DOG BITES MAN: ADVENTURES IN THE LIFE OF A TRANSLATION CONSULTANT

Posted on October 11, 2021 by Sue

Not all languages put words in the same order and this can make life a little difficult for translators and consultants.
Category: Observations

Do you speak SVO or VOS ?

As many of you know, I work as a Bible translation consultant, which means that I spend much of my time working with teams to help them check their translation for accuracy. People naturally ask me how I can do this if I donâ€™t speak all these languages? The simple answer is that we use French as a bridge to the other languages.Â

When the team have worked on their translation, a native speaker of the language prepares what we call a â€˜back-translationâ€™ of the text into French. This is usually a fairly literal word-for-word rendering of the text into French so that the consultant can see how the team has translated it into their language.

To give you an idea of what this might look like, here is an example of a back-translation of Acts 27.21 from Kouya into English:
A long time lasted, and those-who were boat big inside, they not thing not-any eat. Then, Paul stood-up them amongst, and he said them towards: â€œMy friends, I say before, we should-not leave Crete not. You-plural if before my word accept, then things not would-have like-this ruin/damage.â€

By going through a written back-translation and comparing it to the original Greek or Hebrew text, the consultant can see if anything is missing from the translation, or spot something that doesnâ€™t look quite right and make a note to ask the team about it. Then when they get together with the team-either face to face or via Skype/Zoom/Whatsapp-they will go through the passage verse by verse, discussing the meaning in the common language, and making changes to improve the accuracy of the translation.

When working with a team I like to start by having someone read a whole section of the translation out loud, then we go back over it, verse by verse, with a native speaker of the language giving an oral back-translation in French. Itâ€™s amazing just how many tiny errors are spotted when a passage is read aloud: something missing, something that isnâ€™t quite grammatical or an expression that just doesnâ€™t sound right. Then I can ask any questions I have prepared from studying the back-translation and we discuss these, making any corrections or changes as we go.

One thing Iâ€™ve noticed though, as Iâ€™ve worked with teams in different places, is that doing a spontaneous oral back-translation into French is much easier from some languages than others. This has a lot to do with how similar the language is in terms of its default word order compared to

French. Let me explain. Around one third of the worldâ€™s languages deploy an SVO (subject-verb-object) pattern. Most European languages (including English and French) come into this category, as do Mandarin Chinese, Thai, Swahili, Hausa and Kouya, for example. Around a half of languages use the order SOV (subject-object-verb). These would include Ancient Greek, Latin, Japanese, Hindi, Persian. Less than 10% are VSO (verb-subject-object) languages, Biblical Hebrew, Classical Arabic and Irish for example, and only 3% arrange the elements of a typical sentence in the order VOS (verb-object-subject), such as Austronesian languages (like Fijian and Malagasy). Only a handful of languages have an OSV (object-subject verb) or OVS (object-verb-subject) pattern. These include a couple of Amazon rain forest languages as well as Klingon, the fictional language inÂ *Star Trek*!Â

The word order can change to show emphasis or other things, but these are the default patterns, which can be summarised using English like this:

- SVO â€“ Sam ate oranges
- SOV â€“ Sam oranges ate
- VSO â€“ Ate Sam oranges
- VOS â€“ Ate oranges Sam
- OSV â€“ Oranges Sam ate
- OVS â€“ Oranges ate Sam

You can read more about Word Order here.

So you can see that if you are translating from one SVO language to another (English to French or Kouya to French), if you know both languages well, this shouldnâ€™t be too complicated. However if you are translating from a VOS to an SVO language (Malagasy to French/English) itâ€™s a different story. While simple sentences wouldnâ€™t be too bad, when it comes to longer and more complex sentences, such as in the Epistles, this would demand a far greater degree of mental gymnastics! And this is what Iâ€™ve found in practice. So Iâ€™ve had to adjust my checking methods depending on which language team Iâ€™m working with. If itâ€™s an SVO language, I do ask for a spontaneous translation of each verse into French. But if Iâ€™m working with a Malagasy team, I donâ€™t insist on this. I always have a written back-translation, but I only ask for an oral back-translation when we come across problem verses.