

CULTURE, MEANING AND TRANSLATION

My missionary partner and I had just finished a very exciting morning. We had begun learning the Waunana language, our first experience of learning an aboriginal tongue. We were excited, for we had been able to collect more than fifty nouns, names of objects that were visible in and around the house where we were doing our language study. For the afternoon we had decided to begin eliciting some verbs. I was so eager to get ahead in the work that I skipped my siesta and began furiously writing out verb forms in paradigms: I run, you run, she runs, it runs, we run, you run, they run. Then followed all the other tense forms, as far as the English grammar permitted. The idea was that in the afternoon we would only have to fill in the equivalent Waunana forms beside the English pattern already written out.

Finally the informant arrived and we started our work. 'How do you say "I run" in your language?' The Indian was quiet for a while. First he looked down; then he looked out. Suddenly his face lit up as if struck by a sudden flash of inspiration. He spoke very rapidly. If I had been able to transcribe what he said, it would have spread across the page several times. I gulped and bravely started to write; but after a few syllables, I was already hopelessly bogged down.

'How did you say that?' With his repetition I added two more syllables, then bogged down again. When I asked for the third repetition, the informant began to waver and finally to change his story, and so I had to give up entirely. To my half self-justifying and half self-accusing, 'But that surely doesn't all mean just "I run"', he said, 'Why of course not. It means I was sitting here with you; then I looked out of the door and saw a deer, so I quickly grabbed my spear and now *I am running* after it'. Then, almost philosophically, he added to himself, 'Only a fool would run for nothing'. This experience is a vivid reminder that words and their meaning are closely linked up with the experience of man. Not only does the linguistic context in which a word is used determine its meaning, but also, in a given language, meaning is bound to the larger cultural context within which this language functions.

This paper proposes to highlight at least two types of translation problems that grow out of this relationship between language and culture. They are, first, the 'culture-boundness' of words, and secondly, the differences in the unspoken patterns of conflicting world-views. The reason for highlighting these two problems grows directly out of some of the early translation experiences that led the author to study anthropology and linguistics.

The culture-boundness of words appears, first of all, in the vocabulary inventory of a given language. The Comanche Indians of Oklahoma did not have a word for 'bicycle'. This was because their culture had never provided

them with any bicycle experience and so the language had never developed a word for it. However, language is a living organism, and it was not long after seeing one that the Comanches coined a word. It was 'white man sits down to walk'.

We speak of ghosts, demons, evil spirits, but really all of these words involve only one category of phenomena for modern man who doesn't really believe that anything like it actually exists. Another culture, however, that 'believes' in the spirit world may not even have a generic word for 'spirit', but it may distinguish many hundreds of individual spirit beings, each with a separate proper name. This is also reflected in other areas of culture. Highland Quechua Indians, for example, whose main diet is built around the potato, do not have a common word for potato, but they have separate names for many kinds of potatoes—purple potatoes, yellow potatoes, frozen potatoes, etc., etc. It is estimated that some dialects have more than 200 separate words for potatoes.

Culture-boundness of words can also be seen in the differing 'chunks of reality' that culture assigns to individual words. The English word 'parents', for example, is neutral in terms of sex, while in the male-oriented Latin American society parents are called *padres* or 'fathers'. Again, in the female-oriented Lengua Indian society of the Paraguayan Chaco parents are called 'mothers'. Or consider the differing divisions of a prism of colors as made by ourselves and the Waunana of the Choco of Colombia. Everything from a light yellow to a red-orange will be classified as *koara* or 'colored'. Our range of greenish-yellow to a dark blue is called *pawara* or 'grass'. Colors ranging from our navy blue and including all shades of grey and black are called *pīys* meaning 'black'.

When new items enter a culture they most often become associated with related foci already existing in the language. The new item, as it were, enlarges the 'chunk of experience' and expands the meaning of the existing word. The Chippewan Indians in Northern Canada who had used the dog as a beast of burden called the newly arrived horse 'a big dog'. This difference in area of meaning would also be reflected in such words as the English word 'to have' which covers the area of two Spanish words *tener* and *haber*. *Haber* must be used when 'have' the auxiliary verb is intended; and *tener* is used whenever the English refers to 'possess'.

Another feature of culture-boundness relates to differentiating between the emotive value-tags that words carry from language to language. In one of my early experiences with linguistics at the Summer Institute of Linguistics in Briercrest, Saskatchewan, I worked with a female Sioux Indian informant. The lady, a married woman of some 40 to 50 years of age, had a rather severe cold so it was difficult to hear the difference between oral and nasal vowels. For three days she suffered my continual use of the oral *hiya* which means 'louse' (which is also one of the dirtiest insults that a person can give another Sioux) instead of nasal *hiya* which means 'no'.

Closely related to this are the cultural differences in terms of the seat of emotions. In our culture it is placed in the heart, but in many cultures it is placed in other body organs. The Waunana locate it in the spleen; and their equivalent of English 'sweetheart' is *mī kima*, 'my spleen'.

While I was a graduate student at the University of Washington a professor once tried to embarrass me publicly by telling a story of a 'stupid' missionary mistake he had observed in Northern Australia where he had been doing anthropological research. A mission in the area was trying to convert the aborigines. His evaluation was that after thirty years of work they had only a handful of converted Christian natives; and for fifty cents apiece he could have converted them to anthropology, since they knew no more about the one than the other. He then went on to explain: 'When I came there I heard all the people singing a song, "Jesus loves the Little Children, All the Children of the World, Red and Yellow, Black and White, All are precious in His Sight, Jesus loves the Little Children of the World"; and so I said to them, "What in the world are you singing?" They answered, "Oh, that is a song that the missionary taught us, but we don't do that any more. Oh, the people in the hills still do that, but we are civilized now". "What do the people in the hills do that you don't do any more?" ' These people used to be cannibals. When the missionary asked them for a word for 'love' the first one he learned had the conception of 'passion', and so he rejected it. Finally, after he had gone to great lengths to describe the depth of feeling for another person which was to characterize the love about which he was talking, one of the natives volunteered a question: 'Is it a really powerful word, something you feel inside of yourself for another person?' 'Yes, that's it.' The missionary was delighted when he got this 'powerful' word, but actually it was the word for the feeling that a person gets when his spirit is depleted of strength and yearns for human flesh to replenish this spiritual deficit. Thus the God of the song was a great big cannibal who had such a desire for human flesh that He had sent His son into the world, and this son specialized in children—red or yellow, black or white. With a single word the whole concept of the love of God had been so distorted and misconstrued that the Good News value of the Word was undermined.

The culture-boundness is reflected in still at least another way, and this is in the matter of transliteration of words. When the translator decides that the language does not have an adequate word, he may often be tempted to borrow from an official national language. Missionaries to the Navahos, frustrated by the extensive spirit world of these people, did this in the early days. They introduced the English word 'God'. Having no referent in their language for this, the Navahos equated it with the nearest phonetic equivalent, which was *got* and meant 'juniper bush'. This phonetic similarity, plus the fact that the missionary put up a Christmas tree every year, convinced them that the God the missionary was advocating was the juniper bush.

Even when such a loanword from an official national language finds its way into meaningful usage in the language of an aboriginal group, it is generally not borrowed in the full range of meaning that it has in the donor language. For example, in Latin America where many of the Indian tribes have borrowed the words *Espiritu Santo*, it actually does not mean Holy Spirit in the theological sense. It is the label that is applied to the dove that sits on the halo of the statue of the Virgin, which is carried around in church processions.

A second major area of problem revolves around the conflicts in the unspoken premises of differing world-views. By this we mean that both the missionary and the aboriginal think, speak and act on the basis of certain concepts about man and the universe, and that these may not only be fundamentally different from each other, but are generally also unspoken. If the translator is not aware of these differences, serious misunderstanding can result. Consider the very different conclusions of the various participants in a simple bushfire hunt in Africa. In this hunt all of the men and many of the children of the village take part. They form a big circle around an area, light the grass in front of them, and then drive the fire towards the center as they decrease the circle intending finally to trap the animals for killing. But on this day it was unsuccessful.

The missionary said, 'I could have told them so. There was a real heavy thunderstorm that passed through the area last night and all the animals retreated before the storm, so that there just weren't any animals there!'

The unbelieving natives came home and beat their wives. Why? Because they were bad-tempered on account of their failure? Not really. But they 'knew' that for a successful hunt there are certain things that must be done by the hunter and these they had performed faithfully. They also 'knew' that there were certain taboos that wives must keep if the hunt is to be successful. These involve the spirits of the previously killed hunting prey, which were lying around asleep by the hunter's house. Should a wife talk loudly or should she sweep in or outside of the house on the day of the hunt, she would awaken these dormant spirits and they would learn of the hunter's intent and would then go and warn the animals in the circle. These animals once warned would change into spirits and jump out of the circle and thus escape the hunters. Now since they had killed no animals, they 'knew' that the wives were at fault and so they beat them.

The Christian natives, on the other hand, knew that the missionary would not understand if they beat their wives. So they were walking around, wringing their hands and saying, 'Sometimes one gets to feeling that God doesn't have any stomach'.

The missionary had a naturalistic explanation, because he believed a distinct separation between the physical and metaphysical, the material and the spiritual. For the aboriginal these are but different manifestations of the same realities, for things change to spirits and spirits constantly assume form. The poor Christian national was in a real dilemma trying to do partial justice to both.

Missionaries have frequently been vaguely aware of such differences and have then proceeded to enlighten the nationals without actually first understanding their converts' point of view. I remember how I tried to enlighten some Waunana Indians with the fact that disease is caused by germs, not by evil spirits. In order to prove this convincingly we prepared a slide of a drop of blood from someone having malaria, and were able to produce a very clear slide showing a number of malarial parasites having invaded the red blood corpuscles. A blue stain which the parasites absorbed made them visible among the blood cells. To me it was obvious that once one saw these germs under the microscope one ought to be convinced that they were not

spirits as the animists believed. The Indian seeing them through the microscope looked at his friends in real surprise and said, 'Come here and look. I didn't know that those spirits were that small and that they were blue at that'.

Since such discrepancies of world-view are generally unspoken they are very subtle in the confusion they create in the translation. While translating the Great Commission with a Choco Indian in Hillsboro, during 1962, we had an experience which illustrates this. The Indian had just translated the phrase 'to the uttermost part of the earth' as 'to the last earth'. Afraid that this might all at once tie in with the Choco view in which there is an underworld which is both older and lower than the current earth, a present world which is here and now, and the upper world which is both higher and future, I was unsatisfied with the expression. But the Indian firmly insisted on this translation. When it seemed impossible to find a good solution at that point, I resolved to make sure to set the stage properly before translating the same phrase in the first chapter of Acts. Before beginning the translation of Acts the whole concept of world evangelism was discussed both in the Spanish language and in the Indian language. This was to create the framework within which the Indian was to understand and also to translate correctly the phrase 'to the uttermost part of the earth' in Acts 1: 8. When the Indian again came back with the statement 'the last earth', the translator reprimanded him, saying 'Why don't you translate it the way it says? "To the uttermost part of the earth" means, as it were, "to the most distant shore of the earth", and you always translate "to the last earth"'. But the Indian countered, 'But what about the long explanation you gave? What about the people who live on the other side of the bank?' It was very apparent that translator and informant were talking past each other—but where? Then I thought of the round world and asked, 'Do you know that the world is round?' To this he answered with the affirmative, so it couldn't be the flat plane. I tried every other way but to no avail. At last on an inspiration I wheeled the globe into the room and asked, 'Did you know that the world is round like this?' I showed him Panama and the United States, the course of his flight to Hillsboro via Portland, Oregon, and his return flight via Cuba. He sat as if glued to the globe, so I left him to do other work. Suddenly he turned to me and said, 'So, it isn't true'. 'What isn't true?' 'That the world has seven seas.' 'Why,' I countered, 'we generally speak of only five oceans, but you can have as many as you please by giving different names to different sections of the water.' 'That is not what I mean,' he said, 'the earth is really one sea and a bunch of islands.' To this I countered, 'No, don't you see that this water here is light blue. That means that the water is shallow. This patch here is darker blue. That means that the water is deep. There is a "land" bottom underneath the sea.' He remained at the globe, turning it and asking questions. Finally he got up and went to the blackboard and said, 'I always knew that the world was round, but thought it was like this'. Then he drew a circle and in the circle he placed Panama and the United States. 'Since there were seven seas, there had to be seven concentric rings of land and water for the seven lands and seven seas; but the last two are frozen to the sky and there are no people living there, so what you are asking me to

translate is utter nonsense. There are no people there.' It is very apparent how the unspoken premises of the translator and of the informant from different cultures were causing the mis-translation.

If it was necessary for the Word to become flesh and to dwell among us so that men could see the glory of the Father, will it not become necessary again that each translator reincarnate the Word into the culture of the people to whom he is to bring the written Word?

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Some General Impressions of the TRANSLATORS' INSTITUTE held at Yarina Cocha, Peru, April 27-May 21, 1964

Translators' Institutes are now a well-established feature in the general translation scene, and reports of earlier Institutes at Bobo Dioulasso, Libamba and Manila have already appeared in the pages of *The Bible Translator*. In a sense no two Institutes can be altogether alike, for not only do the constituencies and linguistic environments vary considerably, but it is the aim and object of the organizers to experiment, to seek to discover the particular needs of groups of translators in different areas and to adjust the programme in each particular case to meet specific needs. This is the long-term plan. For the present it can be said that the main outlines of the Institutes so far held have followed similar patterns, and it would therefore be tedious to describe in detail the syllabus and sessions held at Yarina. This account will therefore deal only with certain features which may have a special interest to our readers.

This was the first time that the Bible Societies had arranged an Institute for a group of translators all of similar background and training, and all engaged, more or less at the same level, in pioneer work in tribal languages. Yarina Cocha is a tiny township on a large and beautiful lake, some 500 miles from Lima. Here a community of about 300 people have established their headquarters under the auspices of the *Instituto Linguistico de Verano* (Wycliffe Bible Translators), and from this place they reach out hundreds of miles into the Amazonian jungle to make contact with some scores of tribes of Indians. I suppose that at no time in history has there been a concerted effort on such a lavish scale to translate the Scriptures into the varied languages of relatively small tribal communities. This alone makes the movement unique. But Yarina Cocha, the place, is also unique for it is entirely dedicated to the translational task. Of 300 residents, some 80 or 90 are full-time translators. The others are described as 'support personnel', and consist of air pilots, doctors, teachers, printers and their art assistants, and general maintenance staff. A fleet of aeroplanes is their main means of