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**BIBLE TRANSLATION and ENDANGERED LANGUAGES:  
a Philippines perspective**

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The topic of languages dying or being in danger of dying should be a major concern of the Bible Societies and other Bible agencies. There are two things we know: on the one hand Bible Societies and other agencies endeavor to give access to God's word to all peoples in the languages they understand; but on the other hand a Bible translation project can cost at least \$100 000, not including consultant expenses. The tension between these two opposing forces must inevitably lead the Bible agencies to be more discriminating in what projects they initiate and support.

Any discussion on the criteria for what translation projects to support definitely has to include the expected life span of the languages under consideration. This is only logical and practical. What is the use of translating God's word in a language that is no longer used by the people?

This topic of endangered languages has generated a lot of interest, and this can be seen in the enormous amount of literature that has been written on it. The reason for this, I think, is that it is so widespread: in every part of the world, there are endangered languages. In this paper I want to discuss this subject of endangered languages, defining what we mean by it, analyzing the forces that cause it and ways that have been used to overcome it, and looking at how the Bible Societies and others can best make use of the accumulated body of knowledge.

**This is nothing new!**

In a study of endangered languages by Michael Krauss (1992), he made a prediction that 90% of the world's languages will die in the coming century. Starting from the figure of 6528 languages listed in the 1992 issue of *Ethnologue*, this means that by the year 2100, the number could shrink to 600.

Language death is nothing new. It has been happening, I am sure, ever since languages have been in use. It becomes more obvious to us when we read about documented cases such as Latin, for example, which branched out into its daughter Romance languages. Another example is Old English which evolved to Middle English and finally Modern English.

The death of Latin and Old/Middle English, however, is quite different from the rampant death that is taking place and expected to overtake thousands of languages in the next generations. In the case of Latin and English, the change was evolutionary; that is, the language followed its normal course of language change as a consequence of the dynamic nature of language. The old language developed into something else. A change of this type occurred in my own language, Kapampangan. It involved the consistent change of word final diphthongs becoming monophthongs. Using dictionaries dating back to the 18th century as supporting evidence, it was calculated that the completion of this change took at least 100 years. But I must emphasize that this involved only one phonological feature of the language.

In situations where languages are endangered, instead of being evolutionary, the change is revolutionary. The change is brought about by an event or events that are external to the natural processes involving the language, thereby hastening the process of change. There are many areas in the world where languages are endangered. In Australia, only 20 out of 250–270 languages are considered to be in a relatively healthy state. 90% of the languages in Alaska and Northern Soviet show strong signs of death. In Brazil, 65% of the languages are seriously endangered – 46% of the indigenous communities have less than 200 members. In the Philippines, the count of distinct languages ranges from 80–160. But this number may go down to just 15 Austronesian languages in the Philippines by year 2100.

### **How languages become endangered**

So many languages have become endangered that documentation of such cases abound. In what follows I will list what linguists observe to be the conditions that lead to languages becoming endangered. Overall, two conditions are necessary for a language to be endangered. First, there must be contact between two different languages through its speakers. This is what differentiates being endangered from the evolutionary type of death.

In the second place, there is an imbalance of power and control structures, and this becomes a root cause of a series of interrelated changes in the community. By definition, the tilt in the power structure, whether political or linguistic, gives prominence to one of at least two languages. The situation of imbalance can be caused by a number of factors:

**Colonization.** In most instances of colonization the dominant language is the language of the colonizers. With the ability to control power comes other consequential advantages such as economic wealth and elevated social status. This effectively leads to the oppression of endangered speakers and economic disparity between the endangered speaker and the colonizing speaker. In this situation, speakers of the endangered language have to demonstrate fluency in the colonizing language in order to satisfy basic needs such as jobs.

**Standardization.** In a multilingual situation, the need eventually

arises to choose one or two languages to be used in group functions. When such functions are sanctioned by an institution or an organized body, consciously or unconsciously, the language becomes more standardized. This means that there is a driving force to make use of a common form of the language, a form that is more uniform, more consistent in how it is used. Because of standardization, there are more likely to be prescriptive norms, for example in the variety of language to be used in education, rules of spelling in the written language, and the appropriate variety of the language for mass media.

Standardization is usually a consequence of support by institutions in the society, where there is a conscious and concerted effort to sustain a program of an organization or institution such as the government. Ironically, but as expected, schools and other similar institutions contribute to the endangerment of aboriginal and vernacular languages. There are documented cases in Australia, the Philippines, and certainly in most parts of the world where languages have become endangered because of standardization.

Unfortunately, but again as expected, Bible translation also contributes to language death when it strengthens one language as the standard language, to the disadvantage of the other. The prohibitive cost of translation projects and the scarcity of qualified translators make it imperative for Bible Societies and similar agencies to choose one language or one variety of a language out of a number of other choices to be the language for the translation. Although the choice of the language is made on the basis of criteria such as widespread usage and the language being a source of pride for its users, a Bible translation reinforces the strengthening of this language, and thereby accelerates the weakening that may lead to the eventual death of another language. The Bible translation has this much influence in the turn of linguistic events because the Bible itself is a major piece of literature. And the language of the Bible translation is usually also the same one used for the writing of hymns, prayer manuals, language in religious ceremonies, and also in praying.

Standardization has its cost. It leads to the decline of linguistic diversity. Other languages and dialects spoken in the society become less prestigious than the standard language and consequently are used much less.

In the Philippines, those who have written (Quakenbush, 1997; Scebold, 1992) and those such as Ernesto Constantino who have expressed their opinions about endangered languages are agreed that Filipino, which is the national language, is not endangered. Tagalog, which is recognized as the basis of the national language, has a long tradition of being prestigious by virtue of the major locations where it is spoken, especially Manila. Because of the role of Manila in the history of the country's nationhood, Tagalog has also been in the limelight.

Filipino students have for many years learned from an erroneous history book that the Philippines has 87 "dialects". It is certain that what was intended here was 87 distinct languages. But, because of this

error, almost all Filipinos think that there is only one language in the Philippines, that is Tagalog, and the rest are all dialects. The term "language" is equated to a national language; a "dialect" is regarded as inferior. Thus the rest of the Philippine languages started to become endangered through this erroneous understanding of what is a language and what is a dialect.

A similar problem occurred in Italian. The nationalist fascist policies of the 1920s and 1930s held that "dialects" were not appropriate means of communication and were to be suppressed and replaced with Standard Italian. The schools were not allowed to teach in the vernacular. Every official function had to be carried out in Standard Italian. And the prejudice against vernaculars has persisted until the present day. The people see them as a degenerate form of Standard Italian. These varieties share a common ancestor much as French, Portuguese, and Spanish share a common ancestor. Linguists identify six distinct languages or dialect groups on the Italian Peninsula. It is only through the rise of Standard Italian as a lingua franca and the political drive for cultural uniformity that these other languages have become less prestigious. And this now also is reinforced by the lack of knowledge about their cultural heritage and the great wealth of their oral tradition.

**Loss of speakers.** The loss of native speakers of a language can be brought about by a number of factors. It can literally be the wiping out of the population, as attributed to a language in Australia called Martuthunira. In the 19th century, the pearl diving industry took its toll on people between the ages of 18 and 35, the reproductive core of the community. Many were reported to have drowned. As for the rest of the population, many of the coastal people who were the first to be exposed to Europeans and their diseases to which the locals had no immunity, died of syphilis, influenza, and other diseases.

Imposed restrictions can be another reason for the loss of speakers. One reported case, also in Australia, is that of the language Panyjima, spoken in North-western Australia, 50 miles inland from the Pilbara coast. Missionary groups were said to have indiscriminately herded together aboriginal peoples on a mission station, forcing different peoples speaking different languages to live together, making them speak English as a lingua franca to communicate with one another. Even without imposed restrictions, the imbalance brought about by the prestige of one language over another can still lead to the loss of speakers. However, the imposed restrictions, as in this case, can hasten the shift from use of a language to a stage where it is endangered, if not close to death.

A reliable indicator that a language will still be vital to the life of the community is whether it is still being learned by children. This means that parents see the basic functional value of the language for communication, and regard the language highly as a symbol of their identity. This also means that the language will be alive for at least the next generation, or approximately 25-30 years.

**Irish** was a thriving language in Western Europe with large amount of literature. The threat to the Irish language came with the Anglo-

Norman invasion in 1170. The Anglo-Normans conquered most of the country, including all towns. Those who lived in the countryside became assimilated and learned Irish. Those in the towns, however, did not. Instead, the towns and cities became strongholds of the English language. Then the oppression started. Irish was banned in the court system and also in commerce.

At the start of the Industrial Revolution in 1780, there was widespread movement from the Irish countryside to the cities and towns. English was the language of the cities and also the language of the technology that brought the people there. There was a widespread switch from Irish to English. Irish came to be spoken primarily by the peasants in the countryside.

In the 1840s, the Irish potato famine took its toll on the rural population of Ireland who were the bulk of the Irish speakers. Because of the famine, there was widespread emigration to English-speaking countries like Canada, the USA, and Australia. A whole generation of Irish speakers was lost. Uprooting the majority of a population from their native land, coupled with the loss of prestige and functional value of their language, is a major factor in uprooting the language from the society.

### **Endangered languages in the Philippines**

The negrito or Agta groups in the Philippines are a nomadic people. With the coming of modern-day land grabbers, the negritos have been forced either to disperse or to be pushed further into the interior. Even those forced further up the slopes of Mount Pinatubo had to disperse later because of the eruption of the volcano. In the case of the tribes affected by the eruption, whole communities had to be moved to evacuation sites. And this meant that it was necessary to use a lingua franca known by the majority. Dispersal, caused by whatever reason, brings about displacement, change in the environment, a disruption of normal life. All negrito languages in the Philippines are now regarded as dying languages.

The first settlers of the northern part of the island of Palawan were the tribe called Tagbanwa. Today, it is reported that there are about 800 to 1000 Tagbanwas, 200 of them being mother tongue speakers, with the majority of them older people. The SIL missionary responsible for translation with this language group, Robert Scebold, notes two major factors which have brought the decline of the Tagbanwa language and culture: heavy loss of the population during World War 2 caused by malnutrition and diseases; and massive in-migration of settlers from other parts of the Philippines.

It was after the war that the number of settlers to Palawan increased. And with the stories that these people told about the vast areas of agricultural land, more settlers came. Before this, a major reason why people did not come to Palawan was the fear of malaria. But once anti-malarial drugs became available, there was no stopping the in-migration. The majority of the people who came spoke Cuyonon and Tagalog. From the time when contact with other groups became significant, the rate of intermarriages has been at least 58%; Palawan has become a

melting pot to Filipinos from the neighboring islands. It is no wonder that Tagalog, which is taught in schools, has become the lingua franca. And not only in schools, since there was a drive some 20 years ago for parents to teach their preschool children Tagalog before putting them in school, because Tagalog is the medium of instruction for the educational system. Cuyonon, spoken in the island of Cuyo north-west of Palawan, is another dominant language.

### Signs of a language becoming endangered

The following are some of the sure signs that a language is under threat:

- **No functional value.** Language is used for communication. Thus, when a language is not used any more because people do not know how to use it any more, this is a sure sign of language death. The Spanish creoles in Manila called Ternateno and Ermitano, though very prestigious, are now dead because there are no more speakers.
- **A steady decrease in the number of native speakers.** The decrease can be caused by the actual death of speakers, or lack of prestige. Martuthunira spoken in Australia is one example.
- **No prestige.** This is usually accompanied by loss of speakers and the dominance of another or other languages.
- **Children not learning it any more.** The language has lost either its functional value or its prestige and that's why parents don't pass it on to their children any more.
- **No institutional support.** The language is not supported by any institution such as the government, the church, or any similar organization.

Looking at the process from the other end, it starts with language contact with a dominant language, then moves through various stages of people speaking two languages (bilingualism) until the weaker language is not even understood completely.

### One reaction: language maintenance

Language maintenance is a name given to efforts to reverse the process of languages dying out.

Those who are alarmed at the thought of losing a language are usually either linguists or language enthusiasts. The linguist is thinking of still-to-be-collected language data that might either prove or disprove a claim in linguistic theory. Or it could simply be valuable as an addition to an exhaustive data collection. It is in language maintenance that new theories can be explored or tested, whether for reviving a dead language as in the case of Modern Hebrew, or for giving new life to a dying language as in some cases that have been documented in Australia.

The language enthusiast, who may be a native speaker of the endangered language, has an overwhelming sense of loss of the symbol of his or her identity, or loss of the opportunity to explore the full potential of the language's capacity for literary expression. When there

is a strong following for this feeling, the result is a program on language maintenance.

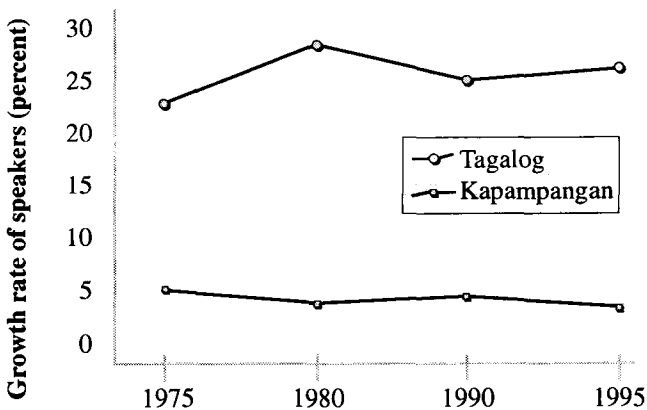
It is not surprising, however, that some linguists have a different point of view. Peter Ladefoged recognizes the influential role of linguists in favoring language maintenance. But he says that not all languages are seen as sacred by those who speak them, and even if they are, the speakers are often willing to exchange them for a more politically useful language. The point that Ladefoged wants to make is that the linguist must respect the actual feelings of the speakers; thus the linguist should be professional and neutral, and allow indigenous communities to determine their own future.

### Evidence of a language being endangered

I have already mentioned several reasons to suspect that Kapampangan, a major language in the Philippines with at least 2 million speakers, is an endangered language. To go beyond mere suspicion and really see for myself if there is any evidence of this, I analyzed the census facts and figures with regard to its number of speakers.

If we simply look at the annual growth rate of the population, which is 2.32% for the past five years, it is not possible to see any threat to the Kapampangan language. However, it is in comparison with the fast growth of the Tagalog-speaking community, and also in comparison with the other major Philippine languages, that a decline in the use of Kapampangan is evident. Note the two charts presented:

#### A: Comparison between Tagalog and Kapampangan speakers



The first chart is the result of a study that compares the percentage of Tagalog speakers with that of Kapampangan speakers in all the regions in the Philippines where there are Kapampangan speakers. The analysis covers a span of 20 years, 1975–1995.

The first chart shows that the percentage of Kapampangan speakers fluctuates, and in the 90s is on the way down, whereas Tagalog is on the way up. This can be explained by the fact that the Pampanga province, which should be the stronghold of the language, is surrounded by Tagalog-speaking provinces. The influence of Tagalog is further strengthened by the closeness of Pampanga to Manila, which encourages a high degree of mobility of the people, and gives them access to mass media which mainly uses Tagalog. For many years Tagalog has been a dominant language in Pampanga, being identified with higher socio-economic status. In short, the trend shows that in all the regions where Tagalog and Kapampangan are spoken, the tendency is for the percentage of Tagalog speakers to increase whereas the opposite is true for Kapampangan.

### **B: Comparison between major language groups and Kapampangan**

<b>Language</b>	<b>1975</b>	<b>1980</b>	<b>1990</b>	<b>1995</b>
1. Ilocano	62%	64%	65%	65%
Pangasinan	23	22	27	28
2. Ilocano	62	64	67	68
Ibanag	11.5	9.5	11.7	9.9
3. Tagalog	46	53	51.6	54
Kapampangan	29	27	28	27
4. Tagalog	80	88	83	84
5. Bikol	77	76	76	76
6. Hiligaynon	75	76	74	76
7. Cebuano	97	98	95	78
8. Waray	62	61.5	60.7	62

The second chart shows the percentage growth over the same period of the major language and the dominant language for each region (numbered from 1 to 8). The comparison reveals that only Tagalog has had a marked increase in the number of speakers when compared with all the other 7 major languages of the Philippines. Pangasinan, Ilocano, Hiligaynon, and Waray had an average of 1% increase. Note the decline in Kapampangan and Cebuano, and the lack of any change in Bikol. At the start of my investigation, I thought that only Kapampangan had the problem. But note the more pronounced decline in the case of Ibanag, a minor language, from 11.5% in 1975 to 9.9% in 1995.

Another minor language considered in this study is Agutaynon. Quakenbush (1997) described it as a relatively robust language with 10,000 speakers in the island of Agutaya and also in Palawan. It is still being learned by children, is still a source of cultural pride, and is used almost exclusively for in-group communication. However, to use Quakenbush's expression, "the door is slightly ajar" for the possibility of a language shift to Tagalog. Parents prefer their children to learn Tagalog. Census figures show that the number of Agutaynon speakers in



1975 was 25 475, falling to 11 018 in 1980, and then to 10 384 in 1990. Unfortunately, information for a more recent count is not available. It is noteworthy nevertheless that the figures already show a decrease by 40% within a period of 15 years.

### **The Bible Society and endangered languages**

It is not difficult to see that the fact of a language being endangered is relevant to the Bible Society and other agencies for determining policy regarding new translation projects. Although the time covered was only a span of 20 years, the charts above show that a trend toward a language becoming endangered can be observed from the census data. Knowing this, I would think that it is possible to estimate a likely rate of loss for some years into the future. And with this in mind it should be possible to determine when a Scripture product should be made available to the people so that they can still fully appreciate the product and use it to its maximum.

For example, I know for a fact that the Agutaynon New Testament is not yet finished. If that New Testament were finished immediately, around 10 000 people will still be able to benefit from it. The longer it takes to finish, the smaller will be the number of people who can use it. At a certain point, those who are responsible have ask what population size would still motivate the Bible Society or any other Bible agency to produce a new translation, whatever the scope of the new project might be. Two hundred? One thousand?

I am certain that a large number, if not a majority, of the present day Agutaynon speakers can also speak Tagalog. Is it sufficient to make the word of God available to these people through the lingua franca and not their native language? Is there a difference in the degree of understanding and appreciation of God's word? Does this approach meet the goal of the Bible Society of making the message of the Bible understandable to the people?

In 1995 the Iraya New Testament was released. Iraya is one of the Mangyan languages spoken in Mindoro in the southern Philippines. After the first surge of sales at the time of the dedication, there were very few further sales. People said this was because the Tagalog language was more popularly used, and because Iraya had been endangered for quite a while. However, this year there was a report of Iraya people wanting to have the Iraya translation rather than the more popular Tagalog translation. Now they say that they have realized they have better understanding of the Iraya New Testament rather than the Tagalog translation, even though they speak both languages.

In spite of the obvious evidence about languages either dying or being endangered, my inquiry to Bible agencies in the Philippines reveals that none has an existing policy on Bible translation and endangered languages. Such a policy is urgently needed now. Without such a policy, long overdue translations will be produced for populations that have dwindled to insignificance. This, of course, also represents a huge loss of resources for the Bible Society and other agencies.

The time has come to establish reliable indicators that show how seriously languages are endangered, and to identify the stages of this process. This is necessary to allow for careful planning of what new projects should be started and how much of the Bible to aim for in these projects. In setting up standard procedures, some difficult decisions will have to be made about when a translation project should be abandoned for reason of its overall diminished returns. Various aspects of this question will have to be considered and weighed up: spiritual, moral, professional, and economic.

Fortunately, unlike physical death, language death is not sudden. But without proper research and planning, Bible agencies might just be in for some surprises!

J. HONG

## **BIBLE TRANSLATION and ENDANGERED LANGUAGES: some general reflections**

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Working on Bible translation over the years, particularly in the area of minority languages, I often have to confront the issue of safeguarding the languages for which we translate the Bible. By “minority language” I don’t mean simply a language spoken by a minority group in the presence of another language spoken by a majority of the general population. Here the expression should also mean an endangered language spoken by a number of people that is getting smaller and smaller, so much so that it is inevitably on the way to extinction.

### **The reality**

This situation of course is a matter of deep concern for people who are involved in translating the Bible, for we would not translate the Bible if we knew that soon few people would be able to read and understand it. As UBS translation consultants we have received a set of criteria set down by our global fellowship to help us develop a priority list of those languages we should translate into and those languages we probably should not translate into. Having a priority list is indeed a sensible strategy, for we have to make the best of our limited resources. Here I will not go into the details of these criteria, such as the minimum number of speakers, the status of the languages concerned, the percentage of Christians in the speech community, and so on. In fact, these may vary from region to region, or even from country to country. A language spoken by millions of people, for example, may be considered “minority” in countries with very large populations like India or China, but surely not in a region like the South Pacific or a country like Papua New Guinea.

Very often, the reality we face is that we have a translation project that has been going on for some years, but there are social and political pressures on the language and its survival is even questionable in the long term. Consultants working closely with the native speakers and eager to