

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!

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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

maintain cordial relationships of trust and sympathy surely feel that it is against their conscience to tell translators and reviewers something like, "Hey, look, it is pointless to continue translating the Bible into your language. There are not many speaking your language! Your children are learning the national language in school, not your language. In one or two generations, no one will use it any more!" or perhaps, "Let's forget about your project! You only need a print run of 1000 copies. Who is going to pay for such a high printing cost?" On the contrary, we would rather encourage our native speaking fellow workers to persevere in their work and to keep on promoting their own native languages.

This is exactly what my experience was with the Mien project in Thailand. Although the survival of the Mien language is not yet under serious threat on a global level, with well over a million speakers, mostly in countries like Laos and China, Mien speakers in Thailand who we are translating the Bible for are to some extent under pressure. There has been for some years a language policy in Thailand to promote Thai as the national language and to discourage the use of minority languages, though this policy is not always carried out. On a recent visit to a Mien village in northern Thailand, I was told that Mien children there who are educated in Thai are reluctant to speak Mien, and even feel ashamed to be seen speaking it by their Thai friends and foreigners.

The key question

Here I come to the key question: As Bible translators or translation consultants, are we only concerned with putting God's Word in people's own language? Aren't we also somehow and to some extent concerned about safeguarding the survival of their language and even their cultural identity? What attitude should we adopt in situations where languages are under threat of extinction? Shouldn't we leave the language issue to linguistic experts? The issue remains a practical one, however, and it is impossible for us to avoid it.

I say it is impossible to avoid the issue, because in many countries and for many projects, Bible translation work and preserving languages are inextricably intertwined. There are many examples I can give from my own experience. Very often our fellow workers in translation projects are themselves experts in their own languages, and in some cases they are the **only** available specialists in the field. Remember we are talking about minority languages spoken by communities that are usually considered under-developed or under-privileged; and certainly there aren't many highly educated people in their midst, let alone people specially trained to study, analyse and defend their languages. In other words, we often have to content ourselves with having people like pastors or priests doing not just Bible translation work, but at the same time being involved in other activities such as language teaching and language research. Yet I am proud to affirm that translators of some of the well-known Bible versions, people I have had the honour to work with, have also been pioneers in the defense of their language or have had a very important role in the study of their language.

There are surely many translation projects around the world that are in this situation. From the East Asia region, I can mention the Cho Chin Bible translator from Myanmar, as a case in point. Cho is one of the Chin languages, spoken by about 80,000 people living in the mountainous northwest of Myanmar. Originally animists, the Cho Chin Christians now account for about 60% of the total Cho Chin population. During the 1930s study of the Cho language was pioneered by a missionary, who with the help of British governor prepared and published the first primers. Used in schools under British rule from 1932 to 1948, these textbooks were abandoned after independence, when Burmese was imposed as the sole language taught in schools. This new situation led to the decline of the Cho language; people from the younger generation no longer spoke it properly, and a large amount of the language structure, its idiomatic expressions and much of the folklore of the people was lost.

As a young primary school teacher and a new Christian convert, the present Bible translator was disheartened by the decline of his mother tongue. Once he had completed Bible training and started ministry in the church, he set about revising the textbooks and reintroduced them in schools in 1980. Ever since, he has been actively involved in organizing teacher training workshops, compiling hymn books, and collecting and recording folk tales, along with the Bible translation work he has been doing since 1988. In a sense this translator is the authority and the only available expert in the Cho Chin language, and we cannot afford to lose him from the Bible translation project. If it were not for his foresight and hard work, the Cho Chin language might not have enjoyed the strong life it has now, let alone the prospect of having a Cho Chin Bible.

Why do languages die?

Experts often suggest that there are two major causes of the death of languages. First a language disappears just because its speakers are physically and abruptly wiped out, by such events as war, famine, or disease. This is usually what happened in the past, as, for instance, during the periods of the discovery of new lands and colonization. In these situations, when whole populations came into contact with other populations, some groups were almost wiped out. In most of the cases, it was the language of the conquered people that was lost and replaced by the language of the conquerors, such as when the Celtic inhabitants of Gaul adopted the Latin language of their Roman conquerors and developed it into today's French, or when some native Americans forsook their Aztec and Inca languages and adopted the Spanish language of their conquerors.

Another cause, more serious but less obvious, is the gradual assimilation of a speech community by another speech community, in which the first community abandons its own speech and adopts the speech of the second community, seen as superior. Usually this situation of language shift, which I find is fittingly described by the title of the popular song "Killing me softly", takes place over a long period of time and a number of generations. Consequently, as the older generations

speaking the ancestral language die out, so their language dies with them. An example is the Manchu from northeastern China, a dying language spoken today only by a few dozen elderly speakers confined to the City of Heihe and the County of Fuyu in Heilongjiang Province. This is a case which is the reverse of the one in the previous paragraph, in that the language of the conquerors, Manchu, has been replaced by the language of the people they conquered. In a recent paper, anthropologist Nancy Dorian mentions other similar cases of conquerors adopting the language of the conquered, such as the Viking invaders who settled in the north of France adopting the Roman speech forms of Normandy, and the Norman conquerors of England allowing their own language to be swallowed up by English.

Some time ago I read an article in the magazine *The Economist*, entitled "Dying Languages: English Kills." According to the writer, today's linguistic experts believe that endangered languages around the world are slipping out of human heritage at the rate of one a day. If this is really true, and if we accept the approximate figure of 6000 as the total number of languages spoken in the world today, in ten years' time we will lose more than half of today's languages; and in a few decades, we might very possibly end up with just a few hundred languages in the world, or even just a few dozen!

This prospect is not unlikely, given the rapid development of modern communication technology, the increasing globalization of mass media, the emergence of new attitudes and political values, all of which favour the use of a smaller number of major languages of the world at the expense of minority languages. In other words, these major languages can be seen as culprits in the death of minority languages. Of course, there are many other factors and variables that bring about language shift, which occurs as a speech community finds that there is no advantage in retaining its ancestral language and prefers adopting another language. Some linguists, for instance, compare the position of today's English to that of Latin during the time of the Roman Empire. They conclude that English will ultimately, sooner or later, replace a great number of other languages in the world.

It is not just English, as the title of *The Economist* article squarely puts it, that "kills," though its impact is definitely felt on a global level. A whole range of national languages, each promoted within national boundaries and imposed on a population made up of many groups with many different languages, are also as effective in doing the "killing." In fact, writers have described the "linguistically destructive" emergence of national languages ever since the time of the industrial revolution and the rise of nationalism in Europe. Quoting from linguist Ralph D. Grillo, anthropologist Nancy C. Dorian points out that the histories of several of the national languages of Europe, particularly those of French and English, are in fact histories of a growing monopoly on prestige and legitimacy by a single dominant speech form, all others being put down to inferior status. It is at the expense of their minority languages within their boundary that European states such as France and Great

Britain have succeeded in allocating “unique prestige and legitimacy to a single carefully cultivated supra-local speech variety as the nation’s official language.”

It is also possible to see similar consequences of the rise of national languages in the East Asia and Indo-Pacific regions in recent times. There are examples from countries which practise a strong language policy in order to bolster a sense of national identity and unity, such as Mandarin Chinese imposed on the fifty or so other language groups in China, Vietnamese imposed on a similar number of groups in Vietnam, Burmese on over a hundred language groups in the Union of Myanmar, and of course, Bahasa Indonesia on a population that is really a vast mosaic of languages and cultures. A linguistics professor in the Netherlands, for instance, sees an uncertain future for the 500 or so local languages still used in Indonesia for songs, ritual and cultural ceremonies, as prospects for their survival are weak in the face of the Bahasa Indonesia which has long taken over in schools and communications.

Today, the undeniable fact is that many minority languages are languishing and dying to give way to a range of major languages promoted as regional or national languages. The prospects for many small languages in the Third World are particularly weak. For instance, linguists are fairly certain that in less than a century, some 600 Bantu languages presently spoken across sub-Saharan Africa will be reduced to a mere dozen or two, and that the one hundred or so Melanesian languages currently spoken in the island group of Vanuatu in the South Pacific will disappear to give way to the creole language Bislama.

However, in this modern world where technology and efficiency are the catchwords, there are strong, valid reasons to promote national languages, because their wide use will render mass communication, education, implementation of government policy and, of course, evangelization, much easier, cheaper, and faster. It goes without saying that governments tend to be less than tolerant toward minority groups living within their boundaries and speaking languages different from the national one.

Language diversity: blessing or curse?

As Bible translators and consultants, we are of course not directly concerned about whether a minority language is to survive or to become extinct. We always affirm that our only concern is to put God’s Word in a people’s own language so that they can read and understand and accept God’s message. End of story! However, in an indirect way, we are in fact helping to preserve some of the minority languages for which we are translating. Very often, the Bible is the only literature available in a language, which its speakers consider not only as a sacred, religious text, but also as a model, a standard, a custodian of their linguistic heritage, just as the King James Version was to the English language for several centuries. Even close to the motherland of the English language, there are challenges to meet, as the article on dying languages in *The Economist* indicates. There are just 50,000 speakers

left of Scottish Gaelic, for instance, and their only text is the Bible, with no other tradition of writing letters.

What this comes to mean for those who work in Bible translation is that the more threatened a minority language is and the less speakers it has (and therefore the scarcer its literature is), the harder it often is to reject the request from the enlightened leaders of its speech community for a Bible translation.

We all agree that language does play an important part in the identity of a given people, like a mirror that reflects the soul of its culture, a vehicle that conveys its mindset, a framework that shapes its world view. As linguist Marianne Mithun has said, language represents the most creative, pervasive aspect of culture, the most intimate side of the mind. On the one hand, a community abandoning its language is without doubt a terrible loss in itself, a loss not only on the level of cultural identity for the community concerned, but also on the level of linguistic heritage for the whole of mankind. As the stock of human languages is shrinking at a startling speed, the loss of language diversity will surely mean that we will never again have the opportunity to appreciate the full creative capacities of the human mind and spirit. As the article on dying languages in *The Economist* says, the extinction of a language certainly involves the loss of a unique range of knowledge tied up in the verbal arts.

On the other hand, however, we may wonder whether this is just the way that human society develops, that it has always been that way, inevitably – some languages disappear, and new languages come up to replace them. After all, if we want to draw a lesson in the most literal sense from the story of the Tower of Babel in Genesis, we may even see this linguistic diversity in human society as a curse from God, a punishment on human beings so proud as to want to make themselves equal with God by building the Tower.

As workers involved in the ministry of Bible translation, we would rather believe that human speech is a blessing from God. It is one of the divine gifts that clearly distinguish us from animals. The human ability of speech, that is, the ability of learning and performing this speech, and even the ability of further developing and re-inventing it, is still very much a mystery that linguists and other scientists are trying to study and elucidate. This ability, of course, allows any speaking community to develop its own speech into a distinctive language over a long period of time, thus leading to the diversification of human languages. Bearing in mind the divine origin of human speech and echoing the ideal of linguist Michel Malherbe, we would rather raise our voice to proclaim this truth: No matter how many or how few the speakers are, no matter how advanced or how undeveloped the speech communities are, all languages in the world are equal in dignity and nobleness, and have the same capacity to express the human mind, though not always with the same nuances. This diversity of languages is comparable to the individuality of people: each person is different from all others, and has special talent of his or her own; yet they are all equal in dignity and right, and deserve a place under the sun.