

MECHANICS OF NEW TESTAMENT TRANSLATION INTO LAHU

PAUL LEWIS

The mechanics and procedures of Bible translating may not seem important. However, the methods used can often make the difference between a good or a poor translation of the Scriptures. Therefore, it seems advisable for each translator to plan carefully the mechanics he will follow in his work to ensure the best possible final product. I cannot possibly tell another translator what the mechanics of his work should be, but in this article I will explain how we went about the translation of the New Testament into Lahu.

The Lahu are a tribe spreading across much of Yunnan, China, eastern Burma, and northern Thailand, with a few in western Laos. Many years ago a translation of the New Testament was made into Lahu, but for many reasons, including faulty technique in the method used, it was not satisfactory. Thus we were confronted with the need to produce virtually a new translation.

The Lahu Christians of Burma chose a team of three to do the original work of translation. Two Lahu men and I made up this team. We worked for almost four years, giving full time to translation work during much of that period.

Order of translation

The first thing we did was to make a rough draft of the following selected chapters: Matthew 5-7, Luke 15, John 1, Romans 1, I Corinthians 13, I Timothy 3, Hebrews 1, and Revelation 13. These chapters offer a wide variety of style and translation problems. After we went through several steps of translation and checking in these chapters (which I will explain below), we then translated the New Testament book by book. We did not translate consecutively from Matthew through the book of Revelation, however. We found it far better to translate a Gospel first, for example, and then go to Hebrews. After Hebrews we did Romans, and then another Gospel. We purposely left some of the more difficult books, such as Ephesians, to be done toward the end, so we would have more experience translating before we did them. However, we found that it would be too much of a mental strain to work too long a period on the more difficult books, especially the Pauline epistles. It was best to alternate between the very difficult and less difficult books, and from one style of writing to another. I remember for instance the sense of relief we felt when after completing Colossians we began translating I John.

Making the first draft

Our actual translating procedure was as follows. The three of us on the translation team would sit around a table with the Greek

text, various English versions and different translations from the languages of Burma on it. Discussion concerning each verse, its meaning and place within the context, was held in Lahu. Commentaries were freely consulted. The two questions we faced in each verse were: What exactly is being said?, and, How can we say this best in Lahu?

When we felt we could start writing a translation of the verse, one of the Lahu men would suggest a phrase, or sometimes a whole sentence. If all three of us felt that this was quite accurate (although we always considered what we first wrote down as very tentative), I would type what had been said on a 3 x 5 slip. The verse reference was always typed in the upper left hand corner. I always double spaced the text so there would be room for corrections. I cannot overemphasize the value of using 3 x 5 slips in the initial phases of the work. For one thing, if in checking our first translation we found a better or alternate way, we could easily put in a new slip when we felt we had a better translation, while retaining the old slip behind it. Also it was easy to make checks on certain words or phrases that were giving us trouble. We simply took the slips containing those words out of the file and examined them together. It was a simple matter to put them back in the proper places after such checks.

In some of the more difficult passages we often found that we could not decide between two or more possible ways of translating the same verse. In such cases we would write each of these versions on separate slips and put "Alt." (for alternate) after each verse reference. This reminded us when we checked, that we had two slips for that verse. Sometimes we had alternates for only one phrase. These we usually indicated on the same slip, unless the phrase was too long.

Preliminary checks

After doing the original translation of a section, we put it aside for a minimum of two or three weeks. During that interval I checked it against the Greek and the English—mainly to see if everything was included, and also to see if it had the proper flow from verse to verse and from paragraph to paragraph.

In my checking I never made any changes on my own. If I had questions or suggested changes, I would mark them in pencil with my initials following. Upon the completion of a book I also checked through the translation with the check lists furnished by the American Bible Society, which I found to be very helpful. I had a different mark to indicate questions raised from these check lists.

The next step was for me to read our rough-draft translation to the two Lahu men several weeks after we had first done it. This was the first time they heard it read through consecutively. Since

they were not looking at any other translations, they heard mistakes and awkward wordings in the Lahu that had slipped by before, and we worked on these mistakes. At the same time I also brought up my questions, usually by saying, "Would this way sound a little better, or this?" Sometimes too I would give a hypothetical situation from everyday life and ask what word they would use, and then we would turn to the translation to be sure that we had used a natural Lahu expression. I would estimate that about 25% of my questions led to some kind of change in what we had done, although often the change made would not be the one I had suggested.

The next step in our procedure was to have two others come in with our team of three to check what we had done. One of these two was my wife, and the other was a man who had had a great deal of experience in translation and literature work. This man was nearly blind from cataracts during most of our New Testament work, so he had to listen to what was read, without checking any other translation. This often proved to be an asset. The rest of us again compared what we had done with other translations, to see if there was a better way of rendering a phrase or a verse. At this point we also included our section headings (provided by the American Bible Society), which we had previously translated. One thing we had to watch very carefully was that if we made a change in the wording of the passage we also had to make the same kind of change in the section heading, if the two places were related.

Next I typed up a copy in dummy form of a whole book, or portion of a book, that would later be checked by our larger committee of 16. The team of three would then read through this dummy copy, all three of us sitting so we could see it. The two Lahu men took turns reading it. This was the first time they had actually read what we had done. As they read it aloud they discovered certain mistakes that had slipped by before.

Submission to representative readers

The corrected copy was then either typed up with enough copies for the 16 member committee, or duplicated with several hundred copies so that it could be used in village Bible classes. The book of Acts was duplicated in an edition of 800 copies for an even wider sampling. We could not do this with all books, but we duplicated at least half of the New Testament in what might be termed as "trial runs".

The "16 member committee" I constantly refer to was a committee of 16 Lahu Christian workers selected by the more than 6,000 Christian Lahus in the area to make a final check on our translation. In this committee there were representatives from virtually every part of the area. Several different dialects were represented, with a majority being from the dialect used in the translation. We asked

these committee members to take the translations (still tentative of course) which they received from us and read them to a few of their church leaders. Together they then made desired corrections in the margin of the copies and sent them back in before the meeting.

The suggested corrections were very interesting. Some of them revealed that the readers completely misunderstood the section—which mistakes we were happy to catch and clarify before the final printing. A few corrections showed dialectical differences. But some of the most revealing “corrections” were those where the group had simply written in the margin, “We don’t know what this says”. In the rather complete directions concerning the reading of these tentative translations, we had encouraged them to do this when they really did not understand a certain phrase, verse or section.

Committee procedure

All of the corrections sent in were collated. Again we used the 3 x 5 slips, with the reference in the upper left-hand corner, and the suggestion or question typed on the slip, beneath the way we had it in our tentative translation. At the bottom we used a number which showed which person or group it was that made the suggestion. The verse number in the master manuscript (which I retained) was then circled, so that when we read together in the committee I would be sure to bring up this suggestion. When the suggestion was brought up in the committee I never told what group or what person made the suggested change, but simply said, “one group (or person) feels that so-and-so would be a better way of saying this. What does the committee feel?” This kept us from getting personal, or voting for one’s favorite village.

During part of the time we were doing the translation work I was teaching in our Pangwai Bible School, and was also teaching an adult Sunday School class. In these classes I was able to test in a very practical way some of our translations. In doing this I tried to encourage people to help us by finding mistakes or suggesting improvements. When they realized we really were anxious to have the best possible rendering of each phrase and each verse in Lahu, we got many valuable suggestions from these two groups.

Our committee of 16 met for a week at a time, four times a year. At their request I acted as chairman of this committee, but never voted. When there was more than one Greek text I tried to give them the one considered to be the best. If there was a problem of meaning I tried to clarify that too, but I never told them what the Lahu should be. I tried to make sure that every side was presented clearly and fairly in the discussions, something that a Lahu may not have been able to do if serving as chairman. My wife acted as secretary for this committee, and she too did not vote. She wrote down all of the votes in a permanent record so that we would not

have to vote on the same thing meeting after meeting. For example, one plural indicator in Lahu is said with a slightly different tone by different people. Since this occurs throughout the New Testament we could have taken a vote on how to write it at every meeting, but by having the recorded vote we wrote it that way only, and did not have to vote on it again and again.

Whenever we had a tie or very close vote in the committee of 16 which involved Lahu vocabulary or pronunciation, this matter was brought up to the Lahus present in our annual Bible Conference, in which we would have as many as 80 or 90 voting. If there was a tie there we duplicated letters and sent them out to the Lahu churches for a vote. We realize that this was not always the best way of doing it, but it was the most practical in our situation.

After we had gone through the above processes in the entire New Testament, the original team and my wife read together the entire manuscript from beginning to end. During this reading we were especially checking for consistency within the book, consistency of Lahu usage, and consistency of the Lahu spelling and tone marks. We did not make any major changes in the text, except where we were simply making every part of the New Testament consistent with the pattern established by the committee of 16. I should say, however, that we were always amazed at how many mistakes we found in each check. There seems to be no end to the amount of checking that needs to be done. But one day you must say, "This is it. We must quit our checking and print."

Help from the Bible Society

Throughout the entire process we received invaluable aid from the British and Foreign Bible Society, which was editorially responsible for our translation. We wrote in many questions to the translations secretary before our larger committee met, and we had other questions to refer to him after the meetings of the committee. Not only did the Bible Society help us in our specific problems, but the secretaries constantly stimulated us, directly and indirectly, to do our very best. Whenever the agent in Burma, the Rev. Stanley S. Vincent, attended our committee meetings we found his presence to be most helpful.

We are now hoping to help in the translation of the New Testament into the Akha language. As far as we can tell now, our basic procedure will be the same as in the Lahu translation work. Of course we will have to make adaptations since we are dealing with a relatively small church with fewer literates. We will try to improve on our technique wherever possible, and we will show the greatest care in each step of the translation procedure, since I believe that the mechanical procedure of translating can make the difference between a good or a poor translation.
