LEARNING FROM TRANSLATIONS

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You can learn an amazing amount from translations into languages other than English.
Category: Observations

There were times when I was working with the Kouya translation team that I felt rather embarrassed. You see, you can look at the front of the NIV, ESV or any of the other English language translations and see the names of the translation team. You'll find professor this, doctor that and a whole host of highly respected and highly qualified people. Compared to them, the Kouya team was positively amateurish; and they were translating into their mother tongue, whereas the Kouya team leaders were struggling in their third, fourth or fifth language.

I found two things helpful. The first was the realisation that these highly respected professionals didn't seem in any hurry to give up their comfortable academic life to come and live in a rain forest. We mightn't have been as qualified, but we were willing to get stuck in. The other thing is that sometimes, just sometimes, the Kouya translation was demonstrably better than anything that the English team could come up with. Let me give an example.

The Hebrew word *goel* is a difficult one to translate into English and is rendered in a number of different ways in English versions. In Ruth, where the concept is key to the story, it is translated as "kinsman redeemer" by the NIV. This is the closest relative who is responsible to marry the widowed Ruth to ensure that her husband's family line is carried on. To English speakers it is a complex and rather foreign concept. Working in Kouya, I carefully explained the idea of the *goel* expecting that we would need to come up with some complex phrase (like kinsman redeemer) to capture the essence of the meaning in Kouya. However, one of the translators simply said; "oh, yes, we do that, too". It was a part of their culture as much as it was a part of the ancient Hebrew one, and so they had a perfectly good word for it. No need for any complex phrases and Kouya preachers don't need to spend ages explaining to their congregations what a "kinsman redeemer is". At this point (and probably others) our translation was better than any of the English versions.

The reason I write this is not to give myself a pat on the back; this all happened 30 years ago and I don't need the affirmation. I simply want to point out that translations in other languages sometimes have advantages over those into English and we English speakers can learn from them. There is a fascinating article in Christianity Today by Jost Zetsche that looks at some of the things we can learn from translations around the world:

> *In secular use, a prophet is someone who foretells the future. In the Bible, though, prophets go beyond predicting the future to proclaim the words of God now. Readers of the Bible in Kuna, a language in Panama and Colombia, understand this broader meaning when they read about a prophet as â€œone who speaks the voice of God.â€ Papua New Guinean Ekari Christians call a prophet â€œone who speaks under divine impulseâ€ (gokobaki*

> *tijawiidaiga wega-tai). And readers of the CoatlÃin Mixe Bible in Mexico are privileged to encounter a particularly vivid term in â€œGodâ€™s word-thrower.â€*

These examples are taken from the Translation Insights and Perspectives website. Preachers who are looking for insights into a particular passage might well find something useful here.