Bible Translators' Conferences

A. Thailand

The Chiengmai translators' conference held from June 18th—24th, 1952, under the auspices of the American Bible Society, had as its purpose the laying of plans for translation work in the various indigenous languages of northern Thailand. Twenty delegates representing five different missions studied with keen interest the many related problems.

The keynote of the conference might be called "Newness", despite the fact that the conference was held in the ancient walled city of Chiengmai. After missionaries from different areas had pooled their information as to the location and numbers of aboriginal peoples, it was seen that there were greater numbers of people than had been realized. Apparently troubled conditions in Southeast Asia were resulting in more and more tribal peoples entering the more peaceful country of Thailand from war-torn areas of China, Burma, and Indo-China. To meet this new need, new missionaries, some young and others veterans of work in Southwest China, were available to go into certain of the more remote areas. New translations would undoubtedly be needed for some tribes, but further studies were considered necessary so as to determine the degree to which present translations in Lisu, Lahu, and Miao could be used.

Since the conference found it necessary to study so many phases of the translation problem, the programme touched on many important subjects. Mr. William Smalley of the Christian and Missionary Alliance in Indo-China and a specialist in linguistics and anthropology, gave several lectures on the linguistic structure of the various language families in Southeast Asia and discussed some of the significant corresponding features of the cultures of the respective groups. By using a Miao informant from a nearby leprosarium, Mr. Smalley demonstrated the techniques for analyzing the significant tones of the language as well as the vowel and consonant sounds. He also pointed out the application of orthographic principles to be employed in deciding upon a practical system for the writing of these differences.

Dr. Eugene A. Nida, Secretary for Translations of the American Bible Society, gave several lectures on techniques for language learning, methods for analyzing the meanings of words in aboriginal languages, and a system of exegesis which would be helpful to missionaries in translating.

These general lectures were supplemented with discussions covering a number of phases of work in Thailand. The principal topics were: (1) a survey of linguistic and ethnic groups, (2) the proper construction of practical alphabets, (3) the methods for determining into what languages or dialects translations should be made, (4) the development of a co-ordinated programme so as to prevent overlapping of work between missionaries working in different areas but on related languages, and (5) the adequate rendering of various key words in Scripture.

One of the subjects which was particularly interesting was the comparison of the syntactic structure of some of the languages of Southeast

Asia with the totally different structure of Greek. Suggestions were made as to the most effective means which missionaries could employ in working out a system of correspondences so as to prevent literal and meaningless renderings, particularly of long, involved Greek sentences.

The conference was very grateful to the Overseas Missionary Fellowship, and American Baptist, and the Presbyterian (U.S.A.) Missions for their wonderful hospitality, and appreciated very much the arrangements and leadership given the conference by Rev. Peter A. Voth, American Bible Society Secretary for Thailand.

E. A. Nida

B. **Guatemala**

The third Guatemalan conference on Translation and Linguistics was held at the Central American Bible Institute in Guatemala City, January 6th—9th, 1953. This was the second such conference attended by national informants, who shared all activities with the missionaries. The language of the conference was accordingly Spanish. The conference was under the direction of Edward Sywulka and there were twenty-three missionaries, representing the Presbyterian (U.S.A.), Nazarene, Primitive Methodist, Friends, Central American Mission and the Wycliffe Bible Translators missions, and ten nationals of whom two were Latins working with Indians, representing the Mam, Quiché, Kekchi, Conob and Cakchiquel Indians. Language work among the Chorti, Chuj, Aguacateca, and Ixil Indians was also represented by missionaries. There were present, in addition, Dr. and Mrs. Nida and Margaret T. Hills from the American Bible Society. The food, delightfully and thoughtfully prepared to please nationals and foreigners, was under the efficient direction of Mrs. Arthur Konrad, wife of the director of the Institute.

The conference began with a devotional service on Tuesday evening, January 6th. Each morning Dr. Nida spoke on some phase of translation problems, his two hour talks being broken by discussions by William Sedat and followed by others by Mr. Cox. Among the problems discussed by Dr. Nida were those of syntax and exegesis in relation to certain particularly difficult passages in the Epistles—relationships that a translator often is forced to translate less ambiguously than is necessary in some Indo-European languages, and points seldom covered by commentaries prepared by and for speakers of such languages. One must keep in mind three kinds of substantives, such as objects (people, spirits), actions (repentance, love, baptism) and abstractions (goodness, etc.). Such words may have various aspects or combinations of aspects and so occasionally need to be translated differently, depending on the relationship of the idea to the speaker or writer. Chapter 1 of Colossians was analyzed from this point of view. He devoted several periods to a discussion of the various uses of the Spanish preposition "de" and its translation in Indian languages. He also discussed the periodic need for revisions, explaining the revision of the Valera Version and the American Revised Standard Version.

Mr. Sedat and Mr. Cox discussed, among others, the problem of dialect selection (one national suggested the binding up in one volume

of Gospels and Epistles in several dialects and letting use select the best); the term "Evangelio" adjusted to the language was recommended instead of a translation of "Good News"; in regard to the use of native forms of Bible names (Lu-Peter) some felt it was undignified to use "pet" names, but others felt it was better to use the recognized form; and that the term "San" should be kept in book titles.

In the afternoons there were discussions led by other members of the conference. Miss Hills told what happened to a manuscript after it was sent to the Bible House and asked opinions on format, etc. An expected advance copy of the Bolivian Quechua New Testament in a new format did not arrive from New York, but the people were in favour of large type wherever possible. While red is a popular colour in Guatemala, some of the Indians felt that at this time it was not desirable for Portions because of the Communist pressure. Guatemala blue was requested for New Testaments, with coloured edges instead of white (red was satisfactory and desirable for this). The general opinion was in favour of the use of Spanish with the Indian texts. The Indians were pleased with the idea of paragraph form but, on the whole, verse form seemed to be preferred for general use, particularly in New Testaments. There was enthusiastic approval of the use of section heads. Another afternoon Mr. Limkemann told how the American Bible Society can help with Scriptures. Mr. Ekstrom showed how he and his wife had tried to solve a difficult problem of shifting accent in the Chuj languages. Plans for a conference to be held in 1954, January 5th—8th were made with Stanley Wick as chairman, the conference to be held in the same town. It was hoped to have greater representation. Subjects for discussion include literacy and the preparation of primers, dictionaries, further study of "de", study of particulars such as clitics, aspect of verbs, and the preparation of other literature. Plans were made for the issue of a periodical on these subjects for circulation during the year by missionaries in Guatemala. When possible, throughout the conference, the promotion of literacy and the preparation of other materials was urged.

Each afternoon session closed with a devotional service, in which nationals took part. One evening there was a picnic supper at the very modern radio station of the Central American Mission, and on Thursday and Friday evenings from 9.30 to 9.45 programmes in English, participated in by missionaries and Indians, were sent out by short wave to the States.

The missions took care of their own expenses, including transportation, but since the Central American Mission made the very low charge of $ 4.00 per person for the entire conference, the American Bible Society contributed $ 50.00 to the Central American Mission in appreciation of the excellent service rendered.

Margaret T. Hills