

OUT OF THE MOUTHS OF BABES: Testing a New Reader text with Luo-speaking children

Dr. Mae Reggy is UBS New Reader Program Officer for Africa, based in Nairobi, Kenya

(This article is a shortened version of a longer paper which was presented at the United Bible Societies Translation Workshop held during May 1981. The original paper contained a full treatment of the New Reader text referred to, whereas this condensed version presents just a selection of the material.

—Editor)

The Luo are a tribe of people who originally came from the Sudan. More than 500 years ago they began to migrate, travelling south along the River Nile. They are found today in parts of Uganda and parts of Kenya.

The population of Luo in Kenya is estimated at $2\frac{1}{2}$ million. Most of them live around Lake Victoria, in Central and South Nyanza. All the Luo in Kenya speak basically the same language, with only minor variations in the usage and pronunciation of a few words.

In the past, the Bible was translated by European missionaries, who were not well versed in the language and culture of the Luo. Consequently the old Luo Bible is a literal translation which most people find too difficult to read with understanding.

A series of New Reader selections has been commenced in Luo, called *Wach Maber*. Book A is already in print, and it has been used with school children; however teachers have commented that it is too difficult for children who are just beginning to read. So a research project has been undertaken, in order to “test” *Wach Maber* Book A, and identify the areas of difficulty in it, particularly for primary school children.

The project was carried out in Uhoho Location, which is located in Siaya District, Central Nyanza. Uhoho is a predominantly Christian area, and it was, before independence, the only Luo location which was situated in a predominantly Luyia-speaking area, then called North Nyanza.

The Method

Obtaining “texts” from Luo-speaking children in their own words was the main way in which information was gathered for this research. These “texts” are significant because the children were able to speak for themselves. In this way, an “inside” view of Luo children’s own oral language could be put on record, and the New Reader translator was able to learn how to communicate the scriptures better to children who speak Luo and other related languages.

Thirteen Luo-speaking children from Uhoho listened separately to the story *Yesu Okwero Yamo Mondo Okue* (“Jesus orders a storm to stop”) on cassette tape. This story was chosen because it was considered to be short, dramatic, and appealing to children. The story was read from the NR text in Luo by a Luo primary school-teacher from the area. Each child’s retelling of the story was recorded on a separate cassette tape. These cassette tapes were then transcribed. Three primary school teachers from Uhoho were among those who helped with the transcriptions. (The written transcriptions are what are referred to as “oral texts” in this article.) After transcription was finished, the oral texts

were analysed to find out how well the children understood the story—its setting, participants, events and basic teaching.

The children also read the story aloud from the New Reader booklet and each child's oral reading was recorded. Later, the children's oral readings were analysed to find out where they stumbled in reading.

Discussion of the children's oral texts

The story takes place on a lake. This setting may be a serious problem for some groups of children. However, the Luo are people who live along rivers and lakes. Luo-speaking people are familiar with boats and navigation. Common Luo words for "lake" (*nam*) and for "boat" (*yie*) were used in the NR text. When children retold the story, ten of them used the specific word *nam* for "lake". The word *yie* ("boat") was used by ten of them. Three children did not use the word *yie*; however, these children used different expressions, *kadhō nam*, *kalo nam*, *n'gado nam* which refer to "crossing a lake". There is little doubt that the children understood where the story took place.

The word *yie* simply means "boat" and so it is not clear whether the children understood that the boat was sufficiently large enough to carry at least thirteen people. As a verb for "getting into" the boat, the NR text has used *idho* which means "to climb". Five children used the verb *idho* when they retold the story. Four children did not say precisely how Jesus and his disciples got into the boat. Four other children used the verb *donjo* which means "to enter". Teachers commented that *donjo* is a more common word, but *idho* which expresses the idea of "climbing" implies that the boat was relatively large. It is important that children know that this was a relatively large boat; otherwise, they will be unimpressed with the nature of the storm, "for if the persons got into a boat which was entirely too small to carry them all then the ensuing danger would be predictable and not the result of any violent storm" (Nida).

It is not clear whether the children understood how the boat moved across the water. Although there are common Luo words for boats and navigation, in some cases, the common words are different depending on whether a speaker is from Central Nyanza or South Nyanza. The clause "they started to row" has been translated in the NR text as *gichako siayo*. The verb *siayo* ("to row"), a common word in South Nyanza, is not commonly-known and understood in Central Nyanza. Later in the NR text, another verb *kwang'o* is used. *Kwang'o* is commonly understood in Central Nyanza.

When children retold the story, most did not say precisely how the boat moved. Only four children used a specific verb for "rowing": two used the expression *gikwang'* ("they rowed") and two used the expression *gichako siayo* ("they started to row").

Although there are only two major participants in the story—Jesus and his disciples—it is important that children understand who is doing what. The first sentence of the NR text makes it clear that Jesus (*Yesu*) was getting into a boat "together with" his disciples (*jopuonjrene*). Eleven children mentioned "Jesus" and "his disciples" at the beginning of their narration. One child mentioned "the disciples" in the third sentence of his story, after the storm had come. One child used only the pronoun prefix *gi* (for "they") and identified the "disciples"

only when they called out for help.

Different words were used for “disciples” when the children retold the story. One child used the word *jaote* which means “messenger” or “apostle”. Three children used the word *jalop* which means “follower”; *jalop* seems to be more common among children from Catholic backgrounds. Nine children used the word *japuonjre* which means “student”, “learner” or “disciple”. *Japuonjre* is used in the NR text, and is considered a commonly known word for children. The children made few “mistakes” in assigning participants to events within the story. Only two children said that Jesus “and his disciples” were “going to sleep”. Two used a general word *jog* meaning “the people” to show another set of participants in the story.

The idea of crossing a lake was conveyed by most of the children. Some used direct discourse, but in a more simple, conversational form, *Wakal nam* (“let us cross the lake”). Others said, *Yesu nodwaro n'gado nam* (“Jesus wanted to cross the lake”) thereby replacing the direct discourse and using the verb *n'gado* in its simple infinitive form.

In expressing the idea of a storm blowing down on the lake, the word *ahiti* is used which means “waves” or “stormy waves”. *Ahiti* is not a commonly-known word in Central Nyanza. Two teachers did not know this word; another one said that he had read it in books but did not use it in conversation. The NR text uses the word *apaka* later on in the story. *Apaka* is more commonly-known and understood in Central Nyanza.

The meaning of *apaka* and *ahiti*, “stirring of the lake by a strong wind”, can be expressed by using the simple word *yamo* which means “wind” within a descriptive clause. The word *yamo* is common for South Nyanza and Central Nyanza. It occurs also in the NR text.

When children retold the story, the word *yamo* (“wind”) occurred 33 times, *apaka* 26 times and *ahiti* 11 times. Two children used the two synonyms *apaka* and *ahiti* together which may indicate that they have not understood the meaning of one word or the other. The teachers commented that a booklet packed with words which are common in South Nyanza might conceivably give difficulty to a child in Central Nyanza where such words are unfamiliar.

The NR text describes the waves (*ahiti*) as big waves. The word *mang'ongo* is used to express the quality of bigness. *Mang'ongo* is a difficult word for children. In reviewing the NR text, all of the teachers commented that this word is not commonly used by children. *Maduong'* is a more familiar word for them and is a suitable synonym for *mang'ongo*.

When children retold the story, none of them used the word *mang'ongo* to express how big the waves were. Eight of them used its synonym *maduong'*. Three children used the word *mang'eny* which means “much” to describe the wind: *yamo nobiro mang'eny* (“Much wind came”). Five of them did not use any word to describe the quality of bigness, but described how the wind blew: *yamo makudho matek* (“the wind blew hard”), *yamo kudho ahinya* (“the wind blew much”).

In expressing the idea that the wind was “blowing”, the NR text selected the word *kudho* which means “to blow”. Two children used the verb *kudho* for “to blow”. One child used the verb *gocho* which also means “to blow”. Seven children used the verb *biro* “to come”: *Apaka nobiro maduong'* (“Big waves

came”), *yamo nobiro* (“Wind came”). One child made the sound of wind blowing: *yamo ochako kudho matek u-u-u-u-u!* (“The wind started to blow hard, o-o-o-o-o-o”).

All of the children expressed the idea of the disciples waking Jesus. Most used the verb *chiewo* (“to wake”) of the NR text. Interestingly this part of the story seemed easier for the children to remember. Is it because this is a dramatic part of the story? Or, because it uses dialogue? Or, because the NR text has used a short sentence which the children found easier to remember? It should be noted that the Luo NR booklet A contains relatively short sentences: the average length of sentences is 8.7 words per sentence. However, the children tended to use even shorter sentences when they retold the story. The average length of the children’s sentences was 6.8 words per sentence.

The NT text uses the verb *wacho* to designate the words which the disciples said to Jesus, *ne gi wachone* (“they said to him”). Four children used the verb *wacho* when retelling the story. One of them expressed the idea of urgency in this way: *Jopuonjrene ne luonge ni* (“His disciples called him saying”). The cry for help was expressed by eleven children in the form of direct discourse. Two children did not express any direct plea for help. Eight children used the word *Ruoth* which means “Chief”, “King” or “Queen”. The NR text used the word *Ruoth* for “Master!”. Two children did not have the disciples address Jesus as “Chief”; they made their plea without name or title. One child put it this way: *Chung’! Chung’ piyopiyo! Apaka dhi ne goya!* (“Get up! Get up quickly! The wave is going to beat me!”)

“He told the wind and the stormy water to be quiet” is expressed in the NR text as *nokwero yamo kod apaka mondo oling’*. When children retold the story, only one of them left this climatic event out of his narration. Ten children used the verb *kwero* which means “to forbid” as was used in the NR text. Nine children used the same expression *oling’* “to be quiet” or “to be silent” as in the NR text. One child used *okue* which means “to be still”. Two children used the verb *chog’* meaning “to stop”. One child expressed the order as a form of direct discourse. *(O)wachne yamo, “Yamo, we kudho!”* (“He said to the wind, ‘Wind, stop blowing!’”)

Koro ere yie ma un-go? is expressed in the NR text as a direct question by Jesus to his disciples meaning “Now where is the faith that you have?” Only four children expressed this mild rebuke when they retold the story. Two children used the exact words of the NR text, *koro ere yie ma un-go?* One child simplified the question, *yeunkure?* (“where is your faith”). One child started, *nopenjogi ni wach na yie maru* (“then he asked them to tell him their faith”) at the end of his rendering of the story.

The essential part of the story may have been missing from the oral texts in nine children because the noun *yie* meaning “faith” or “belief” is abstract. Having “faith” may be a difficult concept for children to understand. Interestingly the Luo word *yie* has at least two common meanings: *yie* can mean “boat” or “canoe” and *yie* can also mean “faith” or “belief”. The correct meaning can only be understood from the context of the story. Both meanings, “boat” (*yie*) and “faith” (*yie*), are key words in this particular story. The teachers felt that the NR text might be confusing for some children. They suggested that the question be restructured. They suggested this rendering:

“Where is the faith in your heart?” Or better still: “Why haven’t you trusted me?”

The question *En ng’at manade?* “What kind of person is this?” was expressed by ten children. Was this so because the children’s interest had fastened onto the power of Jesus to do unusual things? Or, because of direct discourse? Or, because the question sounds more like the way people actually speak?

The children’s reading

Children did not do badly when reading the story aloud from the NR booklet. Each child stumbled over an average of 12.5 words. Children in lower primary classes 2 and 3 missed more words than children in upper classes: some missed 33, 29, 27 words in the story. We may feel that the text is likely to be suited to “Level C” (Class 5) because on the average children who had completed class 5 “missed” 4.5 words compared to 18.6 words “missed” by children who had completed class 3.

The word that children stumbled over most often was *loka kocha*. The teachers commented that this word is usually spoken as *lokacha* and written as one word in Central Nyanza. Six children used this word when they retold the story. Five of them said, *lokacha* (“the other side”). Only one said *loka kocha*.

Other troublesome words were: *siayo*, *wang’aduru*, *mang’ongo*, *kaachiel*, *nochiew*, *noidho*, *gikwang*, *nokwero*, *nokuwe*, *ahiti*, *kagiwuoro*, *awinjani*, *kengi* and *un-go*. Most of these are important words which greatly affect how children understand the story. And most of them were left out when children retold the story in their own words.

Conclusions and recommendations

Two or three days of “testing” *one* Bible story with a small number of children speaking *one* language in *one* area does not yield wide conclusions. However, it does seem that the teachers have a point in claiming the NR Luo booklet A is difficult for children who are just beginning to read. Most of the difficulty—at least for Uhoho children—seems to be caused by unfamiliar words, which because of their age or geographical area they have not known or understood.

When children read the story aloud they missed an average of 12.5 words. However, children in upper primary classes missed fewer words than children who had completed classes 2, 3. So we suspect that booklet A is at a slightly higher level of difficulty than is required for children who are just beginning to read. It is probably at “B” or “C” level.

When it came to retelling the story, most children knew that Jesus and his disciples were on a boat when a storm came. Many “missed” important events in the story. Most left out its important teaching. And most significantly, the vocabulary that the children used to retell the story was different from that of the NR text, even for children in classes 4, 5 and 6. Vocabulary was not the only difference between the children’s rendering and that of the NR text. The children used more simple constructions and shorter sentences.

Based on this limited study, the following recommendations can be made to

the NR translation team:

1. Whenever possible, use common words which are part of children's own store of language. Having a person on the translation team who is familiar with the oral language of Luo-speaking children will be essential.
2. Whenever possible, avoid regional words such as *siayo*, *ahiti loka kocha* which may be common to South Nyanza but not Central Nyanza. Having a person from each of the geographical areas where Luo is spoken differently—particularly South Nyanza, Central Nyanza (Yuoma, Kano) and Central Nyanza (Upinya, Gem, Uhoho) will be essential.
3. Avoid difficult constructions that will seem awkward to children. Particularly in direct discourse such expressions as *wang'aduru* can be replaced with a more conversational style which will appeal to children. Recording a story as children (or adult new readers) tell it in their own words will be a useful technique for NR translators.
4. Test all NT drafts with the intended target audiences (adults or children). Whenever the essential elements of a passage such as its participants, setting, events or basic teaching are "lost", find a way to restructure the language, or perhaps choose a more suitable passage.

EUGENE A. NIDA

NEW WORDS FOR OLD MEANINGS

Dr. Eugene Nida is a Special Consultant for Translations with the American Bible Society. He was until recently UBS Translations Research Coordinator.

Note

(At the time when the Good News Bible was released, a small book by Dr. Nida entitled Good News for Everyone was also released. This book was intended to be a guide for readers of the new translation explaining the principles and procedures followed by the translators. The following article is actually a chapter from Good News for Everyone, presented here in an edited form. Another extract from the book was published in the April 1980 issue of The Bible Translator.

—Editor)

"But why change the Bible? We've come to love all those wonderful words". This was the way one person protested the introduction of new words for old meanings in the *Good News Bible*. Such phrases as "gird up the loins of your mind", "tent of meeting", and even "only begotten" are not to be found in the *Good News Bible*, nor do we find such out-of-date phrases as "We do you to wit" (2 Cor 8. 1) or "Thou shalt destroy them that speaking leasing" (Ps 5.6).