

## Cultural Diversity and the Element of Negation

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**Abstract:** Communication, the process of sending and receiving messages to achieve understanding, is accomplished through language, verbal and nonverbal. Language usage differs from culture to culture. Some African languages tend to use an indirect verbal style to express their messages. This may be achieved by using negative constructions to express positive meanings. Negation in this regard is used to emphasise the positive. In communication involving people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, this negation can cause misunderstandings. The effect of such miscommunication is frequently observed during situations of conflict resolution when, for example, a case is tried in a modern court of law. The purpose of this paper is to highlight misunderstandings in communication brought about by the use of negative constructions when expressing the positive in intercultural interactions. Examples from Tshivenda are used to illustrate the arguments.

**Keywords:** Cultural activity, demonstrative, indirect verbal style, intercultural communication, language diversity, court of law, negative construction, nonverbal action, South Africa, Tshivenda.

### 1. Introduction

With the accelerating rate of social, economic and cultural change in the world, different racial and ethnic groups are interacting with each other more and more. For example, people from diverse cultures interact in the workplace, in shopping centres, at schools and institutions of higher learning, and when travelling. Kim (2002) remarks:

At the forefront of this reality are countless people who are on the move across cultural boundaries – millions of immigrants, refugees, and other long-term resettlers who seek a better life. Others relocate temporarily for a narrower set of purposes – artists, musicians, writers, business people, construction workers, nurses, doctors, Peace Corps volunteers, students, professors, researchers, diplomats, and other government employees, military personnel, missionaries, and journalists (p. 259).

Difficulties inevitably arise whenever there is extensive cross-cultural interaction (Cushner & Brislin, 1996). Hogan-Garcia (1999) believes that the accelerating rate of social, economic and cultural change is a distinct and important factor explaining the increased need for cultural-competence training. Cultural-competence involves the ability to understand the language and behavior of the target community (Harden, 2011). In order for people from different racial and ethnic groups to interact successfully, they need to be conversant with the cultures of people from diverse cultural backgrounds. They need various kinds of knowledge, skills, attitudes and

critical cultural awareness. Lack of knowledge of another's culture is one of the major factors causing intercultural miscommunication (Lim, 2002).

Fuglesang (1982) argues that all societies have "culture", both in the broadest sense and in the most specific sense (p. 80). However, culture differs from one racial or ethnic group to another. Societies differ from each other in cultural aspects such as language, dress and tradition. The discussion in this paper is focused on aspects of language. Lim (2002) writes that cultures have systems of meaning unique to themselves (i.e. languages), which may confuse people from other cultures and which may make it difficult, if not impossible, for them to understand each other (p. 69). In a conversation between people from different linguistic and cultural backgrounds, the degree of shared meaning in experiencing the reality is likely to be small because of cultural variations in verbal messages. These cultural variations can cause miscommunication in an intercultural conversation. For instance, some African languages tend to use negative constructions to express the positive. When used in a situation involving people from other linguistic and cultural backgrounds, such negation causes misunderstandings. The purpose of this paper is to highlight misunderstandings in intercultural communication brought about by the use of negative constructions when expressing the positive. Examples from Tshivenda, one of South Africa's indigenous languages, will be used to illustrate the arguments.

Tshivenda is one of the minority languages of South Africa, spoken by more than a million people (2011 Census). The language is mainly spoken in South Africa and Zimbabwe. In South Africa, Vhavenda are concentrated in the northern part of the country's Limpopo Province. Other Vhavenda stay in cities, for example, Pretoria and Johannesburg. Whereas Tshivenda is the language, Vhavenda are people who speak Tshivenda. The singular form of Vhavenda is Muvenda. Tshivenda is related to Kalanga, a language spoken in Zimbabwe and Botswana. It belongs to the Southern Bantu family and shares common linguistic features with other African languages. According to Poulos (1990) "The Venda people form a distinct ethnic group, speaking a language which is not mutually communicative with any other language in its 'family', and yet, as was mentioned earlier, it shares common linguistic features with the other languages." (p. 2) Tshivenda is based on two principles, i.e., the system of noun classes and the system of concords. Each Tshivenda noun belongs to a class.

The discussion will commence with a brief exposition of the theoretical framework, which will be followed by the main discussion of misunderstandings caused by an indirect style of verbal communication. The discussion will conclude with illustrative examples of misunderstandings resulting from the use of these negative constructions in present day South African law courts.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

In this section, brief definitions of the concepts *culture*, *cultural diversity* and *language diversity* are provided.

Culture is a particular way of life that encompasses the values, premises and practices in terms of which members of a community order their interactions. Brown (1980) views culture as the context within which we exist, think, feel and relate to others. It exists in a person's values, beliefs, explanatory systems and behaviours which are learned in the family and other

social groups (p.122). According to Hogan-Garcia (1999), culture is the learned, shared and transmitted values, beliefs, norms and way of life of a designated group which are generally transmitted intergenerationally and which influence group members' thinking and action modes (p. 11). Barnett and Lee (2002) define culture as language patterns, values, attitudes, beliefs, customs and thought patterning (p. 276). These authors see culture as the property of a group rather than an individual because it is a group's shared collective meaning system through which that group's collective values, attitudes, beliefs, customs and thoughts are understood (Barnett & Lee, 2002, p.277). This means that members of a group share a common cultural heritage. As indicated above, culture differs from one racial or ethnic group to another. Such racial or ethnic groups differ markedly from each other in cultural aspects such as language, dress and traditions. As a result of these cultural differences, we talk about the existence of cultural diversity among the people.

According to Sherif Trask and Hamon (2007), cultural diversity refers to differences in beliefs; practices and attitudes that exist in families and individuals and which stem from cultural background (p. 4). Cultural diversity therefore can be defined as the quality of diverse or different cultures, as opposed to a monoculture. It is a range of different societies with different origins, religions and traditions, all living and interacting together. Cultural diversity can be experienced in a number of areas, i.e. workplaces, institutions of higher learning, when travelling, sporting events, et cetera. In support to the above, Hogan-Garcia (1999) says, "... our communities and our work domains are increasingly diverse, both socially and culturally, and the rate of social and economic change is accelerating" (p. 1). Sherif Trask and Hamon (2007) add that the concept of "diversity" has been viewed only in terms of race and ethnicity. To them, diversity in language also forms part of cultural diversity. Cultural diversity should therefore be viewed not only in terms of race and ethnicity, but also of language because languages possess distinct cultures.

Language is a system of verbal communication which is governed by rules and conveys power. McHenry (1992) defines language as a system of conventional spoken or written symbols by means of which human beings as members of a social group and participants in its culture, communicate (p.147). Language is therefore a tool by which meaning is assigned to events. Phillipsen (2002) explains:

A communal conversation is always conducted in and through particular means of communication, and these means have particular meanings for the people who use and experience them. *Means* refer to particular languages, dialects, styles, routines, organizing principles, interpretive conventions, ways of speaking, and genres of communication (p. 55).

However, racial and ethnic identities often account for language differences. This is so because the customs practised by a group help shape the language used to communicate with others, and the language used by a particular culture has its own set of meanings that often sets a group apart from others (Dunn & Goodnight, 2003). Gudykunst and Kim (1992) note that language is one of the major vehicles through which we encode messages.

As indicated above, language is the expression of culture; the two are closely tied together.

Gudykunst and Kim (1992) observe: “Obviously, languages can differ from culture to culture. Culture and language are closely intertwined, with each influencing the other. Our language is a product of our culture, and our culture is a product of our language.” (p. 222). The two are intricately interwoven such that one cannot separate them without losing the significance of either language or culture (Brown, 1980, p.124). This is emphasised by Dingwaney (1995) who says that language cannot be isolated from the “world” or “culture” within which it is embedded and which it thus expresses (p. 3). Language and culture are inseparable because they both contribute to the manner in which an individual or a given society interprets reality. Barnett and Lee (2002) believe that:

The meanings that are attributed to verbal and nonverbal behaviour are determined by the society as a whole. Culture may be taken to be a consensus about the meanings of symbols, verbal and nonverbal, held by the members of a community (p. 277).

Dunn and Goodnight (2003) see language as often problematic for communication because others do not perceive words in the way we intend them to be understood. The problem emanates from the differences in cultural background which exist in different groups or societies. One of the chief ways we express our thoughts, feelings and attitudes is through verbal communication; but groups and societies communicate differently verbally because verbal communication is governed by their culture. As a result, there are different verbal communication styles in different cultural groups. Verbal communication styles can be divided into the direct and the indirect. Gudykunst and Ting-Toomy (1992) define these styles as follows:

The direct verbal style refers to verbal messages that embody and involve speakers’ true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and desires in the discourse process. The indirect verbal style, in contrast, refers to verbal messages that camouflage and conceal speakers’ true intentions in terms of their wants, needs, and goals in the discourse situation (p. 224).

The indirect verbal style is a characteristic of many societies. People like to camouflage and conceal their true intentions in the discourse situation in many ways, as will be illustrated below. Lim (2008) cites Wierzbicka (1991) who comments on the Javanese indirect verbal style as follows: “Javanese norms favor beating about the bush, not saying what is on one’s mind, unwillingness to face issues in their naked truth, never saying what one really thinks, avoiding gratuitous truths, and never showing one’s real feelings directly” (p.81). The point is that members of this community conceal their intentions in a discourse situation by not saying what they really think.

Some societies conceal their true intentions in a discourse situation by using negative constructions. The negation construction, as a form of verbal message, is part of the indirect verbal style in that it conceals the speaker’s true intentions in terms of the goals of a conversation. Through a negation construction, a negative statement will be uttered with a view to sending a positive message to listeners. If listeners lack knowledge of the culture of the speaker, they may misinterpret the statement and receive an incorrect message because the true message has

been concealed. Knowledge of the culture of the other linguistic group is important in such communication because it encodes frames of meaning, moral order and tacit understandings that guide social actors in the course of their daily lives (Grillo, 2009, p.15).

### 3. Negation as a Form of Indirect Verbal Style

South Africa is a country characterised by different racial and ethnic groups. This means the existence of many cultures and languages in one country. These racial and ethnic groups live together and communicate with each other on a daily basis, hence there is cultural and language diversity. As there are several different languages, there will always be misunderstandings in communication between these different groups, especially if one group is not prepared to learn the culture and language of the other. As a result, communication in various spheres of life is affected; for example, in the workplace, when travelling, at social, religious and traditional gatherings, and at schools. Racial and ethnic groups construct sentences differently when sending messages to listeners. Some racial or ethnic groups, the Vhavi, for example, have a tendency to use the indirect verbal style in the form of negative constructions when expressing positive sentiments. These negative constructions are often used in relation to persons. They are uttered mainly in answer to a question. The negative construction usually starts with the phrase *A si ...* (It is not ...). According to Poulos (1990), negative constructions are forms which merely negate positive actions or states (p.254). However, if the negative construction is used in an indirect verbal style, it expresses a positive action or state.

The negative constructions in this case are used for different purposes, among them, to confirm the statement, to emphasise a point, or to attract attention. The Tshivenda sentence construction *A si ene* (It is not him/her) is used to confirm a statement. *A si ene* (It is not him/her) literally indicates that this is not the person to whom reference has been made. But, used as an indirect verbal style in Tshivenda, it means that this is the person to whom reference has been made. After being asked to confirm the identity of the person mentioned, instead of responding positively by saying *Ndi ene* (It is him/her), the respondent responds negatively *A si ene* (It is not him/her), implying the positive rather than responding positively. The real message is concealed in a negative response. Listeners who are not conversant with the Tshivenda culture and its language usage may find it difficult to interpret the message as intended by the respondent, concluding that the meaning is negative, as expressed.

During some conversations, a person may respond to a question: Is this the person who stole your phone? (*Ndi ene uyu o tswaho founu yaḡu?*) by posing a question prefixed to the negative construction to attract the attention of the listeners. In the following response: *Vha amba uyu? A si ene hoyu* (Do you mean this one? It is not him/her this one), the respondent uses a question before confirming the identity of the person to whom reference has been made. The question attracts the attention of the listeners and they focus on the person to whom reference is made. In the second statement, the respondent answers in the negative, assured that listeners are paying attention to his/her response, but implying the positive. If listeners do not understand Tshivenda culture or language, they will fail to interpret the message correctly.

In other instances, the negative construction is used to emphasise a point. A respondent could answer a question: Is he/she the person who stole your phone? (*Ndi ene o tswaho founu*

*yanu?*) by saying *Uyu! A si ene hoyu* (Do you mean this one! It is not him/her this one). The negative construction in this regard is prefixed by a demonstrative, *uyu* (this one). This demonstrative is used to emphasise the identity of the person responsible for stealing the phone, i.e. he/she is the person responsible. The second statement in the negative ends with a demonstrative *hoyu* (this very one), again referring to the person to whom reference is made. The demonstrative at the end of the second statement adds to the emphasis introduced by the first demonstrative *uyu* (this one). Although the response is in the negative, it confirms that the person to whom reference has been made is responsible for stealing the phone.

There are many ways the negative construction can be used to express the positive in Tshivenda. As indicated above, Vhavenda can use a simple negative construction to express the positive, or a question preceding a negative construction, or a demonstrative preceding a negative statement. When asked to respond to a question such as: Is this the person who assaulted you? (*Ndi ene uyu o ni rwaho?*), instead of saying *Ndi ene* (It is him/her), the respondent might say *A si ene* (It is not him/her). The meaning of the statement *A si ene* (It is not him/her) negates the positive, which is *Ndi ene* (It is him/her). The true meaning has been concealed. This response is usually accompanied by nonverbal actions by the respondent. On this, Gudykunst and Ting-Toomy (1992) say: "Verbal style carries the tonal coloring of the message. It is expressed through the shades of tonal qualities, modes of nonverbal channels, and consistent thematic development in the discourse process." (p.223). Depending on the nonverbal actions of the respondent, like shaking the head, persons who are aware of the peculiarities of Tshivenda culture will understand that the respondent is concealing his/her true intentions in the indirect verbal form. This would be difficult for listeners from a different cultural or linguistic background, who are not familiar with the Tshivenda culture, to interpret. Members of communities characterised by diverse cultures and languages should strive to understand the cultures and languages of other racial and ethnic groups in order to interpret indirect verbal styles such as these. In order to understand cultures and languages of other racial and ethnic groups, they should be tolerant to other cultures and appreciate diversity. People who appreciate diversity welcome difference into their lives and see it as a positive experience (Baldwin & Hecht, 1995).

The Vhavenda use a question that precedes a negation construction to express the positive. In responding to the question: Is he/she the person who assaulted you? (*Ndi ene uyu o ni rwaho?*), the respondent would say: *Ni amba uyu? A si ene* (Do you mean this one? It is not him/her). In responding to this question, the respondent poses a question that is followed by a negative construction. In a case like this, the person to whom reference has been made would be seated in the vicinity and the respondent would reply using a question form, knowing very well that the person referred to is the one who assaulted him/her. As indicated in the paragraphs above, the question is used to attract the attention of the listeners and to emphasise the identity of this person. This question, accompanied by a gesture towards the person in question, expresses the fact that this person is the one who is responsible for striking the respondent. But, the second statement which is in the negative negates this fact. In this statement the respondent denies that the person to whom reference is made is responsible for striking him/her. Accompanied by the question and the gesture, the negative construction emphasises the fact that it is the person mentioned who struck him/her. Persons from other racial and ethnic groups would be

confused by this response. Firstly, the respondent's question would lead them to think that he or she does not know the person mentioned, and the look the respondent gives the person in question might give them the impression that he or she is seeing the person for the first time. This would be confirmed by the last statement in which the respondent denies that this is the person responsible for striking him/her. As a result, they will conclude that this person did not strike the respondent.

In other instances, a negative construction preceded by a demonstrative is used to express the positive. As in the examples given above, this comes after a question has been asked. A person could be asked the following question: Is he/she the person who took the money from you? (*Ndi ene o ni dzhielaho tshelede?*) The respondent would answer: *Uyu! A si ene hoyu* (This one! It is not him/her). The first part of the response is the demonstrative *Uyu* (This one). By using this demonstrative the respondent seeks to emphasise the identity of the culprit. When uttering the word *Uyu* (This one), the respondent will look at the person mentioned and sometimes nod his/her head towards him/her. In the second part of the response the respondent denies that the person to whom reference is made is responsible for taking his/her money. This denial is sometimes accompanied by a shaking of the head, which convinces the listeners of the truth of this statement. In reality, the respondent is saying that this person is responsible for taking the money. Those who are knowledgeable in the Tshivenda culture and language will interpret the verbal and nonverbal actions of the respondent as an expression of the positive. A misunderstanding may occur when the conversation is with a member of another racial or ethnic group who knows very little about these cultural and language differences. Such a person might misinterpret the message, leading to a misunderstanding because the message has been concealed.

The indirect verbal style illustrated above is regularly experienced during situations of conflict resolution in modern South African courts, where the impact of the use of negative constructions to express the positive is largely felt. In South Africa, many racial and ethnic groups coexist in all spheres of life, including the workplace. Added to this, many people from foreign countries come to work in South Africa. They bring with them their own cultures and languages, different from those of South Africans. This adds to the cultural and language diversity in the country. In some instances, judges involved in conflict resolution arrive at incorrect judgements as a result of this cultural and language diversity. South Africa recognises all indigenous African languages and English and Afrikaans as official languages. Therefore, people are permitted to communicate in their own languages in courts of law. However, presentations made in a language other than English are interpreted into English to allow all participants, including the judges, who may not belong to the same racial or ethnic group as the complainant, to understand the proceedings. If the complainant is a Muvenda who uses negative constructions to confirm the positive, such negative constructions will have to be interpreted into English if participants are to follow the arguments. This is where communication misunderstandings between different racial and ethnic groups can occur. Examples are provided below to illustrate how people who have committed a crime may be acquitted in courts because of a misunderstanding resulting from the use of negative constructions in Tshivenda.

The judges and prosecutors presiding in such court cases are drawn from all racial and ethnic groups because of their expertise and not because of their knowledge of culture and

language usage. As a result, their appointment does not depend on race or ethnicity.

A court case may involve a Muvenda as a complainant and a person from a different racial or ethnic group as the defendant, while the judge may be an English-speaking person. The complainant might have been involved in a conflict with the defendant, which resulted in one striking the other. The complainant opens a case of assault. During the hearing, it might happen that the case is led by a person who hardly knows the Tshivenda culture or language usage. The judge will depend a great deal on the interpreter. In the presence of both the complainant and the defendant, the judge may ask the following question: Is this the person who assaulted you? (*Ndi ene uyu o ni rwaho?*). Instead of responding directly, the complainant will conceal his/her real intention and say: *A si ene hoyu!* (It is not him/her this one!). The interpreter will interpret this negative construction literally. The judge will thus also understand it in this way. On passing judgement, the judge will be guided by this interpretation and acquit the culprit because the victim has indicated that the accused is not the person who assaulted him/her. The judgement will come as a surprise to the victim and any others in the courtroom who understand Tshivenda culture and language usage. In this case, the victim has provided a negative construction to confirm the positive, i.e. *Ndi ene* (It is him/her). The exclamation mark after the demonstrative *hoyu* also plays a role, indicating that the complainant does not mean what he/she is saying, but quite the opposite. The exclamation mark indicates that the complainant is surprised that the judge could ask such a question. Only people who are acquainted with Tshivenda culture and language usage would understand this. Even if the interpreter is aware of this use of the negative construction to imply the positive, he/she cannot provide an affirmative interpretation because it conveys a different message altogether from what has actually been said. This then creates a misunderstanding on the part of the judge, leading to him find the culprit not guilty, which is contrary to the complainant's response. There is no shared meaning between the judge and the complainant.

As indicated above, the negative construction uttered by the complainant can be preceded by a question construction. In responding to the question: Is this the person who assaulted you? (*Ndi ene o ni rwaho uyu?*), the respondent could say: *Vha amba uyu? A si ene hoyu* (Do you mean this one? It is not him/her this very one). The use of this question construction attracts the attention of the judge and the audience to the culprit. In certain instances, when the question construction is uttered, the respondent will look at the culprit, sometimes nodding his/her head towards him/her. The audience would not find this strange because in every culture there are basic standards for social interaction such as eye contact and body language. This gesture accompanies the demonstrative *uyu* (this one), emphasising the identity of the culprit. All the participants will look at the culprit, anticipating that the respondent will say he/she is responsible for assaulting him/her. But immediately the respondent continues with a negative construction, *A si ene hoyu* (It is not him/her), the judge is relieved because there is no case against the culprit and he acquits him/her. However, some people in the courtroom who understand Tshivenda culture and language usage will be surprised at the judgement. This is not what the victim had expected from the judge because his/her utterance emphasised that the person mentioned was responsible for the assault. However, the true intention of the respondent is concealed through the use of the negative construction *A si ene hoyu* (It is not him/her this one). To the respondent, all these nonverbal acts and the negative construction emphasise that

the accused is the one responsible for the attack. However, the judge does not interpret this as an indirect verbal style of communication implying the opposite, but understands rather the literal meaning of the respondent's words. Even if the judge is familiar with Tshivenda culture and language, and understands that the negative construction expresses the positive, he/she cannot interpret it as such; he/she must take the interpreter's words as correct.

#### 4. Conclusion

The paper has emphasized how, owing to cultural differences, languages have different styles of expressing meaning; this can lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication. The paper has shown how, in culturally diverse South Africa, some cultures, especially those among the indigenous minority groups, are not understood by the community as would be expected, because all indigenous languages except Khoi-San are recognised as official languages by the government. This is illustrated through the discussion of the handling of conflict resolution in modern courts. Because of the misunderstandings caused by the use of negative constructions, judges at times arrive at incorrect judgements. People who commit crimes could be acquitted in South African courts if misunderstandings occur when negative constructions are used to express a point. As a result, the affected communities feel discriminated against by the courts. In order to avoid situations of this nature, people, especially those who work in public institutions, should strive to understand the cultural practices of other communities and the way they express themselves. A knowledgeable communicator needs information about the people, the communication rules, the context, and the normative expectations governing the interaction with the members of the other culture (Wiseman, 2002). This could go a long way to avoiding miscommunication in intercultural communication situations.

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