

Translating the Lugbara Bible¹

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The Lugbara are a tribe of about 300,000 people living in the West Nile District of Uganda and the adjacent area of Northeast Belgian Congo. The Africa Inland Mission began work among them in 1918, and there is now a strong church established. In the West Nile a total of nine Africans have been ordained, and a further four are in training. Of these, ten are Lugbara-speaking and three of these men have spent a year at Oak Hill College.

Outstanding Men

The New Testament was published by the Bible Society in 1936. Since 1951 I have been chairman of the Lugbara Bible Translation Committee responsible for the translation of the Old Testament and the revision of the New. The committee consists of three missionaries and nine Africans representing all sections and dialects of the Lugbara tribe.

The African members were appointed by the church for their special qualifications of knowledge of other versions of the Bible—Swahili, Luganda, Bangala or Alur. All are leading elders, evangelists or pastors. Some four are ordained, and a number are responsible for the oversight of up to thirty churches in an area as big as an English county. All are busy in church work, and for this reason we used to find difficulty in fixing dates for our meetings convenient for everyone. Therefore two years ago we split our committee into two teams, each under one of our pastors, and we try and meet with each section for a full week alternate months. Thus the missionary members meet each month, the African members every other month.

The leaders of these two halves of the committee are outstanding men, and we do feel God has been good to us in granting us such leaders. The Rev. Benoni Obetia only stands about 5 feet high, but his name means Mr. "Can't be thrown down," and is very suitable, for he is full of faith and enthusiasm, with a wonderful sense of humour, and is very fond of telling stories against himself. He recently got a set of false teeth, and had great amusement telling how one of his small sons thought this was a great improvement and asked his father if the doctor had not got any other spare parts he could fit him with! Above all, he has a real love for his Bible, and is just living for the day when the whole Bible will be in the hands of his people.

The Rev. Hezekia Ajule is a different type of man. He is quite prominent in African local government affairs, and is a member of various committees. At no time has he sought this position, but has been chosen because of the confidence and respect he has won. He has been honoured with the Queen's Medal for his services. In 1953-4 he spent a year at Oak Hill College. He is a great help to our committee, for in addition to knowing English, he has a first-class knowledge of Swahili. He loves to talk of his experiences in England, where Christian

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friends received him as a brother in Christ, and of the Keswick Convention, which he much enjoyed. He is above all a humble man of God who, too, is longing for the day when his people have the Word of God in their own language.

Method of Work

The method of work we are following is for draft translations to be produced either by a missionary or an African. These drafts are then cross checked, i.e. an African-produced version is checked by a missionary, and vice versa, and then finally gone through verse by verse with the committee. This cross-checking is very necessary, especially in the versions produced by Africans from English. We are so used to our English Bible that we do not realise how hard it is, and how many of the words are not in general use. An otherwise good translation of the Song of Solomon would insist on calling the roes and the hinds the "ant-bears." Anything less suitable as a term of endearment would be hard to imagine! Another example that comes to mind is when Cyrus was said to have returned to the exiles thirty golden "war-horses" (AV "chargers of gold"), and when the Levites each waiting on their office were described as "waiting in their offices"; this is perhaps an unconscious comment on modern missionary methods! No doubt we missionaries make similar mistakes in our draft translations.

For the Old Testament we use the English Revised Version as our basis, with reference of course to the American Revised Standard Version. The RSV seems to have made considerable use of the Septuagint, which we also have for reference. In the New Testament we are revising direct from the Greek. At the time of writing only four books remain to complete the whole of the Old Testament, while about two thirds of the NT still needs revising.

We have had a wonderful spirit of co-operation and friendship on our committee and with the church as a whole. Right from the beginning the African members asked us if, instead of them always gathering on the Mission station, we missionaries would not agree to go out to different churches for our meetings, so that every part of the district could share in the entertainment of the committee for the week and be kept informed of the progress of the work. This we gladly agreed to do; and so we have been all over the Lugbara area for our committee meetings. Everywhere we have had the warmest welcome from the local Christians and the happiest fellowship in the work which they regard as their own.

So you can imagine us once a month loading the back of the Land-Rover with our battered cases, the precious box of books, Hebrew, Greek, LXX, Swahili, Lugunda, Bangala, and Alur Bibles, RV, RSV, AV, and other English versions, concordances and dictionaries, a large trestle table, camp beds, bed bags with blankets and mosquito nets, pots and pans, primus and lamps, baskets of vegetables, etc., and setting off for one of our district churches. When we arrive we find that a house or a classroom has been set aside for us and for our committee meetings. Sometimes it has even been especially built for the occasion, and before long we are settling down to the well-known task of patiently

checking through the draft before us verse by verse with our friends.

We work from after breakfast until it is dark, and eat our midday meal together to save time. Some of the local Christians may drop in from time to time, to sit quietly by and see and hear what we are doing; and we soon get to know them, as we join them in the meal they have prepared for us, or sit round the fire with them at night. Always there is the question, "When will we have the whole Bible at last?" and great is the disappointment when we have to tell them that it will be at least two years before the manuscript will be ready to be sent to the Bible Society, and then another long wait while proofs are being corrected and the Bible printed.

We are trying to produce an idiomatic translation in a dialect everyone understands, free from local or unusual words; a translation which is accurate to the original, and sounds when read like Lugbara, not like Lugbara words strung together in an English or Hebrew order.

The difficulties caused by differences of culture, climate, fauna and flora, and religious conceptions are what we might expect, but it is often the unexpected difficulties which cause us the most trouble, difficulties caused by differences of idiom or metaphor which we have somehow failed to notice or to realise would be difficult. For example, Matthew 2:20, "They are dead which sought the young child's life." Herod did not seek the young child's life, but his death. A literal translation of that verse in Proverbs from which comes our well-known proverb "Pride goeth before a fall," produced the question "Where is it going to?" If you translate the words "O house of Israel" as "O hut of Israel," it obviously means something very different.

There is nothing like having to translate a verse to help one to find out the real meaning. If you doubt this, try to translate the next difficult verse you come across into French or some other language. So these times spent translating the Bible have been a real blessing to all of us. Especially profitable has been the close study of the Greek New Testament, and we are continually finding fresh treasures in the original language of the NT. Many of these, of course, depend on the root meaning of the Greek, or its metaphorical use, and cannot easily be conveyed in another language, and are quite unnoticed in our ordinary Authorised Version.

Here are just a few of the verses we noted recently while making a revision of Luke. For example, could you find the verse where Christ says, "Don't be a sputnik"? Yet you have read it many times. Luke 12:29, "And seek not ye what ye shall eat, or what ye shall drink, neither be ye of a doubtful mind." The Greek word *meteorizō* translated "to be of a doubtful mind," is the same root from which we have the English word "meteor" and means, according to the Analytical Greek Concordance, "Literally, 'to raise aloft,' metaphorically, 'to be excited with anxiety, be in anxious suspense'." So it means literally to fly through space like a meteor, or metaphorically 'to be up in the air about' something. Many of us engage in mental space-travel as our minds fly from one worry to another!

Each time the committee meets we all, European and African members alike, find something fresh in what we are doing for our own

souls. If we are checking an Old Testament book, it is often new to some of our African members, and we frequently find ourselves taking time off while excited comments are made on some fresh treasure from God's Word, and notes are made for future sermons. What a joy it is to see some word or verse go home, and these dark-skinned African faces light up with joy and wonder, and to realise how literally true are the words, "The entrance of Thy Word giveth light."

Readers' Corner

From J. L. Swellengrebel

Reading the learned and interesting note on Acts 2:24 in the January 1959 TBT, I imagined St. Peter, or St. Luke, looking down from heaven and saying with a smile: "How clever those fellows are! I never knew it was that which I should have meant to say!"

The author of the note holds the opinion that the translator of the LXX who chose the rendering (*perieschon me*) *ôdines thanatou* in Ps. 17:5, 114:3 (= MT 18:5; 116:3), seems to have confused two very similar Hebrew words, i.e. *hëbhël* and *hëbhël*, which have the same plural form and mean, respectively, 'bond' and 'pangs of birth'. Assuming that the said translator had before him the same wording as we know from the Masoretic Text—which is probable but not certain—this opinion seems readily acceptable. Because of this misreading the translator chose the Greek word *ôdines*, known in Greek since Homer in the sense of 'pangs (of birth)' and in that sense also used several times in the LXX. In Ps. 18:5 etc., however, this sense fits badly. Therefore, according to the author of the note, "it may reasonably be inferred... that the phrase *ôdines thanatou* in the LXX was meant to convey the meaning 'the bonds of death', in conformity with the Hebrew phrase it was translating."

On the ground of the facts so clearly expounded by Mr. Bratcher, I am inclined to hold a different view: The LXX translator, starting from the—misread—Hebrew word *hëbël* = 'pang(s of birth)', naturally chose the Greek word having the same meaning. The fruit of his misreading was a mistranslation, which resulted in a rather forced metaphor (although perhaps not so forced as Mr. Bratcher is suggesting; with the wider meaning 'anguish', the construction in Ps. 18:5 etc. can be taken as a subjective genitive instead of an objective genitive: anguish death is inflicting, instead of pangs of birth death is experiencing).¹ That drawback the LXX translator accepted, in the same way

¹ Cp. the construction of *ôdines tou thanatou*, which is found in the Polykarpbrief I, 2, according to Bauer, *Griech-Deutsches Wörterbuch z. N.T.* (1937), p. 1481. Cp. Kittel, *Theol. Wörterbuch z. N.T.*, IV, p. 338: *Fraglos hat die LXX dies ôdines tou thanatou nicht im eigentlichen, sondern im übertragenen Sinne, nicht von Geburtswehen, sondern von qualvollen Schmerzen überhaupt verstanden. Die Vorstellung von einer Geburt, bei der der Tod Schmerzen erleidet oder hervorruft, liegt Ps. 17:5, 6, 114 (116):3... wo ôdines tou thanatou vorkommt, gänzlich fern, wie die Verba perieschon, ekuklôsan beweisen. Dazu hat LXX oft ôdines im Sinne von qualvollen Schmerzen entsprechend dem hbr AT (vgl. Ex. 15:14; Hos. 13:13; Na. 2:11; Js. 13:8; 21:3 usw) Nach Hi 39:2, wo luein ôdinas heisst: die Wehen (durch Geburt der Frucht) beendigen, ist also Ag. 2:24 nicht zu erklären.*