

TOWARDS A REVISED TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE IN SWAHILI

1. Historical Survey

The Swahili translations in use at present are:

1. The Union Version Bible, 1952 (The British and Foreign Bible Society)—U.V.
2. A translation by the German Scholar, Dr K. Roehl, 1937, reprinted in 1962 by the Württembergische Bibelanstalt—R.B.=Roehl's Bible.
3. A Roman Catholic Translation of the New Testament by Father Alfred Loogman, C.S.Sp., 1958 (Holy Ghost Fathers, Morogoro)—C.V.
4. A New Testament and Psalms in Congo Swahili (or Ngwana) 1955, followed in 1960 by a complete Bible (The British and Foreign Bible Society)—K.V.

According to the preface, the U.V., which started with Broomfield's work on Luke (1934), is an amalgamation in which *all* the better things of previous translations are used. But Peltola¹ seems to be right when she doubts this and states that the U.V. is more like an improved standard version of the former Zanzibar translation, started by Steere (Ruth and Jonah, 1868). Although the Kimvita or Mombasa dialect is often mentioned in this preface, the U.V. did not in fact make much use of the Mombasa version, which was started by Krapf and Taylor (Deut. and II Chron. 1889). The R.B., the publication of which began with the appearance of the New Testament in 1930, was largely neglected by those who produced the U.V. This was due to the absence of German missionaries from the East African Mission field during and after World War II.

We do not know to what extent the C.V., which began with Baur's Catechism (1867) and Sacleux's Catechism of 1887, and was followed by the work of other translators such as Brutel (Gospel and Acts, 1913), or the K.V., started by Stapleton, Studd and Lowder (Luke and Acts, 1930), were used in the production of the U.V.

It is clear from what has been said that the heavy dependence of the U.V. on one previous version will have meant that some of the peculiarities and even shortcomings of this Zanzibar version can be expected to occur again in the U.V. Roehl² and Peltola³ as well as Bühlmann⁴ have pointed this out sufficiently:

¹ M. Peltola, 'An Outline of the History of the Translation of the New Testament into Swahili', *Studia Missiologica Fennica* I, 1957, p. 38.

² K. Roehl, *Wie die Bibelübersetzung aus der Heidenpredigt heraus wächst*, Vorträge auf der studentischen Missionskonferenz in Halle, 1913, pp. 143 ff.

³ M. Peltola, *op. cit.*

⁴ W. Bühlmann, 'Die Heilige Schrift im Swahili-Sprachgebiet', *Neue Zeitschrift für Missionswissenschaft* 18, 1962, p. 120.

(a) The Christian terms are loanwords from Arabic and therefore not free from certain Muslim connotations. The Biblical names occur in the Arabic form: *Musa, Ibrahimu*. It is known that until 1896 the Zanzibar version had *Isa Masia* for 'Jesus'.

(b) The idiom is too literal and not according to the Bantu way of thinking, which leads to difficulties in understanding. '*Jedenfalls könnte sie vom Standpunkt des Swahili aus einen Vergleich mit der Koranübersetzung des Sheik el Amin nicht aushalten*' (Bühlmann).¹

(c) And we should like to add: There are too many words in it which are foreign and unknown to the inland reader. The U.V. translation apparently aims at the higher sociological level among the Swahili speakers and readers.

(d) The syntactical structure of the sentences in the original Hebrew and especially the Greek text has been retained too much and is in clear contrast with tendencies in modern Swahili.

The origin of the R.B. arose largely from objections to the Zanzibar version, especially to the strongly Arabicized Swahili. Roehl's medium is an *entarabisiert* Kiswahili cha Bara. But in fact he overshoots the mark and his dis-arabization leads to an artificial 'rebantuization' (Broomfield).² Bantu words that are not in common use are introduced, whilst very well known Arabic loanwords are rejected, although later on more of these loanwords are included.

The '*Roehls Bibel*' seems however to have been popular more on account of its handy size, its beautiful pictures and its low price than because of its being a satisfactory translation.

The C.V. is written in an easy-going language, but has, as Bühlmann has mentioned, too many deviations from the Greek original.

Later than all these versions Father A. van den Hout made a plan for a new Roman Catholic Bible translation. A committee of eight missionaries and four African priests, under the supervision of Father Loogman, took up the matter, and in 1958 the New Testament was published. But it showed many shortcomings, such as:

- (a) having too much of a European character;
- (b) having too poor a vocabulary;
- (c) not being true to the original;
- (d) having no homogeneity in terminology and in principles of translation.

The K.V. has used many Bantu words instead of loanwords from the Arabic. From a translation originally close to the awkward spoken 'Up-country Swahili' this version has, by means of enrichment with words and grammatical forms of Standard Swahili, risen to a level of a kind of Basic Swahili. Stripped of its mainly phonetical Congolese peculiarities (e.g. Class-prefixes of a shape CV where Standard Swahili has C, 'z' for the

¹ W. Bühlmann, *op. cit.*

² G. W. Broomfield, 'The Rebantuization of the Swahili Language', *Africa* 4, 1931, pp. 77 ff.

phoneme of Arabic origin 'dh', etc., intervocalic 'l') this translation seems well fitted to function as a useful rendering of the Word of God for millions of the so-called 'Up-country' speakers. However, we are not well enough acquainted with this version to judge of its more essential traits, and refer to papers such as those of Deans¹ and Lecoste.²

2. Why a New Translation?

Due to the many deficiencies of the Swahili translations which are in use at the moment, the desirability of a new translation becomes clear. 'The translation of the New Testament into Swahili is still an unfinished task' (Peltola³). Furthermore, modern changes in Swahili as well as developments concerning the knowledge of the language have brought to light two tendencies:

I. A group of speakers at the coast, on the islands and in the big towns of East Africa, mostly belonging—sociologically speaking—to the upper class think the U.V. too simple and unliterary. They advocate a type of literary Swahili with a richness of vocabulary such as is present in the archaic poetical language of the *utenzi's*, the epic poems which, in new editions, have been brought recently to the notice of many. (See Allen.⁴)

The champions of this kind of Swahili make a plea for the use of Christian terms that have an etymological value and whose origin can be traced via Arabic to Hebrew (Beecher⁵).

II. On the other hand there is another group of speakers, mainly in the interior, who use Swahili as a lingua franca besides the vernacular. To them the U.V. is far too difficult. Some of them use the R.B., but in general without much satisfaction. Their need and wish is, if not for a colloquial at least for an intelligible Swahili Bible with a clear, simple, more idiomatic vocabulary, the stock words of everyday life, and with a grammar which, although far from being an 'up-country' corrupt set of rules, is nevertheless in accordance with the contemporary use of spoken Swahili; not the Swahili of poetry, but the Swahili of the increasingly widely read newspapers like *Baraza*, *Taifa*, etc.

At a translators' conference held at Limuru in March 1964, both views were put forward. We did plead there *to give at any rate priority* to the latter translation, and we think it is time now to state our reasons clearly below.

According to us, the defenders of the first type of Swahili revision have to realize that:

(a) They are maintaining a detached 'ivory tower' outlook, a rôle against

¹ W. A. Deans, 'Congo Swahili, a Lingua Franca of Central Africa', *The Bible Translator*, 1953, pp. 77-83.

² Beaudoin Lecoste, 'Le Ngwana, Variété congolaise du Swahili', *Kondo Overzee* XX, 1954, pp. 391-408.

³ M. Peltola, *op. cit.*

⁴ J. W. T. Allen, 'The Bible in Swahili', *Swahili* 33.2, 1963, pp. 125-7.

⁵ L. Beecher, 'Christian Terminology in the Vocabulary of an Animist Society', *The Bible Translator*, 1964, pp. 117-27.

which Spencer has recently issued a warning.¹ If the *only* new Swahili translation is to be their classical version, it would imply that at least for Western Tanzania and for the whole of Western and Central Kenya, the Swahili Bible will become still more unintelligible than it is at present. Whole passages are now read in the churches without understanding. The reader stutters and stammers, and often gives a free translation! The question arises, should the strategy of the Bible Societies be directed to the few connoisseurs of the coast, or to the hungry masses of the interior?

(b) Etymological value is no guarantee that a certain word will function in a given language. 'The history of a word is less important than its current use. Therefore the guiding principle for the selection of terms must be contemporary usage rather than etymological meaning.'² The overlooking of this is one of the most serious short-comings of Archbishop Beecher's paper.

Besides, can one be sure of the etymological derivation of a word? The advocates of Christian terms in Swahili with a Hebrew ancestry tend to ascribe an Arabic or Hebrew origin to words that may just as well be pure Bantu.

(c) Can the old fear of the first missionaries, of promoting the expansion of Islam by the use of Swahili, be fully ignored nowadays? Do we not deal especially in Bible translation with words which have besides their lexical meaning a large religious connotation? See again Beecher, who advocates the use of the Arabic loanwords *Mola* and *Maulana* instead of the less correct, but in any case neutral, *Bwana*.³

(d) '... the Bible, like its Lord, must be "incarnate" in the actual living language of the people.'⁴ This language *is* the Swahili of newspapers, radio, etc., a language in continuous development. This language is *not* an archaic, classical one, however many values may be ascribed to it.

3. Who will Undertake the Revision?

In raising this question we are concerned to ask what Church authorities will be responsible for the N.V.—if we may use this abbreviation for the New Version.

The Tanganyika Episcopal Conference (R.C.) has already reached agreement with the British and Foreign Bible Society for the use of the text of the complete U.V. However, this is with the understanding that the Apocrypha will be included, as well as selected notes and comments from the Jerusalem Bible.⁵ This means that the B.F.B.S., like other Bible Societies, abandons its principle of former days of 'without note and comment' and 'having nothing to do with the Apocrypha'. It also implies the possibility

¹ J. Spencer, ed. *Language in Africa*, Cambridge University Press, 1963, p. 136.

² S. J. de S. Weerasinghe, *The Bible Translator*, 1964, p. 26, 'Some Reflections on Sinhalese Bible Revision'.

³ L. Beecher, *op. cit.*, p. 118 f.

⁴ M. Brown, 'The Lwo Bible', *The Bible Translator*, 1960, p. 33.

⁵ See O. Béguin, *Roman Catholicism and the Bible*, London: Lutterworth Press, 1963; p. 20.

that in future a lot of Protestant readers will buy *this* Bible, hoping to get a fuller Bible and commentary at the same time for the same price.

But there are plans which reach still further. In future the Tanganyika Episcopal Conference and the Christian Council of Tanzania intend to set up a joint committee, which will revise the Bible text in the light of recent scholarship and adapt the notes and comments to the African environment. The hope is expressed that this joint committee can arrive at one text and one set of notes and comments which will be equally acceptable to both Protestants and Roman Catholics.¹

One must agree with J. N. T. Allen, who advocates that the new translation should be done by nationals, who preferably have studied Greek and Hebrew.

4. Preparatory Work

Large scale preparatory work is a prerequisite for an effective translation, and therefore we recommend a careful study of the vocabulary and syntax of the U.V. in the light of present textual and exegetical knowledge of the Bible. In my view, all existent translations prior to the publication of the volumes in the United Bible Societies' series 'Helps for Translators', and the recent studies on naturalness in translations, now seem out of date.²

The proposed concordance of the U.V. New Testament, a publication undertaken by the Christian Council of Tanzania, with the co-operation of many churches, could be a big help in this. On the other hand, however, one might ask whether it would not be preferable to channel all the available power into the work on the N.V., and to postpone the realization of the plans for a Swahili Concordance until the N.V. has been completed. Furthermore, we recommend a survey of current Swahili, especially to investigate which lexical and grammatical features of Coastal Swahili are not in use, e.g. with the Primary School leavers.³ In the third place, there should be investigations as to what developments are taking place in modern Swahili, based on an analysis of local newspapers like *Taifaleo*, *Baraza Pamoja*, and *Lengo*. Those developments form an essential part of the language, even though they are 'rejected' by advocates of Classical Swahili.

5. The Scope of the Research

Of course we do not advocate an elaborate, purely scientific analysis, but we have in mind the kind of linguistic research that was recently de-

¹ More information about this possible co-operation, also outside the Swahili area, is given by Béguin, *op. cit.*, pp. 51, 57 f., 82 ff.

² A. R. Hulst, *Old Testament Translation Problems*, 1960; R. G. Bratcher and E. A. Nida, *Translator's Handbook on Mark*, 1961; E. A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, 1964; published in Leiden, Netherlands, by E. J. Brill, for the United Bible Societies.

³ See the paper, 'Vocabulary Control in Primary School Swahili Readers', *Swahili*, 33.2, 1963, pp. 87-96. This investigation concerns children's knowledge of Swahili on entering school. Similar investigations should be made for the vocabulary at their disposal on leaving Primary School.

scribed as 'information on which practical decisions on language can be taken'.¹

On the lexical level such research will notice that modern Swahili, being a language for practical use in the first place, and a literary language only in the second, reduces its synonyms, which results in expanded areas of meaning for one stem or radical, e.g. *kitambaa*, *-tengeneza-*. Shifts of meaning are important too for the N.V.: *kibanda* > *nyumba* and *nyumba* > *manumba*.

Also it is necessary that a modern translation reflects words that have recently come into use, as an integral part of the language. These words may be borrowings as well as adaptations from internal sources. Of course, the future N.V. has to reject the multitude of loanwords, especially from English, which are used—although a good native word is available—mainly for reasons of prestige, and actually form a barrier to communication. So we propose to replace *gereza*, 'prison', in the U.V., by *jela* which is in much more common use,² but reject the use of *gallifrendi* for the U.V. *mpenzi* or *rafiki*, 'beloved'.

On the grammatical level the investigators may well find that the N.V. should reflect the superfluous use of the periphrastic relative (*amba* plus relative suffix), a construction which, as Harries observes,³ occurs especially in continuative relative clauses, though this same *amba-* construction is often used for emphasis: *Malkia laijifunua mtoto (ambaye ni) wa kiume*, etc. There are, of course, many other grammatical features, such as the replacing of the continuative—*ka*—tense by the conjunction *na*, and the tendency to put the demonstrative pronoun in the first position, which deserve attention.

It is desirable that under the auspices of the Bible Society in East Africa and the British and Foreign Bible Society this research should start as soon as possible. If this paper has only contributed to that start, it will have rendered a service. It does not lay claim to do more.

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¹ J. Spencer, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 163. The same view as W. H. Whiteley, 'Linguistic Research in East Africa', *Journal of the East Africa Swahili Committee*, 1954, p. 19.

² *gereza* is a loanword too, derived from Portuguese *igreja*, 'chapel'.

³ L. Harries, 'Some Grammatical Features of Recent Swahili Prose', *African Language Studies* II, 1961, pp. 37–41.

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