

## **“WE DID WHAT?”: PROBLEMS IN TRANSLATING THE “WE” PASSAGES OF ACTS IN THE APAL LANGUAGE**

MARTHA L. WADE

The author works with Pioneer Bible Translators in Papua New Guinea and is a UBS honorary translations advisor.

### **Introduction**

“When he had seen the vision, we immediately tried to cross over to Macedonia, being convinced that God had called us to proclaim the good news to them” (Acts 16.10 NRSV). While checking the rough draft of this passage, some of the village people asked, “We (the reader and audience) did what?” In the Apal language, a Papuan language of Papua New Guinea, the first person is generally used only in first person narratives and quoted speech. Since this passage was not marked as a direct quote, the village people concluded that the author was somehow including them in the activity. Their confusion over the sudden switch from third person to first person plural narrative raised the question of what options a translator has in handling this issue. After searching through various helps for translators, I found that the translation problem that I was struggling with had not been specifically addressed. Commentaries discussed who the “we” included, various articles discussed Greek literary styles that made use of these kinds of first person narratives, more recent translation helps advised that names could be specified while maintaining the first person singular for the author, but no one answered the question about what a translator could do if the switch to first person (whether singular or plural) caused confusion and led to the text being misunderstood. In addition to the problem of switching to first person plural in the latter part of Acts, there is also the problem of the use of the first person singular reference in the first verse of Acts. In this article I will first discuss the use of first person in the Apal language and how this affects the translation of Acts 1. Next, the grammatical structure of quotes in Apal will be briefly described. Third, I will discuss who the referents are that are referred to by “we.” Finally, I will look at one possible solution for translating the “we” passages in the Apal language.

### **First person singular and the beginning of Acts**

First person in the Apal language is generally reserved for first person narratives and for quoted material within a narrative. The first person singular is assumed to

be the speaker of the entire narrative or of a specific quote. Even though the Apal culture is primarily an oral culture, there is a small percentage of readers who are either new literates or semi-literates and a few letters are occasionally sent and received. These letters are generally written as first person narratives, but when they are read to the person to whom they were sent, one of three different strategies is generally used. The letter may be read directly to the addressee as it was written if there is no possibility of confusion arising about the identity of the writer and addressee. If, however, there is any possibility of confusion, then either the content of the letter is modified and put in embedded clauses that are similar to indirect speech in English, i.e., “He says that . . .,” or the reader begins by saying, “He speaks,” followed by a direct quote that is concluded with the quote closure formula “he says.” Both of these strategies ensure that the person to whom the letter is being read does not become confused about who is being referred to by “I.” In addition, the reader and listener have the cultural clues of seeing the envelope or folded piece of paper with the addressee’s name on the outside and the name of the sender at the end of the letter. All of these factors make it easy for the reader to clearly understand who sent the letter, to whom the letter was sent, and the contents of the letter.

The book of Acts is a treatise which has many similarities to a letter in that it was written and sent to a specific audience. F. F. Bruce (1984, 32) notes that the beginning of the book is a dedication to Theophilus and that “dedications were common form in contemporary literary circles throughout the Roman Empire.” The book begins with first person singular references, “In the first book, Theophilus, I wrote about all that Jesus did and taught from the beginning” (Acts 1.1 NRSV), but then it quickly changes to third person narrative. In the Apal culture, a letter might contain these kinds of switches if the writer wants to inform the recipient about the well-being or activities of another person, but these sections are generally very short. The book of Acts, in addition to being longer than a normal letter, lacks the other cultural clues that are standard parts of letters, i.e., a clearly stated addressee, a clearly stated author, and most importantly, an envelope or a piece of paper folded in a special way. Without these clues, the use of first person narrative suddenly changing to third person narrative leaves the hearers mystified. In reading a letter they would easily make the changes in grammatical form to ensure that the letter is understood, but since they hold a high opinion of God’s word, they generally read the text of Acts as it is written and that leaves the biblically illiterate reader at a loss as to whom the “I” is referring to, who the man Theophilus is, and how the two are related. In the Tok Pisin translation, the language of wider communication in the area, this confusion is seemingly tolerated, or maybe just ignored, as another one of those incomprehensible parts of the Bible. When this same literal approach was tried with Apal, there was a general revolt. People have come to expect the vernacular translation to be natural and clear. Using first person narrative that switches to third person in a book that was written long ago in another language is just not acceptable to them.

In our current version of Acts we decided to state specifically the implicit information that this was a banana leaf (book/letter) written by Luke for Theophilus. Some translations put this kind of information in footnotes, but it

is rarely found in the actual translation. However, the Yakan language in the Philippines begins Acts 1.1 as follows: “This letter is from Lukas to Teopilus” (Yakan Back Translation, 1996). This approach allows us to use first person singular within the quote of what Luke said to Theophilus and it also allows us to communicate the fact that this is a second letter that he is sending to Theophilus, a concept that is rather complex in Apal. Below is an English version of the Apal translation.

Luke wrote this banana leaf/letter for Theophilus and spoke. “Theophilus,” he said. “Long ago I wrote one banana leaf/letter for you and gave it and it (letter) went, as for that, I wrote about the fact that Jesus began and did work,” he said. “I wrote about the fact that Jesus taught the men and women,” he said. “I wrote about the fact that while God’s Spirit was giving Jesus strength, he (Jesus) habitually spoke to the men that he himself (Jesus) chose [apostles] for the purpose of telling talk,” he said. “I tied a last talk on a banana leaf/letter about the fact that God got Jesus and went, and then I gave it (letter) and it (letter) went,” he said. “As for the one banana leaf I wrote and gave it and it went, I will again write this one and give it and it will go,” he said.

The most questionable part of this translation is the use of the name Luke, which is not in the Greek text. In fact, the name Luke is not specifically stated anywhere in Acts and only occurs three times in the entire New Testament. An alternate approach that we could have used is to say, “One man wrote this letter . . .” and then in the introduction to the book note that this book was probably written by Luke. A brief survey of the introductions to Acts in various versions showed that in three versions (NIV Study Bible, CEV, and Tok Pisin) the author of Acts was stated to be Luke. In one version (GNB), the use of the name Luke was carefully avoided, but it was stated that the writer was the same as the author of the Gospel of Luke. We could have used this approach, but for new literates the introductions are usually harder to read than the actual text because of their heavy information load. In addition, the introductions to the books are often seen by new literates as just another part of the book and given the same inspired status as the section headings and the actual text. Thus for new literates putting the information that Luke is the probable author of Acts in the introduction would not necessarily give it any different status than if it is put in the actual translation. Because of this and because of the fact that at this time the Apal speakers do not want introductions to the books, we decided to include Luke’s name in the first verse of Acts. This decision affected our choice of how to translate the “we” sections of Acts as will be seen in the next section.

### Quotations in Apal

In the translation of Acts 1.1-2a, each sentence after the first sentence ends in the phrase “he said.” This is a standard feature of direct quotes in Apal. The quoted material is preceded by a sentence that states the speaker and uses the verb *abi* “he speaks” or another speech verb marked for the proper person, number, and tense. After that, each sentence of quoted material ends with the verb *ui* “he says” in the same person, number, and tense as the verb *abi* “he speaks” that preceded the quote. Since grammatical features are used to carefully mark all quotes, quotation marks are not used in the Apal translation.

When quoting another person within a quote, the phrase *aba abi* “speaking he speaks” with the proper person, number, and tense is added before the final *ui* “he says.” For each following level of embedded quotations another layer of *aba abi* “speaking he speaks” is added before the end of the sentence. In translated material we sometimes have up to four layers of quotes within quotes as can be seen in the following sentence from Acts 28.26: “ ‘ ‘ ‘ ‘You will be hearing the talk many times, but you will not understand the meaning of the talk,’ you (Isaiah) should say,’ he (God) says,’ he said (Isaiah wrote),” he (Paul) said.

In natural speech the use of two layers of quotes is quite frequent and three layers may occasionally be heard for very short stretches of speech. If these quote markers are accidentally dropped (as I sometimes do when I am trying to communicate with the village people) there is complete confusion about who actually said what. In translated material, readers feel uncomfortable when three or four layers of quotes are continued for long stretches of speech, but this is mainly due to the fact that in daily life you normally do not use these kinds of quotes for a long story. We have experimented with dropping some of the extra layers of grammatical quote markers, but each time confusion has resulted since hearers did not know whether it was Paul speaking his own thoughts or quoting a prophet’s speech or quoting a prophet’s quote of God’s speech. Because of this we have decided to continue carefully marking each layer of quotation.

Because each layer of a quotation is marked, we were faced with a difficult decision about what to do after the first couple of verses of Acts. Since the entire book is technically a communication from Luke, each sentence in the entire book should end in “he said.” This approach is in fact being used in the Epistles, which contain relatively small amounts of narratives with quotations. But since Acts is a very large book that has long stretches of speech with embedded quotations, we chose to stop the quotation of Luke’s “speech” (writing) after the first part of v. 2 and translate the rest of the book as a third person narrative. This decision makes the book shorter and more readable, but it also affected our decision about how to translate the “we” passages of Acts.

### The “we” passages in Acts

There are four passages in Acts which use first person plural narrative—Acts 16.10-17; 20.5-15; 21.1-18; and 27.1–28.16. In all of these passages the use of “we” gives the impression that in some way the author was Paul’s companion and participated in the activities of these passages. Praeder (1987, 193-4) has summarized some of the approaches to interpreting the “we” passages, as follows:

In traditional solutions first person narration is seen as proof of authorial participation: Luke\* the companion of Paul or the physician is the author of Acts and the narrator of the first person passages. According to source critical solutions, first person narration was supplied to Luke by one or more of his sources and is a sign of participation by one or more of his source authorities. Redaction critical and comparative literary solutions rule out authorial participation and unreflected use of one or more first person sources. They conclude that Luke is fully responsible for first person narration in its

final form, whether he inherited it from one or more sources or introduced it on his own. Redaction critical solutions are sought in literary study of first person narration in Acts. Comparative literary solutions understand first person narration in relation to sea voyages and ancient historiography or sea voyages in ancient literature.

All of these approaches attempt to explain why the “we” passages occur in Acts and to whom the “we” refers. Most of the issues raised by these approaches will not directly affect a translation. If, however, a language either has a specific means of marking this kind of change in perspective or if the sudden change of perspective causes problems in comprehension, then the question of whom the “we” refers to becomes relevant.

In Acts 16.10-16, “we” probably refers to at least Paul, Silas, Timothy, the author (Luke), and possibly others. In Acts 16.17, Paul is listed separately from the “rest of us” and this confirms that there were at least two others with Paul, i.e., the author (Luke) and at least one other person. In Acts 20.5-15, there are several possibilities for the referents of “we,” as the *Translator’s Handbook* (Newman and Nida 1972, 383) indicates:

(1) us may include only Luke and Paul; or (2) us may refer to an indefinite number of Christians from Philippi, among whom was included the author himself; or (3) it may be that only Tychicus and Trophimus went on ahead, since they were from Asia and were known by the churches there, and hence us would refer to the other persons listed as well as Luke.

In Acts 21.1-18, “we” generally refers to Paul, the author (Luke), and probably others, as can be seen by the fact that “we” in 21.12, 14, and 18 is a group that is separate from Paul. Likewise in Acts 27.1–28.16, “we” refers to Paul, the author (Luke), and others including all 276 people on the boat in Acts 27.37. Most of the time, however, it seems to refer to a smaller group since the author also refers to various other third person groups who threw the grain into the sea, decided to run the ship aground, and were involved in other activities in 27.38 and following.

As can be seen by this brief overview, “we” generally refers to a small group which includes Paul, the author (Luke), and one or more other companions. In a few passages Paul is specifically excluded from the “we” group, but only in Acts 20.5-15 is there any real confusion about whether or not Paul is included in some of the references to the “we” group. Since the identity of the referents is not a major problem, the question that I will deal with in the next section is how to refer to the group in a way that will be properly understood in the vernacular.

### **“We” in the Apal translation**

In Acts 1.1 we were able to maintain the first person pronouns by putting the statements in a quote. This solution could also be used with the “we” passages. To do this we would have to include a statement such as “Luke wrote and spoke.” After the introductory sentence, each sentence in the “we” passage would end with the quote closure, “he said.” Unfortunately, this would be interpreted to mean that the preceding material was probably not written by Luke. If we were to follow a source critical solution at this point, then probably we would say,

“Another man wrote and spoke,” which would be interpreted to mean that the following material was written by someone other than the author of the book. Source critical solutions generally suggest that the author (Luke?) borrowed these first person narratives from another source and inserted them into the text to add authority to his narration of the story. If, however, one accepts the unity of the book of Acts, then the addition of either of the above quote formulas would not be an acceptable way to retain first person plural pronouns.

As mentioned at the beginning, use of the first person plural pronouns in these passages caused a great deal of confusion about the identity of the referents. In regular third person narratives translators have generally been encouraged to use the language’s standard means of marking participants whether that is by using a name, noun phrase, pronoun, verbal ending only, or zero referencing. Similarly, translators have been encouraged to make the proper adjustments in pronoun referencing when Greek indirect discourse is translated by direct discourse in the vernacular. The “we” passages of Acts present a similar problem in participant referencing. Assuming that the highest priority is clarity in participant referencing, then for the Apal language the best solution at this time is to change the passage to third person and specify the identities of the referents. In most cases the subject ends up being a phrase like “Paul, Luke, and others of their group,” but the exact choice of referencing is determined by the context and how the referents have been referred to previously.

This solution is not without support from others in the translation field. In the “Dynamic Tok Pisin New Testament” (a front-translation produced informally by SIL in Papua New Guinea to help translators) the name Luke is added, but the first person reference is maintained, leaving a rather difficult construction as may be seen in Acts 16.10a:

Dynamic Tok Pisin:

Na taim Pol i lukim dispela samting olsem driman, mi bihainim ol, na nem bilong mi Luk. Orait na mipela redim ol samting kwiktaim tumas long painim bot i go long Masedonia.

Literal translation:

And when Paul saw this thing like a dream, I was traveling with them, and my name is Luke. Alright and we prepared all the things very quickly so that we could find a boat to go to Macedonia.

A solution similar to this is suggested by Carlton (2001, 168) as follows:

The use of “**we**” here (the first time in the book of Acts) indicates that **Luke**, the author of this book, has joined Paul at the city of Troas. Make sure it does **not** sound like a direct quote of someone else. To avoid confusion, you may need to say, “. . . Paul, Silas, Timothy and I (who am writing this book ↔ Luke) . . .” It should be clear that “**we**” includes Paul. It should **not** sound like he stayed behind in Troas.

There are, of course, problems with this translation choice. The most glaring problem is the addition of the name Luke, as mentioned earlier. But, assuming that the reason the author switched to first person plural was to show his participation

in the activity, then the addition of the same name that was used for the author in Acts 1.1 would in fact fulfill that function of the switch to first person plural narrative in Greek. If the switch to first person plural narrative was for other reasons, such as to make the narrative more vivid, then that kind of vividness would need to be added to the passage in addition to making the participant referencing accurate. In the Apal language, we have decided to assume that the main reason for the switch to first person plural was to show the participation of the author in the activity and as a result we have modified all the “we” passages so that they are now third person narratives with the appropriate kinds of participant referencing. This choice to change first person plural narrative to third person narrative would probably not be feasible in an area that is biblically literate and tends to compare all vernacular translations with one or more major language translations. For the Apal language speakers, however, differences between the vernacular and the Tok Pisin Bible do not seem to be a major problem since they think the vernacular is so much clearer than the Tok Pisin version. They say that the language in the Tok Pisin Bible is similar to a parable in which you have to try to figure out what the author is really talking about.

### Summary

The “we” passages in Acts are a translation problem in the Apal language because of the fact that first person plural is generally interpreted as inclusive unless otherwise specified and because these kinds of sudden switches from third to first person narratives are only understood within a limited context. Assuming that the primary purpose of the switch to first person plural narrative in Acts was to show that the author participated with Paul in various activities, we decided to change the first person narrative to third person narrative and use phrases like “Paul, Luke, and others of their group,” instead of “we.” The standard rules of participant referencing in Apal were followed, so this phrase or another phrase that indicates the appropriate participants only occurs a limited number of times in each of the “we” passages of Acts. The rest of the references to the “we” in Greek are done with pronouns and verbal endings. The choice to switch from first person plural to third person plural is not a major translation problem, but using the name Luke is a choice that most translators would probably not agree to or be able to use in a biblically literate area. For the Apal language, however, this is seemingly the best way to make the participant referencing clear.

### References

- Bruce, F. F. 1984. *The Book of the Acts*. New International Commentary on the New Testament. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.
- Carlton, Matthew E. 2001. *The Translator’s Reference Translation of the Acts of the Apostles*. Dallas: SIL International.
- “Dynamic Tok Pisin New Testament.” Translator’s Workplace 4.0, SIL.
- Newman, Barclay M., and Eugene A. Nida. 1972. *A Translator’s Handbook on the Acts of the Apostles*. New York: United Bible Societies.
- Praeder, Susan Marie. 1987. The Problem of First Person Narration in Acts. *Novum Testamentum* 29.3:193-218.
- “Yakan Back Translation.” 1996. SIL Philippines.