

## Dysmetaphrasis

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In the early hours of this morning, I decided to make up a new word. This is a problem I have when my mind starts to wander in the waking hours. It occurs in those transitional moments before the rising sun lights the bedroom curtains. I then allow myself to get up, make my first cup of tea, and open my laptop.



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A new word is called a neologism, literally meaning “new word”, and this morning’s word was *dysmetaphrasis*. I quickly scanned the Internet to check that no one had gotten there before me, which usually happens with my new words. I have not yet been able to find it, although it may be hidden somewhere in the depths of an obscure treatise, but for the time being, I am going to claim it as my own.

I have put the prefix *dys*, meaning bad or difficult, onto the word *metaphrasis*, meaning roughly “translation”, both from their Greek origins. It describes the problems we have nowadays in communications with the many technological words, especially in medicine, that are used in everyday consultations. These words are often misunderstood or incorrectly translated by the patients.

To give an example, a young Afrikaans-speaking woman consulted me a while ago, having slipped on the pavement and fallen onto her bottom. I sent her for an X-ray which, fortunately, showed no fractures and told her she had a bruised sacrum. She returned to her office, where she works as the only woman in the department of a local bank. One of the chaps asked her about what the doctor had said. She replied that I had told her that she had a bruised scrotum. This resulted in a fair amount of mirth and falling about from the male audience.

Dysmetaphrasis can easily occur when a word has several meanings, called polysemy. For ten years, I did a clinic in a

remote area of the Drakensberg Mountains called the Injasuti valley. On occasions, the patients would come in and complain that they were suffering from *inyongo*, which, when translated, means bile or gall. I decided to ask ten consecutive patients, who complained of *inyongo*, what exactly they meant by the complaint. The replies were various combinations of headache, shivers, stomach ache, loss of appetite, tiredness, heartburn, low libido, nausea, bitterness in the mouth, vomiting, cough, body pain and dizziness. There would probably be a similar but smaller variety of interpretations for a patient who complained of being “bilious” in English.

The opposite of these misunderstandings is when one word can be deeply understood and I am going to chance my luck and call this *eumetaphrasis*. An example of eumetaphrasis occurred one day in a clinic when a daughter brought in her elderly mother to see me. Her mother was feeling withdrawn and depressed. I spoke to her mother in Zulu and asked her if she was suffering from *ixhala*. It is a word for which there is no exact equivalent in English but roughly means a feeling of longing and loss. As I spoke the word, I put my hand on my heart. The power of a word, as we know, is often increased by an accompanying gesture. It is difficult to describe her reaction. Her eyes lit up with a mixture of joy and relief. She then put her hand on her daughter’s arm. It was another hand gesture, saying, “I am being understood”.

One of the problems with the practice of medicine is that after small triumphs, things can easily go wrong again. Subtle shifts in translations can lead to the wrong information being given to the recipient. One of my colleagues, who thought himself fluent in Zulu, said to a patient who he was about to give an injection, “*phenduka ngizokuhlaba*”. This means, “turn over, I am going to stab you”.

Our Zulu interpreter overheard this and wryly informed him that it was slang and that perhaps he should not say this to female patients as it meant that he was about to poke them and not with a needle.