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## THE "PURE" VERNACULAR: Are we producing a translation that is understandable today?

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*"If archaic words are used, the translation will probably not be used after the older people are gone. Words understood by all speakers of the language are the ones which will be the best choice in the translation."*  
Mildred L. Larson

When I first started studying the Lamogai language of West New Britain Province in Papua New Guinea, I was urged by my language-learning consultant to stop using the trade language, Tok Pisin, as soon as possible. I can still remember his words, "Don't say anything in Tok Pisin that you already know how to say in the local vernacular."

I took what he said seriously. A short time later, I determined that I would no longer use Tok Pisin in any of my day-to-day interaction with the Lamogai people. From that time on, all my conversation with them would be done exclusively in the Lamogai language. When I explained this to the Lamogai people, they eagerly supported my decision, and they promised to help me with it. However, in their enthusiasm, they tended to take things to an extreme – replacing all borrowed words with "pure" vernacular words, many of which were either no longer in use or manufactured from other words.

What I mean by "manufactured" is that in cases where no appropriate Lamogai word (either old language or in present-day use) could be found, they would invent a term. For example, the people of our village told us to refer to "money" as "tree leaves," instead of using the Tok Pisin word *mani*. However, when people from other villages heard us use this term, they almost always interpreted it literally as "leaves."

Eventually, I was the one who was pushing for a "pure" vernacular. My desire to speak pure, uncorrupted Lamogai was spurred on by the guilty feeling I had each time I was forced to use a borrowed word. As a result, my speech became filled with archaisms (old language forms)

and invented terms. I began referring to rice as “ant eggs” and shoes as “foot skins.”

The people in our own village grew accustomed to our frequent use of archaisms and invented words. However, when I spoke with visitors from neighboring Lamogai villages, they often did not know what I was saying. They were unfamiliar with many of the words and phrases in my excessively pure Lamogai. For some reason, it didn't dawn on me that even the mother-tongue speakers from our own village rarely used many of these “pure” Lamogai words, except when they were speaking to me!

At times, when I was recording mother-tongue speakers giving text material on tape, I found myself getting a bit annoyed at the number of Tok Pisin words that were being mixed in with the “pure” Lamogai. In fact, I even found myself correcting them when they used a word borrowed from the trade language.

A few months later, when my language-learning consultant returned for a follow-up visit, I was surprised and a bit embarrassed to find that he was not nearly as impressed with my “pure” Lamogai as I had hoped he would be. As an outside observer, he was able to tell me quite plainly what I needed to get me back on track. He helped me to realize that Lamogai, as I was learning to speak it, was very different from the way it is actually spoken by the mother-tongue speakers of the language today. I am sure that deep down inside, I knew it all along; but for some reason, I did not want to face up to the fact that present-day Lamogai includes a large number of borrowed words. Borrowed words made the language seem so common and unexciting. It was then that I began to ask myself, “What is my real objective in learning the Lamogai language?” And I knew the answer: my goal is that the message of the Bible will be communicated clearly to the Lamogai people in the language they know best – the common language that they use in their daily interaction with each other.

### **What is our real objective?**

A few years ago, I met a mother-tongue translator who was working on translating the New Testament into his own language, using the Tok Pisin translation as his base. He told me that he had received training in Bible translation principles, and that he was working to produce a translation that is clear, natural, and true to the original.

For over an hour we discussed aspects of Bible translation. In our discussion, there was one particular area that gave me concern. He stated very strongly that he would not allow any borrowed words to be included in his translation. He explained to me how he spent hours talking with the oldest men in the village, trying to come up with the best vernacular word for each context. Many of the words they came up with were words which had long ago fallen into disuse. I asked him how he expected the readers to understand his translation if it included so many unfamiliar words. “Oh, that's easy,” he said. “We will be producing a dictionary to go along with the translation so the readers can look up the words they do not know as they are reading.”

He then proceeded to tell me that a few weeks earlier, he had stood up on a Sunday morning and read a verse which included some of these old, unfamiliar words. He said that afterwards, some of the younger men

came up and asked him what the words meant. Then, with a sly grin on his face, he said, "I told them they would have to find that out for themselves."

Obviously, this is an extreme case. However, I believe this example should prompt each of us who are involved in Bible translation or Bible teaching to ask ourselves honestly, "What is our ultimate goal? Are we aiming to preserve archaic vernacular words that are being lost, or to communicate the message of the Bible as clearly as possible?"

In the time I spent with this particular mother-tongue translator, it became clear to me that one of his primary aims in doing Bible translation was to revive the old, pure language forms that had been spoken by his ancestors in previous generations. In his translation strategy, the preservation (or in many cases, the resurrection) of "pure", vernacular terms and expressions ended up being more important than clear communication of the meaningful concepts of the Bible.

I cannot fault him in his passion for the "pure" vernacular. I believe he is sincere in his efforts. However, there seems to have been something missing in his training as a Bible translator regarding the potential dangers of using archaic vocabulary. His zeal led him to believe that he could by himself turn back the clock in the process of change that is taking place among speakers of his language. This is no doubt a noble aim, but is it realistic?

### **Is it possible to stem the tide of language change?**

Published Scripture can play an important part in helping to make a language stable and slow down the process of change. However, it is unlikely that the change process can actually be reversed to the point that the language would return to a purer, earlier form. In some cases, many of the borrowed terms that would need to be eliminated may have been in common use for many years. We found that even the oldest man living in our village (who could not speak the trade language) used many borrowed trade language words in his everyday speech.

In producing vernacular Scriptures, it is unrealistic to expect that the way we translate will control the future course of the language. Instead, we should allow present-day, common-language terms and expressions to control the way we translate. A poorly used translation which attempts to "turn the clock back" will do much less to counteract the process of language change than a widely used translation which accepts the language where it is today. Ironically, some of those who have worked the hardest to oppose the process of language change may actually have accomplished the least in that direction.

Translated Scriptures that cannot be understood by the average reader without an accompanying dictionary will probably never be widely used. Rather than struggle against a flood of unfamiliar, outdated terms and expressions, the average reader will probably discard the vernacular translation and turn to the more easily understood trade-language Scriptures.

### **Archaisms and the English Bible**

What would the English Bible sound like if it were not allowed to

contain any word or expression that had its roots in another language (including French, German, Greek, Latin, and so on)? All English translations – even the very oldest ones – include many words that originally came from other languages. The origin of these words does not make them in any way inferior. The primary factor for accepting or rejecting a particular word is how clearly it communicates the intended meaning of the original.

How would the English-speaking Christian community react if the only English Bible they were allowed to use was one which was characterized by old words and outdated or invented phrases? Obviously, they would not put up with it. I find it interesting that the American Bible Society completed the idiomatic *Today's English Version* (also called the *Good News Bible*) in 1976, and then published a new idiomatic translation, the *Contemporary English Version*, a mere 19 years later. Is it fair for Americans and Europeans to say, "We as Westerners are allowed to have a common language Bible in our language, but the small isolated language groups of the world must be satisfied with translations that are characterized by archaic and outdated vocabulary"? Are we expatriates taking our role as advisors and translators too far? Are we possibly being paternalistic in forcing local translators to exclude all borrowed words?

### **Our own feelings versus the need to communicate**

Why is it that some people have a tendency to favor "pure" vernacular words over words which have been borrowed from another language? In my own experience, I had an ideal in my mind of what an indigenous, minority-language Bible translation should look like. To be honest, I was embarrassed by the inclusion of borrowed words in the translated materials with which I was involved. Maybe I was afraid that others would think I was lazy – that I had not made the effort necessary to find the true, vernacular terms. Or perhaps I was afraid that others would think the language I was working with did not sound very interesting or exciting. I must admit that I have probably been guilty of allowing – or even pushing for – the inclusion of some outdated forms in the Lamogai New Testament.

I remember one time I was rechecking a portion of Scripture with some mother-tongue speakers, and we came across the Lamogai word *sudung*, which means "to send." One of the mother-tongue speakers in his mid-20's spoke up and said, "Do we really have to include the word *sudung* in our translation? When we hear it, it makes the translation sound to us as if it is old and outdated. That's just not the way we talk. We never use the word *sudung* in our everyday speech, and some of the younger people don't even know what the word means. Can't we just use the Tok Pisin word *salim* instead? That's the word that everyone uses – even the oldest people in the village."

I knew he was right. I knew that the word *sudung* was just left there from my earlier and extreme concern for the "pure" vernacular. At that point I had to ask myself, "Do I really want to give the Lamogai people a Bible translation that sounds old and outdated? Is that the kind of translation I would want for myself?" Or even worse, "Do I want to give them a translation that includes words which are not understood by the majority of Lamogai readers?"

Sometimes those who are involved in the job of Bible translation act as though there is something sacred about pure vernacular words and expressions, even those that are no longer used. And expatriates need to remember that the indigenous languages of the world are much more than just quaint linguistic systems to be preserved and studied: these languages are the primary means of communication for the people who speak them.

### **Which "borrowed" words are acceptable?**

If archaic words are to be avoided, does that mean that translators have the liberty to use whatever national or trade language words they think are necessary? Absolutely not! When my language-learning consultant helped me to leave behind my extreme concern for the "pure" vernacular, he told me that I should feel free to use any borrowed, trade language words that the mother-tongue speakers use in their everyday speech – to the extent that they themselves use them. However, I was not to include any trade language words when speaking Lamogai that the Lamogai speakers did not use themselves. The mother-tongue speakers are the ones who have the right to determine which words can be borrowed and how often and in what contexts they can be used.

Basically every language in the world uses words which are borrowed from other languages. In English there are many borrowed words which are used so frequently that they are no longer thought of as being borrowed words at all. We found this to be true in the Lamogai language as well. There are a large number of borrowed, trade language words which, through constant use, have now become a part of everyday spoken Lamogai. Some of these words now accept the same prefixes and suffixes as regular Lamogai words. In many cases, the borrowed word is now the word preferred in most contexts, since it is more commonly used and more widely understood than its "pure" vernacular equivalent. Even though expatriates readily recognize certain words as having been borrowed from another language, the mother-tongue speakers do not necessarily view them in that way. We came to realize that many of these borrowed words had become an integral part of the Lamogai language before many of the present-day Lamogai speakers were even born. If we were to insist on including archaic vernacular forms instead of using common borrowed words, we would be preventing present-day speakers from reading the Scriptures in the language they feel most comfortable with. We would no doubt be giving them a translation that they would find cumbersome and difficult to understand.

In reality, it could be said that old, outdated words are actually borrowed from the language of a previous generation. Many of them are foreign to the average speaker of today. Do these old, unfamiliar words really deserve to displace commonly used words which happen to have their origin in another language?

In translation, our primary goal is to transfer meaning from the original language into a form that is crystal clear in the language we are working with. Any word or expression that does not communicate clearly to the majority of speakers of the language should be disqualified. On this

basis, the foreign origin of any given word does not necessarily mean that it should be rejected, but the archaic nature of a word almost always does.

### **“Christian” or “spiritual” language versus “common” language**

The original language of the New Testament is called *koine* or “common” Greek. It was truly the language of the people. God chose not to communicate the message of his Son in a lofty, formalized language. He made sure that the New Testament was written in a (trade) language that was clearly understood by the common person of the day. The average first-century Greek speaker could read or listen to any of the writings of the New Testament and say, “This book speaks the very same language I speak!” This no doubt helped to reinforce the idea that the message of the Gospel is relevant to every area of life.

What then are we communicating when we translate the New Testament into a form that is very different from the common language of the readers? A Bible that is written in a form that sounds heavy and out-of-date may tend to reinforce in the minds of the readers the notion that there should be a distinct separation between Christianity and the everyday affairs of life. Most languages have a written style which is somewhat different from the spoken style of the language. However, in considering this factor we need to be careful that we do not use it as an excuse for bringing in archaisms or newly invented vernacular terms as we see fit.

### **Clear communication, or language preservation?**

Bible translation is a tremendous privilege, but at the same time it is an awesome responsibility. It is of utmost importance that each person involved in the Bible translation task not lose sight of the primary goal – that of communicating the message of the Scriptures in the clearest possible way.

All the languages of the world will change or disappear some day. Any attempt to preserve them as they are will be temporary at best. However, as the Scriptures say, God’s Word is eternal. It will never pass away, and neither will the benefits of communicating the message of his Word in a clear and understandable way.

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## **WHO’S WHO IN ROMANS 16? Identifying men and women among the people Paul sent greetings to**

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A number of years ago while checking Romans 16 in a translation in Africa, it occurred to me to ask the translators what they could tell me about Aquila and Priscilla. The most that they could say was that “these