

AIDSCOM Field Note

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Talking about sex and partners in Luganda:

Issues for questionnaire translation*

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Introduction

It is well known that translating a questionnaire from one language to another can cause changes in the meaning of concepts. Difficulties in achieving exact correspondence between the meaning of questions are magnified when the questions are complex or abstract and when the languages are distantly related.

Here the translation of apparently simple concepts between two distantly related languages is explored with reference to their implications for designing surveys to measure AIDS related knowledge, attitudes and practices. Specifically, the terms for sexual partners and the act of sexual intercourse are examined in Luganda, an African Bantu language. Luganda is one of more than 40 languages spoken in Uganda, a culturally diverse nation in East Africa. More than 1 million people speak Luganda as their native language. Many more Ugandans communicate in Luganda while working, trading, or engaging in social interaction.

Terms for marriage and sexual partners

Concepts that appear straightforward become quite complex in translation. Words that may translate literally are often associated with other concepts in the language. The question "Are you married now?" has a very close translation (*oli mufumbo*). *Oli* means "are you" and *mufumbo*, "married". *Bufumbo* (marriage) is a term related to *kufumba* (to cook). While the translation is clear, the definition of who is married is different.

In America persons are considered "married" when a couple has obtained a certificate from a government agency and participated in a ceremony presided over by an authorized civil servant or religious official. The distinction between who is married and who is not is relatively clear cut. A lifelong monogamous relationship is implied.

In Uganda, persons are described as married under a number of other circumstances. Among the traditional Baganda, marriage was a contract between a man and the father of a woman. The contract was

finalized through the transfer of bridewealth (usually in cattle or currency). In the post-colonial period, a number of changes took place, and there are a number of ways in which a couple may come to be considered by the community as married.

1. A traditional ceremony with transfer of bridewealth or gifts.
2. A civil marriage registered with the government.
3. A ceremony within a religious institution such as the Church of Uganda, Catholic church or Mosque.
4. A couple begins to live together.
5. A couple are recognized as having a long-term sexual relationship.

The traditional practice of polygamy remains common. Polygamous marriages are not recognized in Christian churches and cannot be registered by the national government. However, polygamy is accepted among Moslems. As a result men living in identical situations might describe their partner relationships differently, depending on their religion, the extent to which they have been affected by Westernization, and the social context in which the relationship is being discussed.

Consider a man who has two female partners with whom he engages in sex and produces children. He may live with one and visit the other, or separate his time between the households, providing economic support for the woman and children in each. When asked the question "How many wives do you have?" one man might say "two" and another might say "one". In fact, if neither relationship was certified by method 2 or 3 above, a conceivably correct answer would be "none". A Christian for whom the first marriage was recognized in church would be likely to say he had one wife and one girlfriend. Separating "wives" from "girlfriends" in the analysis of survey data becomes problematic.

In Luganda the word for wife is **omukyala**, which also translates as "lady", distinct from **omukazi** (woman). The concept of steady partner is best translated as **muganzi wo owenkalakalira** (**muganzi** = lover, **wo** = your, **owenkalakalira** = permanent). The concept of a "casual partner" is less easily translated. The closest approximation is **muganzi wo owolumu**, (**muganzi** = lover, **wo** = your, **owolumu** = once). With a high incidence of HIV infection among the general population, one "casual partner" can represent less risk in terms of frequency than a "wife".

In summary, the translation of English terms about marriage and types of sexual partners into Luganda is reasonably straightforward, with the exception of "casual partner". However, the definition who is a "wife" and who is "married" is considerably different.

Terms for sexual intercourse

Terms for sexual intercourse are more difficult to translate literally. The literal translation of sex or vaginal intercourse is **okutomba**. This word is considered highly offensive and is never spoken. It might only be used while joking among very close friends of the same sex and age. A loose analogy might be to the word "fuck" in American English, except that it is more offensive. Also, it has no other usage except to indicate sexual intercourse, while Americans use fuck in a variety of contexts.

A second way to refer to sexual intercourse is **okulola omukazi** (to work a woman). Here the ordinary word for work (I work at a bank) is interpreted in the context of the sentence as referring to sex. It is less rude than **okutomba** (a taboo word) but would not be used in ordinary conversation. It might be used in joking between friends. A similar reference is found in **bamulide omukazi** (to eat a woman).

A word that is reasonably appropriate for a questionnaire is **okwebakaka**, which means to sleep with. It has a high level of specificity when used in the proper context (two persons of the opposite sex. It is also the ordinary term for sleep (a mother sleeps with her baby). Although it seems close to the metaphor used in American English, some Luganda speakers also consider using **webakako** to refer to sex too rude for polite conversation, especially if speaking to the opposite sex or an elder. A more polite but less specific phrase would be **wegatako nomukazi/nomusaja**. Used in a question, it would mean "did you join with a woman/man".

A variety of phrases are used to refer to sex by Ugandans who speak English. Where Americans would say "have sex", Ugandans would say "play sex". Where Americans might say "he is always fooling around", Ugandans would say "he is always moving around". In American English the phrase "to sleep around" implies someone who has sex with a lot of partners. The meaning of "sleep around" is much different in Ugandan English, where it is interpreted as "Do you live around here?". As a result it is quite possible to ask a Ugandan "Do you still sleep around?" and he will cheerfully reply "yes", meaning simply that his home is nearby. So while **webakako** refers to sleep and can be used to imply sex in Luganda, "sleeping around" and "sleeping with" are much different concepts in English for Ugandans.

Conclusion

The fact that the most clearcut translation of "sex" that can be used in a Luganda questionnaire is the same as a polite euphemism used in America illustrates the complexity of studying even simple concepts of sexual practices cross-culturally. Obtaining measures of frequency of intercourse or specific acts is even more

complicated.** Acheiving exact translations of complex concepts that retain their meaning in translation is not always possible.

Researchers that design questionnaires that will be translated into other languages should use simple concepts, especially when the questionnaire will be used in interviews with non-native speakers. The questionnaires should be translated back into English by independent translators. The final version should be carefully pretested among a group that is similar to the target population, and revised where necessary. Interviewers need to be trained to carefully balance the need to use the exact questions on the questionnaire with the need to rephrase the question in order to insure that the question is understood by the respondent.

Notes

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** "How many times have you "had sex" with that partner?" would be interpreted as the number of nights spent together rather than the number of times.