

# PRACTICAL PAPERS FOR THE BIBLE TRANSLATOR

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## **PRONOUNS FOR GOD: he, she, or it?**

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Not every pronoun system matches the ones found in Hebrew, Greek, and English. What should the translator do when confronted with several choices for the pronoun which refers to "God"?

In working with several translation projects in West Africa, I have come to learn that picking the proper pronoun for God is not an easy matter. In some languages there can be over 20 different pronouns to choose from, while in others, the choice is restricted simply to "he" or "it". What guidelines should be used for picking the pronoun for God?

### **Pronoun choice in real languages**

In some languages there is no problem in deciding what pronoun should be used. All speakers agree that a certain pronoun is the only appropriate choice. For example, in Godie, a Kru language spoken in south-west Ivory Coast, there are four possible third person pronouns:

- O*, used for human beings (male or female);
- E*, used mainly for large animals (elephant, snake, panther, antelope);
- a*, used for many miscellaneous items (rice, bird, cooking pot);
- U*, used for many natural elements (sky, wind, water, mountain, sun, moon), non-liquid masses (smoke, cloud, dust), and some spiritual entities (human spirit, evil spirits, God).

In such a system the natural choice is *U*, and a translation with this pronoun will read smoothly and clearly.

However, not all languages have such a clear distinction. Indeed, as languages change through time (as all languages do), pronoun systems are affected, and people become a little unsure of pronoun usage. Sometimes they hesitate between two forms, as when the same speaker of English may refer to a baby as either "he" or "it". Some speakers may have a special preference for one pronoun or another; for example, some speakers of English may refer to a ship as "she", while the majority will prefer to use the pronoun "it".

This kind of variation in pronouns exists in Bete, another language of Ivory Coast spoken not far from Godie. Bete and Godie are closely related, and have exactly the same third person pronouns (*O*, *E*, *a*, and *U*), with roughly the same use. But when referring to the word for God, speakers differ in their pronoun choice. People over the age of 35–40, or those who come from a very traditional village setting, tend to use the non-human pronoun *U* (like Godie), while younger speakers and city dwellers tend to use the human pronoun *O*.

### Understanding language variation

Why does this variation exist? Variation in language is usually an indication that a language is undergoing change in a particular area. But it is not always easy to understand why the changes occur, or even in which direction the change is going. In the case of Bete, it is clear that *U* (the non-human form) is the older form, and that the younger generation is beginning more and more to substitute the human pronoun *O*. From a linguistic point of view, this change in Bete may have several explanations.

One motivation for changing pronouns may be the speaker's desire to make clear who or what he or she is referring to, especially when there is an ambiguity. In the case of Bete, the word *laagO* "God" has taken on a new meaning. It still means "God", but it also means "religion". Thus some speakers have changed pronouns for God to prevent ambiguity.

Another factor may be a special use of pronouns in folktales. In Bete and many other languages, characters in folktales are often "anthropomorphized" (considered as human) and take human rather than non-human pronouns. This includes Spider, Chimpanzee, and Chameleon, as well as God, who is a frequent character in many stories. Perhaps this special use of the human pronoun *O* in the folktale context has spread over into everyday use for some speakers.

But other factors are also playing a part. The grammatical system of Bete (and several other Kru languages) leaves the speaker with a complex set of choices. Pronouns are usually determined by two factors. If the item referred to is a human being, the human set of pronouns is automatically used. But if the item is not human, pronouns are determined by the last vowel of the noun to which they refer. Thus, since the word *IUE* "elephant" ends in a front vowel, it takes the front vowel pronoun *E*. The word for "God" *laagO* ends in a back vowel, and so normally takes the back vowel pronoun *U*.

If for some reason God shifts categories in the minds of Bete speakers, there can be a change in pronoun choice. From informal discussions with young Christians especially, it would appear that, at least for some people, the experience and/or concepts of Christianity are affecting the choice of pronoun for God. Some people explain that God is no longer "far away", but is somehow tangible and personal. For these speakers God has shifted over into the human category, so the rules of vowel agreement (applying to the ends of words) are no longer in effect.

In fact, there may even be general confusion over what determines a

pronoun. Is it the last vowel of a word? Or is it the category or class a word belongs to? We may find ourselves in the middle of a complicated linguistic change, where the very rules of grammar of a language are undergoing radical change.

Thus there are many possible explanations for the change in Bete: confusion and possible weakening of the rules involving pronoun selection, a desire to eliminate ambiguity, patterns found in folktales, and a “new interpretation” of who God is. And though it may be possible to pinpoint some of the reasons why a pronoun system begins to change, many factors probably remain unrecognized.

### **The effect of change**

We have considered two closely related languages, Godie and Bete, and we have seen that while Godie is conservative (maintaining the old pronoun system), Bete is innovative (opening the door to a new pronoun system). We can predict that within another generation or two no Bete-speaking person will refer to God with the older non-human pronoun; probably all speakers will refer to God with the human form. They may regard the use of *U* in material printed now in the same way many speakers see the use of “thee” and “thou” in English – a kind of religious jargon restricted to one environment.

Indeed in several other languages of the same family, the change from non-human pronoun to human pronoun is already complete. In closely related Kouya, God is now always referred to with the human pronoun. When Christians listened to a 20-year-old Gospel recording using the older non-human pronoun, they were astonished. They said, “Those people don’t know how to speak our language,” while in fact they were native speakers of Kouya! The same thing has occurred in other Kru languages spoken further away in Liberia. In Grebo, Tchien, and Gbaeson Krahn, the only pronoun used for God is the human *O*. One speaker of Krahn noted that while the pronoun used to be *E* (their non-human form), everybody now says *O* (the human form). He commented, “If somebody says *E*, it hurts my ears.” This language change has been complete – speakers can no longer accept the older form.

Thus we see also that there are stages of language change: a beginning stage when no variation exists (stage 1), a stage when a new variant is introduced and the old and new forms exist side by side (stage 2), and a final stage (3) when one form “wins” over another.

### **Guidelines for the translator**

What guidelines should a translator follow when choosing a pronoun to take the place of the word for God? The first principle is one of respect for a person’s own language. If the language has a clear preference for one form or another (stage 1), the translator **must** respect that choice in the language. I know of languages where missionaries have imposed the human pronoun on a translation, thinking perhaps that God must be human. In English and Greek, after all, God is “he” and not “it”. In Hebrew God is

“he” and not “she”. But such thinking can lead to a very false conclusion. The Bible indeed teaches that the Word became flesh (a reason to use the human pronoun), but it also teaches that God is a spirit (a reason **not** to use a human one)! Therefore if a language has a non-human pronoun for God, a translator cannot just change the pronoun to suit his own theological ideas!

At the same time the translator cannot become a “guardian of the language”. In France a committee exists to decide if new words coming into the language have a right to remain. The committee decides, for instance, whether the word “week-end” (pronounced “veekend”) will be considered real French. A Bible translator does not have that option. If, as is the case in Kouya, Grebo, and Krahn, the language has already decided in favor of a human pronoun for God (stage 3), the translator cannot turn back the clock, so to speak, and impose the older form on the younger generation. He or she must respect the language’s ability to change and let it stand at that.

In languages like Bete, where the language is clearly in transition (stage 2), translators must ask themselves some serious questions:

1. Will the use of the “new” pronoun lead older people to reject the translation?
2. Would the use of the “new” pronoun have certain undesirable side-effects? For example, in the case of Bete, would the adoption of the human pronoun (used for God in folktales) lend an undesirable folktale-like quality to an otherwise serious Bible translation?
3. Will the use of the “old” pronoun render the text obscure or unacceptable for younger readers?

In the particular case of Bete, translators who themselves felt comfortable with the newer human pronoun have chosen to retain the older pronoun in their translation. They fear that use of the newer pronoun would alienate speakers who are older or who come from a village setting. They reason that young people can accept that the non-human form is the “original”. Their choice seems to follow cultural patterns (the younger giving in to the elder) and may in fact slow down the spread of the newer human form among the younger generation. If, on the other hand, the human form becomes more and more popular, despite the written translation, the translators will need to think seriously about revising their translation.

### **Effects of toying with the system**

The effects of “toying” with a language can be serious. If a translator forces an unnatural pronoun for God, then even more unnatural things may follow. In one translation the translators decided on the human form for God – a form which apparently was not in wide use. After doing this, however, they were at odds with how to deal with the Holy Spirit (who, they reasoned, is co-equal with God). They thus introduced a human pronoun for Spirit, making the translation even more unnatural. (It is interesting to

note that in languages like Grebo and Krahn, where the pronoun for God has changed more or less naturally, the pronoun for “spirit” has resisted change and remained non-human.)

In another African language, Peve, God was normally referred to with a feminine pronoun. (See “The problem of a female deity in translation”, by R. Venberg, in *TBT* vol. 35, no. 4, pages 415–417.) Christians attempted to change the pronoun from “she” to “he”, and introduced the change into the translation. This however led to a division between church people (the “in-group”) and those on the outside. People began to ask: “Is it necessary to change our talk in order to become a Christian?” A satisfactory solution was found by going back to the original pronoun for God.

In both the cases cited above, “toying” with pronouns has led some people to reject entire translations of the Bible, and given others an excuse to reject Christianity.

### Conclusion

In a nutshell, the matter comes down to this: **the translator must choose pronouns that reflect natural language use at the time of the translation.** He should not theologize pronoun choices, and he must continually keep his audience in view – an audience that encompasses all age groups, all social classes, and especially Christians and non-Christians alike.

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## PRODUCING SCRIPTURE SELECTIONS

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There seems to be general agreement in Bible Society circles that Scripture published in the form of a **selection** (which is normally a biblical discourse unit such as the text found between section headings) is a legitimate and useful way to distribute the biblical message in our contemporary world. It is felt that there are many people who will not take the time to read Scripture in complete New Testament or Bible formats. So short discourse units that present a pertinent message to the world are lifted out and produced for wide distribution.

It seems, however, that the things that follow from a decision to use Scripture in this way are not always recognized. To take texts out of their setting in the Bible and print them as stand-alone publications carries with it a special responsibility. And care must also be exercised when several biblical passages are gathered together into one publication under a particular theme.

The principles for good selection production have been available for some time. (They are in print, for instance, in the UBS Manual “*On Selections*” published in 1977.) However a study of recent publications