

RELIGIOUS WORDS! WHICH AND WHERE?

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Not long ago a new Bible translation project was started in Nigeria. At the introductory workshop the Translations Consultant suggested that a very useful point of departure would be to do a careful step-by-step study of the religious terms used in the normal everyday language of the people for whom this translation was to be prepared.

During the course of the workshop the Consultant introduced the idea of studying the meaning of difficult words by writing down the parts or *components* of their meaning. He used as the basis for discussion a number of religious words from the Yala language, which is spoken by people who live in the Cross-River State of Nigeria. These words were written on the blackboard.

One of the Yala words chosen for discussion was *aje*. The pieces or components of its meaning were listed as follows:

AJE

1. Spirit.
2. Created by $\mathcal{O}w\mathcal{O}$.
3. Female counterpart of $\mathcal{O}w\mathcal{O}$.
4. Related to $\mathcal{O}w\mathcal{O}$ as a wife is to a husband.
5. Mother/creator of all earthly things.
6. Gives food to all her children.
7. Eats all of the things that she creates when they die.
8. Ground—earth.

At this point a local participant in the workshop jumped up and exclaimed: “This thing is not good! It reminds me of what I am supposed to forget! It is not Christian! Is it really true?”

The exercise had evidently carried the outspoken participant and perhaps several others into a religious world which—although suppressed—was just under the surface of his conscious thought. It brought about a conflict in his religious ideals. His immediate reaction was that the everyday religious words of his language were bad, especially when a person thinks about their full range of meaning. He felt threatened, and he concluded that the natural religious terminology of his language was not fit for carrying meaning in a translation of the Bible. It is this kind of approach to translation which has helped to fill the Bibles of the world with borrowed Greek, Latin, English, and other language words which have no meaning for many of the persons for whom these Bibles are being translated.

In this particular situation the group immediately became involved in a very positive discussion. The group concluded that:

- (a) Translation has to do with understanding the meaning of the message that is recorded in the original or source text.
- (b) Translation also has to do with finding a way of putting that same meaning in the normal message patterns of the receiving language.

- (c) In order to more accurately translate meaning from the source to the receiving language it is very helpful if a translator has consciously recognized the pieces (components) of the overall meaning structure in at least each of the important religious words of both the source and receiving language.
- (d) It is easier to sort out and study the pieces of meaning that make up the total meaning of a religious word if that word is analyzed at the same time as the other words in the same area of meaning (e.g. religious words, farming terms, hunting terms, names, etc.).
- (e) Such a study has nothing to do with accepting or rejecting a particular set of religious beliefs. It is, however, a necessary stage in the translator's training and preparation. It helps him to become consciously aware of the meaning packages (words and phrases) that he has at his disposal when he gets involved in the actual task of translating the meaning that he has learned by reading and studying the words and phrases of the source language.

After this very pleasant and indeed practical discussion the workshop participants came back to the basic point—the study of the components of meaning that work together in revealing the many-sided meaning of each religious word in a given language. They did this by turning their attention to the Yala terms *yapliija* and *ɔwɔ*, which have the following components of meaning:

YAPLIJA

1. Spirit.
2. Power behind all shrines.
3. Gives gifts.
4. Withholds gifts.
5. Giver of children.
6. Protects mothers and children.
7. Causes death and disease.
8. Rewards good behavior.

ɔwɔ

1. Spirit.
2. Creator and ultimate cause of everything.
3. Father of all.
4. Male counterpart of *aje*.
5. Related to *aje* as a husband is to a wife.
6. Above all other spiritual powers.
7. Gives or withholds rain.
8. Gives each person a special gift (*εjā*) at birth.
9. Knows everything.
10. Watches over the world with an all-seeing eye.
11. Sky.

After comparing the components of meaning in these two Yala religious words with those of the Yala word *aje*, the workshop participants considered together which of the available meaning packages (*aje*, *yapliija* or *ɔwɔ*) of Yala would be the most appropriate translation for the word *God* in the following passages:

“So *God* created man in his own image.” (Genesis 1.27)

“Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap; they have neither storehouse nor barn; and yet *God* feeds them.” (Luke 12.24)

The group immediately rejected *aje* as the translation for *God* in these passages because *aje*'s component 2 (created by *ɔwɔ*) and *aje*'s component 7 (eats all the things that she creates when they die) are in direct contradiction with the biblical meaning of *God*.

This left *yapliija* and *ɔwɔ* as possibilities. It was soon agreed, however, that neither fits the whole biblical meaning of *God* exactly.

Next, there was a disagreement as to which of these two words was the most appropriate choice. The factors brought up for consideration were:

- (a) Component 4 of *yapliija* (withholds gifts) and component 7 of *yapliija* (causes death and disease) are normally not thought of as primary or important components of the biblical meaning of *God*, although some passages place the power of death in the hand of *God* and speak not only of his withholding gifts but of his sending evil. (See, for example, Dt 29.18–23, 30.15–19, 32.23–26, Job 30.23, Ps 118.18 and Jer 8.17.)
- (b) Although the Bible pictures *God* as Father and speaks of Israel as “playing the harlot” in her relationship with *God* (for example Hos 4.12–15, 5.4–7, 9.1, Ezek 6.9, 20.30, 23.35) components 4 and 5 of *ɔwɔ* (male counterpart of *aje* and related to *aje* as a husband is to a wife) are certainly components of meaning that are not specifically found in the list of components of the biblical word *God*.
- (c) Components 4 and 5 of *ɔwɔ* (male counterpart of *aje* and related to *aje* as a husband is to a wife) are, however, not the most important components of *ɔwɔ* in the thinking of the Yala person. Many Yala people would never mention these components, although they would agree that they are part of the meaning of *ɔwɔ* when someone else mentions them. Therefore, by recognizing *ɔwɔ*'s components 1, 2, 3, 6, 7, 8, 9 and 10 as distinctive meaning components, it is fair to think of *ɔwɔ*'s components 4 and 5 as optional meaning components.
- (d) The distinctive meaning components of both *yapliija* and *ɔwɔ* are not in direct contradiction with the biblical picture of *God* and thus either word could be used without conveying a basically wrong meaning.

At this point the workshop group came together around the idea that:

- (a) *ɔwɔ* seems to be the best translation in Genesis 1.27 (first passage) since this passage highlights the creative activity which is especially emphasized in *ɔwɔ*'s component 2 (creator and ultimate cause of everything) and in *ɔwɔ*'s component 6 (above all the other spiritual powers).

- (b) Although *yapliija* could be considered a good translation for Luke 12.24 (second passage) because of its component 3 (gives gifts), it was felt that *ɔwɔ* would probably be the best translation here also because of the overall context—especially because of Luke 12.6 “Are not five sparrows sold for two pennies? And not one of them is forgotten before God” which ties in so closely with *ɔwɔ*’s component 10 (watches over the world with an all-seeing eye).
- (c) In general, *ɔwɔ* looks like the best Yala word for translating the biblical meaning package signaled by the biblical word God.

At this point the Consultant demonstrated how the wrong translation of a biblical idea can create a great barrier for the spread of Christianity. He pointed out that the Yala people, especially those who had not gone to school, although they were very friendly and hospitable, were not in a hurry to become Christians. The cause of this resistance to Christianity was hidden from view until one day a close friend of a Christian pastor said in anger, “I will never become a Christian as long as you say that *yapliija* is the devil!!” This statement took the pastor, who had learned to “communicate the Gospel” in the Yala language, by complete surprise. After all, *yapliija* had always been used by the Christians when referring to the devil or demons. He loved his friend, but he was not about to “change the Word of God” as he said, “in order to get his friend to become a Christian”.

After some time the pastor had the presence of mind to ask his friend why he had made the seemingly strange statement. His friend immediately responded, “I value my children! Don’t you?” When the pastor tactfully asked further questions he learned that *yapliija* is the spiritual power that gives children and protects mothers and children (*yapliija*’s component 5). It soon became evident that no self-respecting Yala person could accept the teaching that *yapliija* was all bad and must be totally rejected before he could become a Christian.

After more discussion with other Yala people and a good deal of real soul-searching the pastor realized that the problem was not with his friend or with the Yala people in general but in the translation. Obviously, *yapliija* didn’t mean the devil or demons. Rather, it was the most general word for *spiritual power* in the Yala language. It could be either good or bad, positive or negative. At that point the pastor realized that *yapliija ɔnēshehi* “good *yapliija*” would probably be a very fitting translation for the biblical word God.

The Consultant concluded this true story by pointing out that the New Testament has now been prepared in Yala. It translates the word devil and also demon with *yapliija ɔdɔɔbi* “bad *yapliija*”. And under the influence of the Scripture the Christians are now beginning to spread the Good News in such a way that there is room in the church for the pastor’s angry friend. It is a fact, however, that this positive change could never have been possible if someone had not taken time to do a full study of the components of meaning that make up *yapliija*’s overall meaning in Yala.

Now, back to the blackboard for more Yala religious words and the study

of their components of meaning. The next two words are *uhu* and *okū*. Their components were written down as follows:

UHU

1. Spirit.
2. Indwells living beings.
3. Brings life to living beings.
4. Can separate from a living being and later come back.
5. Helps people.
6. White in color.
7. Shadow.

OKŪ

1. Spirit.
2. Roams about in the world.
3. Can take the form of a human being.
4. Can control the *uhu* of a human being.
5. Never helps people.
6. Disembodied spirit of a dead person.

Okū and *uhu* are very important Yala meaning packages because they are the best possible Yala choices for representing the biblical word "spirit". The workshop participants agreed that *uhu* was the best translation for spirit in John 4.24 "God is a *spirit* and they that worship Him must worship Him in *spirit* and in truth." On the other hand the participants felt that *okū* was the proper Yala translation for spirit in Mark 6.49 "But when they saw Him walking on the sea they thought it was a *spirit*, and cried out."

Toward the end of the session on *okū* and *uhu* one of the more quiet workshop participants interrupted and said, "So then, A WORD IS NOT ALWAYS A WORD." When asked to explain himself, he said, "It looks now as if a word in one language is never quite the same as a word in another language. It also appears that sometimes a word in one language equals two words in another language. That is, it is necessary to use both the word *okū* and *uhu* in Yala to translate the word "spirit" in English. But my question is, how can you tell if it takes one word or two in the translation and how can you be sure that you have the right one?"

The answer is careful study of the components of meaning. The problem, however, is that it is easier to say this than to do it. Most Christians—and translators are no exception—are trapped in "church language". Often they do not realize that they are defining and using the basic religious terms in their own language quite differently when they are in church or working on Bible translation from the way their non-Christian neighbors use them—or for that matter from the way they themselves use them when they are talking about spiritual things in a normal conversation in the market, farm, office, or social situation.

The truth of the matter is that it is almost impossible to just pull the various components of meaning of a religious word out of the air, as it were. One of the tools for digging out the components of meaning that has been very

helpful to some translators is the SENTENCE METHOD. In this method the translator talks to people, both non-Christians and Christians, about the word which he wants to study. (Incidentally, some translators have found that tape recording these conversations is very helpful.) Next, as many sentences as possible which include the word which the translator is studying are written down. After a representative number of sentences which use this word in different grammatical structures and with different sides of the overall meaning have been recorded, the translator should be in a position to list many of the components of meaning of that particular word. If, during the same overall exercise all of the words in a particular area of meaning are studied for their components of meaning, the translator should also be in a fairly good position to make the right decisions as to *which religious word he should use in each passage*. Then he will be able to make the best possible translation in a variety of different passages in the receiving language.

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TRANSLATING LUKE'S PASSION STORY FROM THE TEV

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Many translators find the TEV (*Good News for Modern Man* and *Good News Bible*) very helpful as they translate into their own languages. The TEV is usually simple and clear, and in it many translation problems have been solved in ways translators in other languages can also use. On the other hand, sometimes the TEV itself is not simple enough, or may even be misleading.

Some typical problems in the TEV showed up during a workshop in Shillong, India, where people from about fourteen languages were translating Luke 23.32–24.48 into their various languages. Many questions arose in working from the TEV, some of the same ones coming up in the work of several different translators, and others becoming evident to those of us who were leading the discussions. The TEV itself sometimes actually created problems for the translator, and at other times it could have been more helpful in solving his problems if it had been translated differently and had followed its own principles of translation more fully. We also found that there were important problems with the English style and with the flow of language.

In this article I would like to point out some of these problems and suggest changes which would make the TEV translation of part of this passage more helpful. I am doing this in order to show translators what they might themselves do in similar cases, in their own languages, so that their own translations will be as clear as possible. I will deal only with Luke 23.32–56 in order to keep this article from becoming too long.

Although the Shillong workshop was using the third edition of the TEV New Testament, the *Good News Bible* has now been published, and the New Testament in that complete Bible is a fourth edition with many changes over