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## Book Review

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Marianne Beerle-Moor and Vitaly Voinov, eds. *Language Vitality through Bible Translation*. Berkeley Insights in Linguistics and Semiotics 95. New York: Peter Lang, 2015. viii + 246 pp. ISBN: 9781433128929 (hardback), €66.90/£54/\$86.95. Also available as e-book.

A year ago I attended a funeral wake in Ochum, a Krung tribal village of Ratanakiri province, Cambodia, about half an hour's drive from where my family and I live. The Krung are one of six indigenous people groups in our province, each with its own language. This was a Christian funeral, but most of the deceased woman's family still practiced animism.

The Christian–animist split among participants was clear: the Christians were gathered around the casket, a huge hollowed-out log split down the middle and cut to size. The bereaved husband sat beside the casket. Behind the Christians sat the animists, who were participating in the traditional wake activity of drinking rice wine. Among the Christians, a pastor read a portion from the Krung Bible—the translation of the Krung New Testament is nearing completion—and preached a sermon, and the mourners sang hymns from the Krung hymnal.

This wake underlined the divisions Christianization and Bible translation have brought to Krung society: the animists formed one group, the Christians another. And there were markers of cultural change, too: the animists drank wine, joked, and gossiped—like their ancestors have done at wakes for generations—while the Christians listened to a sermon and sang hymns. But not all signs of change were pointing towards cultural loss among the Christians. While the Christians avoided the traditional wine, they sang hymns set to traditional Krung tunes, accompanied by gongs. Among the Krung in this area, the traditional art of gong playing has been

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abandoned by almost everyone; only the Christians are actively preserving the art. Then there was the singing itself, from a photocopied hymnal written in the Krung script. Both the Krung alphabet and literacy in Krung are outcomes of Bible translation activity, carried out in cooperation with other humanitarian and missionary organizations. So too with the growing corpus of new (Christian) songs in Krung: not translated hymns, but Krung through-and-through.

What is the impact of Christianization and Bible translation among the Krung? Is the religion of the Bible disrupting the culture, encouraging the fragmentation of relationships and renunciation of ancient practices? Or is it instead preserving the culture, fashioning new cultural institutions and preserving old cultural forms? Or both?

Questions like these were brought to prominence in the linguistic community at the 2007 meeting of the Linguistic Society of America (LSA), in a symposium called “Missionaries and scholars: The overlapping agendas of linguists in the field,” which included a range of perspectives on Bible translation in relation to language, culture, and the secular academic discipline of linguistics. Many of the presentations were later published in the journal *Language* in a special section entitled “SIL International and the disciplinary culture of linguistics” (Dobrin et al. 2009). Strictly speaking the symposium did not aim either to oppose or to endorse Bible translation per se; rather, the participants discussed the degree to which academic linguists should rely on and give credibility to missionary linguists involved in Bible translation efforts. Nevertheless, the questions raised in those talks reached to broader issues, the sort illustrated by the Krung funeral wake. Dobrin and Good’s contribution to the discussion highlighted the impact of missionary activities on language ecologies, interventions “such as reshaping the speech forms associated with indigenous religion, making new demands on speakers’ metalinguistic resources, or introducing standardized ways of reading” (2009, 622). Handman, too, focused on language ecology, raising concerns about the clash between Christian conceptions of language (as representing one’s true intentions) and conceptions held by at least some minority-language communities (which do “not tie speech and intentionality” [2009, 639]).

Unlike these first two contributions, which merely raise questions, Epps and Ladley launched a strong offensive against Bible translation activities undertaken by SIL International and similar organizations. They argued that while SIL’s community development work “evidences a concern for speaker welfare, it also conceals an incompatibility with the principle of self-determination, the idea that communities have a right to freely choose their own futures. Despite a rhetorical commitment to the latter ideal, the practical

effects of SIL involvement are closely aligned with the forces of politically and economically dominant societies that confront and overwhelm local indigenous societies and their languages” (2009, 640). In short, to get help from missionaries, speakers of minority languages sacrifice their self-determination by converting to Christianity, at the same time abandoning their traditional religious beliefs, along with concomitant “attitudes toward work and leisure, male–female relationships, use of alcohol and tobacco (whether for ritual and recreation), personal modesty, economic transactions, and so forth.” Genres of verbal art may also be casualties: “In many cases the practices and beliefs of parents and grandparents are not simply lost, but actively repudiated” (644). It’s a grim picture: academic linguists can continue cooperating with Bible translators and thus passively contribute to the cultural annihilation perpetrated by missionaries, or they can build their own institutions for community work, thus “situating the field on a more justifiable foundation” (646).

Since the symposium, little has been published on the issue, until the appearance in 2015 of *Language Vitality through Bible Translation*, a collection of fourteen papers exploring the positive impact that Bible translation activities have had on local language communities, in particular as these activities have promoted sustainable language use. The volume is an impressive collection, with contributions organized into five parts based on geographical area: East Asia, Africa, the Americas, the South Pacific, and North Eurasia. Many chapters include case studies, while others relate to historical situations, as in Pamela Jean Owens’s thoughtful discussion of Cherokee Bible translation projects, which she—as a Cherokee tribe member herself—suggests have “help[ed] to ensure survival of the Cherokee language and, ultimately, the continued sovereignty of the Cherokee people” (99). Some focus on just a single language, while others discuss or make reference to several languages (more than one hundred languages are discussed or mentioned in the fourteen chapters).

Most contributions are written by language outsiders, but there is one by an insider, Gennady V. Kostochakov’s heartfelt piece, “Can Bible translation revitalize the dying Shor language?” And while most chapters deal with recent or ongoing Bible translation projects, one offers a fascinating account of how a long-lost Bible translation of the Caucasus was recently rediscovered and deciphered, making an important historical linguistic contribution: Marianne Beerle-Moor’s “Bible translation as witness to a forgotten language: The case of Caucasian Albanian.” This review, however, will highlight only a few chapters, namely, those that touch most closely on the question of whether Bible translation is on the whole hurtful to minority languages and the cultures in which they are embedded.

It may be helpful to begin with what the book is not: it “is not intended to be primarily apologetic in nature” (13), and so many of the issues raised by critics in the LSA symposium are not addressed, including the accusation that missionaries introduce changes that seriously compromise the integrity of traditional culture. As the editors point out, many competent scholars have answered this charge before. The contributors also do not address the more narrow claim that Christian conceptions of language, embodied in the Bible, disrupt language ecologies. But the question of language ecologies is an instance of the larger issue of cultural degradation.

This book does, however, indirectly speak to these broad concerns. In most of the languages discussed by the authors, Bible translators are working on projects for already established communities of Christians. The work of translation is certain to reinforce religio-cultural changes already underway, but in most cases this comes at the request of community members themselves. And in fact, the introduction of a vernacular Bible gives minority Christians the chance to direct—to indigenize—the process of change as they begin to read and interpret the Scriptures for themselves.

This empowering function of translation is highlighted especially by Steve Berneking’s chapter, “The new Lakota Bible as anti-imperial translation,” which reports on the work of the Lakota Bible translation team in Rapid City, South Dakota—a team composed entirely of Lakota tribe members—to retranslate the Bible into a form of Lakota appropriate to their linguistic forms and cultural background. The heart of Berneking’s chapter comes in a brief description of three translation choices made by the Lakota translators: (1) instead of using the word “God” for the Christian deity, the new translation uses the Lakota name *Wakan̄iŋka*, “sometimes wrongly rendered in English ‘Creator’ or ‘Great Spirit’” (119); (2) instead of translating imperative pleas to God using the direct imperative voice (“Have mercy on me, O God”), which is inappropriate for humans to use in relation to *Wakan̄iŋka*, the translators have innovated by using the “female deferential command enclitic marker *ye*,” with a male-speaker marker at the end of the request; (3) the term “anoint” for ritual consecration has been rendered with the Lakota word meaning “smudge,” reflecting the traditional way of consecrating a Lakota warrior for battle.

Berneking’s claims about “anti-imperial translation” notwithstanding, what is striking about these examples is that they are not striking at all; translators for hundreds of years have been giving linguistically and culturally appropriate renderings in their translations (think of the Authorized Version’s “God save the king!”). And so, far from being a weapon of cultural annihilation, Bible translation—particularly as carried out by or alongside native language translators, as it usually is—takes the receptor culture very

seriously and expands the horizons of that culture from within, as it were. Philip Noss, in his contribution, “Bible translation, dictionaries, and language development: The case of Gbaya,” captures the reality well: “It has been claimed that translation is manipulation, and if that is true, the Gbaya have exploited translation throughout their history to their own benefit both in the secular context and in religious discourse, from the ancient initiation rites to the liturgies of contemporary Christendom” (68).

Another chapter highlighting the ways in which culture is bolstered by Bible translation and accompanying projects is Brenda Boerger’s account of her team’s work in the Solomon Islands, in “Bible translation as Nataqgu language and culture advocacy.” By taking care to choose culturally appropriate metaphors, the Nataqgu translation has “documented waning elements of the language and culture for posterity” (164). For example, Ps 60.4 in Nataqgu translates back into English as “Big-man, you are our war leader. Lift up the ‘rooster tail banner’ for us,” drawing on a traditional Nataqgu practice in which the war leader would wave red leaves called the “rooster tail” over his head or affix them to a stick as a war banner (162–63).

Boerger also discusses efforts she participated in to introduce traditional verse form and dance into Nataqgu hymn singing. Although “custom forms had begun to wane by the time of [Boerger’s team’s] arrival on the island,” by the time she left, the younger generation were singing songs written in the traditional verse form (167). Make no mistake, this is a major accomplishment, carried off without the help of popular media, on the one hand, or UNESCO, on the other. And if my experience in Southeast Asia is an indicator, it is the sort of thing happening in minority Christian communities around the world: while most community members adopt the musical forms of the dominant culture (which are often themselves retreaded versions of Western pop music), churches may sometimes be the one place encouraging creative engagement with traditional musical forms. Neither missionaries nor secular linguists can hold back the tide of globalization, but many missionaries have figured out a way to do more than simply archiving traditional forms so that scholars in Western countries can someday hear how this or that group used to sing or talk or tell stories.

Another major theme in Boerger’s chapter, a theme dominant as well in Michael Cahill’s “Endangered languages and Bible translation in Brazil and Papua New Guinea,” is the impact of “long-term residence of an outsider advocate” (151). As both authors make clear, it is not only that Bible translators are actively supporting minority-language use, or bolstering speakers’ confidence in their mother tongue, or promoting literacy—all things that Bible translators typically do—but what makes these and other efforts effective in promoting the vitality of languages and cultures is the actual

physical presence of a committed outsider over a period of many years. This is not to say that the outsider is a kind of language savior, come to rescue the languishing natives. On the contrary, the present volume is full of evidence that language vitality efforts are effective only if native speakers are committed to using and promoting their language. But it often takes the long-term commitment of an outsider to develop insider leadership, even to give speakers hope that their language is worth speaking, worth saving. Bible translators and other missionaries are uniquely situated for this kind of long-term, residential commitment. As the contributors to the LSA symposium acknowledge, the research university structure—not to mention funding constraints—make this sort of long-term engagement impossible for most or all academic linguists.

A related theme shared by Boerger and Cahill—but developed most in Cahill's contribution—is at first blush counterintuitive: in many cases where Bible translation work has helped save languages from extinction, strictly language-oriented work may not be the major factor. The Binumarien of Papua New Guinea are a fascinating example. Between the early 1900s and 1959, the Binumarien population declined from about 3,000 to 111. It was at this low point that SIL missionaries arrived in the village. Extinction of the language was likely, because the tribe itself was on the brink of extinction. Almost immediately the missionaries provided the villagers with access to medical help, which reversed the population's downward trend. Over the long term, this medical help probably saved the language (and more importantly, the speakers of the language) from disappearing.

Cahill might have stopped his story there, but he does not. He goes on to relate that in traditional Binumarien culture, women were regarded as dirt, "beaten as a matter of course." Birthing practices excluded women from society, "contributing to the low birth rate." It was through the translation of the Bible's story of creation in Genesis, where both Adam and Eve are created good (in contrast to the Binumarien view that the first woman was originally a man who was cursed for sinning, and thus became a woman) that the villagers became convinced that women had value, because they were valued by God. In consequence, "gradually women have been accorded a higher status." This anecdote reads as though it could be a direct answer to the accusation that missionaries bring culture change. Cahill's response, though not stated in these terms, is essentially, "Yes, if wife-beating is a traditional element of a culture, then we own the title 'culture-changer.'" Other stories told by Cahill show the same pattern: Bible translators take up residence among a nearly moribund language group and through health interventions and, yes, Christian-induced culture change, help save the group from extinction.

And this brings us to what, to my mind, is the most important theme of this collection: languages matter, but people matter more. Bible translators are uniquely situated to help dying languages because translators do not care about language for itself, as an artifact extracted from culture, disconnected from speakers. Bible translators care about language for what it is to those who speak it: as a way to communicate with real, living people; as a vehicle for telling stories, building and maintaining relationships, knowing the world; as that part of culture that makes human culture possible. So when Bible translators settle in to live ten, twenty, thirty years with a particular language group, “language work” is only one part of their job description. Their real job is “people work,” helping actual people with their actual problems, be they health problems, interpersonal problems, or even problems created by traditional culture and religion. And it turns out that helping communities in this way can also strengthen the position of the community’s language.

I do not mean to say that this volume does not address work done by translators which is focused narrowly on language vitality. Joseph Hong, in “Language endangerment in the light of Bible translation,” discusses the looming threat of large-scale language death and notes that local Bible translation projects are often the focal point of expertise and advocacy in a language community. J. Stephen Quackenbush details the efforts undertaken by SIL for the Agutaynen language of Palawan, Philippines, such as spelling reform, literacy promotion, arts and media activities, and activism in collaboration with communities. Through these long-term efforts, Agutaynen moved on the EGIDS—a scale for measuring a language’s vitality—from a score of 6a “Vigorous” up to 5 “Written,” with hopes that it may eventually move to 4 “Educational.” But Quackenbush, like many other authors in this volume, is realistic, acknowledging that there are too many factors in play to know the long-term prospects for Agutaynen. This honesty is refreshing, as author after author relates stories of modest success, and in some cases (as in Jill Riepe’s contribution) of no visible success at all, as of yet.

I have had to pass in silence over many excellent contributions, but the few chapters discussed above will, I hope, give the reader of this review a taste of what is to be found in *Language Vitality through Bible Translation*. One of the strengths of this book, a strength that is not adequately reflected in the preceding discussion, is the diversity of voices that it gathers together. One is left with the impression that Bible translation takes many different forms in different communities, with a wide variety of accompanying activities. Amid all this variety—variety of approaches, variety of activities, variety of cultures—it is striking that the primary focus of Bible translators is so rarely on preserving the existence and vitality of a language. Their

focus is characteristically on people—the people to be served by the translation, often the indigenous church. Yet the indirect approach succeeds. It may be that languages are best preserved by those who do not set out to preserve them.

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