

USING IDIOMATIC EXPRESSIONS AS RHETORIC: A STRATEGY TOWARDS ACCULTURATION BY KENYAN STUDENTS IN CHINA

Author's address

Dr. Tom Olali

Department of Kiswahili

University of Nairobi

P O Box 30197-00100

Nairobi

Kenya

e-mail: tom.mboya@uonbi.ac.ke

tom.olali@gmail.com

Telephone: +254721424993

Position: Senior Lecturer.

Abstract

This paper asserts that Kenyan students in China meet face to face almost on a daily basis with certain problems in the course of writing or studying the Chinese language. It rests on the view that idiomatic expressions as an aspect of rhetoric can enhance substantially the understanding of the Chinese language by a Kenyan student in a process the paper refers to as 'language acculturation'. The paper begins to substantiate this claim with a definition of rhetoric and idioms. Then it postulates that if the student has a prior knowledge and a reservoir of certain Swahili idiomatic expressions and is able to situate them into the Chinese context, he or she will then be able to express an idea, describe a condition, an event or a situation. The paper attempts to correlate a number of idiomatic expressions found in Swahili and which have 'almost' similar connotations with certain Chinese idioms.

Key Words Acculturation, Idiom, Rhetoric, Swahili, Metaphor, Identity, Communication

1. Introduction

China and Africa in recent years have been enjoying closer ties in areas including economy and culture. With a view to further promoting cultural exchanges between China and the African countries, the ministries of Education in China and Kenya reached an agreement in June 2004 to establish a Confucius Institute at the University of Nairobi. In September 2009, the Department of Linguistics and Languages at the University of Nairobi admitted the first group of undergraduate students to study Chinese language. The Confucius Institute was designed by the China National Office for Teaching Chinese as a Foreign Language (NOCFL) to promote Chinese teaching in the world and provide excellent teachers and learning materials for overseas learners of Chinese. According to the NOCFL's programme, the number of Confucius Institutes around the world will reach a hundred in the near future. In Africa, there are currently three Confucius Institutes; in Kenya, South Africa and Zimbabwe.

2. The status of Kiswahili

Kiswahili's main locality is East and Central Africa. It is spoken as a mother-tongue by its original "tribes", collectively known as the Waswahili, of the coastal littoral of Kenya and Tanzania (including the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba). It is also spoken southwards along the coast as far South as Mozambique and the northern tip of Madagascar, through the Comoros. People other than the Waswahili who speak it as a mother tongue are the Swahilised Arabs, some of whom have had it as their mother tongue for several centuries from around the 12th Century to date (Chimerah, 2000). To the West of the East African Coast, Swahili-speaking communities are found in the Democratic Republic of Congo, Malawi, Southern Somalia, Rwanda, Burundi and Uganda. The Swahili-speaking Northern Madagascans in Madagascar also speak it as a mother tongue (Polome, 1967; Whiteley, 1969).

The majority of Swahili speakers, however, speak it as a mother tongue. This is so in areas like Tanzania, the rest of Kenya, Northern Uganda and also some pockets in the Luganda-dominated South, East and North-Eastern Congo, Northern Zambia (bordering Tanzania and the Democratic Republic of Congo). Kiswahili is also spoken as a mother-tongue as well as a second language in the island of Sokotra, off the Horn of Africa (Whiteley, 1969). A recent development is that the language is spoken by about a third of Oman's total population as a mother-tongue. Kiswahili speakers in Oman are Arab-descended migrants from East Africa, the greatest majority coming from the islands of Zanzibar and Pemba, who "retraced the steps of their distant forefathers to reclaim their ancestry in that oil-rich modern nation" (Chimerah 2000).

In Kenya, Kiswahili is the national language while English remains the official language. Nevertheless, Kiswahili still permeates all spheres of life in Kenya and shares the political mantle with English. In addition, Kiswahili still dominates social interaction as well as urban life at a non-

official pedestal. Kiswahili is viewed as the language of national unity particularly against the backdrop of a multiplicity of ethnic groupings numbering about 42.

3. Using idiomatic expressions as a rhetoric strategy

Swahili is full of idiomatic expressions, which the Swahili people prefer to use as a fundamental aspect of rhetoric. Expression in this context refers to the application of the correct language to an argument.

In Swahili, there is a long list of synonymous idioms readily available for reference, consultation, choice and use. For example, to give a bribe is represented with the idioms: *pokea chai* (literally to receive tea); *kula ugali* (literally to eat gruel)¹; *kula hongo* (eat *hongo*); *kula rushwa* (eat *rushwa*); *kula mlungula* (eat *mlungula*). These expressions refer to actions that compromise one's integrity. They indicate demanding a bribe, or being involved in corruption or getting a kickback. The terms *mlungula*, *rushwa* and *hongo* which are synonyms, refer to kickbacks, bribes and corruption. Similarly, Kenyan students in China may want to substitute a hackneyed or stale idiom with another, but may not be able to think of any. These variations (the different choices of idiomatic expressions with similar connotation) have elicited a question that is often posed to Swahili rhetorician, 'what is an idiom?' which I address later. Or maybe we are not sure which idiom is offering us the question (is the question curious or obligatory, dismissive or confused?).

It is important to first of all provide a general understanding of what is meant by rhetoric before situating them in the present problem. Traditionally, rhetoric has been concerned with the art of persuasion. Plato defined rhetoric as the winning of men's mind by words (Maccoby 1967). For Aristotle, rhetoric was the faculty of discerning the possible means of persuasion in each case. The new rhetoric is also concerned with the processes of persuasion. It is concerned with the new description and analysis of the processes of persuasion, and is based on psychology (Maccoby, 1967). The new rhetoric is a theory of argumentation which has as its object the study of discursive techniques that aim to provoke or to increase the adherence of men's minds to the theses that are presented for their assent. It also examines the conditions that allow argumentation to begin and to be developed as well as the effects produced by this development. The new rhetoric continues classical rhetoric and also indicates how it differs from it. The new rhetoric continues the rhetoric of Aristotle insofar as it is aimed at all types of hearers. It embraces what the ancients termed dialectics (the technique of discussion and debate by means of questions and answers dealing especially with matters of opinion) which Aristotle analysed in his *Topics*. It includes the reasoning that Aristotle qualified as dialectical which he distinguished from the analytical reasoning of formal logic.

¹ The latter expression is political rhetoric referring to an opposition politician in Kenya who dined with the Head of State to scuttle the chances of the opposition winning a crucial election.

The new rhetoric is opposed to the tradition of modern, purely literary rhetoric better called stylistic, which reduces rhetoric to a study of figures of style, because it is not concerned with the forms of discourse for their ornamental or aesthetic value but solely insofar as they are means of persuasion and more especially means of creating “presence” (that is bringing to the mind of the hearer things that are not immediately present) through the techniques of presentation).

The new rhetoric is treated as a simple verbal discipline, as the art of speaking well (McKeon 1952). Rhetoric, simply stated, is a way of *persuasion*—using language to convince or sway an audience. Able rhetoricians, including good writers and good lawyers know how to make points effectively by arranging their arguments and choosing the appropriate language in which to convey their message. Rhetorical expressions, which are characteristic of a departure from the ordinary form of expression or ordinary course of ideas, are occasionally used to achieve certain objectives. They use figurative usage like personification, simile, metaphor, metonymy (Maccoby 1967).

De Luca argues that any theoretical discourse that is entitled to be called ‘rhetoric’ must as a minimum conceive of rhetoric as an art of invention, that is, it must give a central place to the systematic discovery and investigation of the available arguments in a given situation. Furthermore, he adds that it must conceive of the arguments generated by rhetorical invention as both produced and circulated within a network of social and civil discourse, images and events. In addition, he says that as ancient rhetoricians such as Gorgias and Cicero argued in theory and personified in practice, any practice entitled to be called ‘rhetoric’, must intervene in some way in social and civic discursive networks (De Luca 1999).

Mark Twain once complained that the ‘idiot Parisians’ failed to understand their own language when he spoke to them in French. Everyone who has been abroad knows the challenges of coping with a language not his/her own, and I do not mean just the blank stares of incomprehension which can result from trying to order a meal. Sometimes the students find themselves in more complicated situations than that.

I will use an anecdote told at a social gathering in Tianjin Municipality to illustrate the point. A Kenyan student coming for a postgraduate programme was unexpectedly obliged to communicate in Chinese. Prior to leaving Kenya, he had taken a brief course in conversational Chinese and had learnt some Chinese idioms but had not fully understood proper contexts within which to use them. The student had a Chinese friend whom he had met in Kenya and who helped him settle in Tianjin very quickly. He introduced his Chinese friend to a group of African and Chinese students using a Chinese Idiom. He referred to his Chinese friend as *bǎo hù sǎn*, which literally meant ‘the umbrella’. What followed was a long, pregnant pause. The African and Chinese students, including his Chinese friend, looked at him intently. The Kenyan student quickly became uncomfortable as soon as the eyes of the listeners revealed clearly that he had made a linguistic and social *faux pas*. He realized that he had expressed something that he should not have said in a language he knew only slightly. He had conveyed some meaning not at all intended. He had meant to say that his

Chinese friend had helped him settle down, failing to understand that the idiom *bǎo hù sǎn* referred to ‘an umbrella offered by some superior and powerful people to their subordinates to do something that is often illegal.’ It has a negative connotation. An umbrella plays a protective role. It protects one from rain and scorching sun. It forms an edge around a person. It is highly likely that the Kenyan student was situating his use of ‘umbrella’ in the context of ‘protection.’ He equated his Chinese friend who had played a pivotal role in his transition and settlement, to an umbrella that provides protection of some sort from extreme weather patterns.

After what seemed like several minutes, the Kenyan student’s Chinese friend decided that the student did not really understand Chinese and passed the incident off with a laugh, complimenting the Kenyan student on his mastery of Chinese despite the *faux pas*. This did not prevent the Kenyan student from excusing himself and fleeing the premises as soon as possible without losing any more dignity. His day ended in turmoil because of a wrong idiomatic expression. Little knowledge of Chinese had proven dangerous.

From the anecdote, we note that idioms can be misunderstood, or missed altogether, if the speaker and audience do not have a common frame of reference; secondly, idioms can be taken literally by non-native speakers, unless the idiom has an equivalent in the audience’s primary language, a fact that is observed by Palmatier (1989). Idiom is an expression that means something other than the literal meanings of its individual words (Nordquist, 2003). The Kenyan student in some sense did not intend to pass a wrong message. He actually deciphered on a broader semantic field to express the relationships of certain objects and the umbrella. The Kenyan student was a good speaker of Chinese to some extent but the lack of use of the right idiom stood in his path, hindering whatever seemingly was a good intention. A similar example is provided by Fraake(1980).He says: “For example, even if we cannot identify an instance of a “tree,” if we learn the verbal response tree interlinked with plant by one pair of queries, to elm, oak, pine, etc. by another, to leaf, stem, branch, trunk, root, etc. by another, to lumber, firewood, etc. by another, then we have discovered some of the kinds of relationships that can exist among categories of things in a culture”.

Second language learners in majority language contexts are typically members of ethnic minorities and these learners vary enormously in the extent to which they approximate to the language norms of the majority language (Ellis, 1997). The mastering of this idiomatic expression is likely to lead to acculturation which can be defined generally as ‘the process of becoming adapted to a new culture’ (Brown, 1980).

Although Kenyan and Chinese ways of life are different and cultures are expected to vary greatly in content and in particular rules, yet all cultures, like all languages, are expected to be similar in overall design (Eastman, 1980). Roger Keesing suggests that for culture, we might hope to arrive at a set of universal distinctive features of behavioural acts which would enter in various ways into the rules governing behaviour (1971). For the Kenyan student to be able to acculturate by using idiomatic expressions ‘transferred’ from the Kiswahili language to the Chinese language, there has

to be a 'good' learning situation for the Kenyan student to be able to put into use this strategy and for it to succeed. Schumann (1978) observes that a 'good' learning situation is when the two groups view each other as socially equal and that both groups display positive attitudes towards each other and the other group in this case the Kenyan student envisages staying in the China or the Target language for an extended period.

At this juncture, let us briefly examine what an idiomatic expression is. It is the use of words which is peculiar to a particular language. But what does it actually mean? And even more interestingly, where do these fascinating 'anomalies' of our everyday language originate from? Idiomatic expression is a manner of speaking that is natural to native speakers of language. Failure by the Kenyan student to contextualize the Chinese idiom *bǎo hù sǎn* greatly deprived him of opportunity to expand his sphere in the activity of that time that was to interact with other members of his cohort. From the anecdote, we can see that an idiomatic expression is an expression conforming or appropriate to the peculiar structural form of a language; an expression sanctioned by usage, having a sense peculiar to itself and not agreeing with the logical sense of its structural form: For instance, the term 'red herring,' an idiomatic expression meaning 'false trail,' is used of something which is neither red nor a herring.

Idiomatic expressions should be used when a speaker cannot think of an original, understandable way of phrasing a concept. The idiomatic expression is usually an expression the speaker is familiar with. The speaker has heard it before. Secondly, the speaker has used it before; thirdly, the speaker understands the context. The use of these idiomatic expressions is strategic rhetorically since rhetoric is viewed here as a form of verbal discipline, as a way of speaking well. It is used as a strategy to persuade and to convince the audience or the hearer. This is a rhetorical strategy in that it helps to make points by arranging arguments in a more effective way and to use an appropriate language which in this context is the use of idiomatic expression. The user (the rhetorician) departs from ordinary form of expression or ordinary course of ideas to achieve certain objectives.

4.0 Suggested idiomatic expressions

I spent one year at Tianjin Normal University in China where I taught Swahili language and Oral English (2007-2008). During that time, I interacted with my students whom I asked to provide me with equivalent Chinese idiomatic expressions against those of Swahili language, which I had to find. The objective was to find Swahili and Chinese idiomatic expressions that have similar connotations. Their selection was based on popular and commonly used idiomatic expressions in Swahili and modern Chinese. In addition, these idiomatic expressions were aimed at forming a reservoir for reference for the Kenyan students studying the Chinese language in China as a strategy towards acculturation. As I was doing this, I was well aware that working with these popular expressions may in some cases be slightly misleading. The use of idiomatic expressions may have been somewhat different in the extent of day to day usage. However, the examples that I am giving below should be a reliable source of general information regarding the structures of the expressions.

1a. yǎn zhōng dīng (Literal: the nail in the eye)

1b. yeye ni mzigu [Literal: He/she is a luggage]

One who is a burden and a thorn in the flesh

2a. bài jiā zī (Literal: the child who makes the family bankrupt)

The real meaning is a black sheep

2b. mtoto yai [Literal: A child like an egg]

A spoilt child

3a. liǎng miàn pài (Literal: two-faced person)

3b. kuwa kinyonga [Literal: He/she is a chameleon]

One who shifts alliances

4a. tiě gōng jī (Literal: the iron cock)

4b. kuwa mkono gamu [Literal: to have an adhesive hand]

To be a miser

5a. zǒu hòu mén (Literal: enter into the room by the back door)

Refers to securing advantages through influence

5b. zunguka mbuyu [Literal: go around the baobab tree]

to give a bribe

6a. fèi máo tuǐ (Literal: the leg which can fly)

Describes the kind of person who runs quickly and the one who is good at running.

6b. kwenda telki [Literal: go at a trot] the quick ambling gait of a donkey, half

walk, half run. Describes a person who runs or walks fast

7a. chǎo yóu yú (Literal: cook the squid)

7b. kumwaga unga [Literal: to pour down flour]

to lose a job or be fired

8a. chàng gāo diào (Literal: sing the song by the higher tone)

8b. kuongeza chumvi [Literal: to add salt]

to exaggerate

9a. chī xiǎo zào (Literal: eat a specially cooked food)

To get extra and special care.

9b. starehe za mbwa kukalia mkia wake [Literal: the luxury of a dog to sit on

its tail] lead a life of conspicuous consumption

10a. bēi hēi guō (Literal: take one's black pan on the back)

To bear the blame of others/to be a scapegoat

10b. kubeba mzigo si wangu [Literal: to carry a baggage not meant for me]

To perform tasks meant for others

11a. bái rì mèng (Literal: daydream)

11b. kujenga nyumba ya karatasi [Literal: to build a paper house]

to have a project that is not sustainable

12a. bái yǎn láng (Literal: the wolf with the white eyes)

Someone who is ungrateful

12b. kuwa ngiri [Literal: to be a warthog]

To quickly forget the good deeds that others have done for you

13a. bǎo hù sǎn (Literal: the umbrella)

An umbrella offered by some superior and powerful people to some subordinate persons to do something that is often illegal

13b. uti wa mgongo [Literal: the spinal cord]

Depending on someone to get something. It could be legal or illegal.

14a. jí shí yǔ (Literal: timely rain)

14b. kuokoa jahazi [Literal: to save the dhow]

To help someone in time of need

From the above expressions, one is able to clearly observe that the idiomatic expressions give a broad palette of colours to illuminate both the Swahili and the Chinese language. At the same time, such expressions both build a connection to cultural roots, history and traditions as well as they enable communication that reaches below the surface of thought, to more or less metaphysical and philosophical discourse.

The above idiomatic expressions in Chinese and Swahili have certain characteristics in common.

- The idioms are conventionalized, that means that their meaning or use cannot be predicted, or at least entirely predicted, on the basis of a knowledge of the independent conventions that determine the use of their constituents when they appear in isolation from one another. The meaning is not straightforward composition of the meaning of its parts. As an example, 13 a. **bǎo hù sǎn (Literal: the umbrella)**, whose meaning has nothing to do with the umbrella and also **8b. kuongeza chumvi [Literal: to add salt]** whose meaning does not relate with salt.

- The idioms are Inflexible: The idioms typically appear only in a limited number of syntactic frames of constructions, unlike freely composed expressions.
- Figuration: The idioms typically involve metaphors (**14b. kuokoa jahazi** [Literal: to save the dhow] or other kinds of figuration. Of course speakers may not always perceive the precise motive for the figure involved –**10a. bēi hēi guō** (Literal: take one's black pan on the back) why should be used to mean bear the blame of others/to be a scapegoat– but they generally perceive that some form of figuration is involved, at least to the extent of being able to assign to the idiom a 'literal meaning'.
- Proverbiality: The idioms above are typically used to describe – and implicitly, to explain – a recurrent situation of particular social interest (becoming restless, talking informally, divulging a secret, or whatever) in virtue of its resemblance or relation to a scenario involving concrete things and relations.
- Informality: like other proverbial expressions, idioms are typically associated with relatively informal or colloquial registers and with popular speech and oral culture.
- Affect: idioms are typically used to imply a certain evaluation or affective stance towards the things they denote. A language doesn't ordinarily use idioms to describe situations that are regarded in a neutral manner though of course one could imagine a community in which such activities were sufficiently charged with social meaning to be worthy of idiomatic reference. Apart from the property of conventionality, it can be explained that none of these properties applies necessarily to all idioms. There are some idioms, for example, which do not involve figuration, and, at the same time, not all idioms have literal meanings that denote concrete things and relations.

I like to return for a moment to the little question that never seems to stop returning to us: what is rhetoric? Those of us who traffic in this word rhetoric have a great deal of experience with the ubiquity of the questions what is rhetoric and the countless idioms and situations in which it reappears. Rhetoric has gotten an undeservedly bad rap in recent decades. The only ways most people know the word are derogatory: a question where no answer is expected is *rhetorical question* and politicians who are all talk and no action are said to use *empty rhetoric*. But the ancient art of rhetoric, one of the seven liberal arts, deserves more respect than that.

Classical rhetoricians divided the field into several varieties. Deliberate rhetoric, the art of persuading an audience to take (or not to take) some action. Forensic rhetoric, the art of making a persuasive case in a legal matter, as when a lawyer argues for against an accused person. Epideictic rhetoric, the use of powerfully effective language to praise or blame someone or something. Those who study rhetoric have classified hundreds of figures of speech, sometimes ornamental, but often concerned with achieving certain effects. The Kenyan student is supposed to factor in epideictic rhetoric in his day to day discourse by using different idiomatic expressions. Rhetoric is the art or

the discipline that deals with the use of discourse, either spoken or written, to inform or persuade or motivate an audience, whether that audience is made up of one person or a group of persons (Corbett,1999).

5.0 Conclusion

This paper has advocated the need for a Kenyan student to take into cognizance the fact that employing idiomatic expressions as rhetoric is part of their learning and acculturation into the Chinese social fabric. The use of idiomatic expressions makes the Kenyan student be able to leave the centre (Kenya) to the periphery (China) with an added advantage. In antiquity, rhetoric was education, the leading out of the child from the private world of the family (and the family's responsibility for suitable training) to the social and political worlds (Holzman, 2003). Learning to write well, which meant, on the one hand, a discrete (primarily literary) body of knowledge, was the necessary preparation for what is seen as the only truly human existence: that of a participant in the social life of the community and the political life of the state.

The paper has also established that the use of idiomatic expressions as an aspect of rhetoric is a strategy whose results may not be rapid but positive in the long run to the Kenyan student in the context of acculturation. The Kenyan student is obliged to learn the Chinese idioms to understand the Chinese culture. Kevin De Luca, a speech-rhetorician agrees in part with my observation. He defines rhetoric as the mobilization of signs for the articulation of identities, ideologies, consciousness, publics, and cultures (De Luca, 1999). Rhetoric deals with questions surrounding any study of language and the relation between language and the world, the relation between discourse and knowledge, the heuristic and communicative functions of verbal expression, the roles of situation and audience in shaping utterance, the social and ethical aspects of discourse (Farris, 2003).

The paper further recommends very strongly that the Kenyan student should appreciate the use of Chinese idiomatic expression as a strategy to learning the Chinese language. Despite what they may perceive as a 'complex idiomatic expressions' in Chinese, they must strive to study it with particular reference to similarities occurring in both the Swahili and the Chinese languages. The Kenyan student coming to study in China should not find Chinese idioms a stumbling block. If the Chinese idiom is indeed a stumbling block, then it cannot be expected to enhance learning. They will be limited as facilitators of communication. They will retard instead of developing thinking. And this is not the case. In regard to the above views, any instructional, educational or even everyday conversation could become an uphill task for the Kenyan student in China and factoring in Swahili idiomatic expressions with equivalent connotation in Chinese would be fundamental and should thus never be ignored or given second priority consideration.

References

- Brown, H. (1980). 'The optimal distance model of second language acquisition'. *TESOL Quarterly* 14:157-164
- Chimerah, R. (2000). *Kiswahili: Past Present and Future Horizons*. Nairobi: Nairobi University Press
- Corbett, E. (1999). *Classical Rhetoric for the Modern Student*. London. Oxford University Press.
- De Luca, K. (1999). *Image politics: The New Rhetoric of Environmental Activism*. New York: Guilford.
- Eastman, C. (1980). *Aspects of Language and Culture*. Washington: Chandler and Sharp Publishers, Inc.
- Ellis, R. (1994). *The Study of Second Language Acquisition*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Farris, C. (2003). "Where Rhetoric Meets the Road: First-Year Composition." *Enculturation* 5.1. Available online at: http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/farris.html. [Accessed on 12 February 2014].
- Frake, C. (1980). *Language and Cultural Description*. Stanford: Stanford University Press.
- Holzman, M. (2003). "Rhetoric/composition//Academic Institutions/cultural studies." *Enculturation* 5.1. Available online at: http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/holzman.html [Accessed on 12 February 2014].
- Keesing, R. (1971). *New Perspectives in Cultural Anthropology*. New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston.
- Maccoby, N. (1967). The New "Scientific" Rhetoric in Communication, *Voice of America Forum Lectures*.
- McKeon, R *et al.* (1952). *Critics and Criticism*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.
- Nordquist, R. (2003). "What is idiom?" Available online at: <http://grammar.about.com/od/il/g/idiomterm.html>. [Accessed on 13 February 2014].
- Palmatier, R. (1989). *Sport Talk: A dictionary of Sports Metaphors*. New York: Greenwood Press.
- Polome, E. (1967). *Swahili Handbook*. Washington D.C: Centre for Applied Linguistics.

Ratcliffe, K. (2003). "The Current State of Composition Scholar/ Teachers: Is Rhetoric Gone or Just Hiding Out?" *Enculturation* 5.1. Available online at:
http://enculturation.gmu.edu/5_1/ratcliffe.html. [Accessed on 13 February 2014].

Schumann, J.(1978). 'Social and psychological factors in second language acquisition'
In *Journal of Multilingual and Multicultural Development*.Rowley:
Mass. Newbury House.

Whiteley, W.(1969). *Swahili: The Rise of a National Language*. London: Methuen and C.
London.