

## TRANSLATION PROBLEMS IN JOEL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOME EAST AFRICAN LANGUAGES: PART 1

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East Africa has a diversity of language types. In these two articles our examples are drawn from two language types, the Bantu and the Nilotic.

The Bantu group of languages are nominal class determined. Classes are grammatical categories which form patterns of agreement marked in Bantu by prefixes. The choice of the proper prefix is determined by the subject noun as can be illustrated below:

Class 1	<i>mtoto</i> child	<i>mdogo</i> small	<i>yule</i> that	<i>alianguka</i> fell
Class 2	<i>watoto</i> children	<i>wadogo</i> small	<i>wale</i> those	<i>walianguka</i> fell
Class 7	<i>mti</i> tree	<i>mdogo</i> small	<i>ule</i> that	<i>zilianguka</i> fell
Class 8	<i>miti</i> trees	<i>midogo</i> small	<i>ile</i> those	<i>ilianguka</i> fell

Each class requires agreement of all other elements with the noun, and noun class is the sole determiner of the correctness of the sentence. Some inconsistencies are allowed. For example:

ng'ombe	wangu	amekufa
cow	mine	dead
mtoto	wangu	amekufa
child	mine	dead

In this example, *ng'ombe* (cow) takes the people class. Many nouns of this type which do not obey their class agreements are dumped in a separate class. An informed speaker of Swahili will know the nouns which must be treated like this.

In the book of Joel, old translations have not taken into account the rules of class agreement. Take the place of the locusts in the book for example: the locusts are the main agents for carrying out God's judgement. But the reference to the locusts by the use of a number of metaphors and similes has been greatly misinterpreted in many of East African languages. The locusts have consistently been translated as an *army of people* by the use of the nominal prefixes that go with people class. This then does not bring out the figurative usage which is intended in the original.

The English language which most East African translators use as base allows for ambiguity which Bantu languages do not. In a passage such as "For a nation has come up against my land" (1.6) "a nation" here is grammatically correct in English even though it is ambiguous. In Bantu languages, the translator must specify the exact reference of the *nation* in order to choose the right class. For example the Swahili Common language translation has had to identify it further as a *nation of locusts*. This is the most common problem in the translations of the book of Joel in many of the languages of East Africa.

The problem is very widespread, but we shall only make brief references to it here, and use the rest of the space for treating other types of problems.

The title of this book is translated in East African languages as Joeli (GikU, RagU, MerU), Yoeli (SwU, LuyU, RuhU), Yoweri (LugU) or as Joel (LuoU, TukU) the last two being non-Bantu. In certain of the languages, there is a struggle to keep to the English spelling in rendering the title of the book. For example, languages which do not have /j/ as a sound still struggle to retain the English phoneme. Similarly, those which have a consonant-vowel pattern sometimes omit the final vowel because the English does not have it.

This is a common problem with proper names and other items that need transliterating. As in other cases of this type, the solution lies in encouraging translators to respect the sound system of the African language. The common practice in East Africa has been to start from European languages (English, French and German) as the base for transliteration. In some cases however (such as Swahili), it has been found advisable to use the Greek or Hebrew as a starting point. This has helped to bridge the differences that were brought by European missionaries from different countries and churches.

The expression **word of the Lord** (1.1) is often found to be unnatural because of the personification of *word*. The GNB rendering as *message* is also difficult, because such a general term does not exist in several of the languages. Swahili which has a generic term adapts the GNB rendering, using *ujumbe* ("message") in SwCL, rather than *neni* ("word") which is used in SwU. In other translations, however, *word* is kept with varying differences between those who render it in singular or plural.

The expression **son of** (in 1.1) presents some interesting renderings. Luo naturally requires a term that distinguishes male from female child. In many Bantu languages, however, the phrase *son of* does not have to be made specific. It is usually rendered as *child of*. Sometimes it is not even necessary to include the word for child/son. It is sufficient to use only the possessive *of* ("wa" . . . Gik, Luy). This natural rendering is often lost in an effort to stay close to the base or model forms.

English versions differ in the rendering of **aged men** (RSV 1.2). Some see this as excluding women (RSV), while others take the inclusive view (GNB). In most African languages examined, the words used take the exclusive view.

Thompson suggests that *aged man* may be referring to elders or "*leaders of the people*" (NEB). The NEB, however, does not make obvious that age is a factor in the leadership. This is implied in the next phrase which goes on to ask about the experience of their past. The East African translations favour the exclusive view as in the RSV because it would sound ridiculous in these languages to take the inclusive view. Culture has dictated that the *leaders* are not only men but also older men.

The RSV "**has such a thing**", GNB "**has anything**" (1.2) present a problem of what class the thing belongs to. In order to make any translation at all, the translator has to make a conscious decision on how to classify *thing*. The most common view taken has been to interpret *thing* as *occurrence* (Swa *mambo* or Luy *makhuwa*). It follows then that 1.3 "**tell your children of it**" will have to agree with 1.2 above.

Another problem in 1.2 is the rendering of **land** in the phrase “*all the inhabitants of the land.*” The term land has been understood in some translations as a piece of farming or residential space. In other translations, it was found necessary to render it as all inhabitants of this world (for example RagU, *Kivala yiki*). The clarification made by GNB seems essential here: “those who live in Judah”. Common language translations are adapting the GNB rendering to the requirements of their languages.

The second half of 1.3 in RSV is a phrase with a missing (implicit) verb, as it presupposes the verb in the first half of the verse. In cases of this kind, the verb has to be supplied in Bantu languages in order to achieve a grammatical agreement.

It is interesting to note that most of the translations examined give specific local names for the types of stages of **locusts** referred to in 1.4. The RSV refers to the locusts by use of descriptive phrases whereas the GNB describes them merely as swarms. The East African region has for many years experienced the scourge of locust devastation of crops and vegetation. The locust is therefore well known in this region and local languages obviously reflect the people’s knowledge. Here then is a case where the RSV text would be preferred to the GNB text.

The descriptive references to the locusts in the RSV assist in the identification of the type or stage. In this case the languages of East Africa could have benefited from use of the Hebrew text which identifies the locusts by their specific names. Because locusts are so well known, verse 1.4 is indeed more dynamic in these languages than in English, and probably reflects the poetic nature of the original which English may not.

In 1.5, SwU uses the word for getting out of the drunken state which is not easily translated in other languages. According to Thomson, the drunkards are to awake **from the drunken sleep**. It therefore seems that the usage of *levukeni* by the SwU is acceptable. However, in other translations, the verbs for wake (LuyU *vuka*, SwaU *amka*) do not carry the non-literal meaning of the phrase. They merely refer to waking up from sleep. Therefore, where such a verb has been chosen, the results are awkward.

In the phrase that follows, **weep and wail** (1.5), except for Luo the translations examined have made the distinction between wail and weep. Luo expresses both ideas by the use of one word. Since this is an aspect of the same activity, it does not seem really necessary to look for two words to identify the difference between weep and wail unless the language so dictates. Yet there are many obvious attempts to distinguish the activities—even up to the point of inventing words which do not exist.

The subject of **wine** creates interesting debate in Protestant circles in East Africa (1.5). Drinking of any alcohol at all was one of the sins most denounced by early missionaries. Hence translators are uncomfortable by the occurrences of wine in the Bible. Some of the established churches which use wine prefer to see church wine as holy, and would not refer to it by the local names used for alcoholic drinks. Instead church wine is often referred to by terms borrowed from other languages, *divai* (from German, *der Wein*) or *vini/mvinyo* (from Italian/Latin *vino/vinum*). Several translations done by Protestants have

adapted the Swahili *divai* for wine, while those done by Catholics use *vini* or *mvinyo*. Some translators go as far as substituting *Ribena* or any other name for fruit juice, wherever wine occurs in the Bible. The ongoing RuhCL is attempting to use in this verse the generic local name for alcohol. It is still not known what the people's reaction will be.

The expression **cut off from your mouth** (1.5) has been translated literally in older versions and it is awkward. The C.L. translations follow GNB "the grapes for making new wine have been destroyed."

Verse 1.6 introduces the major problem of Bantu noun class agreement in Joel. The translations have rendered **nation** as people. This misunderstanding has been consistently applied to the rest of the similar metaphoric references to the locusts; so for example, verse 1.7 in SwU reads as *ameuharibu mzabibu wangu . . .* "he has destroyed my grapes". This confusion is carried on the end of verse 7. A similar problem occurs in verses 1.19, 2.2–11, 2.20, 2.25 and so on.

In 1.19, for example, the RSV which is commonly used as the base text has "For fire has devoured the pastures of the wilderness . . .!" The tendency has been to translate this literally, thus understanding fire to be another element of destruction in addition to locusts. If, however, we accept the GNB interpretation which is also supported by Thompson, then "fire" is only a metaphor in RSV, and GNB makes it even more clear by using a simile. That is to say that the locusts are the main participants even in 1.19. In a class-determined language such information is essential for correct rendering. Unfortunately, the older translations did not take into account the class agreement required by Bantu languages and so we get the impression that it is people who made the attack.

To return to the order of the text again, 1.8 has other types of problems. The theological debates about the understanding of the terms "virgin" and "young girl" here and elsewhere are well known. The East African translations are divided between two interpretations. Those which use "virgin" in the verse are distinct from those which use "young girl". However, the ongoing Turkana common language translation connected the first two lines of verse 8 and therefore associated bridegroom to virgin—and thus understood the two lines as saying that the girl was a newly wedded wife, but still a virgin. Problems of this nature occur frequently where the base text is poorly understood and consequently wrongly translated.

Archaic usage of certain words in the RSV creates conscious. For example, 1.11 **confound**, which in that passage means be **ashamed**, is rendered in GNB as "grieved" in order to make the passage meaningful. This kind of conscious decision in the choice of words is not always obvious to East African translators. In 1.14 RSV has "sanctify a fast" which translators have rendered as "make holy a fast" instead of "call a fast". This is because of the known meaning of the word "sanctify".

The symbolic meaning of **sackcloth** in 1.8 and 1.13 creates cultural problems. As is understood, wearing of sackcloth was a Jewish custom which symbolizes remorse, repentance, mourning. The East African cultures are completely unfamiliar with this Jewish practice.

In East Africa, wearing clothes made out of sacking or wearing the sack itself will either be done out of poverty or when a person is performing dirty jobs. In the latter case the sackcloth is an apron. However, several of the cultures have things they put on or off during times of sorrow. In Turkana, a woman removes her normal everyday skin clothes and ornaments and wears rather poor skins during the time of mourning. The whole custom is known as *ngiboro*. It is very difficult to translate putting on sackcloth because even material like sacking is unfamiliar. The Ruhaya, on the other hand, have a mourning cloth made out of the bark of a tree; and the use of this cloth is similar to the Jewish use of sackcloth. It was found that in both the Turkana and Ruhaya common language translations, their traditional mourning ceremonies were used. This of course raises questions of accuracy and fidelity. These translations are therefore doing away with the actual symbol of sackcloth modelled on the GNB. Others who would like to retain the expression use descriptions such as "clothes made out of sack and used for . . .".

A certain amount of restructuring of 1.10 is essential for achieving proper logic. The existing translations of this verse are awkward. The different renderings in RSV and TEV confuse some East African translators even though they mean the same thing. **Grapes** are not native to East Africa. Therefore translators do not always connect wine with grapes immediately.

Some of the names of the **fruits** in 1.12 are unfamiliar such as pomegranates and apples. The translations have used local trees such as oranges and guava trees. The inaccuracy in this is obvious but no satisfactory solutions have been found.

As might be expected, the expression **sons of men** (1.12) has been translated literally in older versions, but common language translations have followed GNB.

In verses 1.18, 20 the reference to **beasts** in RSV is commonly understood in East Africa as **wild animals**. This may be due to the abundance of wild life in East Africa. Sometimes in the actual translation a generic term is used in verse 18 making it ambiguous as to whether it is wild animals or domestic animals. However, in 1.20, it is clearly rendered as wild animals. The problem here may be that the East African translators use RSV as their basic text.

The GNB section heading a **call to repentance** (2.12) is difficult to translate. It has therefore been rendered differently, for instance SwCL "an invitation for people to repent". It is more natural in the Bantu languages to begin verse 2.12 "The Lord says", and then put the whole plea in quotes. It is not quite clear what "yet even now" refers to in the older translations; the SwCL has for some reason translated that phrase in a double way, *hata hivyo*, "even then", and *hata sasa*, "even now". Thompson notes that "yet even now" means that in spite of the day of the Lord already occurring and in spite of the damage already done by locusts, God is still offering the people another chance. If this is the case, maybe the SwCL should render the translation as only *hata hivyo* "even then".

Of the three things mentioned in 2.12, **fasting, weeping and mourning**, fasting is the most difficult to translate. It does not seem sufficient to translate fasting with *going without food*. The translation of 2.13 must be made as clear

as possible to complete the idea of repentance which runs through both verses 2.12 and 2.13.

In 2.13, the existing translations have literally got “tear your hearts and not your clothes”. The GNB rendering is better understood. “Let your broken hearts show sorrow: tearing your clothes is not enough.” Even with this better rendering, there is still a problem with the term “broken heart” because this expression is not natural in many languages.

2.14 is difficult to translate from the RSV because of several ambiguities. The participants and their roles are not clear. GNB has restructured this verse and removed the ambiguity, and that seems to be the way translations in East Africa would be advised to go. The verse is not only awkward, but unintelligible in several of the older versions examined.

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## TRANSLATION PROBLEMS IN JOEL WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO SOME EAST AFRICAN LANGUAGES: PART 2

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The section commencing at 2.18 marks a clear change in the message of the prophet. God restores and positively alters the fortunes of his people after their prayers and repentance.

The land and the whole of nature are central and inextricably connected to the destiny of God's people. The world of nature, as it were, determines the well-being of its inhabitants. But nature is not independent—it is an instrument in the hands of God, for good or for retribution. The essential idea here is basic and clearly understood in East African communities. Indeed the significance and sacredness of nature and man's dependence upon nature can hardly be over emphasized in these communities. (See for example Jomo Kenyatta's *Facing Mount Kenya*, where this point is stressed.)

Translational problems found in this section are not unique. They are essentially due to a failure to read the base text correctly, or to translate it literally without really communicating. 2.18 illustrates problems which confront those who translate literally from either the base text or the model text. A literal translation of the RSV “. . . **the Lord became jealous for his land**” as the SwU and the LuyU have is not only unnatural but lacks meaning in the language. On the other hand, a literal translation of this expression from the GNB model text encounters similar problems. The GNB expression “show concern” lacks an equivalent in East African languages. A dynamic translation as in the Luo Bible . . . *nonyiso ni ohero pinye ahinya*, “showed much love for his land”, appears a possible acceptable solution. Turkana has adopted a similar solution.