



Challenges and Complexities in Translating Kiswahili Cultural Expressions: A Comparative Analysis and Practical Solutions

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Abstract

This study examines the challenges and complexities involved in translating Kiswahili cultural concepts into other languages, by focusing on practical solutions to address these issues. Kiswahili is deeply interwoven with cultural nuances that often defy straight forward translation. Translators face the dual challenge of bridging linguistic differences and reconciling divergent worldviews, social norms, and historical contexts. Through a comparative analysis of Kiswahili cultural expressions and their translations, this study investigates categories such as idioms, humours, sarcasm, ironies, greetings, social practices, and political expressions. The analysis highlights the limitations of literal translation, risks of cultural misrepresentation, and the strategies employed to achieve semantic and cultural equivalence, including borrowing, calque, descriptive translation, and cultural adaptation. This paper advocates for nuanced translation approaches that transcend linguistic conversion to preserve the cultural integrity of the source text through cultural sensitivity. By proposing practical solutions to these translation challenges, this research contributes to enhancing cross-cultural communication and underscores the vital role of cultural competence in translation practises.

Keywords:

Cultural expressions, translation, Kiswahili, challenges.

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Introduction

Kiswahili, also known as Swahili, is an African language spoken by millions, primarily in East Africa, serving as an official language in Tanzania and Kenya. It is also spoken in parts of Uganda, Rwanda, Burundi, the Democratic Republic of Congo, Mozambique, Malawi, and Somalia. With reference to Walsh (2017), the term “Swahili” originates from the Arabic word *sawāḥilī*, meaning “of coasts”, reflecting the language’s historical development along the East African coast. Kiswahili showcases its rich history of cultural and linguistic exchange as it incorporates significant results from interactions between Arab traders and local Bantu-speaking communities. Kiswahili, beyond its historical roots, holds immense cultural significance as a medium for literature, music, film, and media. It is regarded as a unifying language among diverse ethnic groups in East Africa.

Translating Kiswahili cultural expressions into other languages presents intricate challenges that extend beyond mere linguistic conversion. Cultural expressions, such as specific vocabulary and concepts, often lack direct equivalents in target languages, posing significant hurdles for translators. Additionally, according to Nyabunga (2024), the dynamic evolution of Kiswahili, influenced by various ethnic groups and historical exchanges, adds layers of complexity to the translation process. For instance, the translation of agropesticide texts from English to Kiswahili has revealed linguistic gaps, by highlighting the need for careful cultural adaptation to ensure accurate communication (Matalu & Sebonde, 2022).

Research Gap and Objectives

Translating Kiswahili cultural expressions into other languages poses significant challenges due to the deep interconnection between language and culture. Kiswahili’s unique expressions, proverbs, and idiomatic phrases often carry meanings rooted in specific historical, social, and cultural contexts that may not have direct equivalents in other languages. This leads to risks of misinterpretation, cultural misrepresentation, and loss of meaning. Furthermore, the dynamic nature of Kiswahili, influenced by its Bantu origins and historical interactions with other languages, adds layers of complexity to the translation process. The absence of standardised approaches to address these cultural and linguistic gaps complicates the translator’s task, which makes it imperative to explore effective strategies for preserving cultural authenticity while achieving linguistic clarity. Hence, this study probes into these challenges, through exploration practical strategies for achieving effective translations and emphasising the critical role of cultural competence in cultivating cross-cultural understanding and communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND RELATED WORKS

Cultural expressions

Cultural expressions refer to the ways in which individuals or groups showcase their heritage, beliefs, and values through various forms of art, language, traditions, and practices. They encompass a broad range of human activities and can manifest in literature, music, dance, visual arts, festivals, and more. As defined by UNESCO (2001), cultural expressions are essential to the individuality of communities and play a critical role in promoting understanding and dialogue among diverse groups. This definition underscores the significance of culture as a fundamental part of human experience, as it influences social identity and cohesion (Geertz, 1973).

Cultural expressions are often tied to specific contexts, which makes their understanding deeply rooted in the local environment (Hannerz, 1992). They serve as a means of

storytelling and imparting knowledge across generations, as they highlight the role of culture in shaping worldviews. Folklorist Kirshenblatt-Gimblett (2000), argues that cultural expressions can be viewed as performance, where traditions are not merely preserved but actively constructed in contemporary contexts.

Moreover, cultural expressions are influenced by globalisation, which creates both challenges and opportunities for local cultures. Global interconnectedness often results in hybrid cultural forms that blend local traditions with external influences (Appadurai, 1996). This interplay can lead to the commodification of culture, where cultural expressions become marketable assets, potentially leading to cultural erosion or loss of authenticity (Clifford, 1988).

The relationship between cultural expressions and identity is particularly significant. Cultural expressions reflect and shape group identities, allowing communities to assert themselves and resist homogenisation (Hall, 1990). They serve as instruments for social change by articulating marginalised voices and fostering cultural pride (Young, 1990). Thus, understanding cultural expressions is crucial for appreciating the complexity of human societies and the myriad forms of interaction and influence that occur within them.

In summary, cultural expressions are vital to the human experience, encapsulating shared values and aspirations while also reflecting the dynamics of change in contemporary society. They possess the power to connect individuals to their roots, foster intercultural dialogue, and promote social cohesion amidst diverse cultural landscapes (UNESCO, 2001; Appadurai, 1996; Hall, 1990).

Cultural Elements

Culture, as defined by Katan (2004), represents a complex whole encompassing knowledge, beliefs, art, morals, laws, and customs acquired by individuals as members of a society. Within this cultural framework, idioms, humour, and cultural references hold significant importance. Baker (2011) highlights idioms as “fixed patterns of language that allow little or no variation in form and often carry meanings that cannot be deduced from their individual components” (p. 67). For example, idiomatic expressions such as “break the ice,” “kick the bucket,” and “spill the beans” convey meanings beyond their literal components. This challenges direct translation efforts.

Humour, another critical cultural element, is described by Morreall (2009) as an intellectual activity or cognitive play that provokes amusement. Humour often arises from irony, sarcasm, or incongruities, which vary across cultures, which makes its translation context-dependent and culturally nuanced. Cultural references, as outlined by Kramsch (1998), encompass general knowledge and practices rooted in specific cultural contexts. They range from ecological, material, and social aspects to political, religious, and artistic expressions (Newmark, 1988). These references frequently appear in proverbs, idioms, metaphorical expressions, collocations, and figures of speech.

Nida (1964) emphasised the role of the translator as a cultural mediator, facilitating the transfer of messages embedded within cultural contexts. He argued that the translator’s task extends beyond linguistic competence to cultural expertise, ensuring that the translated message resonates appropriately with the target audience. Similarly, Newmark (1988) reinforced the necessity for cultural competence in addressing cultural nuances that often defy straightforward linguistic conversion. Translators must skilfully bridge cultural gaps, by recognising that culture influences language use, interpretation, and meaning construction.

Categories of Cultural Words

Cultural words pose potential challenges in translation due to the divergence between source and target languages. Baker (2011) claims that certain source language (SL) words represent concepts that are entirely unfamiliar in the target language (TL) culture. These concepts can be abstract or concrete, such as religious beliefs, social customs, or specific foods. In other Words, Baker categorises common non-equivalents encountered in translation, including culture-specific concepts; SL concepts that are not lexicalised in the TL; semantically complex SL words; and differences in distinctions of meaning between the two languages. She also discusses cases where the TL lacks superordinate or specific hyponyms; differences in physical or interpersonal perspectives; variations in expressive meaning; and differences in the frequency and purpose of specific forms. Additionally, she notes the use of loanwords in the source text as a translation challenge.

Katan (2009) provides a more comprehensive view by categorising cultural elements at several levels. At the *environmental level*, culture is reflected in the physical surroundings, such as climate, housing, and food. The *behavioural level* covers actions and social practices, including greeting rituals like the common double-cheek kiss in Spain. At the *capabilities level*, culture manifests in the skills, strategies, and non-verbal communication cues used within a society. The *values level* encompasses the societal norms and hierarchies that govern relationships and interactions, while the beliefs level includes shared ideologies and religious or philosophical systems. Lastly, culture is reflected in identity, both collective and individual, which influences how individuals relate to their broader cultural group.

Ku (2006) simplifies this framework into four broader categories, following Molina's taxonomy. First, *environment* refers to terms related to ecology, natural surroundings, and place names. *Cultural heritage* includes references to religious beliefs, historical events, folklore, and significant cultural symbols. *Social culture* encompasses conventions, habits, and social organisations, such as traditions or practices unique to particular communities. Finally, *linguistic culture* covers language-specific phenomena, including fixed expressions, idioms, and insults, which are often difficult to translate without losing their cultural nuance.

Fernández Guerra (2012) highlights four major types of realia, or cultural terms, that complicate translation: *geographic and ethnographic terms*, which involve places and cultural landmarks; *folklore, traditions, and mythology*, which convey a community's myths and customs; *everyday objects, actions, and events*, such as food, clothing, housing, and activities like games or dances; and *social and historical terms*, which encompass political titles, professions, ranks, and institutions that shape society.

Challenges and Complexities While Translating Cultural Concepts

Translating cultural expressions presents numerous challenges due to the deep connection between language and culture. Dweik (2015) identifies key issues that translators face, including unfamiliarity with cultural expressions, failure to achieve equivalence in the target language, ambiguity of some expressions, and lack of knowledge of translation strategies. These challenges are compounded by the complexity and specificity of culture-bound expressions.

One of the primary difficulties in translating culture-specific expressions is their idiomatic nature. These expressions are deeply rooted in culture and often carry meanings that are not directly linked to the individual words used. As Baker (2011) notes, idioms are "frozen patterns of language" whose meanings cannot be deduced from the individual components. For instance, in Kiswahili, the idiom "*mtotowanyokaninyoka*" (the child of a snake is a snake)

conveys a cultural message that may not be easily understood or conveyed in other languages, particularly when cultural contexts differ. Similarly, in English, the expression “raining cats and dogs” maybe puzzling for speakers of languages without a similar idiom for heavy rain. These culture-specific expressions are difficult to translate because their meanings are deeply connected to the cultural context in which they originated.

Another challenge in translating cultural concepts is the difficulty in defining and recognising these expressions. Translators may struggle to identify and understand the full cultural implications of certain expressions if they lack familiarity with the specific culture. The context in which an idiom or expression is used is crucial to understanding its meaning, and without this background, the translator may misinterpret its intended effect (Nida, 1964). For example, the word “donkey” may carry a negative connotation in some cultures, where it refers to an insult, whereas in other cultures it can be a term of endearment for someone hardworking. This cultural discrepancy can lead to misunderstandings if not properly addressed by the translator.

However, cultural awareness and interaction play a significant role in overcoming these challenges. In many cases, a translator’s lack of exposure to the cultural background of the source language can hinder their ability to accurately translate cultural expressions (Newmark, 1988). This lack of cultural competence results in the loss of meaning or misrepresentation of the source culture. Furthermore, a failure to grasp the ecological, social, or religious context in which expressions are embedded may lead to inaccuracies in translation.

The complexity of achieving equivalence is another critical challenge. According to Newmark (1988), the more culturally remote a text is, the harder it becomes to achieve equivalent effects in the target language, as cultural differences may hinder mutual understanding. Translators face difficulties in adapting cultural expressions to make them resonate with the target audience. Al-Dahesh (2008) highlights that one of the most significant problems is the inability to achieve equivalence, especially when translating expressions that are culturally distant from the target language.

The lack of knowledge about translation strategies is also a notable factor contributing to the difficulties in translating cultural expressions. Many translators rely on literal translation or glossing techniques without providing enough context or footnotes, which can lead to a loss of meaning. Additionally, the use of the guessing technique, where translators rely on context to infer meaning, may not be sufficient for culture-specific expressions, especially when the context does not align with the cultural reference.

Unfamiliarity with translation strategies, such as those that bridge cultural gaps, is a key issue identified by Al-Dahesh (2008). This includes challenges such as mistranslation, improper collocations, and the failure to deliver the appropriate functional pragmatic equivalents of idiomatic expressions. Translators may also struggle with cultural nuances such as indirect communication styles in certain cultures, which may not be easily understood by speakers of more direct languages.

Lastly, untranslatability remains a fundamental issue in translating cultural concepts. Some cultural ideas are so unique to a particular culture that they cannot be directly translated into another language. These include deeply ingrained beliefs, customs, and practices that are beyond the scope of linguistic transfer. Translating folk songs, mythological tales, and cultural rituals set substantial challenges because they are rooted in the unique worldview of the culture, making it impossible to capture their full meaning in a target language. Nida

(1964) points out that when attempting to bridge a wide cultural gap, no translation can completely eliminate the traces of the foreign setting.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework for this study draws upon Nida's Dynamic Equivalence (1964) and Newmark's Communicative and Semantic Translation approaches (1981), which offer distinct perspectives on translation that balance meaning and cultural context. Nida's Dynamic Equivalence emphasises the need for a translation that evokes the same emotional response from the target audience as the original text, by spotlighting the general meaning rather than literal word-for-word translation. In contrast, Newmark's Communicative Translation approach (1981) aims for clarity and naturalness in the target language, by ensuring that the message is effectively communicated to the reader, while his Semantic Translation approach (1981) preserves the intricate details of the source text's meaning, maintaining fidelity to the original. These complementary approaches provide a robust framework for understanding how translation strategies accommodate both the linguistic and cultural nuances of the source text, for effective communication across languages and cultures.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a documentary review and a comparative analysis to investigate the translation of Kiswahili cultural expressions. The research focuses on idiomatic expressions, irony, humour, political expressions, sarcasm, and social practises.

Research Design

A qualitative research design is adopted to provide an in-depth analysis of how Kiswahili cultural expressions are rendered in translation. The study explores the challenges and strategies used in translating culturally embedded meanings by scrutinising various texts, including literary works, media discourse, and everyday communication.

Data Collection

The primary method of data collection is documentary review, where relevant Kiswahili texts and their translated versions are analysed. These documents include, but not limited to, Kiswahili literary works (novels, short stories, and poetry); political speeches and public discourse; social media and digital content containing humour, sarcasm, and idiomatic expressions; Swahili-English bilingual dictionaries and translation studies literature.

Comparative Analysis

A comparative approach is used to examine the original Kiswahili expressions alongside their translated versions. This analysis identifies variations, losses, or shifts in meaning that occur during translation. The study critically assesses how translators handle cultural nuances and whether their choices maintain the intended connotations, humour, or social implications of the original expressions.

Data Analysis

The collected data is categorised based on expression types (idiom, irony, sarcasm, humour, political discourse, and social practices). The study then applies descriptive analysis to highlight common trends, challenges, and strategies in translating these cultural elements. Furthermore, the findings are interpreted within the framework of translation theories, such as

Nida's Dynamic Equivalence and Newmark's Communicative and Semantic Translation approaches.

Ethical Considerations

Since the study is based on secondary sources, ethical considerations include proper citation of all reviewed documents and ensuring that analysed texts are presented accurately without misinterpretation.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

I. TRANSLATING IDIOMS

An idiom is a fixed expression whose meaning cannot be deduced from the individual words that constitute it. Dickins et al. (2017) define idioms as expressions that function as single units, making their meanings unpredictable from their separate parts. Similarly, Larson (1998) describes idioms as strings of words whose meanings differ from their literal interpretations. For instance, the English idiom "It rains cats and dogs" cannot be understood by analysing each word separately but rather as a whole expression signifying heavy rainfall. Baker (1992) asserts that idioms are "frozen patterns of language" that allow little variation and often carry meanings that cannot be deduced from their individual components. Fernando (1996) emphasises that idioms ensure communication is coherent, cohesive, and socially acceptable while adding liveliness to discourse. Translating idioms poses a significant challenge, particularly for culturally distant languages. Scholars agree that translators must first *recognise* the sourcelanguage (SL) idiom, *interpret* its meaning, and then *find an appropriate targetlanguage (TL) equivalent* that conveys the same impact. Baker (1992) identifies two main challenges in translating idioms: *recognising and interpreting* them correctly and *ensuring* that their meaning is effectively conveyed in the TL. In other words, Baker (2011) proposes strategies for translating idioms, including using an idiom of similar meaning and form, using an idiom of similar meaning but different forms, paraphrasing, or omitting the idiom when an equivalent does not exist. Translators must carefully select the most suitable strategy, as idioms are deeply rooted in cultural and linguistic contexts, making their direct translation difficult without losing their intended meaning.

a) Translating by Using an Idiom of Similar Meaning and Form

This strategy involves replacing a source language (SL) idiom by a target language (TL) idiom which has almost identical meaning and form. This is the ideal procedure for translators in doing translation. However, it is sometimes required to do structural shifts for the idiom due to the linguistic discrepancies between languages. Using an idiom of *similar meaning and form* in a way that the TL idiom conveys exactly the "*same meaning*" by the use of the "*same equivalent lexical items*" to the SL ones. She also expresses that this kind of match can only be achieved occasionally (p. 72). The point to be mentioned here is that the more two cultures are identical to each other, the more cases of such equivalents are possible. Contrarily, if the two cultures are not similar and the cultural differences are clearly remarkable between them, then the possibility of making such equivalents for the idiomatic expressions is decreased to its lowest degree.

English Idiom	Meaning	Kiswahili Translation
As you sow, so shall you reap	The consequences of your actions will come back to you.	<i>Utavunaulichopanda</i>
A bad workman blames his tools	A person who does a bad job will often blame the quality of their tools.	<i>Mchaguajembesimkulima</i>

All that glitters is not gold	Things that look good on the outside may not be as good on the inside.	<i>Si kilaking'aachonidhahabu</i>
An ounce of prevention is worth a pound of cure	It's better to prevent problems than to fix them later.	<i>Kinga ni bora kulikotiba</i>
A piece of cake	Something that is very easy to do.	<i>Maji yakunywa / Ilikuamteremko</i>
Bite the bullet	To face a difficult situation with courage.	<i>Valia njuga / Pambanakufakupona</i>
Break a leg	Good luck.	<i>Kila la kheri</i>
Cutting corners	Doing something dishonestly or illegally to save time or money.	<i>Zungukambuyu</i>

b) Translating by using an idiom of similar meaning but different forms

If translators find it impossible to find an idiom counterpart in the target language with similar meaning and form, they would naturally choose the second strategy – an idiom of similar meaning but different forms.

English Idiom	Meaning	Kiswahili Translation
Cry over spilled milk	To be upset about something that has already happened and cannot be changed.	<i>Yaliyopitwasindwele, tugangeyajayo / Maji yakimwagikahayazoleki</i>
All work and no play make Jack a dull boy	People need to have fun and relax in order to be happy and healthy.	<i>Kazinadawa</i>
A leopard can't change its spots	People can't change who they are.	<i>Tabia ningozi</i>

c) Translating by Using Paraphrasing Strategy

The first and the second strategies are the mostly recommended to opt for by translators, if it is impossible to implement, translators would attempt to translate by paraphrasing – an idiom will be replaced by non-idiomatic language. Baker continues that: this is by far the most common way of translating idioms when a match cannot be found in the target language or when it seems inappropriate to use idiomatic language in the target text because of differences in stylistic preferences of the source and target languages.

English Idiom.	Meaning	Kiswahili Translation
Caught between a rock and a hard place	To be in a difficult situation with no good options.	<i>Alifumaniwa</i>
Burning the midnight oil	To work late into the night.	<i>Kufanyakaziusikukucha</i>
In the same boat	In the same situation or predicament.	<i>Tukopamoja</i>
Smoking the same cigarette	Doing the same thing.	<i>Kufanyakitukilekilekwapamoja/kwanamnamoja</i>
An apple a day keeps the doctor away	Eating healthy foods can help you stay healthy.	<i>Ulajiwamatundanimuhimukwaajiliyaafya</i>

d) Translating by Omission

Baker (2011: 84) states that the strategy involves only the literal meaning of an idiom in a context that allows for a concrete reading of an otherwise playful use of language. This

means that an idiom is entirely deleted in the TL because “it has no close match in the target language and its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons” (ibid.) This strategy is done mostly in the sentence or paragraph level. The reason for this phenomenon is that when an idiomatic expression is omitted, nearly always there is a “loss” in the meaning. To “compensate” the resulting loss, one is obliged to mention some supplementary words in some parts of the sentence or paragraph where an omission has been done.

i. Translation by Omission of a Part of Idiom

Baker (2011: 84) argues that this strategy involves rendering only the literal meaning of an idiom in a context that allows for a concrete reading of an otherwise playful use of language. To exemplify the strategy, Baker (ibid. 84- 85) refers to the idiom *on a plate* in the promotional leaflet title *Centuries of Craftsmanship on a Plate*. She (ibid. 84) points out that the English idiom implies both “the idiomatic meaning of the expression as well as the concrete meaning of plate”. The idiom is translated into Japanese, and its idiomatic meaning is compromised in the translation process. The Japanese translation is literally glossed as “the craft of famous people has been continually poured for centuries into a single plate” (ibid.). This category of Baker’s strategies for translating idioms and fixed expressions is again problematic.

Some idioms naturally involve a play on words, a phenomenon that poses translation difficulties since languages differ in the way they form idioms. However, it is practically hard, if not impossible, to reproduce a play on idiom in a specific target language, let alone a set of languages, which is the subject of this paper. Baker (ibid. 72) herself admits that “unless the target-language idiom corresponds to the source-language idiom both in form and in meaning, the play on idiom cannot be successfully reproduced in the target text”. It can be strongly argued that this strategy is a form of paraphrase, and can be safely incorporated in the paraphrase strategy. After all, paraphrase essentially involves rendering the literal meaning at the expense of idiomatic or stylistic expressiveness. For example: To remove that stone was not **a piece of cake** (*Haikuwarahisikuhamishajiwelile*); they all had the **blue on their face** (*Wotewalikuwawamechoka*). In the above examples, idioms in source language (English) were rendered through partial omission of idioms. That is to say the actual idioms were omitted but their meanings were retained but not meanings in the target language (Kiswahili).

ii. Translation by Omission of Entire Idiom

Omission is generally viewed as a negative and dispreferred translation technique. Notwithstanding that, several translation scholars have considered omission a practical and useful translation strategy claiming that “as with single words, an idiom may sometimes be omitted altogether in the target text”. She (ibid.) points out that an idiom can be omitted when “it has no close match in the target language, its meaning cannot be easily paraphrased, or for stylistic reasons”. Likewise, Rasul (2016: 410) states that: ...sometimes translators omit idioms simply because they do not have counterparts in the TL or it is difficult to work out their meanings. This can be rightly criticised, because by omitting an idiom, although translators can avoid producing a nonsensical translation, the meaning of the message may be lost.

e) Translation by borrowing the source language idiom.

Baker (2011: 79) claims that “just as the use of loanwords is a common strategy in dealing with culture-specific items, it is not unusual for idioms to be borrowed in their original form in some contexts”. Logically speaking, the direct borrowing of single words (such as *coup*, *pizza*, *parliament*, etc.) and brand names (such as: *British Petroleum*, *General Motors*, *Thomson Reuters*, etc.) is quite normal. However, borrowing entire idioms, fixed expressions or proverbs intact is virtually impossible. It is axiomatic that source language idioms cannot be borrowed into the TL verbatim. In the first edition of her book, *In Other Words: A Coursebook on Translation* (1992), Baker does not mention such a strategy. It is only in her second edition (2011) that this ungrounded strategy is incorporated.

II. TRANSLATING HUMOURS

Humour is a complex psychological and social phenomenon that involves the perception and appreciation of incongruities, absurdities, and the unexpected. It can manifest in various forms, including verbal jokes, situational comedy, and physical humour, and often serves to relieve tension, foster social bonds, and provide entertainment. Psychologically, humour can be understood through several theories. For instance, *the incongruity theory* which posits that humour arises when there is a discrepancy between what is expected and what actually occurs (Morreall, 1983). Similarly, *the superiority theory* suggests that humour comes from the feeling of superiority over others, often at their expense (Gruner, 1997). Additionally, *the relief theory* indicates that humour can provide a release of psychological tension (Freud, 1960). Furthermore, humour also plays a crucial role in social interactions. It can serve as a tool for social bonding, as shared laughter can strengthen relationships and create a sense of community (Dunbar, 2012). Moreover, humour can be used strategically to navigate difficult conversations or to defuse conflict (Keltner & Bonanno, 1997). In summary, humour is a multifaceted concept that encompasses psychological theories and social functions, making it an essential aspect of human interaction and culture.

In Kiswahili, humour, or *vichekesho*, is indeed a rich tradition that thrives on clever wordplay, exaggeration, understatement, and self-deprecation, serving as a tool to entertain, ease tension, and foster a sense of camaraderie. For examples: “*Nilikuwananjaahadinilisikiatumbolinaitaambulensi*” (I was so hungry I heard my stomach calling for an ambulance) uses exaggeration to paint a vivid, absurd image, while “*Jana nilichekahadinikasahaujinalangu*” (Yesterday I laughed so hard I forgot my name) combines hyperbole with a relatable human twist. The idea of a man so poor *he can't even afford poverty* is another brilliant showcase of how Kiswahili humour often amplifies everyday struggles into something laughably paradoxical.

Humours in Kiswahili rely on different elements as follows:

Type	Description	Example (Swahili)	Translation (English)
Wordplay	Playing with words, creating puns, and using implied meanings.	A: “ <i>Umekulaninileo?</i> ” B: “ <i>Nimekula pepo.</i> ”	A: “ <i>What did you eat today?</i> ” B: “ <i>I ate wind.</i> ” (A humorous way of saying you didn’t eat much.)
Exaggeration	Overstating situations for comedic effect.	“ <i>Nimechokasana, nahisikamanimebeba dunia mgongoni.</i> ”	“ <i>I am so tired; I feel like I carried the world on my back.</i> ”
Understate	Underplaying	“ <i>Mvuailikuwakidogotu,</i>	“ <i>The rain was just a little</i>

ment	a situation for humour.	<i>kamabaharinzimaimemwagika.</i> ”	<i>like the whole ocean spilled.</i> ”
Self-Deprecation	Making fun of oneself.	<i>“Mimi nimvivusana, hatakivulichangukinanipitakwa kasi.”</i>	<i>“I am so lazy, even my shadow overtakes me.”</i>
Satire	Using humour to criticise social or political issues.	<i>“Serikaliyetuinajalisana wananchi, ndiyomaanabarabarazimejaamashimo yakutoshakwaajiliyamazoeziyakuruka.”</i>	<i>“Our government cares so much about the citizens, that’s why the roads are full of enough potholes for jumping exercises.”</i>

Based on the table above it is evident that, translating humour across cultures presents potential challenges due to the deep-rooted cultural and linguistic nuances involved. As seen in the table, humour relies on wordplay, which can be difficult to translate since puns, homophones, and double meanings rarely have direct equivalents in other languages. Exaggeration and understatement may not resonate with audiences unfamiliar with the cultural context behind them, while self-deprecating humour might be misinterpreted depending on societal attitudes toward humility and self-criticism. Satire, which critiques political or social issues, can be particularly tricky as it depends on shared knowledge of cultural events, figures, and norms that may not be universally understood. Additionally, humour often involves tone and expression, which are challenging to convey in written translation, and idiomatic expressions, which may lose their comedic effect when directly translated. Moreover, different cultures have varying senses of humour, with some favouring sarcasm and irony while others prefer slapstick or absurdity. Humour that touches on taboos and sensitivities, such as politics, religion, or social issues, must be carefully adapted to avoid offence while retaining its comedic essence. Lastly, humour that relies on cultural stereotypes can be problematic, as it may perpetuate biases or fail to resonate with a new audience. These challenges highlight the complexities of translating humour, requiring not just linguistic expertise but also a deep understanding of both the source and target cultures.

III. TRANSLATING IRONIES

Irony, a multifaceted literary device, refers to the expression of one’s meaning by using language that normally signifies the opposite, often for humorous or emphatic effect. It is a complex concept that can manifest in various forms, including verbal irony, situational irony, and dramatic irony. Verbal irony occurs when a speaker says one thing but means another, often in a sarcastic manner. This form of irony is common in everyday speech and literature, where the intended meaning is contrasted with the literal interpretation of the words spoken (Gerrig& Allport, 2006). For example, if a person steps outside into a storm and exclaims, “What lovely weather we’re having!” they are employing verbal irony to highlight the discrepancy between their words and the reality of the situation. Situational irony, on the other hand, occurs when there is a significant difference between what is expected to happen and what actually occurs. This form of irony is often utilised in narratives to create suspense or an unforeseen twist that adds depth to the storyline (Morrison, 2012). A classic example of situational irony is seen in O. Henry’s short stories, where characters frequently find themselves in scenarios that defy their expectations, leading to poignant revelations. Dramatic irony is a narrative technique wherein the audience is privy to information that the characters do not possess, creating tension and engagement (Hynds, 2008). A well-known example of dramatic irony is found in Shakespeare’s “Romeo and Juliet,” where the audience knows that Juliet is not truly dead, but Romeo does not, leading to tragic consequences.

Irony plays a crucial role in literature as it enriches the text, revealing deeper truths about human nature and the complexity of situations. It invites readers to engage more critically with the content and consider multiple layers of meaning (Smith, 2020). By presenting contradictions and unexpected outcomes, irony serves not only as a literary device but also as a reflection of life's unpredictability.

Type of Irony	Example (Swahili)	Translation (English)
Situational Irony	<i>"Kitu cha ajabusana, kituo cha zima moto kinawaka moto!"</i>	<i>"What a strange thing, a fire station is on fire!"</i>
	<i>"Polisianakamatwanapolisiwenzake!"</i>	<i>"A police officer gets arrested by fellow officers!"</i>
	<i>"Aliendahospitaliiliapone, lakini alipofika, aliuguazaidi."</i>	<i>"He went to the hospital to get better, but when he arrived, he got even sicker."</i>
Verbal Irony (Sarcastic Compliment)	<i>"Oh, kazinzurisana!"</i>	<i>"Oh, that's a very good job!"</i> (Said sarcastically when someone does a poor job.)
	<i>"Kweli wenenimwerevusana, hadi unashindwa kufungavya komwenyewe!"</i>	<i>"You are so smart; you can't even tie your own shoes!"</i>
Verbal Irony (Understatement)	<i>"Ni tatizodogotu!"</i> (During a major disaster)	<i>"It's just a minor setback."</i> (During a major disaster)
	<i>"Mvuailikuwakidogotu, kamabaharin zimaimemwagika."</i>	<i>"The rain was just a little, like the whole ocean spilled."</i>
Dramatic Irony	A character in a Kiswahili play boasts about their wealth, while the audience knows they are actually poor.	A character in a play might be about to make a tragic mistake, while the audience knows the outcome.

Translating irony from Kiswahili to English (or vice versa) poses cultural challenges because irony is often deeply rooted in linguistic nuances, social norms, and shared cultural contexts. For instance, verbal irony, especially sarcasm, may not carry the same tone or implication in another language if the cultural expectations of politeness or humour differ. A phrase like *"Oh, kazinzurisana!"* (Oh, that's a very good job!) could be misinterpreted as genuine praise by someone unfamiliar with sarcastic tones in Kiswahili. Similarly, situational irony, such as *"Kituo cha zima moto kinawaka moto!"* (A fire station is on fire!), may not evoke the same level of humour in cultures where irony is not a common rhetorical device. Dramatic irony in storytelling also relies on cultural context; a Kiswahili-speaking audience may interpret a character's boastfulness differently than an English-speaking audience, affecting how humour or tragedy is perceived. Since irony often depends on shared knowledge and expectations,

translators must carefully adapt meaning rather than just words, ensuring that the intended ironic effect is preserved without losing cultural relevance.

IV. TRANSLATING SARCASM

Sarcasm is a form of verbal irony that involves stating something in a way that typically conveys the opposite meaning, often with the intent to mock or convey contempt (Giora, 2003). It is characterised by a tone of voice or contextual cues that indicate the speaker does not genuinely mean what they are saying. For example, saying, “Great job!” in a situation where someone has clearly made a mistake exemplifies sarcasm. The understanding and interpretation of sarcasm rely heavily on social and contextual factors. According to Wilson and Sperber (1992), sarcasm can be seen as a communicative act that requires the listener to recognise the speaker’s intention, which often involves a shared understanding of the context and social norms. This can make sarcasm a complex form of communication, as it demands cognitive processing to decipher the intended meaning. Research has shown that sarcasm can serve various functions in communication. It can be used to express humour, convey criticism, or reinforce social bonds through shared understanding (Kreuz & Roberts, 1993). Additionally, it can act as a coping mechanism in stressful situations, allowing individuals to express frustration or disappointment in a less direct manner (Gervais & Wilson, 2005). In summary, sarcasm is a nuanced form of communication that relies on irony, social context, and shared knowledge between the speaker and listener. For example

Example (Swahili)	Translation (English)
“Wewenimchapakazisana, kwakweli!”	“You’re such a hard worker, really!” (Said to someone who is being lazy.)
“Kweli una akilinyingi, kumwagamaziwa yote sakafuni!”	“You’re really smart, spilling all the milk on the floor!”
“Unapatajekichwakikubwahivyowakatiubongomdogokam awakombokola?”	“How do you get such a big head when your brain is as small as a grasshopper’s?”
“Wewenimwerevusana, hadiunashindwakufungaviatuvyakomwenyewe!”	“You are so smart; you can’t even tie your own shoelaces!”
“Kweliwewenimchapakazi, unalalakazinikila siku!”	“You are such a hard worker; you sleep at work every day!”
“Nimefurahisanakuonakwambaumechelewatanaleo.”	“I’m so happy to see that you’re late again today.”
“Hakikawewenimkarimu, ungebakinachakulachotehatakamakingeharibika.”	“You are truly generous; you would keep all the food even if it spoiled.”
“Wewenimwerevusana, unajuakilakitu!”	“You are so clever, you know everything!”

In relation to the above table, translating sarcasm between Kiswahili and English presents cultural and linguistic challenges because sarcasm heavily relies on tone, context, and shared social norms. In some cultures, direct sarcasm may be considered rude or offensive, whereas in others, it is a common and acceptable form of humour or criticism. For instance, “Kweliwewenimchapakazi, unalalakazinikila siku!” (You are such a hard worker, you sleep at work every day!) might be easily understood in Kiswahili-speaking contexts, but in English, without the right tone or emphasis, it could be mistaken for a literal statement. Additionally, sarcasm in Kiswahili often integrates metaphors and idiomatic expressions that may not have direct English equivalents.

Phrases like “*Unapatajekichwakikubwahivyowakatiubongomdogokamawakombokola?*” (How do you get such a big head when your brain is as small as a grasshopper’s?) rely on local references that may lose their humour or impact when translated. This makes it crucial for translators to adapt sarcasm contextually, rather than just translating words, to maintain the intended humour, criticism, or irony.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Crafting culturally Kiswahili appropriate messages through translation is essential for effective communication. Initially, understanding the target audience is a fundamental step in this process. Conducting thorough research into the cultural values, beliefs, and communication styles of the audience can help avoid misunderstandings. For instance, nuances in language can vary significantly between regions. In Kiswahili-speaking contexts, certain words may carry different meanings. For example, the term “Bibi” may refer to a wife in Kenya but denotes an elderly woman in Burundi, highlighting the importance of cultural sensitivity (Mugambi, 2020). Recognising these distinctions can prevent unintended offence and foster respectful interactions.

In addition, during rendition of message, using culturally appropriate language is another critical aspect of effective communication. Avoiding slang and jargon ensures that messages are clear and accessible to the audience. Research indicates that using simple and straightforward language enhances comprehension, especially in cross-cultural contexts (Hofstede, 2021). Additionally, choosing words carefully and being mindful of their connotations can prevent misinterpretations. For instance, in Kiswahili, the word “kichwa” can refer to both a person’s head and the main topic of discussion, underscoring the need for clarity in communication (Kilonzo, 2022).

Furthermore, while translating, adapting communication styles to suit cultural norms is equally important. In Kiswahili cultures, indirectness is often preferred, particularly when addressing sensitive topics or individuals of higher social standing. This communication style emphasises politeness and respect, allowing for smoother interactions (Njeru, 2021). For example, instead of directly asking someone to perform a task, one might phrase it as a request for assistance, thereby maintaining harmony and avoiding confrontation.

Thus, during translation it is crucial to be sensitive to cultural differences by avoiding stereotypes and respecting local customs. Using respectful greetings and addressing individuals appropriately according to their cultural norms can significantly enhance the effectiveness of communication (Muriuki, 2023). Engaging with cultural experts and seeking feedback from members of the target audience can further refine messages to ensure they resonate well and are culturally appropriate (Ochieng, 2022).

In a nutshell, in translation, through understanding the audience, using appropriate language, adapting communication styles, and being sensitive to cultural differences, communicators can craft messages that are respectful and effective, ultimately leading to improved engagement and stronger relationships across diverse cultures.

CONCLUSION

Translating cultural expressions, realia or cultural concepts and terms, such as idioms, humour, sarcasm, cultural values and taboos, presents a multifaceted challenges and difficulties. This reflects the intricate interplay of language, tradition, and social norms, but this does not mean that they cannot be translated. The nuanced meanings embedded in

Kiswahili expressions are deeply rooted in the cultural fabric, often defying direct equivalence in other languages. This task necessitates more than linguistic proficiency; it demands cultural sensitivity, contextual understanding, and an appreciation for the subtleties that words alone cannot convey. Translating cultural concepts requires not only linguistic expertise but also a deep understanding of the cultural, historical, and social aspects associated with those concepts. It requires sensitivity, flexibility, and a commitment to preserving the integrity and richness of the original culture being translated. Navigating these intricacies requires translators to act as cultural mediators, bridging gaps not only in language but also in understanding and interpretation. The process highlights the importance of preserving the essence and intent behind the words, ensuring that the richness of Kiswahili culture is conveyed with fidelity and respect. Thus, translating Kiswahili cultural expressions and concepts is a journey of discovery and connection, as it cultivates greater appreciation and cross-cultural understanding in an ever-globalised world.

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