

## Conclusion

Hopefully these examples have given some idea of the kinds of translation problem that can be raised by nested quotes, and some ways these can be handled when translating into a language where these are not a natural feature.

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## HOW DOES GOD FIT IN? Developing Translations of *logos* and Other Words in John's Gospel in Anindilyakwa

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Anindilyakwa is an Australian Aboriginal language spoken as a first language by some 1,500 people living mainly on Groote Eylandt and Bickerton Island in the Gulf of Carpentaria. It is a complex prefixing and suffixing language with extensive noun class agreement.

In this article, I explore the development over twenty-five years in the Anindilyakwa translation of the Greek term *logos*, and several other terms, and how the translation of *logos* interacts with the translation of "glory" in John 1.14; 2.11; and 15.8. An integral part of this development is the role of written back-translations and the growing understanding of translation principles on the part of the Aboriginal mother tongue translators.

The first attempts to translate *logos* were made some twenty-five years ago in the late 1970s by Bible translator and linguist Judith Stokes, who retired in 1989 and died in 2003. Judith had support from Euan Fry as consultant. Euan provided assistance through correspondence and through visiting Groote Eylandt about once a year through the 1980s for consultant checking. I became involved in the translation programme from 1983 and saw John's Gospel completed, consultant checked, and locally distributed in 2001.

Changes constantly occur in the development of a translation. This can happen in a variety of ways, including changes over time in both the spoken and written forms of the language as well as changes that come through the developing skills of the translators.

One of the first things that stands out today from the 1970s translation of John 1.1-14 is the use of the English word *God*. Somewhere in the mid-'70s, the Aboriginal people themselves spontaneously began speaking of God as *Neningikarrawara*, which can be back-translated as "he belonging to above." At that time, and through into the mid to late '80s, place names, people's names, and many introduced terms were simply being written in English.

We now freely transliterate place names and people's names so that they sound like Anindilyakwa words. The only name that has resisted transliteration is "Jesus Christ"—no one has ever tried to do so nor wants to do so. (There is no "s" in the language: most Aboriginal languages have no fricative sounds.) It was a joy recently to hear someone confidently sight

reading the list of transliterated place names to which the seven letters were sent in Revelation. For introduced terms, we normally work out a way of translating for meaning, though some terms are transliterated, often within an Anindilyakwa grammatical construction. For example, a “gold” object will be translated as an object “having the properties of gold” *a-kwulda-murra*.

This same construction was used to translate *logos* when John 1.1-14 was first translated. The word *logos* was expressed as *N-ayakwa-murra* “he having the properties of a word/message/language.” In an appropriate context, this term can be used in normal speech to mean “messenger.” In 1994, I asked a capable Aboriginal woman to begin back-translating John’s Gospel. She wasn’t sure what to do with *N-ayakwa-murra* and actually gave up on the task. For various reasons I wasn’t able to follow through with the difficulty she had. So the term stayed in place for over twenty years, through till consultant checking of the whole Gospel began early in 1999. On that occasion, we were doing a comprehension check of this passage with a very experienced Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL) consultant and Elaine, an inexperienced but very intelligent Aboriginal woman in her forties. Try as she might, she could not make any sense of this term in the context of this passage.

So the consultant suggested firstly, that we mention the words “Jesus Christ” in the first verse and secondly, that we add an interpretation of the word *logos* viz. “the one who revealed God to us.” In subsequent verses through to v.14, we were then able to use an appropriate demonstrative form to refer back to “that same one,” thus maintaining some sense of the mystery of this passage. I shall return to this verse shortly.

### **Brief history of Anindilyakwa translation**

Through her involvement in comprehension checking, Elaine was inspired to join the other twelve translators, all women, who at that time were studying part-time for a nationally accredited Certificate in Translating (CIT) being taught through SIL in Darwin. Most of this team had been involved in checking our mini-Bible for naturalness before its publication in 1992. This mini-Bible contained Genesis, Jonah, Luke, Ephesians, 1 Timothy, and James. Judith Stokes had overseen the translation of these books working with two men and several women, only one of whom is still involved in translating. One of the first passages translated by Judith was the Easter story from John’s Gospel in 1971.

Through the mid to late 1980s, Aboriginal translators across northern Australia began to find a voice to ask for training in translation. One of the outcomes was for SIL to organise a workshop in 1988 in Darwin for a number of teams to work on translation of John’s Gospel. Unlike previous workshops held there, both non-Aboriginal and Aboriginal translators were invited to attend. This was to be Euan Fry’s last workshop in his role as consultant to Aboriginal translation teams. It was an attempt to help us all to improve our translation skills but the differences in command of English and in learning styles meant that it was very difficult for Aboriginal translators to benefit from the teaching. We nevertheless made a start to translating John 1–9, my first attempt at facilitating new translation.

Because of our team's focus on completing the mini-Bible and other distractions, it was 1993 before we really got into working on John's Gospel again. One of the exciting things that happened that year was that one of the Aboriginal women began writing down the draft translation for the team instead of depending on me. It soon became obvious that, for the team to gain further independence, a front translation was needed. [A front translation is a prepared text that unpacks a passage, identifying features and supplying information to help translators better understand a passage.] The English level in the Good News Translation (GNT) was far too difficult and even the then new Contemporary English Version (CEV) had too many challenges for our translators. Aboriginal languages have few, if any, abstract nouns. This means we need to unpack almost every abstract noun in order to make explicit just who is doing the action and to whom the action is being done. I later discovered, through one of our CIT exercises, one reason why the Good News Translation was so hard for Aboriginal people to use, viz. in at least some passages, it has more abstract nouns than the New International Version (NIV). In addition, for most Aboriginal languages, REASON needs to come before RESULT, at least for new information. These factors, and others, were taken into account in preparing front translations for the remainder of John's Gospel.

About 1995, some Aboriginal translation teams began studying for the newly established Certificate in Translating. We heard about it and attempted to introduce it to our team but it wasn't until 1997 that we finally made a successful start. For various reasons some of our team weren't involved in several of the early CIT workshops. And so it was that we needed to do a "catch-up" workshop at the beginning of 2001. Along the way some of the team had expressed a desire to learn more about back-translation, a task that requires much more skill in English than the initial translation into their own language.

### **Finding where God fits into John 1.14**

At the time of the "catch-up" workshop, the whole of John's Gospel had been consultant checked and was about to be photocopied and bound for local distribution. I gave the translators John 1.14 in Anindilyakwa and asked them to write the English under each Anindilyakwa word. The literal English of the first sentence read:

And he he the same one, he who made clear for us God, he became a person he like us.

That task was relatively easy. Then I asked them to express the verse in better English. But try as they might, they were unable to work out what to do with God in that first sentence! From the grammar, I had expected them to say something like:

And the same one who revealed God to us, he became a human being like us.

We soon realised that we would have to come back to the problem later. When I finally sat down with Elaine and Milly, one of our most gifted translators, in order to work out what the problem was, it took us a whole morning before it suddenly dawned on the two of them that you can't reveal

something unless it's hidden and they had never thought about the fact that God might be hidden from them. So now John 1.14 reads:

And that same one who revealed God *who was hidden* from us, he became a human being like us. He was born, he had flesh and bones and then he lived here and went around with us people. He is rich in love, he was very kind and he kept on and on speaking the truth. We saw that he was *the leading powerful and beautiful one*, the one who was his Father's one and only Son, the one who came from his Father to here.

And the back-translation of John 1.1 now reads:

Right at the beginning, long, long ago, Jesus Christ was there, the one who revealed God *who was hidden* from us. Before God made the heavens and the earth, right at that time the same one was already there with God. And those two, the same one and God, they were the same/shared the same characteristics.

### **The consequences of finding where God fits into John 1.14**

The Anindilyakwa word for "revealed" occurs some 40 times in one form or another throughout John's Gospel. As we checked through each occurrence, the women were deeply challenged. In John 2.1-11, the story of Jesus turning the water into wine, John concludes, in the NIV version:

This, the first of his miraculous signs, Jesus performed at Cana in Galilee. He thus *revealed his glory...*

We had translated the verse as:

That powerful (thing) Jesus did in Cana in Galilee, that was the first one that showed us that he came from God. Right there he *revealed his power* to us.

Milly was puzzled as she thought about the word "revealed" in this context. She said, "But if God is already revealed, you can't reveal him again! He's no longer hidden." As we talked, she realised that God keeps on revealing more and more of his character to us. So now the last part of that verse reads:

Right there he *revealed* to us *his power that was hidden*.

There was another unexpected difficulty in John 15.8. In the NIV, this verse reads:

This is to my Father's *glory*, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

The Anindilyakwa back-translation reads:

But if you produce much fruit, showing good feelings towards other people, then everyone will know you are my disciples and you are the ones who will *reveal* to them that my Father is *the leading powerful and beautiful one*.

Milly and Elaine sat there puzzled. "Do you mean to say that *we* can reveal God to other people? Is that what it's saying?" Again, they were deeply challenged. It had never occurred to them that our actions could actually reflect God's glory so that others could understand more of his character.

Three of the verses quoted above contain the word translated in NIV as “glory.” Our current translation of “glory” has been strongly influenced by Euan’s article “Translating ‘glory’ in the New Testament,” *BTP* 27(1993): 422-427. He brought out the three components of meaning, viz. brightness or splendour, great power and strength, and majesty and honour (1976:423) and made recommendations as to the components of meaning in focus throughout the New Testament. With no word in Anindilyakwa for glory, we have relied heavily on his recommendations to determine the component(s) of meaning in focus in each verse. In the original 1971 Anindilyakwa translation of John 1.1-14 (before Euan’s article was published), the translation of “glory” in v.14 focussed on brightness. It now focusses on power and majesty, viz. “the leading powerful and beautiful one,” as also in 15.8 (above). John 2.11 (above) focusses only on power.

The reader may be puzzled by our back-translation of John 15.8 referring to *feelings*. We have a collocational clash in Anindilyakwa by suggesting that “people produce fruit.” The same word “produce” can be used to refer to “women producing children.” So the metaphor had to be expanded to make the meaning clear. To “show good feelings” is to “be chest-satisfied” towards others, in contrast to being “chest-empty,” i.e., “having no feelings” towards others. The extended metaphor of the vine was particularly challenging to translate. It wasn’t until late 1999 after the team studied a CIT unit on picture language that we really succeeded in making the translation meaningful.

### **Some implications**

#### **The role of written back-translations**

The example of John 1.14 illustrates firstly, the importance of preparing a back-translation as part of the checking process and secondly, the enormous advantage of asking a native speaker of the language to prepare a back-translation. The back-translation of John ch. 1 that was prepared for the consultant in 1999 was done by a non-Aboriginal colleague.

In the 1970s and ’80s, Bible Society practice in Australia was for the consultant to do mainly spot-checking of translations, focussing on exegetical checking of known or likely difficult passages or verses. An alternative, utilised by Euan in 1976 for John 18–20, was for the non-Aboriginal translator to record himself/herself on tape giving an oral back-translation. By contrast, SIL’s policy was to insist on a consultant doing both exegetical checking and then comprehension checking with an “uninitiated native speaker” (UNS), someone who had not been involved in the translating or previous checking of the passage. Their approach necessitated a written back-translation, which in earlier years was generally prepared by a non-Aboriginal person.

One of the strengths of SIL in their work with Australian Aborigines has been the way they have included translators from other missions as though we were part of SIL. Early on in my involvement in the Anindilyakwa translation programme, I began to appreciate the wisdom of SIL’s more rigorous checking policy and I took on the role of preparing written back-translations which I sent

to Euan for more thorough exegetical checking. We benefitted enormously from his input.

At the same time, our local community was asking for diglot publications of any materials we prepared. During the 1980s, we had a number of selections printed locally. We found ourselves not only preparing a back-translation for checking purposes but also polishing the back-translation to an appropriate level of English for publication purposes, following Anindilyakwa clause order wherever possible and maintaining a basic vocabulary level. Time and again, not only did the “normal” back-translation highlight problems that needed attention but preparing the publication version highlighted still more issues to be checked and modified in the Anindilyakwa translation.

The “publication English” has been greatly appreciated by Aboriginal people. Firstly it has assisted many of them to improve their Anindilyakwa reading skills, since Scripture is not predictable and they have learnt to read in English first. And secondly, it has provided easy access to Scripture for those who aren't yet able to read in their own language. The advantage of the “publication English” compared to standard English translations is that the English follows Aboriginal thought patterns and requires a lot less processing to absorb the content of the message. On one occasion an Aboriginal man from Queensland whose first language was English was ecstatic as he read the “publication English” in our mini-Bible. He found it so much easier to read, presumably because it reflected his thought patterns.

Had Judith Stokes been able to find an Aboriginal person with good enough English skills and willing to prepare a written back-translation of John 18–20 in those early years, they may have discovered two very significant errors in John 19.30, although it may have needed comprehension checking to realise the real significance of the original translation which read:

And Jesus drank the sour-tasting water and he said, “That's enough/the end,” he said. Then he bowed his head and he stopped breathing and died now.

The first error was picked up when I was preparing back-translation English for local publishing of the Easter story in 1986. The expression, “That's enough/the end,” would have been interpreted in the context to mean that he had had enough to drink! It now reads, “I have finished my work now.”

The second error was not detected until the 1990s. The word translated “stopped breathing” actually refers to someone fainting or being unconscious. By changing the verb from *ni-yikarrnga* (literally “he ??-cut/broke”) to *nu-werrikarrnga* (literally “he chest-cut/broke”), the meaning is clearly understood as “he breathed his last.”

One exciting development occurred in our checking of John chs. 13–17. We were able to find an Aboriginal couple not previously involved in translation work who were willing to back-translate these chapters. Although additional time was needed to clarify some of their back-translation, it was well worth the effort. For example, 14.30 in the NIV reads:

I will not speak with you much longer, for the prince of this world is coming. *He has no hold on me.*

Their back-translation read:

The one who is different boss is coming here, the one who is the boss/ruler here in this place everywhere (i.e. in this world). Then/(So) soon I will finish my words. But *he won't leave me*.

The Anindilyakwa word translated “he won’t leave me alone” is actually an idiom. Literally it says, “he won’t chin-throw-me-away.” There is a well-known alternative translation “he won’t take over from me” but the context didn’t lead the couple to choose this meaning. They were very surprised when they realised what the verse was really saying. We worked out that we could make the right meaning come out by adding another idiom, “he won’t take/grab my road away from me.” “To take someone’s road” is to follow in their footsteps, to take on the responsibilities and authority of that person.

This incident shows how a mother tongue speaker can bring out alternative meanings that I as an outsider may not be aware of. In sharing translation principles with supporters, I like to explain how words so often do not match from one language to the next. They may share one area of meaning but the additional meanings may lead to unexpected interpretations in a translation. This example brought out for me how the unexpected interpretation can even result in the opposite meaning to that intended.

All consultant checking on Anindilyakwa translations now follows the pattern of Aboriginal people preparing the back-translation to send to the consultant. The consultant then checks the back-translation for exegetical accuracy and emails any questions back to the translators. These questions are addressed prior to the consultant meeting with the translators and with one or two Aboriginal people who have not previously been involved in that translation (UNS). The consultant then asks the UNS a series of comprehension questions to ensure that the right message is being conveyed.

### **The role of training for mother tongue translators**

As mentioned earlier, our translators began studying for their Certificate in Translating in 1997. After four years of part-time study, eight women graduated with their hard-earned certificates late in 2001. It has been so exciting to see the development in confidence of the team over that time and since then. The Certificate covered basic translation principles from word level to discourse level and also included cross-cultural understanding, awareness of audience, and comprehension checking. Initially, the course was taught by SIL staff with some input from me but as the course progressed, we realised how important it was to go from the known to the unknown, to look at what was happening in their own language first and then to consider what happens in English. The students really appreciated this approach. But it’s taking a lot of consolidation to consistently apply all they have learnt.

One of the things that surprised me in teaching the course was the need to go right back to basics in teaching punctuation, helping them to understand the message that each punctuation mark conveyed, and to develop an Anindilyakwa meta-language. Along the way I have realised more clearly how

some punctuation marks, particularly commas, are used differently in Anindilyakwa and English.

Another thing that shouldn't have surprised me—but it did—was the need to teach the students how to ask questions of the text. Aboriginal people are generally taught not to question their elders. We encouraged the students to think of a specific person, perhaps someone outside the church group, that they could read a passage to and then to think what questions that person might have about the text or what questions they, as translators, might ask to make sure the person is getting the right message. As soon as they thought of a specific person, they started working out questions to ask. Since then, the translators have applied this skill in Bible study as well as in checking. They have really grown in their ability to “dig” for meaning and also in their ability to check for meaning, especially the meaning of picture language.

One of the good things about the course has been that it has given us a framework to return to when checking newly translated passages. For example, as I was listening to their translation of Revelation ch. 1, I realised they had seen the word “Christ” and remembered that we are now using an expanded phrase “the one God poured oil on and marked out first beforehand” to translate this term in other contexts (where Christ is used as a title) and they had inserted that phrase in vv. 2 and 5. I asked them to remember what we had learnt about “spotlighting,” putting the focus on different parts of the passage, and to consider where the focus should be in this passage. They realised that using this phrase in this passage would give a wrong focus.

Recently, in working towards greater independence for the team, I have begun specifically teaching the team to verbalise their rationale for their decisions. I am also helping to sensitise them to hesitations when a good reader sight reads a passage, and to ask questions to explore what caused the hesitations. They have seen how such critical listening and reflecting can bring out unexpected problems in their translation, including unnatural expressions and mistakes caused by the unpredictability of the text.

## **Conclusion**

Our translation team have come a long way in the past 25-30 years. When I joined the team twenty years ago, I never dreamed how much progress toward independence the team would make in that time. When I first met Euan, it was very much a case of the non-Aboriginal translator working with the consultant. The non-Aboriginal translators did almost everything. Now we are about to have a Bible Society consultant come and work directly with the Aboriginal translators on the first two or three chapters of Revelation. The team have been responsible for the translation using a front translation. They are no longer tied to the front translation but feel free to choose alternatives. For the first time, they have typed up the text on computer, edited it themselves in response to my consultant-type questions, and learnt to give the rationale for their decisions. Along the way they are also learning to take responsibility for paragraphing and punctuating their text appropriately and to improve their spelling in Anindilyakwa. And Elaine's daughter is preparing the back-translation to give to the consultant.