

FOREIGN LANGUAGES: LESSONS FROM THE PAST AND INNOVATIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Celebrating Fifty Years of Foreign Language Teaching in Uganda

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Introduction

I would like to take this opportunity to congratulate my colleagues Dr. Edith Natukunda-Togboa and Dr. Enoch Sebuyungu and the other authors for this important achievement and to thank them for having invited me to discuss their book. I must say that reading this book has been a delight for me because whichever page I opened, I found something that concerned me as a language practitioner. Furthermore, I found the papers in this book generally of very good quality, well researched and documented and making use of theoretical tools that have withstood the test of time.

What was even more gratifying for me is that practically all the writers were using, at least in part, their day to day experience in language teaching so I could easily relate with many of the issues they were raising. So I found these articles interesting not only because of the thoroughness and painstaking research that are manifest in many of them but also because of the relevance and realistic nature of what was presented.

The book is divided into four parts as follows: part one deals with *content in a foreign language class*, part two with *pedagogy and foreign languages*, part three with *translation and interpretation* while part four is devoted to *the functionality of foreign languages*.

In part one Natukunda-Togboa and Joel Bertrand handle the issue of teaching gender in a French Beginners' class. I could imagine the beginner in French being greatly intrigued while trying to make a biological connection between a table and its femininity and a tree and its masculinity and how the teacher has to labor to make this student understand that in the overwhelming number cases the gender of a word has nothing to do with its biological attributes if any. Then the student asks for the rationale of one word being masculine and another feminine and that logic is not there. This reminds me of a question I asked a Frenchman teaching us French in the early 70s about the usefulness of verb endings in French (*désinences*) which do not seem to add any further meaning to a conjugated verb and why we couldn't simply do without them. The lecturer glared at me and said: "That's how French is", and continued teaching, visibly irritated. Sebuyungu's article handles students' errors and their causes and I could visualize in his work some of the scripts I was marking many years ago and

the errors I came across at that time. I noted with interest errors arising from mother tongue interference, English interference, *faux amis*, literal translation, among others. Harriet Namukwaya for her part makes a rich and in-depth study on how best to use texts in a foreign language class while Ebraheem Ssali introduces us to the numerous benefits of using internet material while teaching a foreign language, in this specific case, Arabic.

When it comes to part two, we are treated to more fruitful information and learning from three authors, namely, Titus Ogavu(RIP), Victoria Bakurumpagi and Crispus Mwakundia. Titus Ogavu enumerates and analyses the numerous challenges that hinder acquisition of literacy in French in a country like Uganda, one of the key reasons being that students do not read and write enough. He could have added that the reading culture in general is lacking in our population. Bakurumpagi continues in the same vein emphasizing the unfriendly language policies already talked about by Ogavu and the need for redesigning programs and better networking internally and externally to forge alliances with those interested in the promotion of French. Crispus Mwakundia, on the other hand, gives us a more refreshing picture of the popularity and expansion of the teaching of French in Kenya and makes suggestions for better training in inter-cultural communication.

Part three is of particular interest to me because it deals with translation and interpretation, an area that has kept me busy both as a teacher and as a translator/interpreter. Cornelius Wambi Gulere's article on *Nomenclature and authenticity of translated plays from English to Lusoga* is quite fascinating and I admire him for his insistence on adaptation and the idea of translating both imagery and names to reflect the target audience. This is an arduous task demanding a lot of time and discipline because, if I understood him well, it also involves getting the meaning of proper names in the source language and then translating them, where possible. There I therefore need to undertake an etymological study of these names before translating them. This may only be simplified if etymological studies exist in the source language involved. Gulere's approach is part of an old debate about faithfulness to the source language or satisfaction of the target reader. Do I translate the French name *Monsieur Dupont* into Rutooro as *Omunyoro Rwakaikara* or as *Omunyoro Duponti* or even as *Monsyo Duponti*? Isaac Ssettuba continues in the same vein by analyzing the translation of George Orwell's *Animal Farm* into French and into Luganda. The issues of cultural proximity and cultural distance and the strategies used in each one of these situations come to the fore. Margaret Nanfuka on the other hand tackles the situation from another angle by examining the same *Animal Farm* and assessing the different strategies used to translate it both into German and into Luganda focusing on the theme of conflict. The author notes how a specific item, namely apples, is quietly absent from the Luganda version because the translator had no equivalent for it, and yet it was of special significance for the author's message in the original version.

Idris Osman on his part views translation as a tool for bringing closer together different peoples but also for enriching one language by borrowing from another. He uses Arabic to exemplify such issues as language and social identity in translation, translation and social networking between civilizations, and makes valuable insights regarding the contributions of the Arabic Civilization to translation. As for Edith Kalanzi, she scrutinizes the translator's profession, its cost-effectiveness and whether it will survive the onslaught of machine translation and computer aided translation. She argues that the human brain shall still be needed to supplement the advances made by ICT although the term translator may have to be replaced by such names as Document Consultant, Post-MT-Editor, Audio Communications Advisor, e.t.c. which I personally do not find very exciting. The lack of excitement is however mitigated by the fact the profession itself is not likely to disappear.

The last and fourth part of this book is devoted to the functionality of foreign languages. Samuel Wandera talks of inter-cultural competence and its place in the teaching and learning of a foreign language. He is of the view that not enough inter-cultural content is included in the French Beginner's course as taught at Makerere University and yet this is a desirable component when we are training our young people for the job market and for social interaction. Yap Lian Chee Sandra, all the way from Malaysia and currently living in Thailand brings us refreshing information on the position of German in the Thai context. We are told of how Thailand has had a German connection since 1862 (interestingly the same year when Speke reached Lake Nalubaale-Victoria) and that Germans are viewed as serious and disciplined people. We also hear of how Asian languages such as Japanese, Chinese and Korean are more popular than German but we also note that German is more popular than French or Spanish. We are told that Germans are respected for their science and technology and Germany's place in world history, although, we are made to understand, the more exuberant Asian cultures are more attractive to the Thai public.

Edith Natukunda-Togboa on her part makes a vivid analysis of branding in Uganda where there is a French flair. She satisfies some of our curiosity because some of us have always wondered about the motivation of those who use French branding. Are they "francophiles", dreamers, artists, or something else? We also learn that not all those with French branding do attract the desired clientele or do better business. For Julius Singoma Kagamba, French still has a lot to offer considering its position as a language of diplomacy, as a language which was once dominant in the world of trade, politics, learning and many other areas, and the second most popular international language after English.

Conclusion

From the talents that have been exhibited in the above articles, I have no doubt that we have enough talents to produce our own teaching materials for our institutions of higher learning