

SOME TRANSLATION PROBLEMS IN NAVAJO

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The Navajo language belongs to the great Athapascan language family, which is spoken by scattered groups extending like stepping stones across North America all the way from Bering Strait to northern Mexico. The largest of these groups is the Navajo tribe, living in northeast Arizona and northwest New Mexico. This is the largest tribe in the United States and now numbers about 88,000. It is increasing every year. Until a few years ago the tribe was about 70 % non-English-speaking, but this percentage is decreasing now that most of the children are in school for a few years at least.

Translation for the Navajos was begun within a few years after the first missionaries came to the reservation at the turn of the century. Genesis and Mark were published by the American Bible Society in 1910. But since the four men from the Presbyterian and Christian Reformed missions who were doing the translating were full time missionaries as well, the work went very slowly. By 1935, besides the full text of Genesis, Mark, John, and Acts, only small portions of Exodus, Psalms, Luke, Romans, 1 Corinthians, and Revelation were in print. In 1944 three members of Wycliffe Bible Translators began full time language work and then translation with a view to completing the translation of the New Testament at least. Two other members of the Wycliffe Bible Translators joined the Navajo team later, working chiefly in the field of literacy. Also two members of the Christian Reformed mission kept working at translation and produced the first draft of 1 Corinthians. The complete New Testament was published in 1956 by the American Bible Society. The necessity of printing four editions in three years, totaling 9000 volumes, proved the interest and desire of the Navajos for the Word in their own language.

Although a good many problems were encountered as the work progressed, it was not always difficult. As is true in most languages, there are areas where the Navajo culture and that of Palestine in New Testament times are similar and so the translation was simple. Before taking up the problems, it is interesting to note a few of those areas where the cultures mesh.

Areas of similarity of culture

1. *Sheep and sheep herding*

For many generations Navajos have herded sheep in country similar to Palestine and encounter many similar dangers and difficulties. Unlike Palestinian shepherds, Navajos drive their sheep rather than lead them, but Lk. 15:4 depicts an experience common to the shepherds of both countries. The phrase, "...if he lose one", *ta'*

yóó'ayúilt'e'go, 'one away = there-it-he-permits-or-causes-to-go-if' ¹ is a very familiar one, as there are many pitfalls for sheep in Navajo land.

2. Silversmithing

Many Navajos are skilled silversmiths, producing thousands of dollars worth of beautiful silver and turquoise jewelry every year. So the story of the riot of the silversmiths in Acts 19:23-41 presents no difficulties. The usual term for silversmith is *'atsidii* 'something-(unidentified)-he pounds-the-one-who'; but a fuller form includes the phrase which means silver, *béesh ligaii* 'metal white-that-which-is'. This phrase is the object of the verb *yitsid* 'it-he-pounds' so that when the relativizing enclitic *-ii* is added we have *béesh ligaii yitsidii* 'metal white-which-is it-he-pounds-the-one-who'.

3. Church

The Greek word *ecclesia* 'assembly', 'church' lends itself readily to translation into Navajo by the nominalized verb *'atah niliinii*. This expression is made up of the verb prefix *'atah* 'together', implying 'gathering together', the verb proper *nili* 'they-(collectively)-are', and the enclitic *-ii* 'those-who'. To express the idea of an assembly of Christians, 'believers' is included as the subject of the verb; and to show that the meeting is done regularly, the customary aspect of the verb is employed, thus: *da'oodlāanii 'atah nádleehii* 'plural-they-believe-those-who together regularly-they-become-those-who'.

When the text says, "the church of God, of Christ, or the Lord", these names precede the nominalized verb 'to believe', and its form is changed to include the pronoun object in apposition with God, Christ, or the Lord, thus: *God dayoodlāanii* 'God plural-him-they-believe-those-who'.

When the whole body of believers is meant in contrast to a local group, as in Mt. 16:18, Eph. 1:22 and elsewhere, a somewhat different expression occurs. It is made up of the usual word for believers as given above, *da'oodlāanii* plus the phrase *t'ááta' bizhi'ee* 'just-one its-body-that-which-is'.

4. Various

A few other areas of similarity between the cultures may be mentioned briefly in passing: the casting out of evil spirits, Mk. 7:30; the separation of the grain from the chaff, Mt. 3:12; the hand grinding of grain, Lk. 17:35; spinning, Mt. 6:28; discerning of the weather by the sky, Mt. 16:2; the end of the world, Mt. 13:39. The old men speak of the time when things as they are will come to an end and there will be a great change.

¹ Literal translations are given in the order of the syllables of morphemes in the Navajo word. The orthography used is a practical one adapted to English. In this article nasalization of vowels is not indicated.

CLASSES OF TRANSLATION PROBLEMS

Most of the difficulties encountered in the Navajo translation may be grouped in the following categories, which will be discussed in turn and illustrations given: (A) Navajo more explicit, (B) limitations of the language, (C) no cultural equivalent, (D) literalism versus meaningfulness or punch.

A. Navajo more explicit

In many cases the Navajo is more explicit than the English so that details must be supplied that are in neither the English nor the original language.

1. *Bed*

Navajos have three terms for bed: *yaateel* 'sheepskin used as a bed', *bik'i'anitéhi* 'it-on-someone-down-he-lies-the-one-which', *tsásk'eh* 'imprint of the body'. Mk. 2:11 "... Arise, and take up thy bed..."² Here *yaateel* was rejected by the informants, probably because if sheepskins are to be moved they are usually put into a wagon or truck. The blanket is carried about, not the sheepskin. The term *tsásk'eh* has come to refer to something more permanent such as a white man's bed. The form chosen was *bik'initéhi* 'it-on-you-lie-that-which' (-i is another nominalizer) because it could refer to the type of thing, like a bedroll, which one might carry about. The fact that it was a flexible bed, easy to roll, is shown by the stem in the verb 'to take up' -*tsóós* 'to handle a flat, flexible object'. The translation is: ... *Ñdii'nééh, bik'initéhi ñdiültsóosgo* '... Get-up, that-on-which-you-are-lying up-it-(flat, flexible object)-you-taking ...'

2. *Aaron's rod that budded*

The rod was described as a dead piece of stick cut from a certain tree. The informant wanted to know what kind of tree, and when told that it was an almond tree, he asked what color the blossoms were. The encyclopedia disclosed that almond trees in the Middle East bear yellow blossoms. He had to know this before he could give the proper term for "budded", since the color of the bud is incorporated in the word. The translation is: ... *'Éran bigish ch'il nahalingo bilátaḥ da'üichiihée* 'Aaron his-stick plant it-being-like its-top-along plural-something-(unidentified subject)-were-becoming-yellowish-red-the-former-one ...'.

3. *Age of brothers and sisters*

Navajo has terms for 'older sister' -*ádi*, 'younger sister' -*deezhi*; 'older brother' -*naai*, and 'younger brother' -*tsili*. Siblings of the opposite sex are -*lah*, whether older or younger. Jn. 11:1, 2 "... Mary and her sister Martha ... whose brother Lazarus was sick." Here it was

² Biblical quotations are all from the King James Version.

necessary to know which of the two women was the older, but the original language does not indicate it. Since in Lk. 10:38-42 Martha seems to take the responsibility of the housework, the decision was made to consider Martha the older, so the translation became: *Mary 'áádóó bádi Martha . . . halah Lazarus daatsaah* 'Mary and her-older-sister Martha . . . their-brother Lazarus was-sick'. In Mk. 3:31 where Jesus' brethren and his mother are spoken of, there is no problem since Jesus was the first-born.

B. Limitations of the language

Some grammatical rules in Navajo limit the expression of certain Biblical concepts.

1. *The father, the son*

Relationship terms are obligatorily possessed, as *shiye* 'my-son', *niye* 'your-son', *biye* 'his-son' etc. Body parts are also obligatorily possessed, as *shijáád* 'my-leg', *nijáád* 'your-leg' etc. For these there is an unidentified possessor form, *'ajáád* 'something's-leg', which is commonly used, for example, for a leg of mutton, when the leg is no longer a part of the body.

This unidentified possessor form is seldom used with relationship terms. A father is always spoken of as the father of some particular person, a son as the son of some particular person. Thus the translation of 'the Father' and 'the Son' as members of the Godhead throughout the New Testament was difficult. But the Navajos have two words for father, *'azhé'é*, the commonly used one, and *'ataa'*, an older word with some prestige. After being taught concerning the trinity, Navajos were willing to accept *'aTaa'* for 'the Father', and *'aYe'* for 'the Son'.

2. *Son of Man*

This term presented a difficulty not only in Navajo but also one peculiar to all the Athapaskan languages. It lies in the fact that all these languages, so far as we know, have a word phonetically similar to the Navajo *diné* which has three meanings: 'man, people in general', 'a man', 'The People' which is the name the Navajos use for themselves. (The name Navajo was first used by the Spanish explorers.) Although it seemed natural to say *diné biye* 'a-man his-son', this could also mean 'The-People their-son' or 'a-Navajo his-son', in contrast to the son of a white man or of another Indian tribe. Since the concept of the humanity of Christ is so important, we felt that *diné biye* with its three possible meanings should not be used. The term finally decided on was *Diné Sili'i* 'Man he-became-the-one-who'. This could be interpreted to mean 'the one who became a Navajo', but since it still would impart the idea of Christ's becoming man, it was deemed adequate, and it has proven acceptable to the Navajos.

3. *Daughter of Zion*

Navajo distinguishes between a man's son or daughter and a woman's son or daughter by the use of different terms for each. So the gender of Zion had to be determined. The problem was settled when a friend called to our attention a number of verses in the Old Testament where Zion is referred to as "she" or "her", e.g. Ps. 87:5, 48:12, Is. 4:5, 66:8. The term for a woman's daughter is *bich'é'é*, so the "daughter of Zion" became *Záiyon bich'é'é* 'Zion her-daughter'.

4. *Comparisons*

Ordinary comparisons of size, shape, etc. are expressed by saying, e.g., '*éi 'ashkii shiláahdi nneez* 'that boy me-beyond-at he-is-tall'. But comparisons of actions and conditions were difficult until we discovered we could say 'on the side of such and such an action it is good, or it is bad, it is easy or it is hard' etc. This was accomplished by the use of an enclitic *-ji* 'on-the-side-of', which was added to the main verb.

In Mk. 9:43, 45, 47 the comparison is expressed in this way. Verse 43 presents another problem as Navajo has no general term for 'maimed', but must state the type of injury. Since the last part of the verse speaks of having two hands, we concluded that 'maimed' meant 'having only one hand'. Only the translation of vs. 43 is given since the others are the same except for the words foot and eye instead of hand. Mk. 9:43 ... "It is better for thee to enter into life maimed, than having two hands to go into hell..." Navajo: *t'ááláhiji nílá'go 'iiná biih yiniyááji 'éi ná yá'át'ééh*, '... on-one-side your-hand-being life it-into you-go-on-side-of that you-for it-is-good,' *ndi nílá' t'áá'atch'íjigo t'hoo'núh bit haz'áagi ... düüleetji 'éi doo ná yá'ét'éeh da ...*, 'but your-hand on-both-sides-being suffering with-it in-place-at ... you-becoming-(there)-on-side-of that not you-for it-is-good not ...'.

Mt. 10:15, 11:24 and Lk. 10:12 are parallel passages which give the thought that it will be more tolerable for Sodom, or Sodom and Gomorrah, in the day of judgment than for that city. To give this idea in idiomatic Navajo it was necessary to turn the comparison around using "that city" as the subject, and to change "be more tolerable for" to "be caused to suffer more". The translation is: *'Aahwiint'iih beinitkáadi 'éi kin-haal'áhigü Sádam biláahgo 'atibidi-doolniit* 'Judgment it-to-it-will-have-dawned-when that houses-cover-an-area-the-ones-which (city) Sodom it-beyond-being (more than) it-(that city)-shall-be-caused-to-suffer'.

5. *Need*

In Greek and English there is a distinction between 'wants' and 'needs' which does not seem to exist in Navajo. Perhaps this is because in a culture where homes are temporary and possessions few, one

does not want more than one needs. In Lk. 11:8 the translation reads, *t'áá yinizinigi* 'just what-he-wants'. In Acts 2:45 it is *choideidoo'íitii bee'ádaadinii* 'it-they-will-use-that-which with-them-they-are-missing-that-which.'

6. *To be filled, to be full, the fulness of*

The usual term for 'to be full' applies only to material things, so the expression of the figurative meaning of these phrases was difficult. Several interesting constructions which vary with the context were used.

Jn. 15:11 and 16:24 "... your joy may be full" Navajo: *nihini' biighahgo nihit dahózhoo doo* 'your-minds being-equal-to-them with-you plural-joy may-be'.

Mt. 6:22 "... thy whole body shall be full of light;" Navajo: *... nits'üis t'áá'át'é bit hool'in doo* '... your-body the-whole-of-it it-(light)-with it-is-light (daylight) will-be'.

Eph. 4:10 "... that He might fill all things." Navajo: *... t'áá'at-tsoni ádee hadazhdidoolbiit biniyé* '... all-things himself-by-means-of He-them-will-cause-to-be-full in-order-that'. Here the ordinary word for 'to fill' seemed to be the only one that could be used, and it appears to be as meaningful to the Navajos as the English is to us.

C. No cultural equivalent

1. *Fishing with nets*

Many of the people of Palestine were fishermen. Several of Jesus' disciples were called from that occupation. The Navajos do not fish, and an avoidance taboo keeps them from eating fish. Mk. 1:16 says, "... He saw Simon and Andrew his brother casting a net into the sea; for they were fishers." Here we have three problems, net, fishers, and the relative age of the brothers, discussed in section A 3. The Navajos have observed people fishing with a line, and have made up the term for fisherman thus: *tóó' hayiileehi* 'fish up-out-it-he-handles-(with a rope-like object)-the-one-who'. They have never seen fishing with a net. This method was explained to the informants, using pictures to make it clear. They decided to use for 'net' the verb stem *-tsóós*, which refers to the handling of a flat, flexible object. 'Net' was translated *tóó' bee hahaltsósi* 'fish it-(the net)-by-means-of up-out-they-(fish)-are-handled-(with a flat, flexible object)-the-one-which', freely, 'that by means of which they are brought up out'. For 'fishers', however, the informants preferred to retain the form *tóó' hayiileehi* rather than to create the form *tóó' hayiiltsósi*, since the first term had come to mean 'fisherman' without regard to its literal denotation. In Navajo Mk. 1:16 reads, *... Sáimon 'inda bitsili Andrew tóó' bee hahaltsósi taah yilysóosgo dziiltsá; háálá 'éi tóó' hayiileehi nili* '... Simon and his-younger-brother Andrew fish it-by-

means-of up-out-they-are-handled-(with a flat, flexible object)-the-one-which water-into it-(net)-they-handling them-he-saw; for they fish those-who-pull-them-up-out-with-a rope-like-object they are.'

2. *Sowing seed*

The wheat and barley raised in Palestine were planted by scattering seed by hand. Corn (maize) is the chief crop of the Navajos. They plant it by digging holes and dropping a few seeds into each hole. Mk. 4:3, 4 says, "Behold, there went out a sower to sow: . . . as he sowed . . ." The Navajo word for 'farmer' is *k'éédidléehii* 'over-and-over-it-he-plants-the-one-who'. The informants chose to use this for 'sower' and *k'izhdidooléét* 'it-he-will-plant' for 'to sow'. They made the method of planting plain by the translation of 'as he sowed' for which they used *nikijiitgo* 'it-(the seed)-he-scattering'. In none of the other references to sowing did it seem necessary to specify the method, so the word for 'to plant' was used.

3. *King, crown, kingdom*

These terms were easily expressed in the language of Biblical culture, which had kings and noblemen with their brilliant trappings and their position of honor and praise. But leadership among the Navajos is not accompanied by any such titles or distinctions of dress. Those most respected, especially in earlier days, were their headmen, who were the leaders in raids, and the shaman, who was able to serve the people by appealing for them to the gods, or by exorcising evil spirits. Neither of these made any outward show. Neither held his position by political intrigue or heredity. If the headman failed consistently in raids, he was superceded by a better warrior. If the shaman failed many times in his healing ceremonies, it was considered that he was making mistakes in the chants, or had lost favor with the gods, and another was sought.

The term Navajos use for headman is derived from a verb meaning 'to move the head from side to side as in making an oration'. The headman must be a good orator, able to move the people to go to war, or to follow him in any important decision. This word is *naat'áanii* which now means 'one who rules or bosses'. It is employed now for a foreman or boss of any kind of labor, as well as for the chairman of the tribal council. So in order to show that the king is not just a common boss but the highest ruler, the word *'aláahgo*, which expresses the superlative degree, was put before *naat'áanii*, and so *'aláahgo naat'áanii* 'anyone-more-than-being around-he-moves-his-head-the-one-who' means 'the highest ruler'. *Naat'áanii* was used for governor as the context usually shows that the person was a ruler of a country or associated with kings.

Navajos have never worn the traditional feather head-dress usually associated with Indians. These days the common head covering is the big Western hat introduced by the cowboys. In earlier times

the men usually wore a handkerchief or a scarf knotted around the forehead. The word *ch'ah* means 'any kind of head-dress' and there is no other word. Therefore a crown for a king presented a real problem. The word finally chosen was *naat'á-ch'ah* 'orating or ruling- (in the abstract sense)-hat'.

The words 'king' and 'kingdom', although in English related in form and thought, bear no resemblance to each other in Navajo. 'Kingdom' is translated by a long phrase which makes little sense in English when translated literally, but freely translated means 'that over which, with all that pertains to it, someone has the highest authority'.

4. *Yoke*

What to do about this word is, or will be a problem to many translators since the use of oxen in farm work is unknown in many primitive cultures. Navajo is one of that number. They know all about horses, but the few cattle they possess are raised for meat and hides.

Yoke could be transliterated, but it would be meaningless. It could be translated by a descriptive phrase, but this would be very long and awkward. It might read, 'a heavy bar of wood resting on the necks of two oxen with attached curved pieces enclosing their necks'.

The other alternative open to a translator is to use a functional substitute, and that is what was done in Navajo. A free translation of Mt. 11:29, 30 is as follows: 'As two horses work, being harnessed side by side, so you, having been harnessed, work with me . . . For work done with my harness goes well, or easily, and my load is not heavy'.

D. Literalism versus meaningfulness or "punch"

1. *Evil spirit*

The word our translation helpers wanted to use for 'evil spirit' was *ch'üdü* which really means 'a ghost, the spirit of some dead person'. To the Navajo such spirits are always malignant and so are evil. This term was rejected because the Bible term, 'demon or evil spirit', does not refer to the spirits of departed human beings but to those spirits who followed Satan in his rebellion against God. To get away from the idea of ghosts and to provide a term from which the origin of evil spirits could be taught, a literal translation was used for some time, *nitch'i baahági'át'eii* 'spirit bad-it-is-the-one-which'. Later, an older Navajo told us that the phrase brought no feeling of repulsion or fear to a Navajo. In fact, he said that when the Navajos heard this phrase, they would think, "So what! Such a spirit may be evil but it does not affect me".

In the earlier translation a different phrase had been used, *nitch'i bi'iiniziinii* 'spirit it-bewitches-the-one-which or brings evil upon'. This strikes terror to the heart of any Navajo. It had been rejected earlier because of its association with Navajo superstitions, but it was finally put back into the translation because of its greater meaningfulness, its greater "punch".

2. *Sin*

The word commonly used now by Navajo interpreters and Christians is *baahági'át'éii* 'off-side-it-is-that-which', a literal translation of one of the definitions of sin. This had been in use since the early days of missionary work. We thought it good and used it. But we found that when the statement was made that all men are sinners, "we are and you are," the Navajos would quite often say, "I'm not a sinner. I've never been put in jail". After further examination of the area of meaning of the term, we found that it could mean 'bad or naughty', but more commonly 'any kind of catastrophe, accident, fire, death, being put in jail, etc.' We found that when a Navajo did anything that would have terrible consequences to himself, even death, he would say, '*ádit' ní'isiih* 'myself I-make-a-mistake'. The word 'mistake' in Navajo has a far deeper meaning than in English. We tried to use this term but the old word was too firmly entrenched in the thinking of the Christians to be discarded, so it was retained, although it lacks "punch" especially when used with non-Christians.

3. *Faith, to believe on*

The words commonly used are '*oodlá* and *boodlá* 'to-believe-something-(unidentified object) and 'he-believes-him-or-it'. The last word was used even in Jn. 3:16 for "believe on him". It is easily seen that these words can be used of the Navajo religion or any story or person. "To believe on him" implies trust and commitment to the person or truth which is believed.

The words given above lack the "punch" to bring about saving faith. Navajos would readily say, "I believe the good news (gospel)." But it made no change in their lives more often than not. They could say this while they still trusted in the shaman. In view of this, the phrase 'to trust in or depend on' was added to 'to believe', thus: *boodláago ba'óli* 'him-believing him-he-trusts'. This phrase has "punch" and cannot be said while trusting in the Navajo religion.

This description of some of the problems of the Navajo translation is given with the hope that it will be helpful to other translators who may be facing some of the same difficulties.
