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STRENGTHS AND WEAKNESSES OF AN UNTRAINED TRANSLATOR¹

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INTRODUCTION

This paper is not presented as a basis for generalization about untrained translators. It is an analysis of a piece of translation done by one man, which I had the opportunity of examining in detail. It may however provide some insights which can help those who are training national translators.

The piece of literature translated was secular and narrative. The translation was free and richly idiomatic, but unusable in its original form because of the translator's use of obsolescent language and for other reasons which are described below.

PROCEDURE

In June 1965 I began learning the MUYUW language of Woodlark Island in the Territory of Papua New Guinea. In December of the same year I met an educated man on holiday in his home village on Woodlark, who had completed High School and Teacher Training and was about to be posted to a Government school. I had on hand an extract from the diary of a pioneer missionary on Woodlark, who in 1902 had written this record of a canoe trip with local island people. After minor editing of this document, I asked this man to help me translate it into MUYUW, but it suited him better to take it home and do it by himself. I told him in a letter, "It doesn't matter if you have to add bits here and there, to make it sound more natural, or leave bits out which Woodlark people wouldn't say." Thus most of the difficulties which we encounter in Bible translation were removed from this exercise, because:

1. The cultural setting was local and contemporary.
2. The source text was well understood.

¹ I am indebted to Karl Franklin for extensive constructive criticism of an earlier draft of this article.

3. There was no emotional attachment to the quaint style of the source text.
4. The material was narrative.
5. The translator felt no inhibitions against paraphrase, or against omitting details which he felt were not needed.
6. He was fluent in both languages.

I received his manuscript and discussed it in my limited Muyuw with various language helpers over a period of several years, but I found I could do nothing with it. In 1968, when I had reasonable fluency in the language, I went through it again with my best translation helper, and we were able to assign meaning to most of the difficult words and the unusual grammatical forms in the manuscript.

I put it aside again until 1971 when I translated the article myself, using my standard translation method of running off a rough first draft and then working through it several times with indigenous translation helpers. With one helper now quite familiar with the content we worked through the old translation once more and clarified almost everything.

The handwritten manuscript had a number of superficial mistakes in spelling and grammar. After correcting these and typing a clean copy, I found that average readers still had difficulty with it, and preferred the version which I had done with my translation helper.

I was perplexed as to why they found it difficult to read and understand, so I got my translation helper to go through it with me, comparing it with our own version, and extracting what was best from both sources, to make a new version. Sometimes we used passages from either source as they were, but often my helper combined the ideas of both in a completely new version. He was the authority on style and idiom, and I was the authority on equivalence with the source text.

After this I listed the parts of the earlier translation which had been rejected, and classified them. I also listed the portions which were retained complete or in part, and classified them. The results are presented below, together with some observations of a general nature.

STRENGTHS OF THE TRANSLATION

1. Excellent lexical idiom	14
2. Good phrase-level idiom	40
3. Neat grammatical idiom	3
4. Succinct expression	3
5. Apt use of direct speech	3

EXAMPLES

1. Lexical idiom

He had come to look out for me	ilabnibwein
I woke with a fright	alaktukit
We formed in a line (and went)	kakalkideked
We sighted (land)	ipwein
(<i>ipwein</i> is literally "it poked up")	

2. Phrase-level idiom

<i>Original text</i>	<i>Translation</i>	<i>Meaning of translation</i>
do some fishing with the new hooks	biwkunabis isiban	try-out (take the shine off) their-hooks
I tied my bundles on either end of a stick over my shoulder	aneg kwanag wamatag moy watibweloug	I-divided my-load at-my-eyes and at-my-back (The implied use of a carrying stick is clearly understood)
they decided to make a feast by cooking more fish and taro	deisa isipinpeinugs anasul kana in	just they-bustled its-cooking food-and fish
we left one canoe there	kalavew kaytan wag	we-threw-away one canoe
a black squall close at hand	bwaw nigunugoun magin bo neim	squall became-black its-appearance really had-come
(my) wet clothes	agukweim sona sipsopina	my-clothes with their-wetness
welcomed by a crowd of the villagers	takamtanuws nitimitoums	the-stay-at-home-people were-coming-and-making-a-crowd

3. Grammatical idiom

which I had given out when we started	to nasekes mo nakam	they I-gave-them then we-came
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4. Succinctness

she was as friendly as could be wished	singay nasiwayoub	very friendly-female
one of the boys went ahead to announce our coming	teitan simey imgwey livnem	one-male our-companion took-ahead talk-about-us
it was hard to sleep	igak bamasis	it-was-bad I-would-sleep
I called out in my sleep	awak boug	I-shouted night

5. Direct speech

this was unpleasant for me	akinew, alana, "O, bo igege!"	I-saw-it I-said "Oh, what-a-blow!"
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WEAKNESSES OF THE TRANSLATION

1. At the outset it should be stated that one cause of difficulty, which is not necessarily a weakness in the translation, is the fact that the Muyuw people have limited reading material, and are not accustomed to reading literature with a wide vocabulary and a variety of idiom.

2. The translation was handwritten, and had evidently not been re-read to correct mistakes.

3. It contained a good deal of obsolete vocabulary and grammatical forms.

Other deficiencies were classified and counted thus:

4. Lack of amplification of obscure passages	21
5. Lack of discourse connectors	10
6. Lack of paragraph closure	2

7. Lack of sentence connectors	5
8. Lack of motion or sequence words	10
9. Unnatural word order	6
10. Direct speech not used where appropriate	5
11. Wrong meanings	5
12. Awkward literalism	3
13. Omissions	17

DISCUSSION AND EXAMPLES

1. Muiuw reading material

Most of the Muiuw printed literature is my translation, and readers are familiar with its vocabulary and grammatical forms. Some of their own texts which have been printed are quite difficult for them to read, because of a looser use of vocabulary items and the use of grammatical forms which leave much to be implied from context, gestures and intonation. Workers in other languages have also found that New Guineans find it hard to read their traditional oral literature when it is printed.

2. Mistakes

Obvious mistakes in the handwritten manuscript included:

Unintelligibility	5
Wrong choice of word	5
Misspelling	8
Wrong use of function word	6
Wrong pronoun	2

3. Obsolete language

The use of obsolete language was probably the greatest single cause of obscurity. It was fifteen years since the man had lived continuously in his village, and the language had changed significantly in that time. Also there is a strong tradition in the area that the only true Muiuw language is that spoken by the old people. Some folk have specifically stated that there are only two people who know the true language, both aged about eighty years. The translator had relied on his boyhood memories of the language, with help from his sixty-year-old grandfather where his knowledge was deficient.

There are two almost obsolete grammatical forms which he used frequently:

(i) Pause-marker used to be *e* but is now almost exclusively *o*. The translator told me of his surprise at this change in the language, but continued to use the old form.

(ii) "Until" used to be *oko*, but is now mostly *ee*.

Several vocabulary items were used which are still acceptable, but rarely used in current speech and not found in my concordance² of 20,000 words drawn from speakers who were mostly 40-50 years old when I took the recordings in 1965. Two examples are:

² This concordance was produced by a joint project of the Oklahoma University Research Institute and the Summer Institute of Linguistics, which was partially supported by Grant GS-270 of the National Science Foundation.

(i) "Actually/completely" used to be *kamtek*, and is replaced in the concordance by *wan* (120 occurrences). *Kamtek* is used in the translation, and not *wan*.

(ii) "That night" has an old form *mibougin* found in the translation, while the two current terms for the phrase were not used.

As a check on vocabulary change I took the survey word-list of the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Papua New Guinea, and elicited what is remembered of old people's speech. I did not have opportunity to take a list from the two old people mentioned earlier. However I found that the 20-30 year-olds remembered the words more quickly than the 50-60 year-olds. Comparing the old people's words with current speech, I found that 26% have changed significantly, and 16% are not even cognate. In some cases the type of affixation has also changed.³

Other changes, not indicated in this list, are tabooed words from the death of a person whose name sounds like that word. In these cases the whole community adopts a new word. The translation contained a different word for "eye", which is currently used in a nearby dialect, because a man there with a name like the word for "eye" had died.

The change of language and attachment to the old is a large problem not restricted to Woodlark. The problem is increased when a local translator has been away from his people since childhood to gain an education in a national language.

4. Lack of amplification

This is illustrated in "I was recovering from fever" in the opening paragraph, which was translated in its context, "I waited two months. My sickness got better itself. Then he came." This needs some amplification such as, "I waited two months and nothing happened. While waiting, I got sick with fever; it abated; I was almost well, then he came."

5. Discourse connectors

For discourse connection the final verb in a paragraph is commonly repeated in the opening of a new paragraph, or it may be a noun which is repeated in this way. Take an example of the two events in this passage:

"We marched into the village.

The sago brought as an offering for the dead was presented."

The translation has the group marching single-file towards the village, and in the next verb offering the sago. It would have been good style to end the journey with, "We arrived at the village." A new paragraph could then be commenced with, "We arrived at the village and . . ."

6. Paragraph closure

For paragraph closure we will look at the passage which ends, "We started for home. Our party bought three dogs and were satisfied with the trip." This was translated fairly literally with nothing to close the paragraph

³ A more detailed account of language change on Woodlark Island is being prepared for submission to a linguistic journal.

or connect with the next paragraph which begins, "That night we slept at the coral islet at the landing-place." In good Muyuw the paragraph should end with the arrival at the landing-place and sleeping there. The narrative can then pick up the fact that they were sleeping, and flow on to the next event which was a shout from one of the boys while they were sleeping.

7. Sentence connectors

Most sentences were connected nicely, but some sentence-connectors were lacking.

e.g. "We left one canoe there and pushed on. As the sea was getting rougher . . ." The first sentence is well translated "We threw away one canoe and set sail." Before saying "The waves were getting big", a Muyuw person would say "We were going along and . . ."

8. Motion and sequence words

An example of an omitted motion or sequence word is the literal translation of "He returned to his village", which should be "He returned and went to his village."

9. Word-order

Three examples of unnatural word-order were of the type "Her name was Neawa", which should follow the same order as the English, but was reversed in each case. This order is optionally possible, but I have never found a translation helper who will approve of the reverse order in a translation.

10. Direct speech

Direct speech was well employed in three places where it was not present in the English, but it could have been used to good advantage in five more places. Muyuw language employs indirect speech infrequently, but makes rich use of direct speech. In this translation "I tried to persuade him that . . ." could have been rendered more vividly with, "I tried to cut his mind, I said, ' . . .'"

11. Literalism

The translation was refreshingly free from literalisms, but a few awkward ones were present, especially towards the end, when fatigue would be a predisposing factor.

e.g. "Sandflies helped me to realize the difference between our situations", which was rendered, "The insects of the beach made me know the base of their staying and mine." This could be more clearly expressed, "Sandflies were continuously biting me. Therefore I thought about my colleagues' good situations, but mine bad."

12. Wrong meanings

Wrong meanings were few and relatively unimportant.

e.g. "The day was fine" was translated in the sense of a beautiful day, rather than the fact that the rain had stopped.

13. Omissions

Though a weakness in the translation, the omissions actually made it easier to read and understand. In this case I had asked the translator to concentrate on the main sense, so he felt free to omit difficult details, such as "I was comforted" in "I was comforted on meeting an old man." There is a tendency for all translators to omit details which are difficult, or which are not understood.

CONCLUSION

We do not expect a European to do good translation just because he knows two languages. He needs to have facility in literary expression in the target language, sensitivity to the reading ability of his readers, and training and practice in the techniques of semantic and grammatical adjustment. Many national workers have the ability to do good translation, but they should be given adequate training, and have their work checked thoroughly in the early stages, so that they can receive correction and guidance in problem areas. Without this help their potential is not likely to be realized, and they will probably become frustrated by the difficulties, or merely retreat into transliteration and literalisms.

In this particular case this national had considerable natural ability, but had he wished to become a translator he would have benefited from special guidance in the areas of usage of current language, amplification, and discourse flow.

DONALD S. DEER

NOTES ON THE TRANSLATION OF REVELATION, CHAPTER 22, INTO KITUBA

The Rev. Donald S. Deer is a translator of the Kituba language in Zaïre and is presently pursuing further studies at the University of Strasbourg, France.

Only one chapter remains to be done of our translation of the New Testament: chapter 22 of Revelation. I am in my office, reading through the Greek and comparing it with a new French translation called *Français Courant*, which helps us more than any other version as we translate into Kituba.

22:1 In the first verse of chapter 22 the Greek simply says: "He showed me the river." It does not say who "he" is. We know, however, from the 9th verse of the previous chapter that it is the angel. As a matter of fact, this French translation (the French equivalent of *Today's English Version*) spells this out and says: "The angel also showed me the river of the water of life." There is a difference, however, between *Today's English Version* and the *Français Courant* in the treatment of the problem of tense in this verse. TEV says that the river "comes from the throne of God and of the Lamb", whereas