

FOCUS ON TRANSLATORS

“You have a Bible but I haven’t”

Many Christians have their Bibles in their own different languages. The Bible Societies produce and distribute Bibles in many languages so that more people may have access to them. I also have my Bible, not in my native tongue but in the lingua franca of my country, Tanzania.

One Sunday as we went out of a church service, a young man came to me looking sad and said, “You have a Bible but I haven’t.” With words of encouragement I replied, “The pastor read the text very clearly today, so you could follow him although you have no Bible.”

“Yes,” he said, “but what about at home? I would like to read the Bible for myself, now that I know how to read. Listening is good but looking at the words gives one a better chance to understand.” I had no more words to say to him.

Very few Haya Christians and those of many other areas in my country have seen the whole Bible in their tongue. Those who are literate can read from the Swahili Bible. But even for the Swahili version, there has been a very big demand by literate people, especially in the schools. I remember a priest who came once to a bookshop and bought almost the whole stock of the four gospels which were there.

Our work of translating the Bible into Ruhaya, a language spoken around the western part of Lake Victoria, with about one million speakers and about half of them Christians, is interconfessional. The Roman Catholics entered the area more than one hundred years ago while the Protestant churches followed ten years later. The two groups have been in competition and rivalry since then, especially in the area of Christian outreach. Schools were built near to each other because each church was fighting for the betterment of its own people. This rivalry made it difficult for Catholics to read the existing Protestant Swahili Bible. The new interconfessional co-operation especially in translation work in my area is new and encouraging.

Now the team of four men, three ordained priests or pastors and one lay person sit together to work on translation of the Bible into Ruhaya. This work is not simple. It is difficult and demanding. We constantly call upon God in prayer to assist us in this holy task and he has always answered our prayers.

We started in January 1982, and some progress has already been made. We have a good and hard working team of reviewers, among whom are Hebrew and Greek scholars. Some are pastors, teachers, house-wives and evangelists. Participating denominations include Baptists, Pentecostals, Lutherans, Anglicans and Roman Catholics. All those mentioned above differ in one way or another, given the differences in their church backgrounds. In some denominations words were kept in foreign languages in order to keep them holy! The first missionaries did not trouble themselves to find the equivalent local words or terms. Christians had to learn them that way. They were not correctly understood however. This and many other things are the problems of today’s translators.

The Haya language and culture has much in common with the Hebrew language and culture. The Haya people like to express a thought by saying it twice and in different ways. They break a proverb into two, to give room for

the hearer to consider the reply. They are straight-forward and often allow the listener to find the answer by himself.

The Haya religious culture and tradition is rich and varied. This means that we can easily find equivalent Haya terms for the Biblical ones. The problems we are facing are how to use these words within the Christian framework without carrying undesirable overtones from the Haya tradition—that is, how to christianize Haya religious terminology. Some people have the feeling that the words used for gods may bring the wrong feeling towards the real God.

People are eager to have their Bible in their own language. They often ask about when we will complete the work. They have little knowledge about the size of the Bible, the problems we are facing and how often we read, write and re-write. Translating the word of God is sacrificial work but very rewarding and fulfilling. We look forward with eagerness to the end of our task. We need your prayers and support.

(Contributed by Philip B. Tibajuka.)

A satellite translation project

A simultaneous translation project has been conducted in Northern Cameroon for three related languages. They all belong to the Duru subgroup of the Adamawa-Eastern group of Niger-Congo family of languages, and almost no Scriptures were available in any of them before.

The leader of the project is a missionary pastor who speaks Duru fluently. He has a solid theological training, reads Greek and Hebrew, and has some linguistic training and experience. He had previously assisted with the revision of the Duru NT, checking the translations made by Duru pastors.

The rest of the team consisted of six Africans, two from each of the three tribes in question. Their average level of education was French Primary School. They were appointed by the local churches to the task. None of them had any biblical training, and one was only a catechumen.

All three languages are related to Duru. The Dugun language, part of which is called Pape or Pano by outsiders, has about 80 per cent of words in everyday vocabulary in common with Duru. Duupa has about 70 per cent, and Kolbila has about 35 per cent identical or similar word roots. The Dugun and Kolbila translators were more or less fluent readers of Duru, so they had direct access to the Duru translations. The Duupa translators however were totally dependent on French. All translators had some knowledge of the trade language Fulani, but none were able to profit from the existing Fulani translations.

The project ran from February 1981 through August 1982. The aim was to produce the material which the local church needed for the instruction of its catechumens, and for the ordinary Sunday services, that is: a catechism, the gospel of Mark, additional Bible stories from the OT and the NT about three times the size of Mark, a liturgical service, and a primer. This objective was reached roughly within the time expected. In addition, hymn-books containing about 70 songs each were produced in the Dugun and Kolbila languages.

Preliminary work

The project went ahead in the following stages: Survey, phonology studies, grammar studies, translation, checking, producing final manuscripts, printing, and literacy.

A survey was first conducted during February 1981. The three tribes live in neighbouring areas, and people able to speak French or Duru were available all over. Limited word lists were collected and the dialect differences were checked.

The essential work for establishing the Kolbila alphabet had already been done some years before the project began. The Duupa and Dugun teams worked on check lists in March 1981, and we discovered that their sound systems were almost the same as that of Duru.

Two months had been set aside for grammar studies. An indigenous speaker is able to handle many things in grammar without difficulty. So we focussed on clause and sentence structures, and their distribution and function on higher grammatical levels, which had proved to be most important in Duru. Traditional stories and new ones made by the translators were used for this purpose.

Many elements were studied and discussed with the translators, partly separately, partly in common sessions. The aim was to help them discover the working of their own languages in order to enable them to handle all such elements consciously.

Parallel to these studies we were reading the French NT, discussing French structures and comparing them with their languages.

Translation

The first translation item was Mark. The translation work was started in July 81. For the Dugun and Kolbila teams, Duru was used as the base translation, with French translations kept alongside. The Duupa team was entirely dependent on French. They were helped by getting a literal translation from Duru into French on the blackboard.

None of the team members were able to handle French handbooks and commentaries in a profitable way. Their general level of education was not even sufficient to allow them to go to introductory courses for translators held by the Summer Institute of Linguistics in the capital. Consequently, the project leader had to provide that kind of information as it was needed for the translation.

We always started the preparation in common sessions. All difficulties regarding different cultures and customs, implied information, necessary or optional grammatical restructuring and similar items were discussed, as well as new ideas.

The common sessions proved especially profitable in finding equivalent expressions for important terms, for instance sacrifice. One team was asked to explain what kind of sacrifices were made in their culture, where and how they were made, which persons were involved, what the background and the purposes were, and so on. All important terms were put on the blackboard and discussed.

As one team was explaining, the other teams were listening, thinking and

comparing, and in their turn they were able to present their case in an even better way. Finally, they were noting the words and expressions which they wanted to use, in a separate notebook. In most cases, they found the best equivalents at once. Sometimes, however, they modified their expressions later on, or replaced them completely by better ones. Such changes were always discussed with the project leader first.

After the text was discussed, each team would go to their own room. They put their translation on the left hand page of the notebook, and a literal translation into French or Duru on the right hand page, allowing the project leader to check the quality of the translation. At a later stage, when the project leader had become more familiar with the new language, the back-translating was abandoned for Dugun and Duupa; but it had to be maintained to the very end for the Kolbila team.

The pace at which the three teams worked was not at all the same. The Duupa team was the slowest, as they had to work from French. The two other teams spent their free time translating OT stories from Duru. Later on, the fastest team produced a complete literal translation of the Duru stories into French for use by the Duupa team. Thus the capacity of all the teams was fully used.

There were several breaks during the work. In April and May of 1981 the teams had a month off to plant their fields; in September no one worked on the project; and in early December each team went back to their village to work there. Later on, two common workshops of six weeks each were conducted during January, February and March at two different locations. These workshops were extremely profitable in producing new material and completing the final copies; but since all three tribes don't live together anywhere, only one team at a time was able to get immediate reactions from other native speakers.

Checking

In such a translation project away from the tribal area, checking with ordinary people is most important. One of the teams was able to do this work in the village where we had our main center. They received preliminary training in checking, but in the early stages the project leader also assisted them when they went out in the village in the evening.

The checking focussed on important concepts and tracing participants; and the listeners were asked to explain the meaning of what they heard, not just tell whether it was good or bad.

The Dugun team had a great advantage: Village people very often discuss their own language, what is good and bad, right and wrong; so they had the mental training to be alert to what they heard, and the translators got lots of good hints. The other teams received much less helpful feedback. There were apparently two reasons for this: Their first translations were of much better quality; and people were more reluctant to suggest corrections.

The translations were checked not only personally by the translators, but also by cassette. Even before the first draft of Mark was finished, part of it was recorded on cassette and distributed to most of the villages in the area in which there are Christians. These early recordings were played over and over again, so we got some general feedback concerning the overall quality of the trans-

lations even at that early stage of the project. It also prepared Christians and non-Christians to accept the existence and use of the Word of God in their mother tongue.

Literacy

Producing books without anybody to read them is nonsense. In the area of our tribes there are only five primary schools, all teaching in French. Consequently, in some villages there are many readers, while in others there may be one or two, but in most villages there were none.

At a convenient time the congregations in the area were invited to send one or two members who could already read French to take part in workshops of one week each. During these workshops the people learned to read and write their mother tongue, and they were instructed in how to use the forthcoming primer. Then they were to go back to their village and teach others to read.

To help villages where there were no readers, a number of hand-operated cassette players were purchased and distributed. When the final manuscripts were ready, the most useful parts were recorded on cassettes and distributed. In this way, even remote villages with no readers were profiting from the very beginning.

The tales and stories used for grammar studies were used for making up some post-primer easy reading booklets.

Printing

The local church has a good printshop; but in our three tribes no typist was available. There was not even a typewriter on which to train new typists, so the three teams had to copy their translations by hand to produce the first drafts, sometimes second and third drafts, and then the final copies.

There was, however, a trained typist in the region. She had worked for some years with the translation of the Duru NT, and was now out of work. A typewriter was borrowed from the Duru Center, and since our alphabets used the same letters as Duru, it could also be used to type our three languages. However, the machine arrived late, and it was no longer in good condition; so much time had to be spent correcting the final copy. The corrected pages were then submitted to the local printshop for printing.

Some conclusions

The Satellite Translation Project has been a most encouraging experience. It has proved that when a major translation project has been finished, minor translation programs can be conducted in closely related languages in a relatively short span of time. Not counting the initial survey time and the holidays, the three teams actually worked only 15 months. During this time, alphabets were established, the grammars were studied, primers and easy readers were made, and biblical material almost five times the volume of Mark was translated for each of the three languages. If we had continued with the same procedure, the entire NT might have been completed in another two years for all three languages. Adding a full-time typist with a computer would have increased the output considerably. In our case, about six months were spent just copying and editing the texts.

For a program like this to succeed, several conditions must be right: There must be local people who can already read and write; there must be one or more competent advisors available; and a suitable location must be found. There must also be adequate possibilities for printing what is produced, in a reasonably attractive form. And a literacy program must be planned, taking local pastors into account, if literacy is not already widespread.

There are a number of advantages in the type of project where translators from different related languages work together. When translators are working alone, they may easily become discouraged. But it is most encouraging to have the possibility of discussing problems with other people who have struggled or are struggling with the same things. When a program is run as a series of workshops, the value of learning from others tends to be very high. The stronger teams may be of great help to the weaker ones, especially when the languages are closely related.

The lack of competent advisors often hampers the progress of translations programs. In a single local workshop with participants from two, three or four languages, all of the teams can profit equally from one resource person. Even when nobody is competent in all aspects of the translation process, the responsibility may be shared, each resource person contributing within his limited speciality. And finally, all teams may profit from the existing equipment, such as typewriters, computers, and so on.

Most translation projects have a rather narrow scope. Instead of planning a translation program for only one language, in some situations we should try from the very beginning to take into account the translation needs for a whole group of related languages. By training and helping local people to do the work, the time of experienced people and specialists may be much more profitably utilized, and the whole task of translation may be completed quicker.

(Contributed by Lars Lode.)

HOW WAS THAT?

Many translators will be familiar with products which are labelled in more than one language. The different labels are supposed to carry the same information for users who speak the different languages.

The following example shows that sometimes "translations" of labels from one language to another are not very exact. It comes from a packet of breakfast food.

Language 1: "We know that there is often a little problem when you have to serve cereals; soup plates are too big, bowls are too deep, and cups are too small . . ."

Language 2: "We know how difficult it is sometimes to eat cereals around a common table. We know that, especially with children, most of the time more lands on the table than in the mouth . . ."

(From "Theory and Practice of Translation"
by L. Grähs and others.)