

Translating Development: Language as an Indicator of the Local Social World

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“The richness of every European language is a richness in ability to describe its own culture, represent its own world.”

Ryszard Kapuscinski –The Shadow of the Sun

barriers to successful development projects. I originally intended to produce a lexicon of useful agricultural phrases for developmental workers to understand. Instead of receiving a stable set of translations, I heard different explanations for different translations of the same term. These differing translations gave me indirect yet unique insights into the daily life experience of Ghanaians.

Abstract

Linguistic and cultural barriers are a basic challenge to any international development project. Pilot interviews conducted in June of 2011 with native Ghanaian experts validate this perspective. Home to more than fifty languages in a square mileage roughly equivalent to the state of Oregon, Ghana proved a uniquely interesting case study for examining linguistic barriers and cultural

This paper outlines the process by which this project was forced to evolve from that original goal through my own experiences of the language barrier. It concludes with an analysis of the realities of daily Ghanaian experience understood through the multiple, different translations and a discussion of the way in which these understandings may benefit development workers in the future.

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1 Introduction

Dr. Boateng Agyanim (Cape Coast University, Institute for Development Studies) highlighted several strategies World Vision, a Christian development organization, use to communicate with the stakeholders in their target communities prior to project implementation [1]. Using the following set of strategies, World Vision identifies areas for development. World Vision development workers reside in the community. They hold forums in traditional community spaces led by community leaders. After the formal meeting concludes, the World Vision workers remain in the communal space for casual conversation. Part of their communication is often visual, particularly when a language barrier is present. These strategies allow an effective prioritization of community needs. Dr. Agyanim argues that the correct prioritization of community needs is possible only when preceded by strong communication. Crucially, he goes on to argue that effective communication allows the community to create a “psychological space” in which a project can succeed. The idea of “psychological space” underpins several of the methods I suggest for effective communication, understanding, and cultural sensitivity in development projects. (I have chosen to use Dr. Agyanim’s term, but equally valid synonyms proliferate, and all tap into the same basic idea that the community’s perspective must come first. Both the 2005 Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and the 2008 Accra Agenda for Action, for example, describe the necessity of “country ownership”

of development projects. [6]

While Dr. Agyanim described strong communication as predictive of highly effective development work, Elvis Donkah, founder of Alliance for Youth Development, cited an example suggesting that weak communication is predictive of highly ineffective development work. He described the failure of the Winneba Junction Market in no uncertain terms [3]. Lack of stakeholder engagement and failure of effective communication have left this large scale market unused for years. The project leaders, Donkah believes, failed to take into account the presence of another market nearby which already sufficiently served community needs. As a consequence of the desire to develop unnecessarily and poor communication, Donkah maintains, this market was built in an ineffective area for the wrong population, leading to its failure.

The two perspectives cited above validate common sense communication matters, and matters particularly when culture and language are not common (a situation international development is particularly susceptible to). To the end of developing strategies for effective communication and understanding (and therefore better development projects), I conducted approximately fifteen interviews in the June of 2011. The variety of these interviews created a dynamic, shifting project. Because the project continued to develop throughout my time in Ghana, the process I outline below is by no means an easy model to replicate. It is, however, indicative of the challenges of conducting qualitative research in developing countries. Further, it demonstrates useful techniques for

understanding culture through language. By encouraging cultural awareness through language and outlining the methods I used to tap into the Ghanaian culture, I hope to promote the best kinds of development projects, the kinds Dr. Agyanim promotes and Mr. Donkah hopes to see more of those which seek authentic understanding of community needs and can place projects within that framework.

2 Method

Original Research Goals During my research term in Ghana, I had the following goals:

1. Assess significance of communication to development projects
2. Develop lexicon of basic development terms
3. Translate lexicon into Fante ¹
4. Determine efficacy in field through interviews and surveys with ten farmers and ten agricultural students (facilitated by extension officer if necessary)

To achieve the first aim, I interviewed one representative from academia and one from the private sector of local development. These were cited in the previous section, as they provide the contextual framework for

¹Fante was selected because it is a common language and tribe in the central region of Ghana where my interviews were conducted.

the remainder of this paper. The original development terms which I selected for translation were taken from a combination of academic papers (The Coordinated Programme of Economic and Social Development Policies, Agricultural Growth and Competitiveness Under Policy Reforms in Ghana, and The Ghana Poverty Reduction Strategy) and the terms which I heard my fellow research fellows consistently using in the field [2] [6]. They are listed under Table 1.

These phrases were in turn vetted by representatives of the academic sector (including the previously cited Dr. Agyanim) and extension officers of the Ministry of Food and Agriculture. Some phrases were added and others removed, primarily because of what was considered relevant to the region and district in which I was functioning. For example, in southern Ghana, which primarily produces crops like cassava, maize, and cocoa, it makes little sense to have terms pertaining specifically to rice growing. Similarly, certain phrases, like “fallow land”, were introduced to the list because it was suggested that their translations might lend greater understanding to related practices (in that instance, organic farming was considered a corollary to traditional, fallow land farming). Through these conversations, I also developed an understanding of certain contextual phrases that render translations more effective, and thus this, too, became a tangential focus of later interviews.

I intended to have this final list of vetted terms translated by a professor of Ghanaian languages at the University of Cape Coast. My hope was that in the field, with the

aid of extension officers, I might determine how effectively these translations communicated the western, development related understanding that the farmers might encounter in the future. This became difficult for two reasons. The first was simply logistical. Unfortunately, the professor whose services I had enlisted was unable to attend our meeting, and thus, the translations were not furnished. This might have been worked around, given more time, but scheduling did not permit. The second, more systemic, barrier has to do with Ghanaian languages as a broad category. When explaining my project to Dr. Agyanim, he noted that some of these single word terms do not have precise equivalents, and are therefore to a certain degree foreign to Ghanaian farmers. He went on to note that particularly given low literacy and education rates, in the course of asking for an explanation of a given translated term, one might have to explain fully the concept. In general, it is probably not appropriate to speak of Ghanaian languages in this way, given the degree of heterogeneity which they exhibit, but in this instance, we can perhaps accept that the generalization holds across languages.

Because of these difficulties, my project shifted in its application. Rather than a professor of Ghanaian languages determining what would suffice as a translation, I went to the experts—the farmers themselves. Who, after all, would be better equipped to offer a translation guaranteed to function in the field? What follows, then, are the idiomatic expressions which various Fante speakers, including extension officers, farmers, and agricultural students, chose as best communicat-

ing their understanding of common development phrases.

3 Discussion

What follows is a discussion of what I see as the implications of these translations—that they are multiple and variable, that some translate directly but carry different connotations, that different sources gave different translations with different degrees of certainty—all this is significant and open to interpretation, within reason and accepting my own inevitable bias in that interpretation. On the strength of that interpretation, and hopefully of more research to come, we may learn something of the most and least effective ways for development organizations to communicate.

Prior, however, to initiating the discussion of specific translations, a few general points are worth noting. Firstly, only one of the translations provided had a precise equivalent in English. That term was fallow land, and is recognizable, to those familiar with agriculture, as an ancient practice of moving fields to allow soil fertility to regenerate. This fact provides an excellent point of departure for considering the historical context of language. As Mr. Doboey put it after one set of farmer interviews, “these words have not evolved in their language—they have had to develop approximations.”

This was one of the most significant statements I heard in the course of my research because it helps development workers to realize that the concepts we try so often to commu-

Agricultural Term (English)	Fante Term (Ghanaian Approximation)	Agricultural Term (Exact Meaning)	Source
Cocoa fertilizer	Asase wura	Owner of the land	Donatus Boboley
Conservation	Edze resie	To try to keep something	Samuel Biney
Crop diversity	Nsesa edwuma	Changing of specific job	John Eghan ²
Fair trade	Igwa pa	Better market	Jo Jo Fletcher, Samuel Biney, Rashid Ahmed
Fallow land	Epe	Fallow land	John Egan
Food security	Edziban banbo	Food security	Samuel Biney
Hybrid varieties	Abaefer	Improved method	Jo Jo Fletcher, John Egan
	Agric	From Ministry Of Food & Agric.	Boateng Agyanim
High yield plants	Abaefer	Improved method	John Egan
	Agric	From Ministry Of Food & Agric.	Boateng Agyanim
Intercropping	Mfutum	Mixed cropping	John Eghan
	Nfuu sronko sronko	Farming different varieties	Jo Jo Fletcher
Mixed cropping	Mfutum	Mixed cropping	John Eghan
	Nfuu sronko sronko	Farming different varieties	Jo Jo Fletcher
NPK fertilizer	Ôye asase yie	That which makes the land good	Donatus Boboley, John Eghan
	Adze a oma duaba fifir	Something that makes fruit germinate	Jo Jo Fletcher
Organic	Mbowa wo ase	Animal droppings	John Eghan, Jo Jo Fletcher
	Nyame nsa no edwuma	Everything that God makes	Samuel Biney
Sustainability	Ahweyie	Taking good care	Donatus Boboley, John Eghan
	Nshwee pa	Good management	Jo-Jo Fletcher

Figure 1: [2] Where John Eghan is source, translation reflects debate of 7 farmers from Brebia, in the Abura – Asebu – Kumankese district. Survey issued orally/simultaneously to all farmers. Translated by Mr. Eghan and Mr. Boboley. Answers are the product of debate: not each individuals interpretation. Mr. Boboley attempted to communicate points of contention to me.

communicate may be at best utterly foreign, and difficult, if not impossible to communicate fully. I would credit this, at least in part, to our histories (agricultural, cultural, political, social, and so on) differing in critical aspects. When, for example, a development researcher speaks of organic agriculture, the term carries with it multiple connotations of the legacy of the Green Revolution, of particular legislations, of health food stores, of articles published in popular newspapers, of particular brands which are particular to his culture.

The cultures and histories of the United State and Ghana are sufficiently different

that we must at least consider the possibility that our ideas may frequently fail to be culturally available. Notably, the reverse may often also hold true. The words chosen to describe a phenomenon (particularly when translated) are reflective of individual psychological perspectives. These worldviews are in turn reflective of the contexts in which these terms were offered to me. As a result, the guiding principle of the discussion which will follow is that language can offer us insight into peoples everyday lives, into their experiences both internal and external.

As such, this paper is guided by an under-

standing of culture as the individuals experience of the local, social world as per Kleinmanns (1988) definition of culture [4]. I have paired these terms for purposes of discussion, either because the translations provided were the same, despite the terms having different standard usages in English, or because in interviews the two terms were used interchangeably or were consistently related to one another.

Organic and Fallow Land Dr. Agyanim suggested to me that I might develop an alternative survey in which I simply asked farmers why they practiced leaving land fallow [1]. Interestingly, it was his belief that the response would give me a version of a typical Ghanaian farmers understanding of the word “organic.” This may seem at odds with the way these terms are thought of in the United States. Organic and fallow land certainly both belong in the agricultural domain, but their relationship in our culture has nowhere near the same proximity. The Ghanaian concept of organic asserted itself repeatedly as simply “natural farming.” The act of leaving land fallow being an ancient practice, it seems that Dr. Agyanim believed farmers would use it to explain their understanding of organic, natural practices.

“Fallow land” was also one of the very few terms on this list which had a translation which communicated directly the connotations and denotations of the word as we use it, although, as Dr. Agyanim suggested, it may carry additional meanings to Ghanaians (natural, organic, and so on). The connection

between “fallow” and “organic” as natural is further reflected in the translation offered by Mr. Biney, an extension agent, of organic as the way in which God makes things grow [7]. Farmers employed, of course, other phrases as well. When I asked one citrus farmer of Asebu, AAK district, to define organic, he said simply “we are not spraying it,” intending to refer to the fact that organic farmers, of which citrus farmers make a significant percentage, use neither herbicides nor pesticides. Several others defined organic as something which naturally contributed to the health of the soil. This perhaps reflects the fact that the primary context in which non-citrus farmers hear the word “organic” is in opposition to inorganic fertilizer.

NPK Fertilizer and Cocoa Fertilizer

Mr. Doboley spontaneously offered me the above cited common indigenous term for cocoa fertilizer, primarily to demonstrate the high variability in linguistic approximations which farmers use [5]. Together, these terms are particularly interesting in that they both seem to only register the beneficial aspects of inorganic fertilizers. NPK fertilizer as “that which makes the land good,” despite the fact that even the most illiterate farmer is generally aware of the negative effects of inorganic methods, (as Dr. Samuel Amoah of Cape Coast University Agricultural Engineering Department stipulating during one interview). Cocoa fertilizer as “owner of the land” despite the fact that numerous Ghanaian farmers and extension officers have explained to me that the difference between

crops grown with inorganic fertilizers and those grown without is detectable upon taste.

The conversations I had concerning the ways to translate this term gave me a key insight into the minds of the farmers I interviewed to them, yield is bottom line. High yields translate into (marginally) better market prices and therefore the chance to perhaps grow more in the future and break out of a cycle of poverty. How they attain high and higher yields is the only question which is significant to them. To the majority of the farmers I interviewed, our distinctions between inorganic and organic fertilizers were not incomprehensible; they were simply irrelevant. I would hazard that attempts to communicate sustainable and organic practices must be translated at least partially into short term benefits, if we wish these practices to be effectively adopted.

Mixed Cropping and Intercropping

Farmers generally proved to recognize a difference between these terms but could not provide a linguistic distinction in their language. Intercropping one agricultural student understood very literally to refer to the physical placement of secondary crops in between rows of primary crops. Dr. Agyanim considered it to be a farming practice intended specifically to promote soil health—for instance by intercropping with groundnuts, cowpeas, or other legumes although he noted that farmers may not have conscious awareness of the process by which these legumes increase soil fertility [1]. Mr. Dobby maintained that more commonly, farm-

ers will designate the two crops being intercropped by saying, for example, “bankye ne-abro,” to designate intercropping involving cassava and maize [5]. Additionally, he explained that farmers might understand intercropping as involving harvesting at near intervals, whereas mixed cropping harvest might be spread over the course of a year or more. Mixed cropping had less certain definitions. Many of the farmers I interviewed understood it primarily as planting a wide variety of seeds, which we may perhaps interpret to mean that mixed cropping is used to prepare in the event of drought, crop failure, or disease.

High Yield Varieties and Hybrid Plants

Elements of the two previous discussions may be relevant here. Firstly, no distinction was generally made between these two terms, particularly in their translations but also in the conversations held around them. Secondly, that no distinction is made between higher yield varieties and hybrid plants may offer some understanding of what the farmers I interviewed expect from the seeds which they generally group under the term “agric.” From the Ministry of Food and Agriculture, farmers expect more and better. They look to the government for these improved varieties – geared, among other things, towards higher yields and better survival rates in diverse conditions. Neither of these traits are negative in and of themselves, but the urgent desire for crops exhibiting them in spite of an awareness of the dangers of mono-cropping, pollution, and the inorganic fertilizers and pesti-

cides which they require speaks volumes of the daily experience and fears of the Ghanaian farmer.

Food Security and Fair Trade Accessible, affordable, nutritious in interviews with academia, these terms repeatedly came up. When interviewing farmers, the vast majority more literally interpreted it to mean the safety of ones familys food. Only one of the farmers I interviewed defined food security as having nutritious food – and his voice was almost lost in the debate. Luckily, afterward, the translator noted that he had dissented. In that same interview, we moved from conversations about food security to fair trade. Interestingly, farmers generally considered fair prices at markets to be the major path to improving the security of their food. Paradoxically, for people who grow food for a living, the only way to secure food for themselves and their families is fair market prices.

The first farmer I spoke with could not rigorously distinguish one from the other but rather consistently made it clear that one was an element in the others equation. In his terms, “igwa pa,” fair trade, would allow “edziban banbo,” secure food [7]. That this link was so clear in his mind perhaps reflects on the necessity of market initiatives to improve the lot of Ghanaian farmers. They grow adequate food but lack entirely a fair venue in which to sell it. This fact is perhaps even more telling when we consider that this farmer sold exclusively in his own community, Pra-Ewusi. Pra-Ewusi is one of a comparatively more accessible communitiy in the

AAK district, being in close proximity to the District Assembly (the location of district offices of Ministries of Food and Agriculture, Health, and Education), and major stopping points on the way to Cape Coast. Additionally, this community lies one of two few paved roads in the district. That transportation might be an issue even for him offers a significant window into the lives of farmers living in communities like the previously cited Brebia – miles from the nearest paved road.

Conservation and Sustainability Even in English “sustainability” is a word notoriously open to a variety of interpretations. “Conservation” is perhaps less so, but both have played their role what is referred to as the “green washing” of America the way in which these words have come to appear everywhere and refer to everything on which a recycled logo can be stamped regardless of actual benefits and damages done to the environment. I find it interesting, then, that both the translations used for these terms place the full weight on humans. “Good management” or “trying to keep something” are terms which figure conservation or sustainability as the practice and duty of people, or more specifically, farmers. One phrase that came up in interviews with both Dr. Amoah and Dr. Agyanim was “for your children and your childrens children.” [7] [1] They believed this phrase would make the meanings of sustainability and conservation more accessible to Ghanaian farmers – again, the emphasis on people, the roles we play in the world, and who we might be playing them for.

At this point I see Ghanaians being pulled between yearly profits and their duty to maintain for their children their rich cultural history as an agricultural country. Compounding this tension is the fact that fewer and fewer members of the younger generation are going into agriculture. Farmers, agricultural students, and government officials from the director of the district ministry down to the extension officers raised this issue. Trying to keep their history, trying to be good managers of their inheritance these are the issues of conservation and sustainability which Ghanaians struggle with. Their environmental concerns are not yet so pressing, and neither have I seen a general awareness of the larger scale forces (climate change, for example), which are operating all the same.

4 Conclusion

The above discussion is by no means exhaustive. There are significant shortcomings of the current paper. It might have been improved by utilizing a greater variety of sources—university agricultural students, rural agricultural students, academics from the north and the south, officers from districts whose agriculture is doing worse or better than the district I primarily functioned in. More sources, of course, will tend to improve any paper, and that mine were regionally sourced may have significantly affected the perspectives that were offered. As an example, the proximity of the farmers I interviewed to the Asuansi Farm Institute may have resulted in an increased recognition of hybrid varieties of

seeds.

For these reasons, I have avoided claiming to give an “authentic Ghanaian perspective” (if such a thing is possible). As a country, there are certain universal experiences, but the variation within the country (demonstrated, again, by the enormous number of languages) makes it undeniably more effective to produce a paper which is small in focus and qualified in its perspective.

Naturally, this paper focused on a purely linguistic form of communication. But in the end, this may not be the most effective form of communication for farmers. As Dr. Emmanuel Ofori of Kwame Nkrumah University succinctly indicated, “demonstration is communication.” [6] Farmers in Ghana have been engaging in a stable set of agricultural practices for much of their history. If they are to believe that there are better methods, and that they should adopt them, then they need to see the proof with their eyes. We should expect and offer them no less. Farming in Ghana is already a life which is lived season to season. They fight weather and markets to survive from year to year. If we are to ask them to invest in our methods, to take a serious risk, then let us ask them to invest wisely, and with confidence.

That said, this paper began in part with a discussion of the psychological component of development. Both academics and development professionals in Ghana have emphasized that for projects to succeed, the community must make a psychological space for them. That space may in part be created by effective communication, which in effect allows the development organization to inte-

grate itself into the community. By allowing farmers to hear you speak in their native language, you have effectively begun a process of communication and integration which will be rendered all the more effective when demonstration is added to the mix. These translations cannot make the reader fluent, and neither are they intended to do so. The wide number and variety of languages dooms any such attempt from the start.

General feedback on my project validated the utility of this perspective. These translations do offer the possibility to engage in more effective forms of communication with the farmers who speak some English and are quasi-literate. Even imperfect communication on both ends of the conversation may be more effective than communication exclusively through a translator. Coupled with translation, these tools may prove very useful.

Finally, possibilities for future research are potentially infinite in the following regardwestern capacities to understand African world views are facilitated in large part by language, by understanding the words they use to understand us. This paper opened with a selection on European language from the Polish reporter Ryszard Kapuscinskis meditations on his experiences over fifty years in Africa: The richness of every European language is a richness in ability to describe its own culture, represent its own world. [4] The same may be said of African languages, and it is potentially through understanding them that we may understand the African culture, the African world.

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