

PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR
**THE BIBLE
TRANSLATOR**

*Published twice yearly
(April and October)
by the United
Bible Societies*
Vol. 45, No. 4, October 1994

EDITOR: Euan Fry

D. FILBECK

**PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATING FIRST PERSON PLURAL
PRONOUNS IN 2 CORINTHIANS**

David Filbeck is a Bible translator based in northern Thailand

We recently completed the translation of the New Testament into Mal, a Mon-Khmer language spoken by some 6000 speakers in Nan Province of northern Thailand. The most difficult book to translate, I believe, was Paul's second letter to the church at Corinth. It was difficult because this epistle is an emotional letter, and translating emotion from one culture to another, and from one era to another, is not an easy task.

Scholars, for example, have long noted the sharp contrasts between 2 Corinthians 1-9 and 2 Corinthians 10-13. In the first section Paul has many good things to say, especially regarding the obedience and repentance of the Corinthians in response to his first letter. In the latter section, on the other hand, he has several harsh things to say, especially as he confronts his critics who had denigrated his status as an apostle. Within the text, moreover, Paul often ranges from one extreme to another: from overflowing joy to deep despair, from tearful pleading to thundering condemnation, from praise to criticism, from sincerity to sarcasm, and so on.

Of the many translation problems we faced, however, there was one that was constantly before us. That was the question of which first person plural pronoun to use. In the process we soon realized that it was a question intimately related to the emotional tone of the epistle as well.

Why such a problem?

There are several reasons why the first person plural pronouns of 2 Corinthians proved to be a problem in translation.

First, there are over 200 occurrences of the first person plural pronoun in this letter alone, an astonishing number for an epistle that seems at first to be more concerned with teaching than personal matters. This large number caused us to pay closer attention than usual to the individual context in which each occurred to see how each fitted in with the flow of the emotional tone of the letter.

Second, the first person plural pronouns in 2 Corinthians proved to be a problem because the Mal language has a complex system of pronouns. In fact Mal has more pronouns to choose from than the Koine Greek of the New Testament, especially in the number of first person plural pronouns. For example, in choosing a first person plural pronoun in Mal, we must decide among four alternatives:

(1) Dual “we” which **includes** the speaker’s companion in the action involved in the discourse at the time of usage.

(2) Dual “we” which refers to the speaker plus a companion but **excludes** others who are participants in a discourse.

(3) Plural “we” which **includes** the speaker and all listeners as participants in the discourse.

(4) Plural “we” which groups together a speaker along with his/her companions (more than two) but **excludes** others who are participants in a discourse.

The upshot of this is that for each of the occurrences of the first person plural pronoun in 2 Corinthians, where more than one person was involved, we had to decide which of the above four alternatives was the correct one. Or more precisely, which one correctly communicated the intent of Paul as he was dictating this emotional letter to the church at Corinth. This made necessary deeper study of the text than would otherwise be required for translation.

The third reason was that the source languages at our disposal, Greek, English and Thai, proved to be of little or no help in making decisions about the meaning of the text in translating 2 Corinthians into Mal. Greek, English, and Thai do not distinguish between dual and plural and inclusive and exclusive relationships in their respective pronoun systems.

In fact, the Thai translation of 2 Corinthians often proved to be more hindrance than help. The source of the hindrance is that the function of pronouns in Thai is primarily to communicate distinctions in social relations. Only secondarily do they indicate person and number, and then never inclusive or exclusive participation. The social relationships which are so important in the Thai pronoun system are missing from pronouns in the Mal language. In using the Thai translation of the New Testament as their main source language, Mal translators sometimes failed to fully understand the social relationships communicated by Thai pronouns; and this resulted in translating with the wrong pronoun person and number into Mal.

The fourth reason why pronouns proved to be a problem in translating 2 Corinthians into Mal was that the translation Guide to this epistle, published by the United Bible Societies, was of little help in this regard. For example, the only extensive discussion of pronouns in the Guide is found in remarks at the beginning of chapter 10 on the final section of this epistle, 2 Corinthians 10–13. There it is suggested that the first person plural pronoun “we” may be a conventional way used by Paul to refer to

himself. Consequently the first person singular pronoun "I" may be used in place of "we" throughout these final chapters.

This suggestion appeared flawed for two reasons. One, it appeared that this procedure may be reading too much of a present day English usage (the so-called editorial "we") into an ancient document. The second reason is that since Paul was defending his apostolic ministry in 2 Corinthians 10–13, it is likely that he also meant to defend the ministry of his apostolic team (see, for example, 2 Cor 10.8; 11.12, 21). In other words, it seems not very likely that Paul would defend only himself and not extend this defense to include his own team members as well! Indeed, reading 2 Corinthians from the point of view of an inclusive–exclusive pronoun system gives a clear picture that this indeed was the case. Using this pronoun system, we felt, helped us to communicate some of the emotion Paul must have felt himself in defending the standing of his apostolic team.

A count of the first person plural pronouns

In the RSV translation of 2 Corinthians there are a total of 220 occurrences of the English first person plural pronoun ("we", "us", "our", "ourselves"). This is an average of nearly 17 such pronouns per chapter. However, some chapters contain more than others. Following is a list showing how many first person plural pronouns occur in each chapter of 2 Corinthians:

In chapter 1	there are 44	first person plural pronouns
2	7	
3	14	
4	28	
5	41	
6	10	
7	19	
8	19	
9	2	
10	19	
11	2	
12	5	
13	10	
	—	
Total	220	

In making the above count I realized that translating the pronouns of 2 Corinthians into Mal would not be a simple task of one-to-one transfer, that is, pronoun for pronoun. Consequently I made a closer study of 2 Corinthians, (1) to determine which of the four pronominal alternatives (see above) should be used in each context and, at the same time, (2) to establish some principles for making such decisions. The results of this study yielded the following figures:

Dual exclusive "we"	29 occurrences
Plural inclusive "we"	30
Plural exclusive "we"	161

(There are no occurrences of the Mal dual inclusive "we" in 2 Corinthians.) Following is a table showing the various contexts where the above pronouns occurred:

<i>Dual Exclusive</i>	<i>Plural Inclusive</i>	<i>Plural Exclusive</i>
1.6-19	1.1-5	
	1.20	
		1.21-2.10
	2.11-13	
		2.14-3.17
	3.18	
		4.1-5
	4.6	
		4.17-18
	5.1-5	
		5.6-9
	5.10	
		5.11-15
	5.16-18	
		5.19-20
	5.21-6.1a	
		6.1b-13
	6.14-7.1	
		7.2
	7.3	
		7.4-8.8
	8.9	
		8.10-9.14
	9.15	
		9.16-11.30
	11.31-12.17	
		12.18-13.10
	13.11-14	

It is interesting to note at this point that in the complete Mal translation of 2 Corinthians, in addition to the dual exclusive "we", there are 51 plural inclusive and 224 plural exclusive pronouns, making a total of 333 first person dual or plural pronouns in this epistle. The main reason for these added pronouns comes from the need to break up long sentences into shorter sentences or clauses. Where such a sentence contained a first person plural pronoun as its subject or as an object, the subject and object were repeated for many of the additional sentences or clauses extracted from the original.

2 Corinthians 6.1-10 is an example of this procedure. In Greek the first verse contains the main verb of the section, *parakaloumen*, which includes the first person plural suffix and is translated in the RSV as “we entreat”. After a quote from Isaiah and a brief explanation (verse 2), Paul begins in verse 3 a long section containing participles and prepositional phrases. However the Mal language lacks these particular grammatical resources to draw upon in translating the Scriptures. Consequently the participles and prepositional phrases of this section had to be restructured as separate clauses. This restructuring in the Mal translation of 2 Corinthians 3–10 resulted in 40 clauses (most of which are subordinate as time or causal clauses) containing 32 first person plural pronouns as subjects and four as objects of verbs or prepositions.

Discourse markers

The above, however, are only linguistic housekeeping procedures in the process of translation. The real question in Mal is this: on what basis do we decide to use either the **inclusive** or **exclusive** first person plural pronoun, whether in translating a similar pronoun of the source language or in restructuring where the subject or object pronoun must be supplied?

Linguistically for Mal we may consider the inclusive pronoun as the **unmarked** first person plural pronoun. That is, the inclusive first person plural pronoun would generally be chosen and used first in communication. The other three pronouns (two duals and the exclusive first person plural pronoun) are **marked**, meaning that there must be a reason for using each of these pronouns in place of the more general inclusive first person plural. When these reasons are present in a text or conversation they may be termed **discourse markers**.

Fortunately Paul sprinkled several such markers throughout the dictation of his second letter to the Corinthians. It is these markers that play an important role in dividing the text, as shown in the above table, into those sections where the dual exclusive, plural inclusive, and plural exclusive pronouns are used in the Mal translation of 2 Corinthians. For example, in the opening five verses we may assume that Paul begins his epistle by using the first person plural pronoun with the inclusive (unmarked) meaning, when he speaks about the “God of all comfort who comforts us in all our affliction.” “Us” and “our” are understood as including both Paul and the Corinthian readers of his letter. The first person plural pronouns of verse 5 are also inclusive: “For as we share abundantly in Christ’s suffering, so through Christ we share abundantly in comfort too”.

However in verse 6 Paul gives us his first discourse marker on how he now wants the first person plural pronoun (suffix in Greek) to be understood. He employs a “we/you” contrast: “If **we** are afflicted, it is for **your** comfort and salvation.” “We” now excludes the Corinthian readers from the affliction.

Now for Mal there is one more decision to be made. Is the “we” a dual exclusive or a plural (more than two people) exclusive pronoun? For the Mal translation of 2 Corinthians we decided to translate the “we” of

verse 6 with the dual exclusive “we (two)”. This decision was based on the beginning verse of this opening chapter:

“Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother ...”

That is, Paul starts dictating this letter by referring only to himself and one companion.

The Mal dual exclusive “we” is used until 2 Corinthians 1.19. In this verse Paul introduces a third person, Silas. So in 2 Corinthians 1.21 when Paul uses once more the “we/you” contrast, the “we” in this verse is translated with the Mal first person plural (more than two people) exclusive pronoun:

“But it is God who establishes us (exclusive) with you in Christ ...”

From this point on in the Mal translation of 2 Corinthians, the first person dual exclusive pronoun is no longer used: all exclusive pronouns are assumed to be plural involving more than two people.

The “we/you” contrast is an important discourse marker in 2 Corinthians. Altogether there are 32 occurrences of this contrast. In addition to the two already noted, the others are: 1.24 (two times), 3.1; 4.5, 14; 5.11, 12 (two times), 13, 21; 6.1, 11; 7.2, 9, 14; 8.17, 24; 9.3, 11, 10.6, 13; 11.4, 6; 12.18, 19 (two times); 13.4, 6, 9 (two times). For a language such as Greek, lacking a formal inclusive–exclusive pronoun contrast, it is not surprising that the “we/you” contrast was used so often by Paul to achieve the same effect.

Theological considerations

There are more exclusive first person plural pronouns than there are inclusive in the Mal translation of 2 Corinthians. Perhaps all first person plural pronouns in this letter, with the exception of those occurring in the opening and closing verses, should be exclusive. However the table above shows several inclusive pronouns scattered throughout the epistle. The question at this point is: Why, in the midst of so many exclusive first person plural pronouns, are some given an inclusive interpretation?

The ideal answer would be that Paul used words or expressions as discourse markers to formally signal that such first person plural pronouns were to **include** the Corinthian readers. However this occurs only two times in 2 Corinthians. In each of these cases Paul used the Greek word *pantes* “all” in association with “we”:

“And we **all** ...are being changed into his likeness” (3.18)

“For we must **all** appear before the judgment seat of Christ” (5.10).

Unfortunately the majority of occurrences of first person plural

pronouns with inclusive sense are not marked in this way in 2 Corinthians. Therefore we had to have some other basis for translating certain of these pronouns as inclusive. The decision for translating some as inclusive was based on theological considerations.

For example, in the two quotations above from 2 Corinthians 3.18 and 5.10, it is clear that all believers (whether a well-known apostle or obscure layman) are being changed into the likeness of Christ, and that all (again whether great or small) shall be judged by Christ. No believer is or will be excluded!

The "rule of thumb" in this regard that we followed in translating 2 Corinthians was this: Did the verse under consideration and containing a first person plural pronoun refer to a **general theological principle** that was (and is) inclusive of (applicable to) every believer regardless of special gifts (or lack thereof) in Christian service? If the answer was "Yes", then the first person plural pronoun should probably be translated as inclusive.

The first instance of this principle at work is seen in 1 Corinthians 1.20:

"For all the promises of God find their Yes in him. That is why we (inclusive) utter the Amen through him, to the glory of God."

All believers are to be included when the Amen is to be said. Indeed, from the theological point of view no one is to be excluded. Otherwise God will not receive all the glory due him.

This principle held true even in instances of restructuring where a subject pronoun had to be supplied. The most interesting case of this was 2 Corinthians 6.1. In Greek this verse begins with the participle *sunergountes* and is similarly translated by an opening participle in the RSV:

"Working together with him, then, we entreat you not to accept the grace of God in vain."

What makes the verse interesting is that by means of this participle Paul continues the inclusive focus of the first person plural pronouns of 2 Corinthians 5.21. Christ was made to be sin for us so we might become the righteousness of God. From a theological point of view, all believers of all time are made righteous through the work of Jesus Christ. In *sunergountes*, therefore, Paul continues this focus; that is, theologically the Corinthian believers also have a part in this work. But next Paul employs the "we/you" contrast, thus making the "we" at this new point exclusive, that is, excluding the Corinthian readers.

In Mal, however, the opening participle of 2 Corinthians 6.1 had to be restructured into a clause having a first person plural pronoun as the subject. So in restructuring, the first "we" in the Mal translation is inclusive in accordance with the theological thrust of the previous verse and the participle, but the second "we" is exclusive in accordance with the particular discourse marker that Paul uses next. Below is a back-translation of the Mal that shows the restructuring:

“Since we (inclusive) have joined together to do work with him, we (exclusive) beg you not to receive the mercy of God as nothing.”

Another example of this principle is the first person plural pronoun in the formula “the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 8.9). “Our” is translated as inclusive in Mal. However we had to use caution in applying this principle in some contexts. For on closer examination we found that Paul sometimes drew on a general theological theme to provide the explanation or justification for his own apostolic work and the work of his team members, to the exclusion of the Corinthian readers. This is the situation we find in 2 Corinthians 5.11-20 where we find a mix of inclusive and exclusive renderings of the first person plural pronouns depending on the purpose Paul had in mind.

In verse 11 Paul gives the basis for the contrast between him and his apostolic team and the Corinthians. He uses the “we/you” contrast to refer to the work of his team in persuading others. This work does not include the Corinthian readers, for Paul next states that this is a work known to God and hopefully known to the Corinthians as well. In verses 12-13 he uses the “we/you” contrast three more times to draw the attention of the Corinthians to his and his team’s apostolic work as preachers.

Now in 2 Corinthians 5.14 Paul continues in an exclusive mode but then draws on a general theological theme (here, as well as below, shown by emphasis) to demonstrate the validity of this exclusive apostolic work:

“For the love of Christ controls us (exclusive), because we (exclusive) are convinced that one has died for all; therefore all have died.”

Verses 15-17 continues with the same theme:

“Christ has died for all and therefore we no longer regard him from a human point of view, for we are now new creatures in Christ.”

Since this is a theme universally applicable to all believers, the first person pronoun “we” is translated as inclusive.

Next Paul dictates (in verses 18-19) in a style somewhat like parallelism in Hebrew as another way of showing that the general or universal provides the basis for the particular case. In each verse he begins with a general theological theme but then he returns to discuss his team’s ministry of persuading, preaching and reconciling men to God. That is, Paul’s and his team’s ministry of proclamation finds its source and motivation in the general work of what God has done through Jesus Christ. At each point of return, instead of maintaining the inclusive pronoun, we switch in the Mal translation to the first person plural exclusive pronoun in order to show this pattern of the universal forming the foundation for the particular case in Paul’s dictation.

“All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us (inclusive) to himself, and gave us (exclusive) the ministry of reconciliation;

“that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting to us (exclusive) the message of reconciliation.”

That is, in each verse Paul refers to the more general work of reconciliation that God has accomplished in Jesus Christ as the basis for the particular work that he and his team now perform in proclaiming reconciliation to others.

Finally in 2 Corinthians 5.20 Paul returns to the “we/you” contrast to refer to the apostolic work that he and his team perform to the exclusion of the Corinthian readers. In fact, to show the contrast even more sharply, Paul aims this exclusive task of his and his team upon the Corinthians by urging them to be reconciled to God!

“So we (exclusive) are ambassadors for Christ, God making his appeal through us (exclusive). We (exclusive) beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God.”

Because of the “we/you” contrast, the first person plural pronouns in this verse are translated as exclusive in Mal.

Conclusion

There are still contexts which are ambiguous as to whether the interpretation of a first person plural pronoun should be inclusive or exclusive in the Mal translation of 2 Corinthians. And no doubt in the future we will change our minds about some of the interpretations we have made. Both the highly charged emotional tone of the letter and the nature of Greek pronouns contribute to this ambiguity. This is to be expected, for this is one of the “luxuries” of a language that does not employ a formal inclusive–exclusive contrast in its pronominal system.

Indeed, it sometimes appears that Paul engages in “deliberate ambiguity” as he dictates 2 Corinthians. That is, in some instances when he uses a first person plural pronoun, he perhaps means to both exclude his Corinthian readers **and** include them at some higher level of theological truth. To be sure, the truth applied first to his apostolic work and the work of his team. But at some point down the road to Christian maturity the Corinthians (and us – as in Paul’s example) are to be included in the task of proclaiming God’s reconciliation through Jesus Christ as well.

However in the Mal language we are not able to take advantage of such an ambiguity. A choice must be made in terms of inclusive–exclusive participation in the discourse flow of the epistle. Therefore we have tried to use the emotional tone and themes of 2 Corinthians in helping us make these choices, that is, to give our choice in each instance a principled basis.