TRANSLATORS OR MISSIONARIES

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Category: Controversies

The Denver Post recently had an article on Bible Translation which went on to appear all over the internet including on at least one British Website. I did think about commenting on some of the issues that the article raised, but decided not to. However, today I noticed that Daniel Midgely (who describes himself as a Linguistics teacher, researcher, atheist and president-in-exile of the world, which is one of the best profiles I've read in a while) has commented on the article. So, I thought that I would weigh in too!

Mr Midgely writes:

> *I'm actually glad that they're documenting languages. Or rather, they're translating the Bible into various languages, and hopefully documenting more about the language along the way. It needs to be done. I don't even mind that their translation efforts are focused on the Bible. It's a good basic text, a little archaic, but not bad for expressing a good number of concepts. And as a bonus, the Bible has already been translated in many languages, and the texts are already aligned by chapter and verse. It's like the ultimate cross-lingual parallel corpus! Potentially good for machine translation...*
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> *...this Bible-driven approach to language documentation misses a key point of language. A language -- its vocabulary, kinship terms, lexical categories, and even speech acts -- encodes some social ideas that are incomprehensible from outside the system. Coming in to promote a Christian worldview can only hamper the understanding of the language.*

I have to say that this is doing a great deal of injustice to the way in which missionary-linguists work on languages. Yes, a large part of our motivation (but not all of it) for studying Kouya was to translate the New Testament and to produce reading materials. However, our study of the Kouya language and social systems was not shaped by Bible Translation. We did not sit down and work out what words and structures we would need for the Bible and then set about getting them. We patiently worked with Kouya friends and over a period of years learned to speak the language fluently (which is more than most academic linguists do). We recorded and transcribed pages and pages of Kouya texts; folk tales, prayers, arguments and anything else that people would let us record. We then analysed these texts to work out how the language works. Once we had a good understanding of the language as well as a good group of people to work with, we set about trying to express an ancient Greek text in good, idiomatic and fluent Kouya. It was never a case of twisting the Kouya language to fit what we think the Bible requires of it.

The quality of the research that was done on Kouya is reflected in the fact that our colleague, Philip received his Ph.D. for the analysis that he did.

Mr Midgely also comments on the original Denver post article.

> *What concerns me about these efforts is that they come into it with what amounts to a Christian agenda. Despite protestations to the contrary.*
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> > *"Wycliffe missionaries don't evangelize, teach theology, hold Bible study or start churches. They give (preliterate people) a written language," Edwards said. "They teach them to read and write in their mother tongue."*
> >
> > *The missionaries develop alphabets. They create reading primers. They translate the Bible.*

> *Distributing bibles is evangelising. The difference between making bibles and more overt conversion efforts is a thin line. (Although in one case, the conversion backfired.)*

On this one, my sympathies are with Mr Midgely. There is certainly a very fine line between encouraging people to engage with the Bible and overt evangelism. I'm not sure that I would want to draw a clear distinction between the two. Equally, it is not true to say that Wycliffe missionaries don't preach or lead Bible studies. Many Wycliffe missionaries don't do these things, but equally, many do: I did both. The truth is that I preached and led Bible studies as a lay person, it was not part of my job with Wycliffe and it had to be done in my spare time - often at some cost to myself (as you can read here). I was a missionary-linguist who preached in his spare time, not a preaching missionary. But again, this is a pretty fine distinction and I don't suppose that many people would see any difference.

Mr Midgely doesn't comment greatly on the opening part of the Denver Post article, though he does quote it:

> *Protestant translators expect to have the Bible â€" or at least some of it â€" written in every one of the world's 6,909 spoken languages.*
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> *"We're in the greatest period of acceleration in 20 centuries of Bible translation,"*

Regular readers of this blog will know that I am not particularly enamoured of the concept that doing things quickly is necessarily a good thing (here, here and especially here). Speed is a virtue of the Western world, but it is not necessarily a Gospel value. The juxtaposition of the Mr Midgley's (apologies if I've missed an academic title) article and the Denver Post piece illustrate another concern that I have about the speed issue.

Midgley is rightly concerned about the documentation of minority languages around the world. Though I come from a different starting point, I agree with him entirely on this point and I'd also argue that in all probability the only people who will be in a position to document some of these languages will be missionary-linguists. However, if we focus purely on speed then we will, in all

probability, let something slide and that is likely to be language research and documentation and as I have argued elsewhere, we would be wrong to let this slide.

That being said, I do believe that a goal of starting (not finishing) a Bible translation in every language by 2025 is a laudable one. However, the purpose of this goal is so that the wider body of God's people around the world should become involved in this work, not just to do things quicker.

> *In Godâ€™s grace, as his people have come together to partner in Bible translation, the rate at which translations have started has increased. Although we are not on course to start a programme in every language by 2025, we are getting close to it. But the date is not the issue; it is our job to continue to seek the opportunities and partnerships which God provides each day and leave the long term results to God.*
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> *That being said, as westerners we can easily become fixated on dates and activities and it is a constant struggle for us not to try and take charge and do our all in order to reach the deadline for the sake of reaching the deadline. We have to resist this temptation. The genius of Vision 2025 was its call to realign ourselves with what God was doing in and through his people worldwide. We need to be constantly working to renew our alignment with Godâ€™s mission on an individual and corporate level. As we do that, God will sort out the dates â€“ we can safely leave that to Him.*