

## Readers' Corner

From Herbert G. Grether in Thailand:

In the October 1956 issue of *The Bible Translator* ("Readers' Corner"), pp. 185f., Dr. W. R. Hutton suggests that in view of the democratic ideal of the equality of all men, we ought in Bible translation to consider seriously the use of one set of pronouns for all, regardless of social class, in those languages where men are linguistically divided into classes through the use of honorific pronoun forms.

A revision of the Thai Bible is now being made. The Thai language is well provided with honorifics. Reflection on the problem has made me conclude that if the device suggested by Dr. Hutton is feasible in Assam, then the nature and use of honorifics in Assam must be different from that in Thailand. Since others may find themselves in a situation like that of Thailand, I would like to enlarge on my reservations.

In pursuing this theme one needs to look not only at the linguistic facts, the cultural situation, and the emotional attachments of the people with whose language we are dealing, but also at the Bible itself, and at the relation of the Bible to the democratic ideal which we cherish. Let me, therefore, summarize my thought under three headings: (a) the use of honorifics in the Thai language, (b) the use of honorifics in the present Thai Bible, and (c) the nature of the Bible as it relates to the problem.

### *The Use of Honorifics in the Thai Language*

Dr. Hutton is concerned in his statement chiefly with pronouns. I suspect there are few, if any, languages in which there is a more complex system of pronouns than in the Thai language. The system is most baffling to foreigners. Even the Thai themselves, unless they are highly educated and move freely in the higher strata of society, never completely master the whole of it. There are endless forms for each person, first, second, and third. Some, but not all, second person forms may be also used for the third person, and vice versa.

In general it would be correct to class the system as one of "honorifics," but this needs to be qualified. It is true that one use of forms in this system is to indicate relative position in society in the view of the speaker, both with regard to himself and with regard to the one whom he addresses or about whom he speaks. Having said this, one must go on to say that there is in Thailand no rigid, unvarying use with regard to these pronouns. An individual is not thought of nor referred to as belonging to a caste or class from which he cannot move. The same individual may be addressed with a different pronoun by each of the following: children, wife, intimate friends, strangers, employer. Even the same person may address him differently under different circumstances! Thus, no man has a single pronominal tag that cannot be shaken. The pronouns used indicate a man's actual life situation in the relationship obtaining at the moment.

By "life situation" we mean far more than station in life. For in Thai, pronouns are used for more purposes than to "put a man in his place." Some of these uses may be enumerated as follows:

1. The converse of "putting a man in his place"—that is, to show a proper respect for those in authority or in a position generally regarded as superior.
2. To indicate relative age.
3. To indicate sex.
4. To indicate relative familiarity.
5. To indicate whether a man is talking to himself or to another—or to an audience.
6. To indicate whether a man is a priest or a layman.
7. To indicate the mood of the speaker—that is, his pleasure or irritation with the one with whom he speaks, rather apart from considerations of relative social position.

These uses of pronouns are most subtly interrelated. The precise use and interpretation of a pronoun form depends in each case on the actual situation in which it is used. A form may be used in more than one way, either at the same time or at different times. The pattern of use of no two forms is precisely alike. A form which often indicates relative social position may also have other uses—and if it were to be discarded, it would be to the impoverishment of the language.

It is true that under the influence of democratic ideas and ideals, which have been abroad in the land especially since the absolute monarchy was set aside in 1932 in favor of a constitutional monarchy, some of the old forms have been virtually sloughed off, and some have come to be used less frequently than before. Nevertheless, there has been no serious assault on the basic system. The use of a variety of pronoun forms for various purposes is so much a part of the Thai mind that an attack upon the system has been taken on occasion to be an assault on freedom and democracy! During World War II the Premier of Thailand advocated reducing pronouns to one set for expressing the "I-you" relationship. The attempt failed. The people did not have the courage to address even the Premier himself in the way he proposed. "We just couldn't do it," they say to this day.

### *The Use of Honorifics in the Present Thai Bible*

When we turn to the Thai Bible we find that the system has already been simplified. The number of honorifics actually used is much reduced in deference to the nature of the Biblical revelation. A few illustrations may suffice:

In addressing the King of Thailand, people use a first person pronoun form meaning literally 'Servant of Lord Buddha'. This is not found in the Bible (even though the term *Buddha*, i.e. 'Enlightened One', is here taken to be a title for the King, not a reference to Gautama).

In Thailand, special pronouns are used by Buddhist priests in referring to themselves, and by others speaking to them. In the Bible, there is no distinction made between priests and laymen by the use of pronouns.

A graded system of pronouns for use with various kinds of royalty does not find a place in the Thai Bible.

In spite of all this, there is in the Thai Bible a careful use of pronoun forms to indicate respect where it is due, as, for example, in address to God, Christ, and kings; and to reflect those situations where the converse is found, that is, where a superior addresses an inferior. The decision as to who is superior is made, of course, primarily in the light of the Biblical context and attitude, not that of Thai society. Further, the use of Thai pronouns to convey other aspects of relationship, some of which are noted above, is also preserved in the Thai Bible. A particularly poignant illustration of this is found in the story of Joseph in Egypt. Up to the moment of Joseph's self-revelation to his brothers, he uses the pronoun *you* which is natural for the ruler to use with the ruled. But the moment he says, 'I am *your* brother,' he uses a pronoun which is fitting for him to use as a brother, rather than a ruler.

### *The Nature of the Bible as It Relates to the Problem*

With all due regard to the protest of the Bible against injustice, and to ideas in the Bible which have issued in the modern democratic ideal, we must remember that the Bible reflects life as it was "then and there"—and it was not democratic. To read thoroughgoing egalitarianism back into it now is to be untrue to the original setting and sense. It is true that in Hebrew the same pronoun forms are used to refer to all men alike, whether king or commoner. Yet there were ways of indicating a sense of difference in station in the eyes of the speaker. One has only to recall the frequent use of "my lord" and "thy servant" in Bible conversations to realize this.

The teachings of the Bible itself require that in some way or other, whether by form or otherwise, it be possible to express respectful address. In view of the feeling the Thai people have for their language, it would be difficult for children to "honor father and mother" while using a form of address felt to be inappropriate, to say the least. To use a neutral or unrespectful form where the context requires a respectful one would be to the Thai ear either puzzling or senseless—or very bad taste. On the other hand, to use a respectful form for all, without regard to social context, would be extremely confusing.

The essence of democracy, as I think we should understand it from the Bible, does not require that we should summarily obliterate the distinctions expressed by the Thai system of honorifics. It means, rather, that in a society where such distinctions exist, they come to be no longer barriers to real fellowship and justice. It means that all men be so reconciled in Christ that relationships are redeemed, and men, whatever terms they use in speaking to one another, do so with mutual love and respect.

## Conclusion

In view, then, of the great complexity of the system of honorifics in Thai, of the use of forms to express relationships other than class relationships, of the emotional attachment of the people to the forms, and of the confusion and meaninglessness that would result from an attempt to reduce the forms to a single set, it appears that it is not practicable to do so in the Thai Bible.

Further, in our judgment, in view of the nature of the Biblical revelation, such a device would not result in a faithful translation of the Bible into Thai.

Having said this, we hasten to say that the Bible in Thai ought to have, does have, and will continue to have a part in reducing distinctions even as it helps to overcome differences. God's revelation can, we believe, produce a society in which all are one under God. But in Thailand, to beg the question in the very instant in which it is put would be to invite general indifference, if not scorn, toward the Word.

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### From J. L. Swellengrebel in Djakarta:

In *The Bible Translator* of October 1956, p. 185, Dr. Hutton suggests to "democratize" languages that use honorifics. Some general considerations let me rather doubt the desirability of doing so. And my experience with a few Indonesian languages (some of which make extensive use of honorifics, and one which differentiates only very slightly) makes me utterly sceptical about the practicability of this suggestion.

1. When the Bible teaches that all men are equal before God, this does not imply that it denies inequality as a fact of daily life, e.g. St. Paul comments about Philemon's slave Onesimus. It is in accordance with this fact that in the OT people sometimes call themselves "your slave" when addressing themselves to those who are their "equals before God," but who have a higher social standing. For the same reason possibly, Luke addresses Theophilus as "your excellency."

2. I believe language follows society rather than society language. It is impossible to democratize a language when the society has not democratized itself. On the other hand, in a democratic society the language will tend to be more or less democratic. A strict agreement between both is not to be expected: the English language, in losing the differentiation of pronouns for the second person, became "equalitarian" in this important point, yet English society seems not to be less stratified than societies that still differentiate pronouns.

For these reasons I have never felt guilty of upholding class distinctions on Bali when trying to translate, as best I could, according to the way the people talk.

3. As long as a society is using honorifics in its language it usually is impossible to escape from it, as far as my experience goes.

In Bali, for instance, even for "house" there is no socially neutral word. One has to know first the social status of its owner. The same is the case with the use of pronouns. (See "Bible Translation and Politeness in Bali," TBT, July 1950, pp. 124-130). In one of the first phases of translating the Bible in Balinese, the translator did try to use a neutral word for the pronoun second person. He had to borrow from Old-Javanese, the Latin of Bali, to get one. After some time it was discovered that to many readers the word meant nothing, and therefore was interpreted by some of them as meaning 'he' or 'they'. This discovery, added to many other considerations, led later translators to abandon this ill-chosen democratic experiment.

I do not wish to underrate the danger and injustice of a caste system. I believe I can appreciate the reasons for Dr. Hutton's outcry. If in Assamese the social and linguistic situation permits a democratization of the honorifics as he is suggesting, I hope it will be done soon! But against general application of that suggestion a warning seems not to be out of place in *The Bible Translator*.

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**From Eric Bishop, Redhill, Surrey, England:**

I am interested in the proposals for the revision of the Bible in Arabic, more particularly the New Testament; but I happened to notice an interesting paragraph in the January 1957 number of TBT (page 27). Here I should agree with the principle enunciated, but demur at one of the examples, if I am correct in thinking that the translation of Van Dyck may be involved, and once again pardon if I am wrong. But in the Van Dyck rendering of Gen. 2:16 'awsâ certainly means 'command' (among other things. See *Muhit al Muhit ad loc.* I have not had opportunity to look it up in Lane yet, or in *Taj al Arus.*) I do not think that to say it means 'recommend' is justified. The Ten Commandments in most of the Arabic-speaking world are known as 'alwasâya l'ashar (hardly the 'Ten Recommendations'). I wonder whether perhaps the answer may be the geographical rather than lexicographical. The Bible used in the Near East (outside the Roman Catholic Church) is a Lebanese product; quite possibly Egypt or another country (Iraq?) might possess the same word with a different slant. I realize the seriousness of this cognate matter, but question the illustration. I wonder whether a great scholar like Van Dyck and his helpers, who must have known the differences in the common cognates like 'amara 'to order' and 'amar 'to say' or dabara 'to follow behind' and dibber 'to speak,' were not alive to this kind of thing. I think the matter needs more consideration. If it is not Van Dyck, then my apologies to him and you. (Incidentally, in the same paragraph the word should be jazza—the wa is 'and'—and here too I think we should not be too quick in criticism.)

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