

How to distinguish “you (plural)” from “they”?

Isekiri, spoken in Southern Nigeria, and Sango as spoken in Bangui, capital of the Central African Republic, have a peculiar translation problem which is a thorn in the flesh of the Bible translator and of his Translations Consultant. Neither of these languages makes a distinction between the second and third person plural pronouns. For example, not only are “you (plural) went” and “they went” the same forms, but “go!” (addressed to many) is identical to these two also. Equally impossible to distinguish, except by their context, are, for example, “your (plural) words” and “their words”, as well as “I greet you (plural)” and “I greet them”. In Sango speech, but not in writing, the imperative can be marked by a special intonation, or by the addition of the interjection “o” at the end of a sentence. In writing there is also a sentence-final form “ma” which may be used to mark the imperative; but because it is optional, and, if used, only clarifies the meaning when the reader has reached the end of the sentence, its usefulness is limited.

For Bible translators this can be difficult, especially in such passages as Isaiah 46 where the text (the Lord speaking) begins by describing idols in the third person plural (verses 1–2). Then the Lord suddenly addresses the descendants of Jacob in the second person plural (verses 3–5), only to revert to the third person plural person describing those who make idols (verses 6–7). Later, the text reverts again to the address form (verses 8–13). In both Isekiri and Sango, a fairly literal translation of the text would use the same pronouns throughout, with a complete loss of the distinctions made in the original text.

A tempting solution to the problem, but an unacceptable one, is to distinguish the pronouns arbitrarily, that is by simply inventing a new pronoun form for one of them. This has been done, in fact, in many Sango publications that exist today: two pronouns are borrowed from a neighbouring dialect that does distinguish between the different persons. But this solution is unacceptable because it is artificial. It results in a language form that is not the one spoken by the people—it is rather like a kind of code which is unnatural.

One solution half way out of the problem would be to *write* the two pronouns differently, but to *pronounce* them the way people speak, that is, the same. This, too, is an unsatisfactory solution because it would only make the pronouns clear for the reader. It would not help in public reading because the pronouns would be read the same, and the hearers would be none the wiser.

After the translation teams had struggled for some time with this problem, we adopted the following procedure in trying to solve it:

1. In principle we use only natural linguistic signs to remove ambiguity between the two pronouns in question. And a sign is taken to be valid for the whole paragraph in which it occurs. To change pronouns we have to start a new paragraph, starting with the appropriate sign.
2. As a sign to mark the second person plural pronoun we use a vocative noun phrase, like the name of the persons being addressed, followed by an exclamation mark. So, in an exhortation by a prophet, as in Isaiah 43.14 (GNB), we would write:

You people of Israel! Your holy God, the Lord who saves you says, “To save you . . .”

The words "You people of Israel!" are added, therefore, although they are not in the source text. Otherwise the text could be read to mean: Israel's holy God, the Lord who saves them, says, "To save them . . ."

This method serves also to remove ambiguity from plural possessive pronouns. Without the proposed conventions which identify the pronouns of the whole paragraph (in the previous example) as second person plural, the new text could have meant:

You people of Israel! Their holy God, the Lord . . .

Sometimes a general vocative phrase is added, always with the exclamation mark, such as "You listen! . . .". For example in Isaiah 46 referred to earlier, verse 5 will read:

The Lord says, "You listen! With whom will you compare me? . . ."

Verse 8, of course, will have to start with: "You sinners! . . ."

This convention presumes that the exclamation mark is used only in the context of plural imperatives and second person plural pronouns, and not elsewhere. (Note that to use an inverted exclamation mark at the beginning of a sentence as we find in Spanish, to mark the sentence as being in the second person plural or the plural imperative would again be a sign that would only help the reader and not the listener.)

3. The sign that a passage is in the third person plural is the presence of a (plural) noun as the subject of its first sentence. Instead of having, for example, in Isaiah 47.14:

"They will be like bits of straw, . . ."

we have:

"Those astrologers will be . . ."

In fact all ambiguous pronouns, like "their" in a sentence like "Oh people of Israel! You worship *their* idols . . ." will have to be replaced by their reference noun, otherwise the words will be read as "your idols".

4. A point that is specially important for translators using source texts in English: Greek and Hebrew distinguish second person singular from second person plural pronouns. Modern English, of course, does not. Many passages which might look ambiguous are easily clarified by simply translating the second person *singular* pronouns as such whenever they occur. The translator has to have a French or German Bible, or the Authorized Version, at his disposal to verify for each "you(r)" in a modern English version whether it is singular or plural. (This is something, in fact, that all those translating from English should do, even for those languages that do distinguish "you (plural)" from "they"). Maybe some second person plural passages (like Isaiah 44.8) can even be rendered in the singular in order to avoid the possible confusion.

It would be interesting to know if the same, or similar problems exist in other languages!

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