

# Translation Problems in Conob

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Conob is a Mayan language spoken by approximately 60,000 people in the northern part of the Department of Huehuetenango in Guatemala, Central America. The name Conob is used to identify a group of somewhat related dialects, including those spoken in the towns of Barillas, Santa Eulalia, San Rafael, San Miguel, and possibly Concepción, Jacaltenango, Soloma, and San Juan. The people speaking these dialects have been more or less isolated from one another and with comparatively little interdependence of political and social life, and hence there has been no strong centralizing influence. As a result the dialectal changes are much greater than in the Quiché language area, for the Quiché-speaking peoples were the dominant political group before the arrival of the Spanish and had welded their tribe into a comparatively homogeneous group. One of the big practical problems among the Conob is the production of material which will be usable for people speaking related, but in some cases rather widely differing dialects. For the most part the men have much less difficulty than the women in bridging the gap between dialects, for they are much more accustomed to traveling about. To solve the dialect problems it will probably be necessary to publish primers and Gospels in three or four dialects, and then further publication of the New Testament will be in a single dominant dialect. However, the precise form in which this will be worked out must depend very largely upon the indigenous personnel which is available and the way in which the indigenous church grows. Already there are about five hundred members of the church.

The primary problems, exclusive of dialectal ones, are orthographic and lexical.

## Orthography

For the most part the writing of consonants and vowels is no special problem, for the alphabet can be easily adapted to Spanish. The few sounds not contained in Spanish are written as follows: glottalized consonants (both implosive and explosive, which are never in contrast) are marked by a following apostrophe. For example, *k* is a simple velar stop, and *k'* is an implosive glottalized velar stop, made by drawing down the larynx in such a way that the air pops into the mouth before the following vowel comes out. The *b*-sound is always glottalized (that is, it is always accompanied by a simultaneous closure of the glottis, the aperture between the vocal cords), and hence it is not necessary to use an apostrophe. The two series of back stops are indicated by *c* and *qu* for the front series (following the use of Spanish, in which *c* precedes *a*, *o*, and *u*, and *qu* precedes *i* and *e*) and by *k* for the back series. The front series is made by the middle portion of the tongue against the hard palate, and the back series is made by the back of the tongue against the

soft palate, i.e. the velum. The equivalent to English *sh* is written as *x̄*, and a retroflexed sound of the same type is written with simply an *x*. The use of *x* follows one of the values of this letter in the Spanish of Guatemala.

The serious difficulties in writing Conob are not, however, these problems of symbols, since the system for writing Mayan languages in Guatemala is more or less standardized. The complications involve determining the units which should be written as single words. There has been a tradition in the writing of Mayan languages which generally combines many elements into a single word. In some situations this is necessary, but in Conob the synthetic writing of verb expressions has not proven correct. For one thing, the structure of Conob is somewhat different from many of the other Mayan languages, and there is much greater freedom of position for the various component parts. For example, in the Maya of Yucatan there is a suffix *-c'ob*, which is either a pluralizer of nouns or indicates a plural third person subject or object of verbs. In Maya this form is definitely suffixal to either nouns or verbs, but in Conob the corresponding element *-eb* can be used as a separate word, can precede or follow words with which it occurs, and in every way is simply an independent pronoun.

Part of the difficulty involved may be illustrated by two verb expressions, which were formerly written as *c'am chitojcanelok* "he is going away" and *chicamc'ulnachajoj* "you (sg.) understand well." At present these two expressions are written as follows: (1) *c'am chi tojcan elok* and (2) *chi cam c'ul nachaj oj*. In order to understand something of the basis for this division we should examine the meanings of the parts. The first expression is composed of the following elements: (1) *c'am* a negative particle, (2) *chi* a particular which indicates that the time of the action is present, (3) *toj* the verb "to go," (4) *-can* the verb "to remain," (5) *el* the verb "to leave," and (6) *-ok* a bound particle (which never occurs alone) and which accompanies certain negative expressions. This combination of three verbs might appear to be a compound, but it is simply a verb phrase which describes precisely the process of "going away" by including the action of "going," "remaining," and "leaving." Verb phrases with such verbs of direction are very common. The second word is composed of the following parts: (1) *chi*, the same present tense particle, (2) *cam* "it dies," (3) *c'ul* "stomach," (4) *na-* "understands," (5) *-chaj* "itself," and (4) *oj* "by you (sg.)." This is a type of passive verb expression which literally means that the "stomach (the seat of emotions and certain mental activities) thinks itself dying (i.e. very earnestly) by you (s.g.)." This translation makes little or no sense in English, but the phrase is a perfectly regular type of syntactic expression in Conob.

The decision to break up long words in Conob has resulted from two factors: (1) an extensive analysis of the Conob structure, in which it was found that the positions of occurrence of many elements are very free (that is, they act just like complete words), and (2) the reactions of indigenous speakers who could write their own language. The principal indigenous translator, Mateo D. Castañeda, began of his own

accord to break up words, for he insisted that they should be written separately. But as long as he attempted to write partially according to the previous system and partially according to what seemed necessary to him, there was constant conflict in his own mind, and considerable inconsistency. Finally, a careful study of all the doubtful constructions was undertaken, and almost without exception the scientific analysis of the structure confirmed Mateo's reactions as an indigenous speaker. In some instances the breaking up of units has distorted somewhat the syllabic patterns of consonant and vowel sequences, but this is precisely what occurs in Spanish, where *el hombre* "the man" in actual speech is syllabified between the *e* and the *l*, the latter going with the following vowel.

Having proceeded to break up the writing of words in Conob, it was interesting to discover from other missionaries that similar, though not quite such extensive, changes have been made in several other Mayan languages.

### The Selection of Proper Idioms

The terminology employed by people to describe their manner of life (i.e. their culture) is just as diverse as the features which make up their way of living. The situation in the Conob language is surely no exception, and in many features exhibits interesting forms because of the comparative isolation of the tribe and the limited contacts with outside influences.

The problems involving the selection of proper idioms fall under several headings, though in some instances it is somewhat difficult to distinguish clearly between the various factors. For convenience, however, we may subdivide between (1) general idioms, (2) idioms based upon grammatical prerequisites, (3) psychological terms, and (4) expressions involving cultural contrasts.

### General Idioms

Special idioms are found in all languages. The following are simply illustrative: "the seaside" (Mk. 4 : 1) is literally "the mouth of the sea"; "pineth away" (Mk. 9 : 18) is "become bony"; "a cornerstone" (Mk. 12 : 10) is called "the ear of the house"; and "thunder" (Mk. 3 : 17) reflects an indigenous belief and is literally "the sun trembles." This last expression is only a little less accurate than the English idiom "the sun sets," when in reality the sun does no such thing.

Certain general idioms reflect various actions and attitudes of people. For example, "to deny self" (Mk. 8 : 34) is actually "does not belong to himself any longer." This has proven to be an excellent means of expressing what in some languages is very difficult to reproduce. "To worship" (Mk. 7 : 7) is translatable as "to humble oneself before." "To take heed" (Mk. 4 : 24) is literally "to hear dying." The use of the verb "dying" (cf. illustration under *orthography*) makes any action important and serious, that is to say, somewhat equivalent to the English phrase "a matter of life and death," when it refers to the seriousness of the

occasion and not necessarily to the literal dread alternative. Some idioms (as is the case in all languages) appear to be contradictions, e.g. "held their peace" (Mk. 3 : 4) is rendered by "said silence."

Some idioms are used in connection with terms involving particular religious practices, attitudes, or people. For example, "sinners" are "people with bad stomachs (or abdomens)." "Adultery against her" (Mk. 10 : 11) is "did evil against her eyes." "Blasphemy" is "that which hurts the high." The expression "the high" is a type of qualitative substitute used when referring to God. "Pardon" is literally "to erase and make fall." This phrase denotes precisely the completeness of the act of forgiveness. A "covenant" is translated by a phrase meaning "to put mouths equal." This denotes assent and agreement, though it does fail to represent fully the force of the Greek equivalent. The Conob equivalent for "Saviour" has presented quite a problem, for in describing any action of "rescuing" or "saving," the only term is one which also means "helper." Some might argue that such a term is completely unacceptable because of its wide area of meaning, and because one of the areas of meaning corresponds to the English "helper." Nevertheless the Conob word is not the equivalent of the English term "helper," and in actual usage by the Conob Christians such a term has been quite acceptable.

### **Idioms Based upon Grammatical Prerequisites**

The form of some idioms is determined somewhat by the grammatical prerequisites. For example, "is baptized" (Mk. 16 : 16) must be translated literally as "give baptism to oneself." Of course, this does not mean that one performs the ceremony upon himself, but the reflexive is used with many verbs in preference to some type of passive. On the other hand, in many constructions the passive is preferred rather than the active. For example, "they ..... anoint him" (Mk. 16 : 1) is translated "that his body be anointed by them." However, the passive phrase "be condemned" (Mk. 16 : 16) is rendered by a specialized idiomatic form "condemnation will eat in him."

One grammatical problem was encountered in Mk. 8 : 24, in which the clause "I see men as trees, walking" was first translated as "I see men walk like trees." In phrase-final position after the verb "walk" there could be no other meaning than that trees were in the habit of walking. To avoid the wrong interpretation the translation was changed to "I see men like trees and they walk."

### **Psychological Terms**

One of the most interesting developments in Conob is the extensive use of the noun *c'ul*, literally "stomach" or "abdomen," to identify the center of emotional reactions. There are many idioms based upon this fundamental psychological orientation. In the following list, first the literal meaning and then the actual English equivalent is given. The very number of forms will provide something of a basis for examining some of the problems and attitudes reflected in these idioms.

<i>Literal Meaning</i>	<i>English Equivalent</i>
1. Crying in one's stomach	Compassion
2. Large stomach	Patience
3. Good stomach	Well
4. Entering it into one's stomach	Believe
5. One's stomach dies	Love
6. One's stomach rises	Hate
7. One's stomach falls	Surprise
8. One's stomach bites	Wrath
9. One's stomach dries up	Sadness
10. One's stomach is given to	Receiving counsel
11. Strength entering into on's stomach	Confidence
12. One's stomach says "no"	One does not wish
13. One's stomach is smoothed	Peace
14. Your stomach is dog, dry	You are ungrateful
15. There is your stomach	You have your sin
16. Look for your stomach	Serve yourself (i.e. eat)
17. To say "up, here" your stomach	Confess your sin
18. Straight stomach	Determined
19. Trembling stomach	Affliction
20. Heavy stomach	Laziness
21. One's stomach fears	Fear
22. Mixed-up stomach	Indecision
23. Agitated stomach	Fright
24. Fever stomach	Anger
25. Walking in one's stomach	Judging
26. Twisted in one's stomach	Against one's will
27. Lost stomach	Foolish

This use of *c'ul* seems to be so extensive that one could use it for all types of emotional experience, and yet this is not true. For example, one cannot say literally "to love God in one's *c'ul*," for in such a phrase *c'ul* would be taken as the physical stomach. In this instance the term *pixan*, literally "heart," seems to be necessary. On the other hand, this *pixan* is also the soul, which is said to go on a vacation for twenty days each year, and during that time the people must be sure to eat well and to enjoy themselves thoroughly in order that the *pixan* may be convinced that it is profitable to return from the spirit world. In fact, some tortillas (corn cakes) are made in the form of bridges in order to facilitate the return of the *pixan*. Nevertheless the love for God, who is a spirit, must be discussed in terms of the "soul" or "heart" and not by means of the term *c'ul* "stomach," which serves so well for other types of emotional expressions and in certain set phrases (see item 5 above).

In addition to these two words *c'ul* and *pixan*, there is also the Spanish borrowing *anima*, which, however, only means "a person" in present-day usage.

### Expressions Involving Cultural Contrasts

Without careful study of indigenous practices one can be easily mistaken in some translations, which appear to be perfectly easy and natural, but which may involve statements which are quite contradictory. For example, "the kingdom of God" may be translated "where God supervises" (or literally "guards"). However, in Mark 10 : 15 it is not possible to speak of "receiving the kingdom of God," for this would imply that one simply takes over the responsibility for guarding God's country while He rests. Accordingly, the translation is adapted to meet the cultural and linguistic requirements of the language by the form "receive God as king."

The expression "fowls of the air" or as in Spanish *las aves del cielo* "the birds of heaven" (Mk. 4 : 32) produced considerable misunderstanding, for the Conobs have two distinct terms, one to identify domesticated birds and the other nondomesticated birds. The additional descriptive phrase "of heaven" seemed entirely misleading, for the Conob people had never heard of such creatures. Actually, of course, all that was necessary was the term for nondomesticated birds, for that is precisely the meaning of the Biblical expression.

In the phrase "Jesus perceived in his spirit" (Mk. 2 : 8) it is impossible to employ the usual term for "spirit," namely, *espiritu* (borrowed from Spanish). The people distinguish very carefully between an *espiritu*, which is a personality in the spirit world, and the perceptive faculty of a person. Accordingly, in order to avoid attributing to Jesus the possession of and control of some *espiritu* from the spirit world, the term *c'ul* "stomach" is employed, for it is this center of the emotional and perceptive nature which is operative in such events as are described in Mark 2 : 8.

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