BIBLE TRANSLATION AS SUBVERSION

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Category: Observations

In our current context, where we tend to make a clear division between religion and politics, it is easy to dismiss Bible translation as a marginal activity which is only of interest to religious people. However, the reality is that any activity which involves the promotion of minority languages, as Bible translation inevitably does, is a highly political activity.

In the popular imagination, we tend to conceive languages as being functions of nation states. We speak English in the United Kingdom, French in France, and German in Germany etc. However, this simplistic picture is far from accurate. Even within a country as linguistically homogeneous as the United Kingdom there are a number of indigenous languages spoken (Welsh, Scots Gaelic, Cornish etc) as well as a significant number of immigrant languages (you can see a full list here). Other European Countries have very deep linguistic and cultural divisions (Belgium for instance), while countries in other parts of the world exhibit an extraordinary level of linguistic diversity. Ivory Coast, for example, has around 70 indigenous languages.

Faced with the reality of linguistic diversity, national governments very often adopt a policy which favours a particular language and which might actively discourage the use of other indigenous or immigrant languages. There are three broad reasons for this:

- **Prestige**. Governments will promote the use of a particular language in order to enhance its prestige within the country.
- **Politics**. Many people view a proliferation of languages as a hindrance to developing a sense of national unity or consciousness. As a result, many governments promote one language as a national language and either discourage or suppress the use of other languages within the country.
- **Globalisation**. Power and influence on a world scale belongs to the speakers of the international languages; English, Mandarin, Spanish, Arabic etc. Many countries privilege the use of one of these languages in order to encourage economic development.

In reality, these three issues cannot always be separated one from the other. The interplay of these issues leads, ironically, to many former colonies adopting the language of their former colonists as a vehicle of national unity and as a pathway to prosperity.

It is also noticeable that the methods used by governments to suppress the use of minority languages are remarkably similar in very different contexts. For example, the French authorities in Ivory Coast used similar strategies to discourage the use of Ivorian languages as were used by the English to discourage the use of Welsh in rural Wales.

Bible translation challenges these agendas of prestige, politics and globalisation by insisting that all languages are of equal value before God. Even if one were to sideline translation as a purely religious phenomenon, the fact that Bible translation is almost always accompanied by literacy and language promotion activities means that there is always a political dimension to this work. Bible

translation always challenges the hegemony of dominant languages, be they national or international. This is a political act.

It is no surprise then that, at various points in history the civil and religious authorities have insisted that only the official language could be used for the Bible. In Europe, for many years it was illegal to translate the Bible into a language other than Latin. Today's Bible translators are unlikely to face the death penalty for their work, but the notion of subversion is still a reality. The furore over the translation of the New Testament into Jamaican Patois has been interesting to observe. There has been a vociferous lobby insisting that Jamaicans should be happy to use the Bible in English and that Patois is not a fit vehicle for the Christian message. However, at the recent launch of the Patois translation, the representative from the Bible Society of the West Indies pointed out that with the publication of the New Testament, Patois now stands alongside English, French, German and all of the other written languages of the World.