

## THE MISSION AND LINGUISTICS

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Can linguistics rightly be regarded as genuinely one of the 'ancillae missionum' and if so, who should study this special field, the practical missionary, or the 'missions expert' who on the strength of his analyses tries to give guidance to the work of the mission as a whole? Up to now both these questions have been answered very differently in the literature dealing with the subject. It appears that there is only one way to make an end to the prevailing uncertainty. First of all a careful and systematic examination will have to be made of the nature of the various points of contact between the mission and linguistics.

### **Theory and practice**

To begin with, there is at least one point on which all the experts are agreed, namely the conviction that the missionary should have a practical command of the language or languages of his territory. To this the Church has adhered from the earliest times and for obvious reasons. Without a knowledge of the colloquial language the missionary will never be accepted as a full partner in the native community.

In the field of linguistic theory, however, our difficulties begin. Should the missionary involved with the so-called primitive languages seek to apply the science of linguistic theory, particularly those elements of it which sometimes seem remote and abstruse? An examination of the facts reveals that the distinction between a practical and a theoretical knowledge, such as was supposed above, simply does not apply in a whole series of cases. The two approaches to the subject are complementary.

### **As applied to transcription**

One of the first problems where theory and practice inevitably go hand in hand concerns the transcription of native texts. In the earliest stages of missionary work, prayer-books, a catechism and school-books will have to be written. A translation of Holy Scripture will have to be made. In due course a press of some kind will perhaps have to be set up. Not until the construction of the native sound-system is exactly known, however, can a transcription be said to be justified. Although the spoken word consists of many sounds, only the phonemes are written down, i.e. those sounds which

are of value for the distinction in the meaning of the word, and without which one word would change into another or even become meaningless. Every transcription therefore should be preceded by a systematic examination of the vocabulary. Moreover, the sounds can easily influence each other in the accent-unit which constitutes the word. In speech, all sorts of adjustments take place, which are related to well-defined general laws but which vary from language to language. Problems of this kind are so numerous that a general training in phonetics is of the greatest practical value to the missionary. Indeed he cannot hope to undertake the work of transcription successfully without it.

A further difficulty may arise from the choice of orthography. There are more than twelve international systems, of which that by W. Schmidt is one of the best known. How will the missionary be able to choose from these without expert advice? Moreover, his decision is not always entirely free. In Africa, for example, subsidies to mission schools are often made conditional on the use of the so-called Africa- or Westermann-script. These matters certainly call for cautious management.

#### **As applied to the trade language or lingua franca**

A problem as delicate as it is important is that of the trade language, or lingua franca, for any given area. In some regions a language has gained a distinct ascendancy over the neighbouring languages as a result of political domination or widely developed commercial intercourse. The difficulty then solves itself automatically. This is the case, for example, in those areas which use Malay in the Malay Archipelago. The land where the seafaring Malay people come from is situated on Sumatra, close to the narrow passage between this island and the Malay Peninsula, and from there their language has been carried along with the busy sea-traffic from island to island as far as the coast of New Guinea.<sup>1</sup>

There are, however, other cases where circumstances are a good deal more complicated, either because the conflict between the language of the rulers and that of the subjected population has not yet been entirely resolved, or because of the persistent antipathy of a conquered people for the language of their conquerors, even after it has already gained the ascendancy. Examples can be found in certain parts of India, and Europe provides instances in Belgium and in the Tyrol. How should the mission act in such circumstances? And what should be done if, in such circumstances, the colonizing power tries to exert its influence? The Government in Tanganyika, for example, is trying to spread Swahili as widely as possible in order to unify all the tribal peoples who come under its authority in political, social, linguistic and economic matters. What attitude should the mission in Indonesia take towards the 'bahasa Indonesia' which at present they are trying to develop from Malay?

Moreover the conception of a lingua franca is not always easy to handle. What requirements should it conform to? Would mixed types like Pidgin English, Petit-Nègre and Sabir, forms which have a very simple structure and mostly owe their existence to the easy commerce between whites and natives

<sup>1</sup> J. Wils, *Verkeerstalen in de missiegebieden*, Het Missiewerk 31 (1952), 93ss.

in the great harbours on the coast, be worthy enough to serve as a vehicle for preaching the Gospel? There is certainly nothing easier in such a case than to adopt an entirely negative attitude making an end to all uncertainty at once. But is this reasonable and appropriate?

### As applied to the language of prestige

Another distinct problem consists in the choice between the native language and the European language as a teaching medium. There is something to be said for each alternative, as was shown at a special UNESCO congress devoted to this important question. If the European language is introduced at once, as is mostly the French custom, there is a danger of breeding 'évolués' who might as well be called 'déracinés'. Neither these types themselves, nor the people from whom they are descended, have a service done to them in this way. But if the European language is not introduced, or only at a late stage, there is a danger of the native elements feeling slighted. And then rancour may make itself felt for years after.<sup>1</sup>

### Why linguistic training is necessary

The more one tries to grapple with the complex structure of native languages, the more the need of theoretical instruction is realized. For young missionaries on their arrival, for use in schools or for establishing a lingua franca based on a certain dialect, grammars and dictionaries must be written. But into what categories is the language to be formally analysed, and how are they to be described? Will it be safe to speak of 'noun', 'case' or 'number'? What types of pronouns are to be distinguished? And how do matters stand as regards the verbal system and sentence structure? What principles should govern the classification of meaning and connotation in the formulation of a lexicon?

On many of these points, to be sure, a great deal is already known about the structure of the so-called 'primitive' languages (which in reality are often far more complicated than those of the West) as a result of the devoted labour of the missionaries, for which one cannot be sufficiently grateful. But it is only common sense to admit frankly that the part which remains unknown is often far greater and sometimes more important. The main reason for this is that up to now the whole complex of Church-Mission relationships has been viewed almost exclusively through Western spectacles. This is, of course, quite unsound. That the missions themselves suffer because of this stands to reason. Sometimes missionaries cannot get on as they would wish, simply because of linguistic difficulties. It is well known, for instance, that in Nigeria sermons are still occasionally preached with the help of interpreters, simply because the tone-languages have proved to be too much for missionaries not theoretically trained.

<sup>1</sup> Institut International des Civilisations Différentes; XVIème session; Bruxelles 1951; *Problème des langues véhiculaires, principalement en Afrique: aspects éducatif et culturel*. Rapport du R. P. Charles, S.J. (355-75); M. Déstombes, *Les réalisations de l'Unesco*, 375-86; *L'enseignement aux indigènes*, 117-71; W. Schmidt, S.V.D., *The Use of the Vernacular in Education in Africa*, Africa 3 (1930), 136; Unesco, *Réunion d'experts sur l'emploi des langues vernaculaires*, Paris 1951 (Reports of M. Swadesh, P. Cook, Kenneth L. Pike, C. C. Berg, J. Wils, etc.). *Language in Africa; Papers on the Leverhulme Conference on Universities and the Language Problems of Tropical Africa*, ed. J. Spencer, Cambridge 1963.

Now it is true that in none of these cases will the unanswered questions be solved by theory and book learning alone, in the twinkling of an eye. It is, of course, the field-worker, the missionary, who remains the real 'expert'. But on the other hand, just because the theoretical linguist confines himself to books, he is, at least on some points, capable of making an ampler comparison than is possible by the missionary. And above all: in one and a half centuries of linguistics, something of a definite method has grown up, which cannot be neglected with impunity. The knowledge of this would certainly benefit the missionary as well, to the good of the missions themselves especially.

### The search for a Christian terminology

A fourth point where a more theoretical orientation, as it seems to me, could lift a missionary's local experience at once to a higher plane, concerns the question of Christian terminology.<sup>1</sup> The mission not only christens individual natives, it also christens nations and languages as a whole. Christianity, with its numerous new conceptions and emotional gradations, also entails the need for a very wide range of new words and meanings. How then to meet this want, which will arise with the very first sermons and catechetical lessons? Can old native words and conceptions alone serve as a basis for the new forms? Or is it also allowed to borrow from other languages, such as Latin or the language of the colonizing power? If so, how is one to guard against misunderstanding? For often these very words originally have a mythological or folkloristic connection, which makes them totally unsuited for Christian use! For this reason, progress can only be tentative and slow.<sup>2</sup>

There are at least two courses open here to further investigation. In the first place, the missionaries might be called upon for more interest in the study of Christian Latin, which has shown such extraordinary development in the last few years. At present one often gets the impression that every one of them, each in his own field, is experimenting with the same problems entirely independent of similar situations elsewhere. The early Church, however, was familiar with many of these complex problems of translation. The development lasted for four centuries at least. What methodological experience, what sources of inspiration are here stored up, and ready to be reinterpreted and applied to our modern difficulties!<sup>3</sup>

<sup>1</sup> G. Bardy, *La question des langues dans l'Eglise ancienne*, I, Paris 1948; Th. Grentrup, *Religion und Muttersprache*, 1932; Greg. von Breda, *Die Muttersprache*, 1933; F. Melzer, *Unsere Sprache im Lichte der Christusoffenbarung*, 1946; K. Weinhold, *Die gotische Sprache im Dienst des Christentums*, Halle 1870; W. Bühlmann, *Die christliche Terminologie als missionsmethodisches Problem*, 1950; *Babel*, International Journal of Translation, Vol. 9 (1963), special issue, 'Translation of Sacred Texts'.

<sup>2</sup> F. Fligelman, *Moral vocabulary of an unwritten language*, *Anthropos* 27 (1932), 213-48; Alfr. Bertholet, *Wortanklang und Volksetymologie in ihrer Wirkung auf religiösen Glauben und Brauch*, Abh. Preuss. Akad. der Wiss., 1940, 6; W. Havers, *Neuere Literatur zum Sprachtabu*, Abh. Akad. Wien, 1946; H. Rosin, *The Lord is God*, the translation of the divine names and the missionary calling of the Church, Amsterdam, 1956; James Barr, *The Semantics of Biblical Language*, Oxford, 1961.

<sup>3</sup> Chr. Mohrmann, *Liturgical Latin, its origins and character*, Washington, 1957.

### **On working together**

A further point concerns the need for international co-operation in these fields. Christian terminology lends itself especially to this purpose. In particular, the American and British Bible Societies have long been exchanging their detailed experiences in these matters. A series of works such as E. A. Nida's on *Bible Translating*, giving an almost complete 'analysis of principles and procedures with special reference to aboriginal languages', has been the result. Unfortunately, however, on the part of the Catholics nothing of the kind is yet available.<sup>1</sup>

### **The application of the scientific approach**

So far we have approached the linguistic question chiefly from the quarter of the practical difficulties in the field of missionary activity. Its scientific aspect, however, demands our attention quite as much. 'Mission and science have need of each other. And both profit by co-operation.' Such is the point of view repeatedly expressed by recent Popes.

Concerning the science of linguistics in particular: the language is certainly not the soul itself of the native which the missionary wants to reach, but according to a well-known saying, it is certainly the mirror of the soul. The culture of the language is an essential part of the culture of the people. Only by mastering the language with the whole range of content, sentiment and conception, can the young missionary establish himself as a member of the national community, whether the process takes place in Europe or in India or anywhere else. Would not the deeply interested missionary then find an important source of information here? If, for example, one wants to know more about the ways and trends of native thought, feeling and will, the vocabulary will immediately disclose them to anyone who takes the trouble to arrange the lexicon systematically and with this end in view. If one is interested in the self-consciousness of the individual or social relations in the community, the pronominal system with its many forms shows a fixed picture of the most important categories. It is only a matter of gradually mastering the method which the eye can learn to detect in this connection.

An indirect but not therefore less important effect of such a scientific approach is the greater appreciation of the mission itself which is thus stimulated in circles that on other grounds have little regard for missionary activity, or can appreciate it only with reservations. One may refer especially to colonial administrators and officials.

Every friend of the mission will readily think of the great *Anthropos* undertaking of W. Schmidt, S.V.D., and W. Koppers, S.V.D., as the first outstanding example of scientific method in missionary activity. This periodical at once took its place in the foremost rank of scientific publications. How much respect have the stately volumes, now almost forty in number, commanded for the missionary activity of the Church!

It can reasonably be claimed that comparative language study in several parts of the world is founded almost exclusively on the private activity of scientifically minded missionaries. Thus the missionary R. Caldwell laid the foundation of the comparative study of the Dravidian languages, and

<sup>1</sup> E. A. Nida, *Message and Mission*, New York, 1960.

R. H. Codrington did the same for the Melanesian languages. With regard to Africa, we owe the first deeper insight into the Bantu languages to J. Torrend, S.J., and to C. Meinhof. D. Westermann, who was at first Meinhof's collaborator for the Sudanese languages, later became the scientific leader of the semi-official International Institute for African Languages and Cultures, which has its seat in London. In the Netherlands, the 'Bijbelgenootschap' saw to it that its missionary-translators had a full academic training for Bible translation in Indonesia. How much we owe to them with regard to the comparative study of similar languages!<sup>1</sup>

That there is another side to the picture, that there are also many cases in which the missionaries have not succeeded in realizing their intentions, will not surprise anyone. Many a manuscript, representing the strenuous work of years, has never attained publication because the impartial verdict of the scientific world could not be other than negative.

### Further by-products of the use of the 'linguistic' approach

So far we have only considered the relation between the study of linguistics and mission in its religious aspect, and of course this must always remain our main approach. To the Church, however, non-Christian peoples have never been mere objects of a possible missionary activity. The Church has always acknowledged them as natural communities growing up within the processes of history. This means that native populations have also a certain *right* (the word is not too strong) to expect the mission to have an impartial and unprejudiced interest in their culture. And the less the community, because of its retarded development, is able to press this right, the wider and the more spontaneous the interest on the part of the mission should be. It is not through mere accident that sometimes a non-Western community suddenly assumes a quite different attitude on perceiving that the European missionary is willing to speak its language or is at least seriously interested in it. This suggests to them, quite rightly, that the foreigner does not come, as the government official or the planter does, to extract taxes or products, but because he is attracted by the inner nature of their community itself and wishes to know and understand them as a people. Thus the mother-tongue often becomes the first key to the opening of the soul.

Moreover, from a similar point of view, we may note other measures on the part of the mission which may be of great importance for the native community. A well-chosen lingua franca, for example, may have a stimulating, and even formative, influence at a crucial stage in development. Thus in the Netherlands, the famous Dutch Authorized Version of the Bible (1637) supplied a generally accepted standard language over against the then still widely differentiated dialects. It is now clear that this was of great significance to the development of the Republic during the following three centuries. Luther's work has had just the same unifying effect on the German Empire, and in later times the work of Cardinal Peter Pázmány has done the same

<sup>1</sup> R. Caldwell, *Comparative grammar of the Dravidian or South-Indian Family of Languages*, London, 1856; revised and edited by J. L. Wyatt and T. Ramakrishna Pillai, London, 1913.

for Hungary. In this matter, however, mistakes have sometimes been made and if the received standard language divides what in reality belongs together, the life of the community may perhaps feel the wounds for years.

In these early stages primitive populations are still passive, of course, in all these matters. They simply submit to what is ordained with regard to them. Who knows, however, how soon the time will come when they will be independent and will *oppose* themselves to the mission, and will even have the right to make their own decisions. Then the mission will be called to account! What a blessing for the Church, if its policies can stand the test of such criticism! In our days, a well-instructed and properly trained missionary with a real interest in anthropology and culture may mean the saving of a whole missionary undertaking in the future.

### A final summary

Let us now return to our starting-point and try to formulate our conclusions. What will our answer be to the two questions posed at the beginning? After reading the foregoing, the reader will agree, we hope, that the study of linguistics may indeed be acknowledged as an *ancilla missionum*. In this case the points of contact are rich and manifold, and they go deep.

The preceding analysis should have helped us to recognize the extremely important level on which linguistic-missionary questions confront us. It is not enough to learn a language for the more obvious practical reasons. Nor will it do for the missionary to master the languages of his area simply to be socially accepted there. The final purpose of missionary-linguistic activity is to establish a native Christian language, i.e. a vehicle in which the Gospel can reach, without impediment and in as natural a way as possible, the non-Christian community. The eternal Word of the Father has no language. The historical Church, however, cannot do without one. The Church belongs to all languages, and unifies them. '*Ego in omnibus linguis sum; mea est graeca, mea est syra, mea est hebraea, mea est omnium gentium, quia in unitate sum omnium gentium*', says St. Augustine. And in that sense, one may say that even the linguistic work of the missionary Church shares in continuing the incarnation.

Some people will say here that this means moving in the 'adaptive' sphere. This formulation may be accepted if the terms are well understood. The ultimate motive for adaptation is not to be found in the natural right of the native population to respect for their (language-) culture, a right already pointed out earlier. It is in reality a supernatural motive. The missionary leaves his native country with a supernatural intention. His attitude to native languages is in the same way determined by it. So the issues at stake here are of the utmost importance.

As to the practical outworkings of such policies as these, two things may finally be said. First, that the technical linguist has a place of great importance in that he can supply the relevant linguistic data to the working missionary and mission experts with whom he must work in close co-operation.

And secondly, that every missionary should have an introductory course in general linguistics with a special emphasis on phonetics; and that for this purpose a highly qualified technical expert should be available in every

linguistic area of major missionary effort. If these two conditions can be fulfilled, the whole of our work will be greatly enriched and the impact of our message on the life of non-Christian communities be immeasurably increased.