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## Christianization of Vocabulary in the Translation of the Tzeltal New Testament

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Forty keen young Indian men crowded into the translators' hut, claiming every available inch of space on wooden benches and floor, and even occupying the rungs of the ladder leading up to the rafters. They had made their way over steep, rocky trails after dark, in order to "hear the Word of God pass into the real language"—their own Tzeltal tongue, a Mayan dialect spoken by approximately forty-five thousand Indians in the state of Chiapas, Mexico. Several thousand of the highland Indians had turned to the Lord within a few years' time, and it was for these hundreds of new believers, in chapels scattered throughout the mountains, that the Scriptures were being prepared in their own tongue. As the Word of God was translated into the language and into the hearts of these Tzeltal believers, the result has been a New Testament in Tzeltal, printed by the American Bible Society in 1956, and a New Testament Church among the Tzeltals.

### Translating as the Church Develops

The fact that the Tzeltal New Testament came into being concomitantly with the Tzeltal Church of several thousand believers means that the vocabulary of the Tzeltal New Testament was forged in the living context of Christian experience. Terms growing out of the converts' Christian experience went into the pages of the New Testament translation, and, in turn, New Testament terminology became integrated into the Christian vocabulary by a constant interplay of language and experience. In a very real sense, the whole Tzeltal Church served as "translation helpers" for the whole Tzeltal New Testament.

The five years (1949-1954) during which the Tzeltal New Testament was being translated in final form was the period of greatest growth of the Tzeltal Church. Entire families, and sometimes entire settlements

turned from witchcraft, idolatry, and drunkenness to a new life in Christ as they heard the Word of God for the first time. In many instances the translation of portions of the New Testament coincided with the Christian experience of the translation helpers, so that Christian vocabulary was formulated by the native Christians themselves in the context of their own lives. When opposition to the Christians was at its height, with some imprisoned for their faith, others haled before officials, and the largest chapel set on fire, the Book of Acts was in process of translation, so that terms which went into its pages came out of actual conflict. The organization of the Tzeltal Church took place at the same time as the translation of the Pastoral Epistles, with the latter providing the pattern for the newly-formed church. As portion after portion was translated and typed, the native preachers took the newly-translated Scriptures and preached from its pages to congregations of Christians scattered throughout the mountains, while the translator checked for understanding on the part of both preacher and congregation alike. Since the whole gamut of Christian experience is represented in the New Testament, it was of utmost importance for the formulation of a Christian vocabulary that the native Christians should experience the whole range of situations in their own lives and find expression for it in terms of their own language.

In the case of the Tzeltal New Testament, two factors were basic to the formation of a Christian vocabulary: (1) personal, individual experience of regeneration on the part of native speakers of the language, with resultant expression of that experience in words; (2) corporate experience of the native Christians, as their relationship to God on an individual plane brought them into relationship with others on a corporate plane, with development of terminology resulting from the formation of a Christian society. Thus, on both an individual and corporate level, Christianization of vocabulary has taken place, with native speakers of the language making the transition of items from a non-Christian context to a Christian context.

One illustration of the way in which the translation of the New Testament and the experience of the native Christians has had a reciprocal effect is in regard to the term 'death'. The non-Christian term meant 'end, extinction', with the consequent hopelessness and finality connoted by the word. However, the first native Christians, reading the first printed portion of the New Testament in their own language, the Gospel of Mark, read that Jesus said of the death of Jairus' little daughter: "she is asleep." With the addition of a phrase indicating the difference in connotation of death to a Christian as distinguished from a non-Christian, and with further teaching from other passages of Scripture, the Tzeltal Christians introduced a new term for "death" into their vocabulary: 'to sleep in God', with all the hope and assurance that such an expression conveys to believing hearts. This term, as used in the New Testament translation, has played a part in changing their whole attitude toward death, with the result that the gripping fear and the bone-chilling death-wail that formerly accompanied death no longer occur among Tzeltal Christians.

## Processes of Vocabulary Building

Based on the experience of translating the New Testament into Tzeltal, there seem to be three fundamental processes employed in building a New Testament vocabulary:

1) innovation: the introduction of new terms, following the pattern of borrowing already existing in the language, and investing such terms with Christian connotation by teaching;

2) reinterpretation: the use of terms with already existing connotation in the language, but, by extending or reducing the area of meaning of such terms, remodeling the connotation to fit Christian context;

3) adaptation: the use of terms already existing in the language, but in new combinations, resulting in the expression of new concepts.

Of the three processes, innovation accounted for the smallest percentage of terms formulated, because of the fact that such terms have zero-meaning when first used; reinterpretation of terms was employed with caution, because of the difficulty of providing sufficient teaching to divest such terms of their former meaning and invest them with a different meaning; adaptation of words and phrases was the process responsible for by far the greatest number of terms introduced into the New Testament translation, validated by actual integration of such terms into Christian experience, both corporate and individual, to insure effectual communication of truth through the medium of language. The basic premise that "a language is always capable of retooling," due to inherent flexibility and adaptability, makes possible the formulation of a Christian vocabulary from the elements present in the vocabulary of a non-Christian society, with the one stipulation that it be done through the medium of native speakers of the language.

### Innovation

In the translation of the Tzeltal New Testament, the process of innovation was employed in the adoption of the term 'Holy Spirit', since the entire concept was new to the native mind. The word *Espiritu* was borrowed from Spanish, with zero-meaning, and learned by the native Christians as any other proper name. With the Spanish word *Espiritu* was coupled the Tzeltal qualifier *ch'ul*, a term applied to any sacred person or object (in preference to the Spanish term *santo*, 'holy', which in the native culture referred to (1) All Souls' Day; and (2) any image). The resultant term, *ch'ul Espiritu*, has been invested with deep meaning through the Scriptural use of the word, until it now forms an integral part of the Christian vocabulary. The native term *ch'ulel*, meaning 'soul' or 'disembodied spirit', was rejected because of very specialized meaning in terms of the native culture.

In cases where borrowed culture-traits were concerned, as, for example, specifically Jewish cultural items such as temple, circumcision, Sadducees, Pharisees, etc., the terminology for such items was sometimes borrowed. The innovation of terminology for places of worship, church officers, etc., (e.g. *templo*, *ministro*, *anciano*, *diacono*, transliterated

from the Spanish), follows the pattern of borrowing of terms already existing in the language (e.g. Spanish terminology for political offices, such as: *sindico*, *regidor*, *presidente*, *secretario*, etc.). Native terms for religious offices were rejected because of the implication of sorcery connected with the use of such terms. New terminology has proved to be very desirable in the introduction into the native culture of a new culture-complex, such as the organization of the Christian church. For example, the newly-adopted terms for church officers, *anciano* meaning 'elder', and *diacono* meaning 'deacon', have been so invested with meaning, and so widely disseminated by the Christian community, that non-Christians throughout the area have had to introduce them into their vocabulary also, and the old religious offices as well as the old terminology for such offices are becoming obsolete. The percentage of borrowed terms used in the Tzeltal New Testament is very small, and none of the terms introduced by the process of innovation have to do with spiritual concepts, merely with borrowed culture-items of a material or social nature. Historically, the lack of understanding on the part of the highland Indians of former religious instruction can be directly traced to the vocabulary used in such teaching, because terms were borrowed indiscriminately from Spanish for all kinds of religious practices and concepts (e.g. confession, confirmation, sacrament, glory, prayer, etc.), until the meaning became completely obfuscated, with resultant lack of impact on their lives.

### Reinterpretation

A second process employed in formulation of a Christian vocabulary during the translation of the Tzeltal New Testament was that of reinterpretation; that is, using a term which already exists in the native culture, but altering its connotation by teaching it in the context of Scripture until it acquires a Christian meaning. One example of this process in action is the use of the Spanish word for God, *Dios*, in the Tzeltal New Testament. In the non-Christian society, the word *dios* was used for a wide variety of things: viz. sun, moon, cross, earth, images, natural phenomena, etc. This term has been delimited and reinterpreted in New Testament terms, a process which is still in progress as the New Testament is being used over a wide area, and which is investing the term with a new meaning in proportion as the people come into a fuller knowledge of God. The term has also been further delineated in meaning by its antithesis being introduced and applied to objects formerly designated by the word: e.g. *lotil dios* 'false god' is used for images; *ma'diosuc* 'not god' is used for designating 'sun', 'moon', etc. A native term, *ahaw*, was evidently formerly used to refer to deity, but is now used to designate: (1) government officials; (2) ranch-owners, for whom the Indians work; (3) a sacred book transferred yearly from the custody of one part of the tribe to the other in the highland town of Oxchuc. The native Christians have reinterpreted this term and incorporated it into Christian vocabulary to express the Lordship of Christ in relation to every believer.

Another instance of the process of reinterpretation of terms is the use of the word *mulil* for 'sin'. In the non-Christian society, this word referred primarily to immorality; secondarily, to lesser infractions of the social standards set up by their own culture. Sin as an infraction against God was totally foreign to native thinking. The New Testament translation has changed the meaning of this word by broadening it to include all forms of that which Scripture designates as sin, explicit and implicit, implemented by teaching of the Ten Commandments, Sermon on the Mount, etc. The reinterpretation of this particular term has had important results in setting up new moral standards for the native Christians, by teaching them that *mulil* is not, as formerly regarded, mere infraction of the social code of their tribal group, but rather the breaking of God's law.

Another word borrowed from the non-Christian Tzeltal society and given a Christian reinterpretation is 'cross'. In the pre-Christian culture, the cross was considered an object of worship, referred to as 'holy father', and kept on the household altar, with candles and incense burned before it. The cross also figures in some of the native folklore, in which it is represented as standing at the edge of a great sea, restraining the waters which threaten to flood the earth. Because of the highly specialized and non-Christian ideas connected with the word and with the object, it had to be reinterpreted in a Christian connotation. In the Tzeltal New Testament, references to the cross (as in 1 Cor. 1:17-18) usually include the phrase 'the One who died on the cross', in order to prevent misinterpretation of the word, and consequent retention of the former meaning in the native culture.

Another important reinterpretation in the meaning of a word has occurred in regard to the term *ch'ulel* 'soul'. This word had a highly specialized usage in the native culture: the *ch'ulel* was received by Catholic baptism, could be jarred loose from the body by a fall, or enticed away from its owner by various means and eaten by the shamans, and had to be appeased after death, especially on All Souls' Day when it returned to the grave to accept offerings of food. Soul-loss was blamed as the major cause of sickness; therefore, concern for the *ch'ulel* was purely on the basis of well-being in this life, rather than in any sense of regard for the future life. With this background, the word was taken over into Christian terminology, but has been reinterpreted in the terms of Scripture, so that it is beginning to have a Christian connotation. In the case of this word, a term with latent possibilities has been developed through the New Testament translation into a term with active Christian connotation, and by lack of emphasis of the non-Christian connotations of the term, and devaluation in the native culture of the former rites and beliefs connected with the term, it is losing its former meaning.

## Adaptation

The largest percentage of Christian vocabulary developed through translation of the Tzeltal New Testament has been formed through

the process of adapting words already existing in the language to express concepts new to the language, in much the same way in which Christian vocabulary came into being in the original versions of the Scriptures. Such items of vocabulary must be completely native to the language, and also fit the grammatical pattern of the language, in order to insure native comprehension and native acceptance of them. Continuing use of such terms over a period of time will not only test the term in the context of native life, but will also fill the term with meaning for the native Christians. Since language is a part of the culture of any people, Christian vocabulary must grow out of the Christian experience of the people themselves, and be an adequate expression of it.

One example of the adaptation of terms from a non-Christian context to a Christian context, by means of their use in the New Testament translation, is the terminology of 'salvation', 'save', 'Saviour'. In the pre-Christian Tzeltal society, there was a term *col* with the following area of meaning: 'to get loose', 'to go free', 'to get well' (recover from sickness). Also, in the native folklore, this term was used to describe those who survived the flood long ago. In the New Testament translation this term was used, with the addition of a phrase relating it to God, to mean salvation in the spiritual sense. The Christian community has developed the meaning of this word by constant usage in all kinds of contexts, until it now approximates the Scriptural meaning. It is interesting to note that in a neighboring dialect of Tzeltal, where the Word of God has just begun to be preached and where there are only a few believers, this term has not yet acquired a full spiritual connotation, but is in the process of doing so.

A number of terms which went into the New Testament translation came directly out of the native Christians' mouths, as they experienced the power of God in their lives and then expressed their experience in language. One such term, which the translator first heard used by one of the native Christians in prayer, was the very productive idiom *ta stojol Dios*, designating any relationship to God, such as is expressed in the New Testament by 'in Christ, in God, of God', etc. This phrase has been combined with a variety of expressions to render such concepts as: 'to be born of God', 'to turn one's heart toward God' (be converted), 'to belong to God', 'to trust God' ('have one's heart toward God'), 'to give oneself to God', 'to be sad before God' (be convicted), etc. The phrase first came from a native Christian, and has since been adapted by the native Christians in combinations which the translator would never have been capable of devising. Before the native Christians had the experience of being related to God, their language did not possess these expressions; but after having had the experience, they found ways of communicating it in words of new but meaningful combinations. The terminology which went into the pages of the Tzeltal New Testament to express spiritual experience was thus validated by actual spiritual experience on the part of the native Christians.

In several instances, the choice of terms used in the translation has had a direct effect on certain phases of Christian development in the

Tzeltal church. For example, in deciding upon a term for 'pray', the word used for native prayers, usually repetitious chants, was rejected in favor of the expression 'to talk to God', in the same way in which one would talk to another person. The result of using this term has been that a sharp distinction has been made between former religious practices and those of the Christian community. Instead of 'praying' being regarded as the prerogative of only certain medicine men, it is now regarded as the privilege of all believers. Another key word in the Tzeltal New Testament is that used for 'church': 'the whole group, or aggregate, of believers'. The word 'believers' was first formulated from the verb 'to believe, or obey'; then a descriptive term was added which fits the pattern of other words in the language, to designate 'believers in the aggregate'. This term has been adopted by the native Christians, and has had a definite part in conveying the oneness of all who believe, as is shown by the native Christians' prayers for 'the church'. Another term which has influenced the spiritual lives of the Tzeltal Christians is the word for 'faith', translated as 'heart-belief' or 'heart-obedience' in the Indian language. It is a new term, as well as a new concept to the Tzeltals, but has developed amazingly in Christian context, and has shaped the kind of response to the Gospel which characterizes the Tzeltal Church.

Two terms which, in the pre-Christian society, were used in a literal, physical sense, have been extended by the Christian community to have a metaphorical sense: viz. 'flesh' and 'world'. As the new Tzeltal believers have been confronted with the temptations common to any who have a spiritual experience, they have invested these two words with a depth of meaning which increases as their spiritual perception increases. A great deal of the meaning of these two words has been derived from the context in which they occur in the New Testament: i.e. 'body' in contradistinction to the spiritual part of man's nature; 'world' in contradistinction to the spiritual realm, the converse of 'heavenly'. There has been interaction of two factors in the development of meaning of these two words: the context in which the terms occur in the translation; and the real-life situations to which the terms are applied by the native Christians, resulting in the present meaning of the words as forming part of the Christian vocabulary. Active development in the lives of the people affected by the Gospel has resulted in development of a Christian vocabulary which is adequate for the conveying of Christian truth.

In the course of translating the book of Romans, the translator was faced with the need for an expression meaning 'justification'. Various attempts were made, using various expressions which seemed to convey the idea, but the translator was not satisfied. During the final revision of the manuscript, one more way of rendering the idea in Tzeltal was suggested to the Christian translation helpers. With joy the translator noted the instant comprehension on their part, confirmed by their saying: "This is just what God has done for us, 'exonerated us of our sin in His sight'. How else would one say it in our language?" And the translation has passed the test of usage by

the Christian community ever since, who consider it an adequate expression of their Christian experience. Using terms already in the language, but combining them in new ways in order to express new concepts, and validating such terms by their use and acceptance on the part of the native Christians, has been the procedure followed in adaptation of terms in the translation of the Tzeltal New Testament. Two factors, the adaptability of language to the expression of new concepts, and the flexibility of the native mind toward adoption of new expressions, facilitate the Christianization of vocabulary which occurs during the process of New Testament translation. But there must be complete comprehension by the native of the terminology employed, in terms of his language and in terms of his experience, before such terms can be considered an integral part of the Christian vocabulary.

At the same time as the publication of portions of the New Testament in Tzeltal took place, a catechism prepared by a non-speaker of the language, without concern for native reaction, and without basis for native acceptance of the terms used, appeared in print. The author of it borrowed indiscriminately from Spanish for all kinds of spiritual terms which he did not know how to express in the Indian language. The result was a piece of literature almost completely incomprehensible to his readers, and the defeat of his own purpose. Native reaction to the catechism was: "We can't understand what this booklet says; we will go to the place where the Book in our language is being taught, because we can understand it."

Since the Tzeltal New Testament was received in the tribe only a year ago, the process of interaction of language and culture is still in progress, the translation affecting the thought and action of the whole Christian constituency, and the Christian constituency in turn affecting the whole society. Effectual communication, where translation of the New Testament is concerned, may be said to have been attained when there is communication of life, as well as of ideas. For it is by the Spirit of God, using the Word of God in native hearts and minds, through the medium of the native language, "that the communication of our faith becomes effectual" (Philemon 6).

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