

The Risks of Language for Health Translators



Health education translators like Susan Mwangi, right, in Kenya have to choose their words carefully to avoid offending cultural sensitivities

This is the VOA Special English Health Report.

Translators Without Borders is an American nonprofit group. It provides language services to nongovernmental organizations such as, yes, Doctors Without Borders. The group recently trained some new translators in Nairobi in how to put health information into local languages for Kenyans.

For health translators, finding the right words is not just about language but also culture.

Muthoni Gichohi is a manager for Family Health Options Kenya, the group that organized the training. She says she has no problem expressing the names of body parts in English. But as a Kikuyu she says there are some words in her first language that may be "provocative" if she said them in public.

"So I have got to really put it in another way that it is still delivering the same message, but the words will be different."

Trainer Paul Warambo says the same issue arises with Kenya's national language.

"Sometimes you are also forced to use euphemisms -- use a language that is more acceptable to the people. For example, in Swahili, we will not call a body part -- the vagina, for example -- we will not call it by its name. We use kitu chake --- her thing. You do not just mention it by the name, you say 'her thing.'"

The culture of a community will largely decide how words and expressions are translated into socially acceptable language.

In some cases, the way people in a culture think about an activity or object becomes the translated name for that activity or object.

Paul Warambo explains how the term "sexual intercourse" is commonly translated from English into Ki'Swahili.

"We always say, in Ki'Swahili, 'kutenda kitendo kibaya' -- to do something bad. So, imagine sex was associated with something bad, emanating from the African cultural context."

Whether or not a community will accept or even listen to a message is especially important in health care.

Lori Thicke co-founded Translators Without Borders in nineteen ninety-three. She says, in general, a lot of development organizations have often overlooked the importance of language in changing health behavior.

"It is true that people do not think of translation. It is absolutely not on the radar, but it is so critical if you think about it, for people to get information, whether it is how to take their medication, whether it is where to find supplies in a crisis situation."

Muthoni Gichohi and her team recently opened a health information center in a Maasai community. She learned that young Maasai cannot say certain things in the presence of elders. Also, men are usually the ones who speak at public gatherings, so people might not accept a message given by a woman.