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Exploring Culture-related Idioms in Tshivenda

Abstract. Idioms make up a large part of people's knowledge of language. They are an important mode of expression that forms part of a daily communication among the speakers of the language. In addition to the idiom colouring the language with its figurative meaning and serving as a conveyance of distinctive meaning, it also reflects on the general life of the nation and its attitude toward the world. Idioms are formed from national sayings and are related to the culture of the nation. People are considered competent speakers of a language when they master the various idiomatic expressions. Idioms are distinct from ordinary literal language because their meaning cannot be deduced by the general rules of the language in question. As in other languages, Tshivenda is rich in idiomatic expressions. Tshivenda idioms mirror the Vhavana society and they reflect on aspects of life of this society and its immediate environment. Nations do not exist without some form of culture; therefore, it is important for people to understand the cultures of other language groups if they intend on improving communication across the groups. Culture can be imparted to people in different ways, including the use of figurative expressions such as idioms. The youth and learners of the language learn more about the culture of the speakers of the language in idioms. This paper seeks to explore idioms as phraseological units which reveal the culture of the nation. Idioms, as presented in Tshivenda dictionaries will be analysed to achieve this objective.

Key words: *culture, dictionary, figurative expressions, idiomatic expressions, language, phraseological units, Vhavana*

1. Introduction

All nations of the world are characterised by forms of idiomatic expressions which make up a large part of people's knowledge of a language. Idioms form part of a daily communication among the speakers of a language, be it in spoken or written forms. These expressions are not used senselessly;

a number of functions are attached to them. Many people associate idiomatic expressions with the function of colouring a language because they are figurative in nature. In this regard, Ntsanwisi (1968) says that idioms render linguistic expressions more effective. Among other functions, idioms serve as a conveyance of distinctive meaning. They reflect on the general life of the nation and its attitude toward the world by reflecting on the people's experience on aspects of life in all spheres. This means that idioms are formed from national sayings that reflect on the immediate environment in which people are found. As a result, some of these idiomatic expressions contain the elements of culture of a specific nation. Among the aspects that help to identify one nation from the other is culture. If one does not have the knowledge of the culture of a nation, he or she might find it difficult to follow the meaning of an idiomatic expression. Gibbs, Jr (1995: 97) states: "People are not considered competent speakers of a language until they master the various clichéd idiomatic expressions that are ubiquitous in everyday discourse."

African languages, including Tshivenda, are rich in idiomatic expressions. In their daily conversations, speakers of these languages will now and then colour their linguistic expressions with idioms. In addition, idioms are used in literary works to enhance their value. Hence, it is important to know the culture of a language group if one intends to understand some of culture-related idiomatic expressions and the message of literary texts. In emphasizing the importance of the knowledge of culture of a language group regarding understanding the meaning of a literary text, Mafela (1995: 16) asserts:

There is one important element which must not be ignored whenever a literary text is interpreted, and this is culture. It is not easy to interpret the meaning of a literary text without considering the culture of a society for which it has been written because it affects the other elements of a literary text.

The above assertions reveal that readers of literary texts must observe the connections of the literary work and the world outside it. A reader must therefore have the knowledge about the belief, art, morals, law, and custom of the society for which the text has been written to have a fair understanding of the meaning (Mafela, 1995).

The young rising generation among the Africans associate the use of idioms to old members of the community and do not bother to know their origin. They therefore miss a lot of cultural aspects revealed in the idioms. In many instances it becomes difficult for them to interpret literary works because of the lack of understanding of culture-related idioms. It is important to explore culture-related idioms to find out what they contain. This article

investigates idioms as phraseological units which reveal the culture of a community. The results of the investigation will assist the youth and learners of a language to understand meanings during a day to day conversation and when reading literary texts. The content analysis method is used to highlight the use of idioms as a vehicle for revealing the culture of a community. Selected Tshivenda dictionaries, *Ifa lashu la maambe* by Neluvhalani and *Venda Dictionary: Tshivenda – English* by Van Warmelo, and a text *Tshivenda literature: a historical sketch with special reference to its bibliography* by Mafela will serve as sources of selected idiomatic expressions that will be used in the discussion.

2. Idioms and culture

People all over the world have the power to communicate in at least one language. The word language in this context, is meant as the human speech which is characterised by words, phrases and sentences. About knowing a language, Fromkin and Rodman (1998: 389) state:

Knowing a language includes knowing morphemes, simple words, compound words, and their meanings. In addition, it means knowing fixed phrases, consisting of more than one word, with meanings that cannot be inferred from the meanings of the individual words. The usual semantic rules for combining meanings do not apply. Such expressions are called **idioms**.

This discussion is concerned with the knowledge of fixed phrases which Fromkin and Rodman call idioms, and are characterised by meanings which are hard to guess without a special context or previous exposure (Abeille, 1995). Ntsanwisi (1967: 2) defines an idiom as

a fixed structured form or a fixed phrasal pattern of words which go together, peculiar to the genius of a language as regards grammatical structure, accepted usage, and the meaning of which cannot be logically or literally ascertained from its component parts.

Like Fromkin and Rodman, Ntsanwisi also emphasizes that an idiom is a fixed phrase. In his definition of the idiom, Guma (1967) comments on the meaning which cannot be ordinarily deduced or inferred from the knowledge of the individual words that make it up. This means that idioms are figurative in nature.

A language is a carrier of culture of the community. Berthemet (2011: 244) comments about the function of language:

We believe that when we say something, it is because we are members of a definite speech community. We are part of history and language is like a lens through which we see the world, but this lens can be removed.

The choice of words, the use of idiomatic expressions such as proverbs and idioms, transmits a great deal about the culture (Mafela, 2012). An idiom is one of the aspects of a language; it is also a lens through which we see the world. It is therefore a carrier of culture because some individual words which make up and give meaning to the idiom have a link with the culture of the community. An idiom further reflects the general way of life among the people. Ran (n.d) states that language and culture are inextricably linked because they influence each other.

Culture involves general customs and beliefs of a particular group of people (Cloete & Madadzhe, 2004). It is the integrated pattern of human knowledge, belief and behaviour (Mafela, 2012). Guy (1999: 7) defines culture as reference

to the shared values, attitudes, beliefs, behaviors, and language use within a social group. These cultural values and beliefs and practices are at the core of group life and identity and are powerful factors that shape or influence individual attitudes, beliefs and behaviors.

These scholars perceive culture as a hub from which human behaviour finds its source. Culture is a human product because it is about the interpretation of reality and meanings by a specific community. Roberts (2009) points out that traditionalists understood culture in terms of belonging and otherness as if people felt part of one group and so separate from another. Culture gives a community some identity. In addition, culture determines whether certain things generally happen or not; it tells that certain acts have certain causes or motives in various contexts (Mafela, 1995). Communities interpret reality and meaning differently, which leads culture to be different from one community to another. Beyaraza (1994) mentions that culture is relative to individual person's needs, desires, attitudes of life and the specific circumstances, among other differences. People perceive culture differently, as they acquire it differently.

3. Culture-related idioms

African languages share some idiomatic expressions because the speakers of these languages share a lot of aspects in life. There might be some differences in the interpretation of the idiom, but the basic meaning is usu-

ally found to be the same in these language groups. This is so because the speakers live together and that they share some cultural aspects. Sometimes an African language can borrow idioms from other African languages or even from languages such as English. Tshivenda, like any other African language, shares idioms with neighbouring languages, such as Xitsonga, Sesotho sa Leboa and Setswana (three of the nine indigenous official languages of South Africa). However, Tshivenda is also characterised by idiomatic expressions which cannot be found in other languages. The presence of these idiomatic expressions originate from the Vhavenda cultural background. Tshivenda culture-related idiomatic expressions reveal a particular way of life of the Vhavenda. Interpreting the meaning of such idiomatic expressions need the knowledge of the culture of Vhavenda. One should have the knowledge about the way the Vhavenda conduct their life to interpret their idiomatic expressions. Knowing the cultures of other language groups is important because it helps people to communicate competently. South Africa, as a multicultural and multilingual congeal country, should have people who are able to communicate in the languages of the people with whom they freely interact at school, in working situations and business (Neluvhalani, 1987). Hereunder, a few culture-related idioms in Tshivenda are identified and discussed.

3.1. U buba u songo țohola

Like many other Africans in Africa, Vhavenda believe in witchcraft and sorcery. They believe that sorcerers move about during the night practicing their sorcery. Anyone who is seen walking about in the very early hours of the morning is suspected to be a sorcerer by the Vhavenda. Hence Vhavenda came up with an idiomatic expression *U buba u songo țohola* (To wake up very early in the morning with no reason of going to grind maize), which means **to practice sorcery**. In his dictionary of idioms, Neluvhalani (1987: 15) defines the idiomatic expression *U buba u songo țohola* as follows:

U buba u songo țohola – U lowa.

(To wake up early, with no reason of going to grind maize – To practice sorcery.)

When one tells another person that *u buba a songo țohola* (he/she wakes up early with no reason of going to grind maize), he/she means that one is a sorcerer. Among the Vhavenda, it is only those who grind maize who are not accused of sorcery when they are seen moving about very early in the morning because grinding of maize is done at this time. The grinding referred to

in this idiomatic expression is that of using mortar and peddle, which are instruments used by Africans, particularly Vhavenḁa. Women wake up during the middle of the night and grind maize. This is a common practice among the Vhavenḁa and it is known by all people in the community. Therefore, women are not accused of witchcraft or sorcery. Any other person seen moving about very early in the morning will be accused of sorcery. The idiomatic expression *u buba u songo ʒohola* (to practice sorcery) originates from the cultural practice of Vhavenḁa; and the interpretation of the meaning thereof is based on the activities of Vhavenḁa.

3.2. U humbela fola

Taking snuff is an important activity among the Vhavenḁa. In many instances it is taken for pleasure. Once they start taking snuff, Vhavenḁa women take it forever. Snuff is taken by both males and females; even though more females take it than males. In many instances, females start to take snuff when they become girls of marriageable age. Snuff is also used as a vehicle for communication. Vhavenḁa came up with an idiomatic expression, *u humbela fola* (to ask for snuff) meaning to propose love to a girl, after noticing that it is not used only for pleasure, but also for communication between girls and boys. Mafela (2005) writes that idioms are meant to embellish verbal communication in the community. There are many ways of proposing love to a lady among societies of the world. In the past, Vhavenḁa boys used to propose love to girls by asking for snuff. When a Muvēḁa boy was attracted to a girl, he did not tell her directly that he loved her, but asked for snuff. Girls knew what they meant when boys ask for snuff; they would respond by giving boys the snuff or indicate that they do not have it. If a girl happened to give a boy snuff, then the boy would know that she loves him. If she does not love him, she would indicate to him that she did not have snuff. In addition to using snuff as something to entertain oneself, snuff is also used to propose love among the Vhavenḁa in this regard. Current boys and girls, especially those who stay in the rural areas know that asking for snuff, is figurative language which means that one (a boy) loves another (a girl). Mafela (2005: 30) provides the meaning of this idiomatic expression as follows:

U humbela fola – U ambisa

(To ask for snuff – To propose love)

Presently, very few girls and women take snuff as it is considered an old way of entertaining oneself. However, boys carry on using the idiomatic expression *u humbela fola* (to ask for snuff) when proposing love to girls.

Unlike in the past, present girls do not show acceptance or rejection by giving boys snuff or denying them, they tell boys directly that they love them or do not love them. In the past it was considered a taboo for a girl to tell a boy directly that she loves him. Responses used to be in the form of figurative language and actions.

3.3. U *ḵisa tshivhindi*

Vhavaḵḵa are a community that believes in the leadership of a chief or king. They respect the role of the chief and king in their society. In the past, when Vhavaḵḵa realized that the chief or king was overstaying his position, they would come up with a plan to cut his reign short. This was done especially when they realized that the heir was ageing. Senior members of the royal house would organize to strangle the chief or king while enjoying beer. This was performed indoors and secretly by people close to the chief or king. People outside would never know that the chief or king had been strangled. They would only be informed that the chief or king has vanished to a place no one knows (*dzama*), which means that the chief or king has died. This act gave rise to the formation of an idiomatic expression *u ḵisa tshivhindi* (to make one eat the liver), meaning **to kill a person**. Mafela (2005: 31) explains the meaning of *u ḵisa tshivhindi* as follows:

U ḵisa tshivhindi – U vḵulaha nga u tou tshipa

(To make one eat liver – To strangle a person to death)

The performance of *u ḵisa tshivhindi* (to strangle a person to death) is no longer practiced to chiefs and kings only, it is also practiced for ordinary citizens. Ordinary people are killed by strangling these days, and it would be said *o ḵiswa tshivhindi* (he or she has been strangled). These days it is not practiced to manage a situation like it used to be done in the past, but as a habit. People are strangled for various reasons. Unlike in the past, killing a person by strangling is considered a crime presently. The idiomatic expression *u ḵisa tshivhindi* originated from the cultural beliefs of Vhavaḵḵa, and it has a popular usage in the society.

3.4. *Ṭhanga i hwalwa na hatsi*

Many Africans stay in thatched roof huts. The roofing of traditional huts of many African communities, particularly those of Vhavaḵḵa, are made of wood and thatching grass. Unlike the modern roofs which are constructed

on the houses, the roofs of traditional huts among the Vhavenḁa used to be put together on the ground, and carried on to the hut for thatching. The task of carrying it on to the hut would need a number of strong men because it is heavy. It was not the custom of Vhavenḁa to thatch the roof on the ground because its weight will make the task of carrying it difficult. Thatching the roof on the ground was considered abnormal, and would imply that people are in a hurry. The act of hurrying means that there is no peace. Usually, this happened during the periods of quarrels. It is common for people to have differences that lead to quarrels, but where there are quarrels there is no peace. Vhavenḁa came up with an idiomatic expression *ḁhanga i hwalwa na hatsi* (the roof is carried with the thatch) to refer to a situation which is characterised by quarrels, especially to indicate that the quarrel is at its height; meaning that there is no peace. Van Warmelo (1989: 58) defines this idiomatic expression as follows:

ḁhanga i hwalwa na hatsi "The quarrel is at its height, the roof is being carried together with the thatch on it" (which cannot be done) i.e. the people are so worked up, nobody can restore peace just now

Vhavenḁa do not carry the roof with the thatch on it, the roof is thatched on the hut. That is why they see carrying the roof with thatch as an abnormal action, and associate the action with the absence of peace. By mentioning that *ḁhanga i hwalwa na hatsi* (The roof is carried with the thatch) one says that the quarrel is at its height. This means that there is no one who can bring peace to the warring factions. This idiomatic expression was derived from the way Vhavenḁa do things, and it is commonly used in their daily interaction.

3.5. Nzie yo bva khalini

Delicacies differ from one cultural group to another. Among the Vhavenḁa's delicacies are *nzie* (locust), *nḁhwa* (winged termite) and *ḁhungulifha* (large green stink-beetle). These are delicacies which some people would not like to share with others. For Vhavenḁa to enjoy these delicacies they are first roasted or cooked in a pot. When the cooking process is taking place, a lid will be used to cover the pot so that people cannot see what is inside. The one who cooks would not like others to know because he or she might end up sharing the delicacy with them. This is where the idiomatic expression *Nzie yo bva khalini* (The locust is out of the cooking pot) originated, meaning **the secret is known**. Its origin can be linked to the cultural practices

of Vhavenda. The delicacy of *nzie* (locust) is likened with a secret. Mafela (2005: 30) explains the meaning of this idiomatic expression as follows:

Nzie yo bva khalini – Mafhungo a tshiphiri a vho divhea.

(The locust is out of the pot – The secret is known.)

A secret is not supposed to be known by people for whom it is not meant. This means that valuable information should be kept a secret and not to be shared with others. Immediately when it is divulged it will be known by the public, and it is no longer a secret. When people hear one saying that *nzie yo bva khalini* (the locust is out of the pot), they immediately know that valuable information has been leaked.

3.6. U vha pfukhaluhura

Taboos play an important role in reprimanding the youth against misbehaving among the Vhavenda. Children are expected to listen to the elders. If they do not listen to the elders there will always be some consequences. In many instances messages of reprimand are communicated through the use of taboos. It is a taboo for a Muvenda child to jump over an outer fence of a homestead or village. If a child does not listen to the elders and jumps the fence, it is believed that something bad will happen to him/her or his/her relatives. Such a child is called *pfukhaluhura* (one who jumps over a fence). From this taboo, Vhavenda derived an idiomatic expression *u vha pfukhaluhura* (to be someone who jumps over the fence), meaning to **have an uncontrollable behaviour**. This idiomatic expression is associated with children who do not listen to the elders and become uncontrollable. Whenever elders notice a child who is uncontrollable, they will call him/her a *pfukhaluhura* because he/she acts in an unacceptable way. Neluvhalani (1987: 130) defines the idiomatic expression *u vha pfukhaluhura* as follows:

U vha pfukhaluhura – U vha na vhutshilo vhu sa iti lune na vhabebi vha vho kundwa u kaidza nga u shavha u vhuya nazwo. Zwothe zwo bva u lemani

(To jump over the fence – To have an uncontrollable behaviour to the extent that parents end up failing to reprimand one; all this because of being spoiled)

The definition of the idiom above reveals that Vhavenda associate uncontrollable children with people who do not listen to the elders. According to Neluvhalani (1987) children who become uncontrollable are those spoiled

by their parents. This means that some parents contribute toward their children becoming uncontrollable; but at the same time they want the children to listen to them; hence they will call such children *pfukhaluhura*. No one likes to be called a *pfukhaluhura* (one who jumps over the fence). The idiomatic expression *u vha pfukhaluhura* is derived from the cultural beliefs of Vhavenda.

3.7. U vhuya nga *litswu*

Many communities associate the colour black with bad omen, bad results, failure, etcetera. The colour black is perceived negatively in this regard. For example, if there is death in a family, especially that of a senior member of the family such as the husband; the wife would be clothed in black as a symbol of mourning. Although in this status she would be respected by all people in the village, she would also be denied participation in many activities because she is in black clothes. Death is perceived as a loss and bad omen which has befallen the village. Vhavenda associate failure for achievement with the colour black. As a result, they came up with an idiomatic expression *u vhuya nga litswu* (to be rewarded with a black one), meaning **to fail to get one's due**. Van Warmelo (1989: 443) defines the idiom *u vhuya nga litswu* as follows:

-bva or -vhuya nga litswu fail to get one's due, lose one's case

The equivalents of *litswu* (black one) in the idiom – *vhuya nga litswu* are *fail* and *lose* in the explanatory English phrases. These equivalents denote bad results. The association of a black colour with a failure came from Vhavenda's perception of the concept 'black' as bad omen.

4. Discussion

The discussion of the few examples of Tshivenda idiomatic expressions above reveals that idioms do not only colour the language and convey a message to the community; they also reflect on the general life and the culture of the community. In reality, culture-related idioms, particularly those of Vhavenda, are derived from the cultural practices of the community, for example, Vhavenda's belief in witchcraft. Furthermore, the interpretation of culture-related idioms is based on the activities of the community concerned, for example, grinding maize in *u buba a songo tohola* (To wake up very early in the morning with no reason of going to grind maize).

The study of the culture-related idioms has shown convincingly that important messages are conveyed to the community by using idiomatic expressions, as they are not conveyed directly. The idiomatic expression *u hambela fola* (to ask for snuff) is a good example in this regard, because it serves as a vehicle of passing a message of love. By using the idiomatic expressions, speakers try to impress their seriousness on the receiver of the message. Accordingly, the receiver of the message will also respond in a respectful manner.

Like other ordinary idiomatic expressions, culture-related idioms address problems of the youth. Some youth, especially present generation youth, do not respect traditional practices because of their encounter with western civilization. Idiomatic expressions teach the youth to respect the traditional practices and to listen to the elders. For example, *u vha pfukhaluhura* (to be one who jumps over the fence), teaches the youth to listen to the elders. Jumping over the fence does not only refer to physical jumping, but also not abiding by practices as expected in a language group. Members of a community are expected to abide by its rules and norms. In this regard, the community uses culture through idiomatic expressions to reprimand their children. They believe that the youth respect the idioms more than a direct reprimand.

5. Conclusion

Like other indigenous African language groups of South Africa, Vhavaṅḁa is a nation that is characterised by a belief in their culture. The exposition above showed that they reveal this belief through their actions and in the way they communicate with each other. Vhavaṅḁa respect their culture and customs in many ways. This article focused on the exploration of idiomatic expressions as a form of communication. The analysis of the selected idiomatic expressions confirms that idioms carry the culture of a language. It has been illustrated without doubt that people, specifically Vhavaṅḁa, impart culture from one generation to the other through the use of fixed expressions such as idioms because their messages remain the same. As idiomatic expressions are used in verbal and written communication, the discussion above has shown that it would be difficult for listeners and readers to interpret idiomatic expressions, especially culture-related idioms, without the knowledge of the culture of a language group. However, acquiring the messages of idiomatic expressions will assist the youth and learners of the language to learn more about the culture of the language group. The present youth must

avoid associating idiomatic expressions with elders of a language group if they really want to enhance the knowledge of their culture. Learning more about culture-related idioms in their language will help the youth to communicate competently. Despite colouring their speech with idiomatic expressions, the youth will also be empowering themselves with the knowledge of customs and morals of their language group. Culture is related to the ideas, beliefs and customs of a society.

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Badanie idiomów o motywacji kulturowej w języku tshivenda

Streszczenie

Idiomy stanowią ważny element znajomości danego języka. Są one ważnym środkiem wyrażania, odgrywają więc dużą rolę w codziennej komunikacji pomiędzy użytkownikami języka. Oprócz wzbogacania języka o aspekt figuratywny i słuzeniu do przekazywania określonego znaczenia idiomy przekazują również informacje o życiu danego etnosu i jego stosunku do świata. Jednostki te powstają na bazie powiedzeń o charakterze narodowym i są powiązane z daną kulturą. Znajomość rozmaitych idiomów jest konieczna, aby uznać osobę posługującą się językiem za kompetentą w tym zakresie. Idiomy różnią się od zwykłego języka literackiego, ponieważ ich znaczenie nie może być zrozumiane za pomocą ogólnych zasad obowiązujących w danym języku. Podobnie jak inne języki, tshivenda ma bogactwo idiomatycznych wyrażen: idiomy odzwierciedlają społeczeństwo vhavenda i aspekty jego życia oraz bezpośrednie otoczenie. Narody nie istnieją bez jakiejś formy kultury, dlatego jest ważne, aby ludzie rozumieli klutury innych grup językowych, jeżeli mają zamiar poprawić komunikację między grupami. Kultura może być przekazywana ludziom w różny sposób, włączając użycie figuratywnych wyrażen, takich jak idiomy. Ludzie młodzi i osoby uczące się języka dowiadują się dzięki temu więcej o kulturze użytkowników języka. Niniejszy artykuł stanowi próbę zbadania idiomów jako jednostek frazeologicznych, które są nośnikami kultury danego narodu. Aby zrealizować ten cel, zostaną przeanalizowane idiomy poświadczane w słownikach języka tshivenda.

