

An Indian's Interpretation of St. Luke in Simple Spanish

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In 1954 the American Bible Society published a version of St. Luke in a dialect of Spanish which is spoken in many rural areas of Mexico. The purpose of the version was to provide a simply rendered portion of Scripture for those who had neither the reading proficiency nor the literary background to make use of the standard Reina-Valera version. Rather than being a replacement of the standard version or even a revision of it, the simple Spanish version was intended "as an aid to introduce people to the reading of the Reina-Valera version."¹ Among those for whom the version was prepared were speakers of various vernaculars who knew Spanish as a trade language and were becoming literate in it.

One of these vernacular speakers, Sr. Román Díaz, speaks Huichol² as his native language. He learned Spanish at the age of sixteen when driven to the Nayarit coastal plain by the final battles of the Mexican Revolution (1910-1917) and the subsequent Christero uprisings. He lived in the coastal area among Spanish-speaking people for a number of years. Today his fellow tribesmen recognize his relatively superior facility in Spanish and have chosen him on occasion to represent them in dealings with Spanish speakers. He has been a Christian since 1946, and has been conversant with the Scriptures in Spanish since he became literate around 1950. A prepublication draft of the simple Spanish version of St. Luke was checked orally with him.

Sr. Díaz has been the chief translation helper for the first draft of more than half of the Huichol New Testament. Almost as a hobby he has undertaken the rendering of random passages of Scripture into Huichol from Spanish. Consequently he took it in stride when on a trip through his ranch in 1954 I handed him a newly published copy of St. Luke in simple Spanish and suggested that he translate it into Huichol. Several months later he appeared with a draft of most of the first chapter, and requested that I type it up so that other Christians could make use of it.

An analysis of this translation effort is presented here, inasmuch as the difficulties Sr. Díaz encountered in translation seem to mirror rather well his difficulties in understanding the simple Spanish text of the version. There is no intention of minimizing or deprecating in any way Sr. Díaz' ability as a translator; the points in which his translation judg-

¹From the foreword to *Las Buenas Noticias Acerca de Jesucristo según San Lucas, Versión Popular* 'The Good News about Jesus Christ according to St. Luke, popular version', Mexico, D.F.; Sociedad Bíblica Americana, second edition 1956. The text on which this article is based is that of the first edition of 1954, which was modified slightly in the 1956 edition.

²The Huichol live in the southern Sierra Madre Occidental Mountains of Mexico, in the States of Nayarit and Jalisco. Translation and missionary work was begun among them in 1941, and to date slightly over two thirds of the New Testament has been rendered in first draft in Huichol language.

ments were incorrect are no more than an indication of the difficulties any vernacular speaker might encounter in a trade language version, even a simply phrased one. Undoubtedly Sr. Díaz' translation would have been more accurate if the text had been read to him clause by clause and his oral translation written down. However, since the version was intended to be read, an estimate of its usefulness for him must take into account his reading proficiency. In this connection it is worth mentioning that St. Díaz spends on the average more time reading than does any other Huichol Indian I know, reading both in Huichol and in Spanish.

Problems Arising from the Local Spanish Dialect

The Spanish spoken in rural areas along the west coast of central Mexico differs somewhat from the Spanish spoken in rural areas of the central plateau, to which the simple Spanish version tends to conform. Dialect differences between the simple Spanish version and the local Spanish which Sr. Díaz understands range from minor ones such as in v. 7 *no tenían hijo* 'they had no child', rendered 'they had no children' because the singular is not used in that phrase in local Spanish, to more complex differences. Verse 24 *empezó a estar enciente* 'began to be pregnant' was rendered by a guess: 'became sad', since conception is always referred to by other terms in local Spanish and the phrase used was therefore not understood. In v. 39 *montañas* 'mountains' was rendered by a transliteration; although the Huichol as mountain people have a perfectly adequate nomenclature for such terrain, and although local Spanish is just as rich in orographic terms, *montaña* is not one of them. A rendering of *sierra* would have been easily understood.

Local Spanish uses future tense verb forms only in the sense of 'will probably', 'must be going to', i.e., *llegará mañana* 'it is probable that he may arrive tomorrow'. Definite future time is indicated instead by the progressive 'is going to', i.e., *va a llegar mañana* 'he is going to, will, arrive tomorrow'. In v. 16 *los hará volver* 'he will make them turn' was rendered 'they must have been going to arrive'; v. 17 *irá* 'will go' was rendered 'was going to go'. Local dialect use of the future tense seems to have been responsible for a major misunderstanding in v. 34 *¿Como será esto?* 'How shall this be?' the accepted interpretation of which in local Spanish would be 'How can this possibly take place?' The Huichol rendering was doubtless based on the latter interpretation, as it came out, translated freely, 'What on earth!' followed by some rather indignant-sounding emphatic enclitics.

Problems Arising from Words Not Understood

The following words in the translation were either simply not understood, or were rendered by an incorrect guess as to their meaning: v. 5 *rey* 'king', vv. 5, 9 *sacerdote* 'priest', vv. 6, 17 *justos* 'just', v. 9 *le tocó en suerte* 'it fell to him by lot', v. 9 *incienso* 'incense'. All these things can be explained and rendered without difficulty in the vernacular, but without explanation they were merely unknown technical terms. In v. 28 *¡Salve!* 'Hail' was transliterated, resulting in a form *Sariva*, which is the Huichol equivalent of the Spanish proper name *Salvador*. In v. 27 *virgen* 'virgin'

was transliterated, though this transliterated form is used in Huichol to refer to any of the various statues of the Virgin used as objects of worship throughout Mexico. There is reason to believe that at least one of these, *la Virgen de Guadalupe* 'the Virgin of Guadalupe', has become equated with the Huichol eagle goddess *Verica 'iimari* through a similarity of sound to *Virgen Maria* 'Virgin Mary' and a similarity of function. In v. 12 *ángel* 'angel' was likewise transliterated; the transliterated form *haqueri* in Huichol is understood as referring to a child who takes part in a certain harvest ceremony. The proper name *Gabriel* 'Gabriel' in vv. 19 and 26 was guessed at as having the meaning 'impressive' or 'strong' and was so translated.

Words Confused with Similar Sounding Spanish Words

In the rendering of certain words it is possible to ascertain that the Spanish word in the text was misread as a different Spanish word similar in sound to the one in the text. In v. 17 *corazones* 'hearts' was misread *oraciones* 'prayers', v. 17 *dispuesto* 'ready' was misread *después* 'afterwards', v. 28 *por qué* 'why?' was misread *porque* 'because'.

Grammatical Distinctions Missed

In speaking Spanish Sr. Díaz frequently does not make a difference between singular and plural forms. Many of the plural markers in Spanish are syllable-final consonants such as the *-s* in *las* 'feminine plural article', but syllable-final consonants occur in Huichol only as a secondary development in fast speech, and so are generally passed over by Huichol speakers when they speak Spanish. This difficulty in recognizing the plural markers appears in the translation of v. 22 *no les podía hablar* 'he was not able to speak to them', rendered 'they were not able to speak to him'. In v. 36 *la que decían que no podía tener hijos* 'she whom they said was not able to have children' was rendered 'she whom you (singular) said was not able to have children'. One participial form was substituted for another in v. 5 *llamado Zacarías* 'called Zachariah', rendered 'calling to Zachariah'.

Some Words Understood But the Connection Missed

In not a few verses enough words were understood that some of the basic lexical context of the passage was rendered, but the all-important grammatical connections between words were not grasped and not all the essential words were understood. In v. 14 *muchos se gozarán de su nacimiento* 'many will rejoice at his birth', 'many' was understood but its function in the sentence was missed, 'rejoice' was erroneously guessed at, 'at his birth' was understood, and it was rendered 'there will be prayer, much prayer, because he has been born'. In v. 17 *con el espíritu y poder de Elías* 'with the spirit and power of Elijah', 'with' was taken instrumentally, 'spirit' was referred to the more familiar phrase "Holy Spirit," and it was rendered 'by the Holy Spirit and with life'. Also in v. 17 *para preparar un pueblo dispuesto para el Señor* 'to prepare a people ready (to receive) the Lord', 'prepare' was understood, Spanish *pueblo* 'town, people' was taken in its geographic sense, 'ready' was misread 'afterward' as noted in the preceding paragraph, 'for the Lord' was not connected

with 'ready', and it was rendered 'to set up his own town afterward concerning the Lord'. In v. 28 *el Señor está contigo; bendita tú entre las mujeres* 'the Lord is with you; blessed (are) you among women', Lord was understood, 'blessed' was approximated, 'among' was not understood, 'women' was understood, and it was rendered 'The Lord is happy concerning women'. In v. 42 *Bendita tú entre las mujeres, y bendito tu hijo. ¿Por qué recibo este favor tan grande?* 'Blessed (are) you among women, and blessed (is) your son. Why do I receive this great favor?' 'blessed' was again approximated, 'women', 'receive', 'this', and 'great' were understood, but it was rendered 'How good it is for women because you have received this so greatly'. In v. 48 *Porque Dios ha mirado a su pobre criada* 'Because God has looked on his poor handmaid', 'God' and 'looked' were understood, 'handmaid' was not understood, and it was rendered 'God sees us who give thanks to him'.

Two examples illustrate with special clarity the results of an understanding of scattered lexical items without regard to their grammatical connotations. In v. 17 *para hacer que los corazones de los padres se vuelvan hacia los hijos y que los desobedientes se vuelvan a la sabiduría de los justos* 'to cause the hearts of the fathers to turn toward their children and (to cause) the disobedient to turn to the wisdom of the just' was rendered 'that he may pray to his own father about his (the father's) children who are frightened so that they may come rejoicing (*justos* is also rendered 'happy' in v. 6) to where a wise person is'. In v. 37 *para Dios ninguna cosa es imposible* 'for God nothing is impossible' was rendered 'where God is there is nothing'. In this instance it is possible that the two negatives *ninguna* 'none' and *imposible* 'impossible' may have constituted a source of confusion.

In the forty-nine verses minus lacunae which constitute the portion of Sr. Díaz' translation work which was analyzed, translation errors were as follows:

Dialect problems	8
Words not understood	24
Words confused with similar sounding Spanish words	3
Grammatical distinctions missed	12
Some words understood but connection missed	20

If a large enough number of Huichol were literate in Spanish, so that St. Luke in simple Spanish could profitably be circulated widely among them, it is possible that errors of understanding due to dialect differences and words not understood would be eliminated almost entirely by the use of a bilingual dictionary and by careful explanation in the vernacular of the meanings of such words. In most of the cases noted, an almost one-to-one translation correspondence between the word not understood and an equivalent intelligible word or phrase in the vernacular can be established and taught.

Misreadings for words similar in sound to other Spanish words are rare but tend to persist, especially if the misreading is reasonably consistent with good theology. In preparing a talk from the Reina-Valera version Sr. Díaz once misread *desear* 'desire' for *descender* 'descend' in John 3:13, rendering the verse 'No one has descended to heaven, but that

which we desire from heaven', i.e., Christ. On another occasion he rendered *muchas moradas* 'many mansions' of John 14:2 as 'many purple houses', from the homonyms *morada* 'purple' and *morada* 'dwelling place' (from *morar* 'to dwell', which Sr. Diaz probably knows). The idea of purple houses in Heaven apparently struck a responsive chord in the Huichol heart; in a short time even non-Christians were singing a gospel song about Heaven called "Purple Houses" which Sr. Diaz had composed to a native tune. It was with considerable difficulty that both these mis-readings of the text were replaced by more acceptable ones.

By far the most grave problem for the native speaker of a vernacular who aspires to the use of a trade language version is posed by the overall difference between the grammatical patterns of the two languages used. In the twenty instances where Sr. Diaz did not appear to grasp the grammatical connections between words, even though he understood many of the words in the passages, it was precisely the grammatical relationships which he missed on which the sense of several of the passages hung. Such grammatical connections cannot, at least for Huichol and Spanish, be made to stand in a one-to-one translation correspondence as can most vocabulary items with their translated forms. The primary sources of his difficulties are the grammatical distinctions which he must take into account in order to understand what the trade language text says. In a sense he must be taught to exegete the trade language text critically. Otherwise, such a trade language version will remain of only limited value to him.

Translation News

British North Borneo

Dr. W. C. Somerville, General Secretary of the National Bible Society of Scotland, has recently returned from a tour of the Far East, where he attended the meeting of the United Bible Societies' Standing Committee at Bandung, Indonesia. In Labuan, in British North Borneo, he met missionaries of the Borneo Evangelical Mission, including Mr. A. F. Belcher, whose wife is the chief translator in the Murut language, and Dr. W. C. Lees, who is working on translation problems in a number of other languages, Kayan, Kenyah, Kelabit, Dusem, Tagal, Penun and Bisaya. No part of the Scriptures has yet appeared in print in any of these, though several tentative mimeographed translations are already in circulation. The chief difficulty lies in finding really useful translation assistants among the representatives of the various tribes. The first draft of the whole of the New Testament in Murut is now ready. It is expected that the cost of publication will be shared equally by the N.B.S.S. and the B.F.B.S.

Central Africa

Proofreading of the Old Testament in Tumbuka has now been completed. The translation was first made by an African, Samuel Hara, a government interpreter, and was prepared for the printer by the late Rev. T. Cullen Young with the assistance of his brother and a