

Some Difficulties in Bible Translation into a Bantu Language¹

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Each language family, nay, each separate language, has its own peculiarities of structure and idiom, and its own connotation in vocabulary. It is not to be expected that any translation will reflect exactly the full meaning of the original, which is colored by local customs, thought, and history. This is especially noticeable in differences of linguistic approach in the case of the Bantu languages of Africa, when translation of the Holy Scriptures is undertaken. Vast linguistic and vocabulary differences exist between Bantu, on the one side, and Hebrew, the language of the Old Testament, and Greek, the language of the New Testament, on the other. Consideration is here given to a few of the difficulties encountered by the translator of the Bible into one of the Bantu languages, Lamba, spoken in northern Rhodesia and across the border in southern Congo Belge.²

The question of gender presents a real difficulty. Some languages divide nouns into three categories, masculine, feminine, and neuter; some, as French, into only two, masculine and feminine, the names of inanimate objects being divided between these two. Greek employs three genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter. Hebrew, while employing masculine and feminine, uses also common forms. The origin of such division may or may not have been a sexual one. In Bantu languages, on the other hand, the nouns are divided into a large number of categories, called "classes," any one language having between thirteen and eighteen; but none of these classes carries any indication of sex gender; rather they indicate distinctions between personal, material, abstract, size (big things, small things, undersized things, long things), verbal, vegetable, animal, etc. There are therefore no pronouns to distinguish between such concepts as "he" and "she." Again, while Bantu classes 1 and 2 generally indicate persons, in some cases including many non-personal animates, most personal nouns are found in class 1, as *umuntu* 'a person', plural *aŵantu* (in class 2); nevertheless a 'chief' is *imfumu*, in

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² The translation referred to has been carried out by Baptist missionaries working with African Christian helpers. The English Revised Version (1881—1885) was taken as the basis, constant references being made to the Greek NT (version used by the revisers) and to the Hebrew OT text (British and Foreign Bible Society's edition of 1877 printed at Vienna). The translators were European missionaries able to "think" in English and Lamba. When the work commenced, education among the very primitive people was only beginning. The translation aimed at rendering into idiomatic Lamba the "Word of God." Care was taken not to deviate from the exact meaning of the original, as far as this was humanly possible in translating; and the translators rigidly avoided introducing any personal interpretation into the Scriptures. Obviously, revision will be called for when educated Lamba Christians can themselves undertake such a work.

the class containing most names of animals; an 'overseer' is *icilolo* in the class of material or large objects. Now the word for 'spirit' is *umupasi*, a word of class 3, with plural *imipasi* in class 4. In these classes the majority of names of trees occurs; and it is interesting to note that the words *umupuya* 'air, breath', *umweo* 'life', and *umulilo* 'fire' belong to the same class. From a consideration of this, it can be appreciated at once that it is impossible to indicate *grammatically* that the Holy Spirit is a person. The pronoun indicating 'he' (or 'she') for all nouns of class 1, the pre-eminently personal class, is *ye*, but the word *umupasi* must be grammatically indicated by the pronoun *wo*, the same as for *umuti* 'tree', where it would be interpreted as 'it'. It is necessary, then, to leave it to numerous references in the Scriptures to establish that the Holy Spirit is a person, the third person of the Trinity.

Kinship relation provides another subject of great difficulty to translators. The classificatory system used by the Lamba includes the connotation of the words for 'father', for instance, the father's brothers and anyone belonging to the father's clan, in addition to the biological father. Similarly the terms for 'brother' apply to the children of the father's brothers and the mother's sisters, as well as those strictly within the biological family.

In Lamba, difficulty is increased, however, for there is no generic term for 'father' or 'mother'. In each case six terms are used, but each implies a possessor relationship; for instance: *tata* 'my father', *wiso* 'thy father', *wisi* 'his, her father', *wisifwe* 'our father', *wisinwe* 'your father', and *wisiwo* 'their father'; similarly, *mama* 'my mother', *noko* 'thy mother', *nyina* 'his, her mother', *nyinefwe* 'our mother', *nyinenwe* 'your mother', and *nyinawo* 'their mother'. Generally these terms fit in admirably in translating, as many Scripture references include the possessive; but there are some cases when the translator has to come to a decision in interpreting his text. One will suffice: Matthew 28:19, "baptizing them in the name of the Father . . ." Is this to be rendered 'my Father', 'our Father', 'your Father', or 'their Father'? The translator has to make a definite choice of one or other of these. The translators have chosen 'my Father'.

The Lamba, in address, never uses a word indicating 'son' or 'daughter', but the word 'child' without sex distinction. The word is *umwana*. To make a literal translation, *umwana umwalalume* 'male child' is used for 'son', and *umwana umwanakasi* 'female child' for 'daughter'. But to translate Proverbs 1:8, "My son, hear the instruction of thy father," by *Wemwana wanji umwalalume* would certainly not be Lamba idiom; nor could the tender words of Our Lord in Matthew 9:22, "Daughter, be of good comfort," be translated other than by *Wemwana wanji* 'My child'.

An interesting problem is presented in Jeremiah 32:7, with the words "thine uncle." The Hebrew *dod* indicates the paternal uncle. Lamba has two words for 'thine uncle', *wiso* 'thy father's brother' and *mwinsyo woowe* 'thy mother's brother. Here, redemption of a field is involved, inheritance. In matriarchal society, as is the Lamba, only the *mwinsyo*

could be understood by the people as having any part in inheritance; but the term *wiso* has to be used to satisfy Hebrew custom!

Then there is the important question of reverence. When the missionaries commenced Bible translating into Lamba, over forty years ago, they were faced with a real difficulty over the use of the word for 'God' and of other words indicative of God and the Lord Jesus. It is Lamba custom to use the plural of proper names when addressing and referring to persons in any position of seniority or honor, and even between persons of equal position, as a mark of ordinary courtesy and respect. For instance, the chief *Katanga* would invariably be referred to as *wāKatanga*. The problem was: should God, *Lesa*, be referred to as *wāLesa*, the Lord as *wāYawe* (Old Testament "Jehovah" or "Yahwe") or as *wāSikulu* (New Testament *Kurios*), Christ as *wāKlistu*, and so on? These forms of respect are really honorific plurals, and the missionaries feared the possibility of erroneous teaching of a plurality of 'Gods' or of 'Christs'. It was necessary to use the plural *wālesa* (small "l," not capital) in many expressions, such as in Joshua 24:15, 'the gods of the Amorites' *wālesa wāwāAmoli*. Hence the missionaries decided to employ the singular only and use the terms *Lesa*, *Yawe*, *Yesu* 'Jesus', *Sikulu*, *Klistu*, etc. This is what has been used in the published New Testament and in certain books of the Old Testament already published. Now, however, it is found that in trying to avoid one possible misinterpretation a greater disservice has been done, through a lack of according due respect to God the Father and to the Lord Jesus Christ. With the completion of the translation of the whole Bible, realizing that the Lamba people have now had fifty years of Christian teaching, it has been decided to use the respectful plural in such cases throughout the Scriptures. An alteration such as this constitutes a "major linguistic operation," for, to use the plural, each Bantu word is transferred from noun class 1 to noun class 2, and all words in the sentences in grammatical relationship have to be modified to agree in concord with the changed noun; pronouns, adjectives, verbs in agreement have all to assume class 2 forms as well. For instance: 'The Lord of hosts hath done it' *Yawe wamaŵumba walificitile* becomes *ŴaYawe wamaŵumba walificitile*, or 'O God!' *weLesa!* becomes *mweŵaLesa!* And such adjustment has to be made throughout the Bible. With this change we feel confident that the revised Bible will reflect more truly the heart language of the people.

Naturally differences of language structure and usage are commonly concentrated in the verb tense system. The tense systems of Hebrew and Greek, to begin with, differ widely one from the other, but the Bantu languages have tense systems markedly divergent from both of those. Only one aspect of this can be dealt with here. It is a common feature of Bantu tenses to employ at least two pasts and two futures, according to relative immediacy or remoteness. In Lamba, for instance, the immediate past tense indicates an action which has taken place today (on the day the speaker uses it), while the remote past tense indicates an action which took place any time before today. Similarly with the two future tenses: *twakumulipila* 'we shall pay him' indicates that we

shall do it today, while *tukamulipila* definitely delegates the action to a time later than today. Luke 12:46 provides an example of real difficulty in this connection: "The lord of that servant will come in a day when he looketh not for him"—a sentence in which the time is deliberately given as uncertain, and yet the translator has to choose between *wakesa* 'he will come—after today' and *wakwisa* 'he will come—sometime today'.

Probably, however, the greatest difficulty facing the translator concerns the translation of words, a matter of vocabulary concordance. There are the theological terms, involving deep and wonderful teaching, which, it is only to be expected, will not be represented in the vocabulary of people of so different a culture and state of education.

In some cases, involving, among others, terms of local significance, Greek or Hebrew words have had to be introduced and the converts taught the significance of these terms. Such, among the Lamba, are 'Sabbath' *Sabata*, 'Pentecost' *Pentekosite*, 'Temple' *itempuli*, 'Synagogue' *isunagoge*, 'Areopagus' *Aleopage*. In other such cases Lamba equivalents have been found which could reasonably be adapted for use. Such are: 'Passover' *umuciluko* 'a passing over', from the verb *ciluka* 'pass over, jump over'; 'Feast of Tabernacles' *icitenje camitanda* (*imitanda* being 'booths, branch shelters constructed for a night's lodgment in the forest'); 'Cross' *umutaliko* 'a pole with a cross-piece, on which maize was normally tied' from the verb *talika* which, strangely enough, is used of 'holding down a man with arms and legs stretched out, someone gripping each limb'.

For the term 'righteous' the verb *lungama* 'be straight, upright, just' is used, and the causative form of this verb, *lunjika*, is used for 'justification' (being made straight, just). For the opposite term, 'unrighteous', the verb *sendama* 'be crooked, out of straight' is used. It is obvious that in the first instance such terms lack the full connotation of Christian teaching, but with the passage of years, and by comparing scripture with scripture, they have gained a richness of meaning which they did not have before.

For 'Scriptures' the word *amalembo* 'writings' is used, and for 'scribe' *umulembesi* 'writer', despite the fact that the verb *lemba*, from which both the above are derived, originally meant 'to cut, tattoo', *ululembo* being 'a tattoo mark', but from the first contact of the Lamba with Europeans, and their first sight of writing, they applied the verb *lemba* to this wonderful accomplishment.

Lamba has the verb *sweta*, meaning 'to be clean', but they had no concept of holiness. The perfective form of this verb, however, *swetelela* means 'to be absolutely clean', and this has been used to translate 'purity' and 'holiness', though in the latter case the idea of 'separation' has also sometimes to be added. The 'Holy Place' is *apaswetelele*, a locative form meaning 'where it is perfectly pure', and a further intensification of this is achieved by adding the ideophonic derivative *swete*; thus *apaswetelele swete* 'where it is perfectly pure with purity' is used for the 'most holy place'.

The words 'world' and 'earth' present another problem. The Lamba

icalo really means 'country' or 'district'. The early missionaries, coming from Nyasaland, brought the Nyanja phrase *dziko la pansi* 'land of below' and so used in Lamba *icalo capansi*. As a matter of fact, the Lamba do have their own term, *icalo capapano posonde* 'land of here outside', originally used in contradistinction to the land of spirits, which was conceived as being within the earth. It is felt better to use the Lamba idiom, though to speak of 'the country here outside' is definitely difficult when God is speaking from heaven, as in Genesis 1:28, "God said unto them, Be fruitful and multiply and replenish the earth"; or when Jesus spoke, as in John 18:37, "To this end was I born, and for this cause came I into the world, that I should bear witness unto the truth." So the term *icalo capansi* is used as an alternate.

Bantu languages are typically poor in words for the points of the compass. This is so with Lamba. There are the two words for 'east' and 'west', *umutulesuŵa* 'where the sun rises' and *imbonsi* 'where the sun sets', but the only words they have for 'north' and 'south' are solely of local significance, viz. *kumausi* 'to the Aushi country' and *kumalenje* 'to the Lenje country'. Obviously these terms cannot be used in Bible translation; one could not call 'the Queen of the South' *Imfumu yanakasi iyakumalenje*, which would mean 'Queen of Lenjeland'! And so, reluctantly, the terms *nofu* and *saufu*, transliterated from English, have had to be used.

Most Bantu languages distinguish clearly 'the hair of the head' from hair elsewhere on the body, but there is seldom any generic term for hair. Lamba has *imisasi* and *amasako* respectively, and Zulu similarly *izinwele* and *uboya*.³ There is immediately difficulty in such a phrase as in Job 4:15, "The hair of my flesh stood up," though most cases in the Bible clearly state "hair of the head" when that is meant.

Care has to be taken over the word used to translate 'dust', for the Lamba has two clearly distinguished words, *ifukutu* 'settled dust, dust on the ground or on objects' and *ikungu* 'dust in the air, as clouds of dust'. In Ezekiel 26:10, "By reason of the abundance of his horses their dust shall cover thee," *ikungu* has to be used; but in Genesis 2:7, "The Lord God formed man of the dust of the ground," *ifukutu* is the correct term.

Further complications occur when trying to match Biblical words for various types of pottery with those used by the Lamba. The systems of nomenclature and classification according to use, size, and shape are so different. Similarly with terms for baskets, and most seriously with terms for musical instruments. Just think of the lists in Daniel (as in 3:5) of "cornet, flute, harp, sacbut, psaltery, dulcimer, and all kinds of music"! Similar difficulties occur when lists of names of trees are given, trees not to be found in Lambaland, and especially lists of precious stones, as in Revelation 21:19, 20, where we have "jasper, sapphire, chalcedony, emerald, sardonyx, sardius, chrysolite, beryl, topaz, chrysoprasus, jacinth, amethyst." Here is the Lamba rendering: *yasipa, safila kalukedoni, simalagido, sadonu, sadyo, cilusolito, belulo, topasi,*

³ French and other languages make similar distinctions to those in Lamba.

cilusofilaso, wacinti, ametusito, all of which are seen to be transliterations, if not from English, then from Greek.

One of the outstanding deficiencies of Lamba vocabulary concerns terms for colors. There is really only one genuine color term in Lamba, the verb *kasika* 'be red'. The verb *fita*, used for 'black', really means 'be dark'. Similarly the verb *tuwa*, used for 'white', basically means 'be light'. To indicate 'green' reference is sometimes made to the color of copper ore (malachite), or to grass, though the latter is almost yellow at the season of the grass-burning. 'Dark blue' is 'dark like the sky' and 'light blue' is 'light like the sky'. 'Yellow' is indicated by reference to 'baby's excreta'. For 'grey' *uwulelu* 'marsh water' is used, while for 'brown' or 'tawny' reference may be made to the color of certain wild animals. None of the above is really a color term; all are attempts to describe, made necessary by the multiplicity of new objects brought in by civilization. Lambas were completely baffled when asked to describe the colors of the various bindings of books in my library. For the Bible translator this creates real difficulty. For instance, the terms 'purple', 'red', and 'scarlet' are all distinguished by different words in both the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, and Hebrew has an additional word for 'crimson'. The best that the translator can do in such a case as this is to take the basic Lamba word *kasika* for 'red', and then modify it by the terms for 'light' and 'dark', and use it with the ideophonic intensifier *cee* for 'scarlet', or associate it with the word for 'blood'.

It is obvious that there will be many words for which the language has no equivalent. In some of these cases transliteration is resorted to, as with the precious stones above, e.g. for 'bear' (the animal) *beya* is used, for 'camel' *ingamela*, for 'mule' *imyuli*. In other cases circumlocutions and approximations are resorted to. 'Snow' is unknown to the Lamba and this is how "He slew a lion in the midst of a pit in time of snow" (2 Samuel 23:20) is rendered: *Waliipeye inkalamu mukati mwikanda pampindi yakuloka icandwa twu*, the latter portion of which is literally 'at-a-time of-to-rain frost dazzling white', the idea of raining frost giving a picture of snow falling. Any house bigger than a big hut was unknown, hence there is no word for 'tower', which is rendered *icanda yankondo tali* 'tall war house', and *akatanino* 'communal hut, or large chief's hut' serves for 'palace'. There being no word for 'grape' or 'wine', a basic transliteration *-faina* was employed, giving the following words: *ulufaina* 'grape', *imfaina* 'wine', *umufaina* 'grapevine', *iwala lyamifaina* 'vineyard, literally, garden of grapevines'.

Such examples could obviously be multiplied, but they are sufficient to reveal some of the difficulties which confront the Bible translator rendering the Scriptures into a Bantu language. Questions regarding the text of the originals and the real significance of the Hebrew and Greek words and idioms involved are apart from this altogether. But they too serve to emphasize the need of special study and training for the task of Bible translating.