaphors, drawing from nature, domestic animals, architecture, and armament. The Gbaya translators introduced four ideophones. In v. 1, they substituted an ideophone for the image of doves, which they felt would not be understood by their audience: *kàlâkùlêè* depicted the soft beauty of the woman’s eyes visible below the veil. In the same verse, the bountifulness of her hair is compared to a great herd of goats flowing (*fôdêè*) down from on top of the hill of Gilead. Her teeth are characterized by the stunning whiteness (*ndâkâ-ndâkâ*) of sheep that have been bathed (with a footnote, the text reads “that had been shorn”). In v. 3, her dainty lips are black (*mît-mît*) like the graphite used to blacken pottery—a quality of black that is much admired and that alludes to vessels of domestic importance (a footnote indicates that the text reads “red” instead of “black”).

The second description song (5.10-14) is by “The Woman,” “She,” or it may be by the “Chorus of Women” singing the woman’s adulation of her lover. There are eight ideophones in this song. The description is physical, portraying the man’s handsomeness. The first ideophone in v. 10, *bôdôè*,

³ Ogden and Zogbo (1998) suggest possible ideophone use in five verses: 1.12; 2.8; 4.10; 8.6; and 8.7.

⁴ Gbaya orthography is used for the ideophones cited here. Linguistic symbols are standard IPA symbols. The “r” is pronounced as a trill; high tone is marked by an acute accent, low tone with a grave accent; vowel length is indicated by vowel doubling or tripling.

depicts a most perfect appearance, reddish-brown in color, without the slightest blemish. In v. 11, the image of gold, with its beauty and value, describes her lover's head. Details of long thick hair, *síp-síp*, and its color, a delicate black *ḅótótó*, follow. The ideophone of color replaces the crow or raven which would not have good connotations for describing a person's character for a Gbaya community (with a footnote stating that the original text is "crow").

The description progresses from the overall appearance of her lover and the attractiveness of his head and hair to his eyes that are remarkably clear (*ḡgélélé*), like still pure water, not like doves, but like white herons over water, and the white of his eyes like *kàlakùlèè* (see 4.1), as though submerged in milk. Verse 13 describes his cheeks, like a field bearing sweet-smelling incense. His lips are like lilies of the field that give off a scent that smells sweet (*ḅisisì*). Verse 14 draws attention to his sturdy (*rébété*) arms, with shapely muscles, rounded (*kini-kini*) like bracelets. The song continues to its end, without further ideophones in the Gbaya version.

The third descriptive song (7.2-6 [English 7.1-5]), the one chosen by de Hulster for his sample translation, is the man's personal praise for his loved one. In this short selection, there is but a single ideophone. De Hulster's pleonastic translation in v. 5, "your noble nose," is expressed in the Gbaya version by the high-tone ideophone *gómómó*, which portrays a visible protrusion or projection that stands out distinctively. An apt portrayal of a tower, the high tone of the ideophone connotes something more feminine than the ideophone in low tone would have expressed.

All the five senses are represented in the Gbaya translation. Wendland (1995, 43) noted a possible onomatopoeia in the hissing of fire in Song 8.7, which could be expressed by an ideophone of sound (Ogden and Zogbo 1998). The Gbaya translators drew attention to the sound and motion of bubbling water with *kpút-kpút* for the image of the fountain in 4.12 and 15.

Images in 4.11 combine the sensation of smell with taste, first the lips with a perfume-like scent, *ḅisisì*, then the taste of the tongue that is sweet (*dòk-dòk*) like honey and milk! In 5.2, the lover calls to his loved one to open the door quickly, announcing that the hair on his head is all wet (*dùkivùkù*) from the early morning dew.

The Song of Songs is filled with passion, expressed by both lover and beloved, and by other voices, as well. Emotions are depicted explicitly several times. In 4.9, the lover proclaims that the woman's mere glance in his direction drives him mad. Just seeing the bead necklace around her neck overcomes him completely (*bàrà-m-bàrà-m*) with emotion. In 5.4, the woman says she stretched forth her hand with her liver pounding (*mgbút-mgbút*) in passion; in Gbaya culture, the liver is the seat of emotion, not the heart. In 6.10, the chorus of young girls sings to the man that when his beloved looks at him, it is "terrible as an army with banners!" (RSV).

The translators interpreted the metaphor to mean that his spirit is flagging and broken (*gbèlè-sùwèè*) as though facing a mighty army ready for battle!

Two ideophone patterns are used by the translators to express time. The one in 6.10 uses a descriptive ideophone to specify an early morning hour by depicting the faint light (*mbèliyè*) of dawn. The second, in 7.13, uses an emphatic ideophone adverbially to express the earliness (*sút*) of the morning.

Thank you to Izaak de Hulster for his pleonastic response to Ernst Wendland's call in 1995 that "more attention and effort" be afforded to "sonorous and symbolic" Scripture text, a call that was presaged two decades earlier by the adoption of ideophones by Gbaya translators in translating the Bible into their language.

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