ALPHABETS, SHIBBOLETHS AND BROOMS

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Category: Observations

John Hamilton in Ndop, NW Cameroon 17 feb 2009
Alphabets, shibboleths and brooms

I was reminded this morning of the sad custom from the Troubles in N. Ireland when sectarian gangs used to pick on someone and ask them to recite the alphabet. Protestants and Catholics tended to pronounce the letter h somewhat differently and so if you gave theÂ wrong pronunciation in the wrong place...

But it happened too in Old Testament times. Judges chapter 12 tells the sorry tale of sectarian hostility between the men of Gilead and and the men of Ephraim. In this case Ephraimites fleeing from their defeat at the handsof the Gileadites were accosted at the fords of theÂ Jordan and asked to say "shibboleth". The Ephraimite pronunciation "sibboleth" became a death warrant.

Jon Blackwell used this passage in his devotional at the start of day 5Â of the Literacy Workshop for 8 Ndop languages. Participants shared examples of dialectical differences within their own language. For example in Bamunka the word for "broom" is pronounced "suu" in Mesaw quarter while just down the road in Mbanka quarter, they say "chu". The people ofÂ Bamunka can obviously cope with this just as those of us from Belfast know that a Dubliner means "three" when he says "tree" or a Ballymena man encouraging you to "Go quacker!" simply wants you to speed it up.

But words carry power and have consequences. For the Ephraimites, one word meant death. However in John 6 when Jesus' teaching began to scare offÂ many of the less committed disciples, Peter spoke up for the Twelve: "Lord, to whom shall we go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God."

Not everyone attending this workshop is a Christian, but they are working with words, creating a booklet in each of their languages to enable people to learn to read and write. It's all part of the process to give each of the 10 Ndop languages the God's Word in their mother tongue.

Meanwhile each morning, they start with prayer and a devotional talk with a linguistic twist. Jon ended this morning by challenging everyone to believe with Peter that Jesus alone has the words of eternal life.

John Hamilton in Ndop, NW Cameroon

PS PastorÂ Edward called with us early this morning. His son Victor has been ill for some time now and last night was very hot and had a rash. He was planning to take him to the health centre this morning. Please pray for young Victor and his parents Edward and Prisca.