This was a response by Dan Peterson to Jim's seeking for assistance to know how to communicate a complex issue of translation to a theological journal (slightly edited).

Finally some thoughts in response to your attempt to describe semantic ranges of word meanings in different languages and the resulting shifts in meaning occurring in the course of translating a sentence.

I just finished listening to an 18 hour course on human language by a popular and respected linguist. He did a great job of covering all the basic areas of linguistics for people who have no linguistic background. But I was surprised to discover how little he had to say about culture and semantics. Even for non-trained amateurs, I expected at least some time spent discussing the "problem" (actually the fascinating challenge) of inter-cultural communication that arises from the fact that speakers from two worlds structure their "reality" differently. One language/culture's structure of visible and invisible reality will be packaged/conveyed by the semantic ranges of their words, and these will never closely correspond to (more likely will very much differ from) the semantic ranges of expressions in another language.

I like your diagram of Kiswahili glosses under each word of an English sentence. [See below.] I think I know just what you are trying to show with the arrows flying off in unpredictable directions. Literal, or "word for word," translations from English are just as messy in the African languages I spoke--and I'm sure I was only aware of a small part of the complex skewing between languages. Of course one point you/we are trying to make is that this mess is primarily a result of assuming that one can "translate" by finding one Kiswahili word to correspond to each English word. This is actually not at all how bilingual people do natural translation, but it is what most linguistically myopic monolingual speakers think translation is. Furthermore, even the English spoken by people in the African context may resemble European/American English only on the surface, while the deeper semantic structures are quite different.

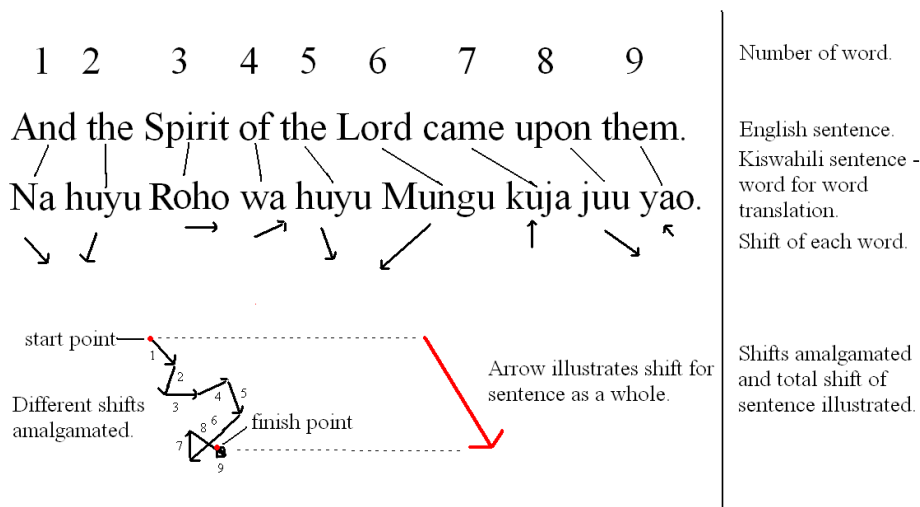This is what Dan is referring to (authored by Jim Harries):

Figure 3 above illustrates diagrammatically what happens when the English sentence "And the Spirit of the Lord came upon them" is translated into Kiswahili. The words are numbered from 1 to 9. The Kiswahili is grammatically highly incorrect, but serves our purposes to illustrate a 'literal' word-for-word translation. The arrows below illustrate the 'shift' that occurs in the course of the translation of each word, in a supposed two-dimensional direction. Below that, the shifts for each word are amalgamated, giving an overall shift for the sentence – in red. Following this procedure, sentences could in turn be amalgamated to give the 'shift' for a text, and so on.

For example I once enjoyed listening to a person translate from French into French. A missionary was speaking, and a local Burkinabe church leader felt compelled to translate the missionary's French (which was quite good by the Sorbonne's standards) into local French in order to ensure proper transfer of meaning. Interestingly, the result was not even quite what the missionary had originally intended to say, even though the church leader was quite educated and fluent in French. The arrows had been flying all over the map without either person being sufficiently aware of the skewing of semantic overlap etc. It would have been better if the missionary had made more of an effort to learn and speak local French (rather than PhD-candidate Sorbonne French), or even better if the missionary had simply stopped trying to use a European language at all.

So I'm back to the linguistics lectures I just listened to: academics, professional linguists, "experienced" missionaries -- they can all fail to understand the hidden dimensions of culture and meaning. Ironically, the lecturer even took time to destroy the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis -- but only from the point of view of grammar; he never mentioned semantics. Somehow people miss the point. Language doesn't control reality, but the reality being communicated through language is just as structured as the sounds and conjugations in the grammar, and this reality comes packaged in the spoken words, the collocations of words, and the logical structure of discourse (from the sentence level to the whole-text level).

Back to your diagram of KiSwahili glosses for each word of an English sentence. In actual language (where this sentence would only be one in the middle of a complex logical structure), things are more complicated than even your "shifting arrows" can convey. For example, as soon as you put two words together, you reinforce a more limited range of semantic options and eliminate most others. This semantic range -- the direction these arrows have shifted -- is now probably significantly different than the meaning of the two words in the source language. Now add the next word and the options become even more narrow -- but also further from the original meaning.

Let me give an example that is completely hypothetical since I don't speak KiSwahili. Put "spirit" together with "came upon" in the language I spoke and the possible range of meaning has narrowed down to something quite different than anything in a Biblical context. The "spirit" may have been "shot" at the person (requiring a shooter and a motive) and this then assumes that the spirit-arrow defences of the latter were insufficient to protect him/her from the spirit-arrow. One goal of the sentence may be to sell a new spirit-arrow defence for this kind of attack. Or the spirit may have been actively pursued/invited by the person, in which case there will be two kinds of consequences: benefits that come from the spirit, and obligations to reciprocate some benefit to the spirit. Now there are many sources of these kinds of spirits, and apparently in this sentence the source is "the lord." In Jula -- since I don't speak KiSwahili -- "lord" is a term describing one half of a patron-client relationship

(common in many societies). So here we have a patron who has shot a spirit (maybe a benevolent spirit?) at his client in order to oblige the client to return a favor? Or could it be that ...

So the meaning of this single sentence, without any context, is already constrained by certain collocations of words to go in a set of directions that are probably unrelated to the original Biblical context. Of course a bilingual speaker might have avoided all or most of these errors by being more careful not to refer to the Biblical Holy Spirit (of the Tri-une Godhead) with the same expressions one uses to talk about spirit-shooting. But in a society only recently exposed to the Biblical message, can we be sure that anyone has yet been careful to avoid these misunderstandings? What if the first missionaries were unaware of these misunderstandings and so they never searched for something better than this word-for-word "translation"? Unfortunately the new Christians will now sound (to the missionary) like they are describing the same world as the Biblical one (or at least what the missionary thinks the Biblical world is), but the missionary may be blissfully unaware of the serious skewing that is going on.

I have had many experiences (as I am sure you have) where someone makes a comment about the Bible or their faith, and it suddenly becomes clear that we have been operating with some very different assumptions. These are wonderful times of discovery, when previously hidden misunderstandings (often linked to a whole web of other misunderstandings) are suddenly revealed and we can start untangling the mess. And it gets really fun when the two of us go back to Scripture and my African friend is fully convinced that his perspective is the right one and that I have been the one all along who has misunderstood!

OK, but how do you communicate this to (probably monolingual) western readers of a theology journal? I have found very few people who fully understand this aspect of inter-cultural communication. Most missionaries don't even have enough background in cultural anthropology to recognize the basic contours of another culture, let alone fluency in the language such that the new culture's structures can be discussed in that language without the hazards -- the impossibility? -- of working through English or French.

Thanks for taking the time to read my rambling thoughts -- I hope I'm not discouraging you, but don't be too hard on yourself if you get a fairly cool reception to your attempts to convey this to people with little or no bi-cultural fluency. Personally I think that the field of cultural anthropology may provide more tools for making missionaries aware of these issues. A language-based approach remains very opaque to people afflicted by monolingual myopia.

May God continue to give you wisdom, to guide your path, and to bring you peace.

In Christ,

Dan Petersen