

Strasen Prayer Letter

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What Exactly Does That Mean?

How often I have asked this very question, or thought it at least! Hardly a day goes by without my wondering about the true meaning of some word or phrase in the Dhimba language. And the wondering doesn't stop when I get an answer because I'm never certain how good the answer is.

Think about it. Here I am, asking non-native English speakers to give me a good English equivalent for a Dhimba expression. Their answers are only as good as the answers they've heard from other non-native English speakers. With patience and time you can get closer to the truth. But it *takes* patience and time, and still there remains an element of uncertainty. So how does accurate translation work happen? Patience, time, and a healthy dose of the Holy Spirit, no doubt.

It is also the case that some words have multiple meanings. That's true in any language. Over time words tend to acquire new uses. Take the English word 'club' for instance. A 'club' can be "a group of people joined together for a special purpose." Or it can be "the place where these people meet". Or it can be "a heavy stick used as a weapon". If you are guilty of 'throwing a club', you might be trying to protect yourself or you might be trying to hurt someone. But you could just as likely be playing a game of cards or playing a round of golf. How can one know for sure? Context is often the deciding factor. The context in which an event occurs generally informs the audience (reader or hearer) of the correct interpretation.

The Dhimba language, as well, has its share of words that carry dual meanings. Some of the clearest examples are seen in things that occur in nature. For example, the word '*etango*' means 'sun', but it can also mean 'day'. The word '*omwedhi*' means 'moon', or it can mean 'month'. The word '*ombula*' means 'rain' in some contexts. In others it means 'year'. The dual nature of these words can best be explained by considering the periodic nature

of the sun, moon, and rain. It is interesting that rain is seen to be an annual event in African cultures of this region.

Other words offer little or no explanation regarding their duality. '*Odhondjedhi*' can mean both 'beard' and 'enemies'. '*Ohi*' can mean both 'fish' and 'earth'. Is there a connection? Perhaps historically there is, but maybe not. In any event, this last example gives rise to a rather interesting translation issue. How does one translate Matthew



12:40? "*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge fish, so the Son of Man will be three days and three nights in the heart of the earth.*"

If the Dhimba word '*ohi*' is used for both 'fish' and 'earth' in this sentence, how will they be understood by a Dhimba audience? Context does not seem to help here. The proximity of the two words will in all likelihood suggest to the audience the same use for both words, either 'fish' or 'earth'. If the Jonah story is well-known, it would then be understood that the Son of Man will be three days and three nights inside a fish. Some have suggested explaining the correct interpretation in a footnote. But most people don't read footnotes, and if this passage is read during a church service, as the Gospel reading for example, the footnote would not be read anyway.

This is how the problem has been resolved in the Dhimba language. For the moment, Matthew 12:40 reads as follows: "*For as Jonah was three days and three nights in the belly of a huge 'ohi' of water, so the Son of Man will be buried and stay three days and three nights in the 'ohi' of soil.*" '*Ohi*' of water will suggest 'fish' and '*ohi*' of soil will suggest 'earth' to the Dhimba people. Will this translation stay as it is now? I can't say. But it will stay until a better suggestion comes along.



Prayer Concerns:

- I am constantly reminded of the need for prayer concerning safe travel here in the northern half of Namibia. It seems we are always having to travel long distances in order to get things that we need or to go to meetings or workshops that we are required to attend. During August, for example, I had to make two 450-mile trips to Windhoek, the first to meet with our LBT representatives who visit us annually and three weeks later a second trip to meet with the United Bible Society consultant who is required to check our Dhimba New Testament manuscript twice a year. In between I made a 200-mile trip to Oshakati for routine service on my vehicle. Reliable vehicle service attendants are still not available in Opuwo. I am so thankful that my Toyota Condor has behaved so well over the past five years and has given me very few moments for concern. And I am confident that it has quite a few more years of reliability left in it. But I never go anywhere without first thanking God for His safe-keeping.
- Perhaps some of my concern for safety has been prompted by things that have happened and keep happening to our head translator, Pastor Tolu. A year ago, while in Oshakati to service his vehicle, his vehicle was nearly stolen. He had driven to the mechanic's garage and was parked outside while he went inside to see the mechanic. He was inside only a moment when he realized he had forgotten something and hurried back out to his car. The thieves were already there and had broken into his vehicle, but were scared off when Pastor Tolu suddenly returned. The security guard who had been on duty only moments before was nowhere in sight. Very suspicious!
- I will close this letter with quite a remarkable story. Last month Pastor Tolu went to Oshakati again to service his vehicle. While he was in Oshakati he thought he would stop at a shop for just a moment. He was not yet inside the building when he was alerted to the fact that a man was near his vehicle. The man had grabbed a bag from the unattended vehicle and was running away. Pastor Tolu ran after him for quite a distance and, with the help of some bystanders, managed to get the thief to discard his bag, which contained a very large sum of money. I'm not sure which is the most remarkable aspect of this story. That someone could be so careless as to leave a bag full of money in clear sight inside a vehicle with a broken window? That Pastor Tolu, a man of age 56 and with a decided limp when he walks because one leg is more than an inch shorter than the other due to a vehicle accident 15 years ago, could chase and nearly overtake a man half his age, healthy, and with a head start? That, in the end, it was three refugees from Zimbabwe who came to Pastor Tolu's aid to help stop the thief when no one else lifted a finger to help? It's another version of the Good Samaritan story. Or could the most remarkable part of the story be this? That God comes to our aid when we are careless as well as when we are helpless. And being careless and/or helpless could describe any one of us at almost any time, if you stop and think about it. The prophet Jeremiah was quite right when he wrote that the mercies of the Lord are "*new every morning*". All we need do is see and imagine.

John

*"The men of Nineveh will stand up at the judgment
with this generation and condemn it;
for they repented at the preaching of Jonah,
and now one greater than Jonah is here."
(Matthew 12:41)*

Contributions

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