

QUESTIONS AND ORTHOGRAPHY IN SANGO

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Sango is a creole language (derived from Ngbandi) spoken in the Central African Republic and adjoining parts of the Congo (Leopoldville, Chad, and Cameroun) by over one million people. The author discusses problems met with in the course of the current translation of the OT and revision of the NT. Ed.

The orthographical representation of questions is as important a problem as any in the translation of the Bible. The first step, of course, is the translation of the text: to transmit the *message* of the Scriptures, albeit in interrogative form. (This problem was taken up in relation to the Huixteco language in *TBT* 11, 123-125, July 1960.) The next step is to make certain that by orthographical means the message is conveyed in the reading of it.

An imperfect system of punctuation, whether in the use of periods, commas, colons, semicolons, exclamation marks, question marks, etc., can vitiate any good work done by a translator on the text itself. It can confuse or mislead the reader.

In the history of writing, all punctuation conventions have been at their best only partially indicative of what actually happens in the spoken language. Take the exclamation mark for example. Everyone would probably read "Go home!" with a high-falling tone, but the exclamation mark, read with this drop of the pitch, would be misleading were it to represent what one said to a group of swimmers ready to compete in a race, i.e., "Go!" In this utterance the pitch remains high and relatively level.

The importance of intonation

The importance of intonation in any language, and certainly in English, becomes quite apparent when we substitute the question mark for the exclamation mark in the latter example. If in a story we were to read, "And the referee then cried 'Go?'" we could only expect the next lines to describe the consternation of the swimmers. The effect is quite comical. (The study of intonation in English is now seriously taken up by linguists, and one of the best works on the subject is still K. L. Pike's *The Intonation of American English*.)

The important point being made is that *intonation is part and parcel of a language*. It is part of the whole system of communication, and language is only imperfectly described without reference to it. Pauses, too, whether looked upon as part of the intonational system or as a separate system, are intricately involved with meaningful contrasts in speech. (In English they happen to be best described as one complex system. Young people are amused by "intonational puns" of sentences like "Look on the road, a head" and "Look on the road ahead.")

Realizing the part of intonation in language, we must be careful to represent it faithfully, as faithfully as we do the "p's" and "q's" of a language. It is very often the case, however, that a translation

committee relegates the matter of punctuation to some "specialist" on the committee, or, with even less fortunate results, to some typist who is known to have had a good college education and can quote the rules about punctuation in his native language.

Every language is different, however, and no two languages have intonational systems which are identical. This means that before punctuation is decided upon, the receptor language must first be analyzed.

The intonation of questions in Sango

The results of ignoring this vital principal are now illustrated by reference to Sango, the trade language of the Central African Republic.¹

Sango uses two means of marking questions, one lexical and the other intonational. Much of the burden is carried by three expressions meaning 'what?' Thus, *jo oua* means 'what person? who?' *la oua* means 'what day? when?' and *gnama gnè* means 'what animal?'. (The spelling is that which is used by Protestant missionaries as in the New Testament, published by the British and Foreign Bible Society.) Interrogative sentences not containing one of these words are signaled by a tonal contour on the last syllable. One of them consists of a rise, whether from low, mid, or high tones (for this is a tonal language) to a higher pitch. This is the simple question. Another one consists of a high-falling then rising contour. This asks for a repetition of what has been said and in some instances indicates surprise. (It is possible that other contours, therefore other types of questions, occur in the language.) Thus, *lo yèké ga la oua* (with final low level tone) means 'when is he coming?' but *lo yèké ga?* (with rising tone from mid tone) means 'Is he coming?' In certain instances a tone contour is superimposed on a sentence already marked by a question word, and then there is a difference of meaning. Thus, *lo yèké ga la oua?* (i.e. with tone contour) would mean 'When did you say he would come?'

The translators of the New Testament, obviously influenced by the conventions of English, consistently marked all questions, whether indicated by question word or tone, with the question mark. The result is that the readers are very often confused. Missionaries, realizing that there was some problem in understanding the text, tried to solve it in two ways, either by teaching that the mark (?) indicates a question as distinct from a fact, or by teaching the readers to use a rising intonation for all questions. Such simple pedagogical rules do not produce unambiguous results. In fact, the second system introduces a meaning into the text that in most instances is certainly not in the original. (See the last sentence of the preceding paragraph.)

¹ More information can be obtained about Sango in the following articles which appeared in *Word* (Journal of the Linguistic Circle of New York): W. J. Samarin, "Sango, an African Lingua Franca", (11, 254-267, 1955), "The Phonology of Pidgin Sango" (14.62-70, 1958), and "The Vocabulary of Sango" (17.16-22, 1961).

Other complications

Understanding the text, in particular questions, is made even more difficult by the complication of long, involved sentences. Some sentences are necessarily longish, for Sango, being a pidginized language, is practically devoid of inflection and is limited in vocabulary. These deficiencies are in part made up for by the use of periphrasis, e.g., in describing by phrases such basic concepts as tense, aspect, and the passive as well as lexical items. 'He will come' is literally 'Now he come'; 'He came' is literally 'He come it is finished'; 'villager' is 'person of village'. Thus, John 3:3 "unless one is born anew" (RSV, as are the other quotations) becomes *tonga na A kiri A dou jo mbeni pèpé* (literally 'when He return He bear person again not', where the capital letter implies God and the active serves to translate the passive).

Other sentences are necessarily long, and if poorly translated, ambiguous, because the language has only very few words which serve to link words or phrases to each other. There are only two prepositions, i.e., *ti* 'of' and *na* 'with' (but which is otherwise very widely used in many different kinds of noun phrases). There are perhaps only three words which might be called conjunctions: *na* 'and', *tèti*, 'because, for' (from *tene ti* 'word of'), and *si* 'then'. With the homonyms *na* and *na* being commonly used in the language, it is not surprising that in poorly translated passages the sense is unclear.

Instead of having avoided these pitfalls, the early translators slavishly followed the syntax of the RV (and consequently of Greek). The result is that there are sentences pocked by the preposition *na*, the conjunction *na*, the preposition *ti*, and the conjunction *tèti* and stuck together by a series of commas, colons, and semi-colons, the structure of which is no easier to figure out than the meaning.

Before we return to the subject of questions, one other difficulty must be mentioned. This is the use of the negative marker *pèpé*. In Sango this word is placed at the end of the sentence, sometimes separated from the preceding part of the sentence by a type of pausal transition that is different from the transition both between words and between phrases or clauses. (In the NT it is placed where the translators thought it would make more sense.) In other words, there is a slight but real pause or interruption in the flow of speech (here symbolized by comma) which occurs before the *pèpé*. E.g., *Mbi téné na lo biri ti ga la so, pèpé*. "I didn't tell him yesterday to come today" (literally "I speak to him yesterday of come sun this, no"). The word, by the way, is derived from a negative interjection of the original language, which has other means of negating sentences. If, therefore, there is some long, involved negative sentence with co-ordinate and dependent clauses, the reader is often at a loss to know exactly *what* is being negated. The seriousness of this problem is revealed by the fact that when a group of Bible Institute graduates were asked to make suggestions to the committee for the revision of the NT, the one thing they agreed

on was the need to make *pèpè* easier to understand.

As if there were not already enough difficulties to prevent the reader from understanding God's Word, he is persistently confronted by difficult or incomprehensible questions. While long, involved sentences present sufficient difficulties for any reader, those which are negative rhetorical questions are often sheer nonsense. The missionary can always know the sense of what he is reading, for he has the Bible in his own language and he uses the Sango NT only to read from as he teaches or preaches, but those people of the Central African Republic literate only in Sango have no such happy haven.

Some examples of wrong meaning

Three examples from the New Testament taken at random should be sufficient to illustrate the problems which now face the revisers of the Sango New Testament, a formidable task indeed.

John 3:4, "How can a man be born when he is old? Can he enter a second time into his mother's womb and be born?" In English, the questions are only incidentally marked by the intonation (and therefore by the punctuation). The signalling of the question is in the *inversion*, i.e., "can a man," "can he." Such a device is nonexistent in Sango. The translation as literally rendered is this: "The end ² person come old it is finished, he can he bear him again by what means? He can return to belly of mother of him again, and mother of him return she bear him again?" Ignoring many other problems with this translation, and assuming that they do not make understanding difficult or impossible, we still arrive at this meaning: "The end a man became old, how he can he bear him again? He can return to his mother's womb, and his mother bear him again?"

Galatians 3:1, where the important question is "who?": "Who has bewitched you, before whose eyes Jesus Christ was publicly portrayed as crucified?" Following the punctuation of the NT, the translation can be construed only in the following way: "Who deceives you? you whom someone has killed because of the death of Jesus Christ on the cross before your eyes."

Perhaps the most remarkable example of a tragic distortion of the Scripture is found in 1 Corinthians 10:16. One of the missions working in the country has encouraged the use of these words by the whole congregation in unison during the communion service. Because the negative is placed at the end and because the people do not realize that it is a rhetorical question, they say it with a falling instead of rising contour, thereby declaring the heresy that there is *no* participation in the blood and body of Christ.

²The Sango phrase here glossed "the end" is meant to be equivalent to English "after" which is followed by a clause. This is an instance where the original translator made an incorrect equivalence; non-religious Sango texts hitherto analyzed reveal no such construction. One strongly doubts that the occurrence of this noun phrase would have any meaning to a Sango speaker uninitiated to the NT use of it.