



Pulpit Interpretation in the Cameroon Baptist Convention Churches

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Abstract: This article examines how the Cameroon Baptist Church (CBC) makes efforts to pass across the gospel message to their target population through sermon interpreting. It highlights how interpretation of sermons are carried out by lay interpreters given the necessity of interpretation in bilingual congregations. The two languages concerned are French and English, the two official languages of Cameroon. The linguistic nature of Cameroon obliges the CBC to organize bilingual church services so as to minister alternately to their bilingual audience. While interpreting is necessary and obligatory given the target church population, the problem is the quality of interpretation due to unskilled interpreters that sometimes misinterpret messages leading to break down in communication. Break downs in sermon interpretations can really be misleading because the word of God is Yes and Amen. It is therefore concluded that given the centrality of interpreting in the CBC settings, it is important for the CBC to train interpreters and make use of them for the well being of evangelism.

Keywords: Pulpit, interpretation, bilingual congregation.

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INTRODUCTION

Interpretation is oral translation. Odhiambo et al define interpreting as a communicative event which occurs during cross - cultural communication when two interlocutors do not share a language. Qian (1994) says interpreting is a form of communication between people with different linguistic and cultural background wherein the interpreter is the transitional point between the sender and the receiver of the message. National Association for Interpretation defines interpretation as "a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and the meanings inherent in the resource" (source: google). In like manner, pulpit interpretation is a Christian mission - based communication process that is initiated owing to the existence of bilingual congregations. Pulpit Interpretation is intended to evangelize, educate and

inform the bilingual audience that expects to receive or is interested in receiving Christian messages rendered in the two languages alternately, so that the general assembly is well-informed indiscriminately. Pulpit interpretation is therefore carried out in bilingual church settings and during church communicative events. For pulpit interpretation to occur, there must be a middle person who can use the two languages of the bilingual congregation alternately. This middle person collects relevant information from the main speaker or resource person and gives it orally to the listener or target audience. The middle person in this case is the interpreter who is gifted in receiving messages in one language and transmitting to others in another one. Pulpit Interpretation is therefore an integral part of the great commission and at the same time an art that should be done by spirit filled and skilled or gifted persons who have the knowledge of the word of God and are committed to God's service. In fact, a pulpit

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interpreter carries out the duty of a preacher and by implication should possess the qualities of a minister of the word of God. It has been observed that the English and the French languages are greatly used in Christian churches nowadays due to the linguistic nature of our country Cameroon: the case of the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC).

Preliminary considerations and review of related literature

The first Church in Cameroon was the Baptist Church. The Baptist Church is one of the Protestant Churches in the world in general and Cameroon in particular. Talking about the origin of Christianity in Cameroon, Engelbert MVENG, *Histoire des Eglises Chrétiennes au Cameroun: Les origines*, Yaoundé, Press Universitaire, 1987, p. 7 and Job Salomon NSOGA, *L' Eglise: quelle nécessité, quelle abois*, Mémoire de Maîtrise en théologie, Yaoundé, Faculté de Théologie Protestante, 2005, p. 1, say that Christianity was introduced in Cameroon in 1841 by John Clarke and Dr Prince who were former black slaves from Jamaica. They were later followed by other black slaves in 1843 known as Joseph Merrick and Andrew Fuller, as seen in J. V. SLAGEREN, *Histoire de L'Eglise en Afrique (Cameroun): Numéro Spécial de Cahiers Pour L'Enseignement Secondaire Classes des Terminales*, Yaounde, Editions Clé, 1969, p. 57. EYONGETA et al *A History of the Cameroon*, New ed, Hong Kong, Longman Group, 1988, p.50, say it was introduced in Cameroon in 1845 by the London Baptist Missionary Society also known as the British Baptist, officially led by Alfred Saker. According to these authors, the mission of the British Baptist lasted for 46 years when their churches were handed over to the Basel Mission in 1887 after the German annexation of Cameroon. The first denomination to be legalised in Cameroon was the *Société Missionnaire Baptiste Européenne (Suisse)* in 1952. It took 111 years for the first Christian denomination to be given the official right to operate in Cameroon after the introduction of Christianity in Cameroon. It is important to note that the Cameroon Baptist Mission (CBM) was first established in the Anglo-Saxon parts of the country. At the start Cameroon was not yet officially bilingual because by then The French and the British had not yet given her independence.

Consequently, this denomination evolved as an Anglo- Saxon one in the Southern Cameroons until 1954 when they changed from Cameroon Baptist Mission (CBM) to the Cameroon Baptist Convention (CBC), under the North American Baptist Conference. When the two Cameroons gained independence in 1960 and 1961 respectively, and opted for reunification, official bilingualism was borne and thus the burning need for translation and interpretation. After independence and subsequent reunification, the CBC still continued in the Coastal

and Grass field regions until when they saw the need to extend their denomination to the Francophone areas when Cameroon moved from the Federal Republic of Cameroon to United Republic of Cameroon in 1972. One of the first churches planted in the francophone zone was the Etoug-ebe Baptist Church, Yaoundé around 1972, and this aroused the interest for the oral translation of sermons and announcements into the two official languages of Cameroon. Before the spread of the CBC denomination to francophone areas, pulpit interpretation was rendered from either Pidgin English or English Language to vernaculars and vice versa. The task was also very difficult at these levels of interpretation as the local interpreters also found it difficult to render certain expressions and vocabulary from Pidgin English or English Language to local languages and vice versa.

The famous anecdotes of the interpretation of the following messages substantiate this point:

- Saul, Saul why are you persecuting my people? rendered as *fengwang, fengwang ...?* *Fengwang* in the Oku language means *salt* in English. The local interpreter owing to a poor mastery of the Bible confused Saul the former name of Apostle Paul in the Bible with the mineral salt.
- Will a man rob God? rendered in a local language as *Will a man rub God?* The idea in the English Language is from Malachi 10:8 which means cheating God by not paying tithes but the interpreter rendered it in the local language as pressing God with ointment or lotion.
- *Rome* interpreted as *room* and *peace* as *pisser/faire pipi*, etc. It is necessary to note here that *pee* in English is *piss* in pidgin, and some people who do not master this word as *pee* in the English Language call it *piss*, which is pidgin, thinking that *piss* is correct English. The lay interpreter of the aforementioned expression thought that the Anglophone speaker meant *piss* the pidgin word for urine and not *peace* which means *la paix*.
- The declaration *Jesus Christ est l'oint de Dieu* rendered incorrectly as *Jesus Christ is far from God* instead of *Jesus Christ is God' anointed* is really misleading especially in the Christian context where Jesus Christ is the centrality of all the messages and the closest to God or God himself.

The above misinterpretations are because of pronunciation issues as well as poor mastery of the Bible. This suggests the significance of contextual meaning in translation. An expert interpreter should not get lost because of homonyms and homophones if he understands the context of communication. Only an unskilled or lay interpreter could make such errors. The spread of the gospel to the French

speaking (francophone) zones aroused the need for sermon interpretation from English to French and vice versa because there was that zeal to evangelize the local francophone population and to make them Disciples of Christ. The need to convert the francophone community therefore ignited the phenomenon of the oral translation of sermons in the Cameroon Baptist Convention Churches from English to French and vice versa. At the beginning, the interpreters used to be Anglophones who had learnt French either formally or informally. They strived to interpret as they could according to their level of mastery of the French Language. With the fruitful evangelism, some members of the francophone community were converted and today we have francophone lay preachers, Pastors and Reverend Pastors in the CBC besides francophone Christians. Since then, Anglophone preachers proclaim the gospel message in the English language while francophone preachers do same in the French language. Even though, some large CBC Churches have separated their church services in relation to linguistic backgrounds, that is, French services are separate from English ones and thus no need for interpretation of sermons. Such congregations are still few. What obtains the most is that the two languages are used simultaneously on the pulpit because of the bilingual nature of the congregations. In such situations the message is rendered in one of the two official languages and translated orally or interpreted in the other language. Though, many preachers and interpreters try a lot to master the two official languages, their mastery level is not very alternate. Anglophone bilingual preachers master the English languages better than how they master the French language and vice versa. The poor mastery of one of the two languages by a preacher produces very unpleasant and wrong renderings. Such wrong renditions include misinterpretation, wrong grammatical usage, poor use of lexis and collocations, wrong structuring of clause elements and wrong meanings of words, wrong calques, unnecessary and unconventional code switching and borrowing among others. Consequently, some Christians who understand only one of the two official languages end up not receiving the exact message rendered in the first language of the main preacher.

Difficulties Faced by Interpreters in the CBC

Even though most preachers do not master the two languages well, some reasons that hinder successful interpretation include the following difficulties faced by the interpreters:

- The manner of word articulation or speech delivery by the main speaker. At times the main preacher does not take into consideration the role played by the interpreter. He/she goes ahead to proclaim their messages as if they

prepared their lessons in tandem with the interpreter. They forget the fact that the interpreter is putting in more efforts than the main speaker in his/her attempt to render the message into the second language.

- Another difficulty the interpreter faces is that, he/she might not have a prior view of the lesson of the preacher. Also, he/she does a spontaneous simultaneous interpretation of a message that they had not previously conceived. He /she receives the message at the moment of proclamation, does a cognitive analyses in the first language and then substitutes the words with their equivalents in the second language before translating it orally to the target audience. All this mental calculations and appraisals are done in the twinkle of an eye to render what the first speaker took time to consciously prepare and deliver.
- English speaking (Anglophone) bilinguals at times run short of the French vocabulary and vice versa.
- Some interpreters who may interpret well are in a funk and the fear of the unknown hinders them from passing the message well to their target.
- Some preachers or announcers say long and complex sentences and the interpreter forgets some of the important facts by the time of rendition.
- The use of vocabulary and expressions that are uncommon to the interpreter is also a problem to successful interpretation. The interpreter is blocked on stage when he/she is unable to get the meaning of a relatively difficult word in a source language. The lack of equivalents turn some interpreters to actors as they struggle to pass the message at all cost using gestures and facial expressions, for instance, *The road to heaven is narrow.*, interpreted as, *Le chemin du ciel est comme ça.* (narrowing the hand to illustrate the notion of narrow, since he does not know the French equivalent *étroit*).
- Scornful expressions from the audience in case of mistranslations is also a pertinent hindrance to interpretation as the interpreter feels incapable and disgraced.

One can therefore imagine the difficult task that the interpreter has.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- Preachers should articulate well, deliver their speeches clearly and be straight to the point so that interpreters should not stress out their minds to reconstruct the equivalent message.
- Preachers should not construct very long sentences or say many sentences at a stretch of talk before allowing the interpreters to translate orally. When they talk much at a time, the

tendency is that the interpreter obviously forgets some of the information and only renders part to the target audience.

- Preachers should give enough time for interpreters to translate the messages in question orally.
- The pairing of the main speaker and the interpreter should be consciously done. If the main speaker is fast in speech the interpreter should also be someone who speaks fast. This fact holds same for slow speakers. When the main speaker speaks faster than the interpreter, the interpreter finds it difficult to receive the message clearly and to render it correctly. At times before the interpreter starts rendering the message, the fast preacher is already saying the next message and at the end of the day, listeners of the target language do not get home with the complete message.
- It has been observed that at times the preacher starts giving a new message when the interpreter has not finished stating the previous message and this creates an atmosphere of some noise making as two people talk at the same time, consequently, the two speech communities of that congregation end up not getting the message clearly.
- It is thought that it will be good if the main speaker prepares the message and explains it to the interpreter before the time of rendering. This will enable the interpreter to study and be versed in the message before time. It will give the interpreter the opportunity to verify the equivalents of some words that he/she does not know or may not know offhand.
- There are some words and expressions in some churches that do not yet have their exact equivalent in the other languages used in the same church. There is need for interpreters to create the equivalent of such words that are lacking in the other language; the case of a word like *3H* in the Cameroon Baptist convention. *3H* in English refers to the initials of the words *head*, *heart* and *hands* for Jesus. In French *3H* will not mean head, heart and hands for Jesus if copied closely and translated as *trois H*. The message will not be appropriate because *head* in French is *la tête*, *heart* in French is *le cœur* and *hands* in French is *les mains*. The French Language respects grammar rules to the letter therefore translating the English version *3H* (read as Three H) as *3H* (read or written in French as *Trois H*) will be semantically wrong. In French, qualifying adjectives and determiners agree in number and in gender with the head word or the noun. The linguistic mistake stemmed from those who gave the acronym *3H* instead of *3Hs*. In English the letters of the alphabet are countable nouns so if you are determining a name with a singular

marker the name or noun should be in the singular form and if it is a plural marker, the noun should be in plural, for instance, one */B/ H/ boy/ /dog/ country/ letter/five*, two *Bs (B's)/ Hs(H's)/ boys/ books/ dogs/ countries/ letters/ 5s(fives)*. There is therefore need for the equivalent of the acronym *3H* in the French language. The expression *3H* could be copied closely into the French language taking into consideration the grammar rule that was not respected in the English version, for instance, *3Hs* (pronounced *Trois Hs*) having in mind that the target congregation knows what *3H* is all about. In fact, translating the expression *3H* as *trois Hs* does not give any appropriate meaning in the French language but may be understood only by those who have previous knowledge about the group in question. The francophone interpreters could borrow the expression from the English version into the French Language, for instance, *les 3Hs Girls* (written as *les Three Hs Girls* or *le Group de Three Hs*) so as to maintain the original conception and the objectives of the founders of the group. If translated using the technique of free modulation (*la modulation libre* ou facultative) the acronym *3H* could be interpreted in a clause like: *le group de jeunes filles qui confient leur têtes, leurs cœurs et leurs main à Jésus/le group des filles pour Jésus ou pour Christ ou pour Jésus Christ, etc.* depending on the linguistic choices of the interpreter. This interpretation will sound funny and incomplete because these girls are taught to offer their whole bodies as living sacrifices to Jesus Christ and not some parts of their bodies. There are such words in the Cameroon Baptist Convention's original jargon that need to be reconsidered in the French Language, for example, the CBC is divided into *Associations, Fields and Convention*. Most often, some interpreters who have not understood that *field* in the CBC jargon is *Le Secteur* in the French version have always interpreted this word as *le terrain*, *le domaine* or *le champ*, and consequently the message is distorted. Also, lay interpreters and even some skilled ones who have a limited vocabulary knowledge in a target language may find it difficult translating certain deceptive cognates, for example, the words *godson* and *goddaughter*, *godsend*, *godhead*, *godship*, *godfather* and *godmother* which mean in French *le filleul*, *la filleule*, *aubaine/bénédiction/ bienfait du ciel*, *la divinité*, *la divinité*, *le parrain*, and *la marraine* respectively. As mentioned earlier, the Cameroon Baptist Convention started as a purely Anglophone denomination in the Northwest and the Southwest provinces of Cameroon. The evolution of Christianity has led to the geometric expansion of Christian denominations coupled with its multiplier effects. The C.B. C has planted

many local churches all over the national territory and is now a national denomination with Francophones as converts. Some peculiar English expressions in the CBC jargon have to be given their exact equivalents in the French language if not francophone interpreters will always be stymied when they are faced with such expressions. Various Church committee names should be given their French equivalents, for example, The FCC, the Trustee, etc. This fact holds for other denominations that started with one official language whether French or English.

- Interpreters should put in more efforts to discover the biblical equivalent of words and expressions so as to be able to render their messages at ease without stressing out a lot to look for farfetched words.
- Preachers should always remember that spoken language is ephemeral and lost after speech so, interpreters can easily lose or forget what was said if the speech is lengthy.
- Lay interpreters should attend refresher courses that can help them to improve on their level of interpretation.
- The churches should send their interpreters to schools of interpretations to boost the quality of their church sermons and to reduce the risk of misinterpretations. It would be the best if interpreters of sermons were professionals in the field of theology thus some trained Pastors could be sent to schools of interpretation to graduate and work as Pastor interpreters. In this way, the messages will be suitably and appropriately rendered. It is not easy to translate a message that you do not master the meaning well. In like manner, Seminaries and other schools of theology should start training their pastors and priests in the two official languages of Cameroon so that in future the preacher and the interpreter will be experts of the word of God and of the two official languages used for evangelism and discipleship in Cameroon. It is worth nothing here that it does not suffice to be an interpreter, it also needs the mastery of the subject in question. An interpreter who does not master the Bible in detail even though he/she masters the languages well may find it difficult translating the expression, for example, **Balm in Gilead/Baume en Galaad** into French. Some names of places and people are written and pronounced differently in the two languages, for instance Mordecai/ Mardochee, Song of Solomon/Cantique des Cantiques, Obadiah/Abdias, Zephaniah/ Sophonie, Haggai/Aggee, Revelation/ Apocalypse. That is why translators and interpreters do specialize in some domains of translation. The vocabulary of the military will obviously differ from that of Christianity or of the medical field, for instance.

- If the church may not be able to train bilingual preachers, they could recruit trained interpreters to do the exercise in their churches.
- Interpreters should render the messages in accordance with the linguistic norms and the culture and beliefs of the target population, for instance, if the main speaker talks about a lion and there is no lion in the culture of the target, the interpreter could describe another wild animal in that culture.
- Interpreters should be conscious of their audience and their desire to listen to the messages disseminated. Romans 10:14 asks how will people believe the gospel when they have not heard or how will they hear if they have not been preached. If the interpreter is not there to transmit the message to their target they will not hear and will subsequently not believe the Gospel.
- It will be good for Anglophone bilinguals to interpret from French to English and vice versa to avoid the difficulty of being stymied in communication due to lack of vocabulary.
- It is necessary for the main preacher to be bilingual so as to clarify or rectify misinterpretations. Let us take the case of an interpreter who interprets in the English Language the French version of *Jesus Christ est l'oint de Dieu* as *Jesus Christ is far from God*. This translation is erroneous and does not edify the Anglophone Christians at all. If the main speaker were bilingual, he would call the attention of the interpreter to the correct message.
- As far as non verbal language is concerned, it would be better for the interpreter to demonstrate, make gestures, facial expressions and other body movements according to the non verbal signs of the target population.
- Translation and interpretation of the gospel from French to English and vice versa should be taught in the CBC seminaries because the most reliable interpreter of the word of God is a man of God because he is versed in the gospel message and masters the content and context better. Therefore, the CBC should open the department of Bible and sermon translation in the two official languages of Cameroon to train Pastors who will be sent to the field as Translators.

CONCLUSION

The above analyses show the importance and the necessity of interpretation in the church. Interpreters should know the significant role that they play in evangelism and discipleship. Without them a part of the congregation will not be blessed with the word of God. It is thanks to them that a message in a foreign language is decoded and transmitted to another public that does not understand a foreign language. They enhance unity

and national integration. They should know that it is God himself who instituted the art of interpretation as insinuated in the book of Acts 2:1-12. The Holy Spirit empowered the disciples of Jesus Christ to be able to speak in other tongues for the advancement of the Kingdom of God. Before the coming of the Holy Spirit the disciples could only speak the Jewish language but the Holy Spirit saw the need for them to speak in other tongues so that the gospel be spread even to the gentiles. Interpreters of the word of God are therefore disciples of Jesus Christ and should do their work excellently for the glory of God, for there is joy in heaven when a soul is won for Christ. Interpreters can make plans to succeed, for example, in Genesis 42:23 Joseph made use of an interpreter to hide his identity from his brothers and achieve his intended goals. Church leaders should not take this exercise for granted but should consider it seriously and do everything possible to ensure that sermons and announcements are well interpreted in churches, if not part of the congregation will not be well informed and may even be misled through misinterpretations. The church should appreciate the evangelistic work that both the expert and lay interpreters are doing by motivating them both morally and financially. If church leaders could imagine a bilingual congregation without an interpreter, they would understand the important role that interpreters play in the spread of the gospel. Finally, the CBC should translating all their official documents into the French Language so as to facilitate cordial interpersonal relationship between the two speech communities in the church.

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