BIBLE TRANSLATION: STATISTICS AND NEEDS

Posted on January 14, 2015 by Eddie

The latest updates in Bible translation statistics lead to some musings about the difficulty of of research into biological organisms and ends with a good Yorkshire phrase.
Category: Observations

At the latest count, there are 2,883 languages with some portion of the Bible available in them. To put this into some sort of context, the modern publishing phenomenon which is Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone is available in something around 67 languages.

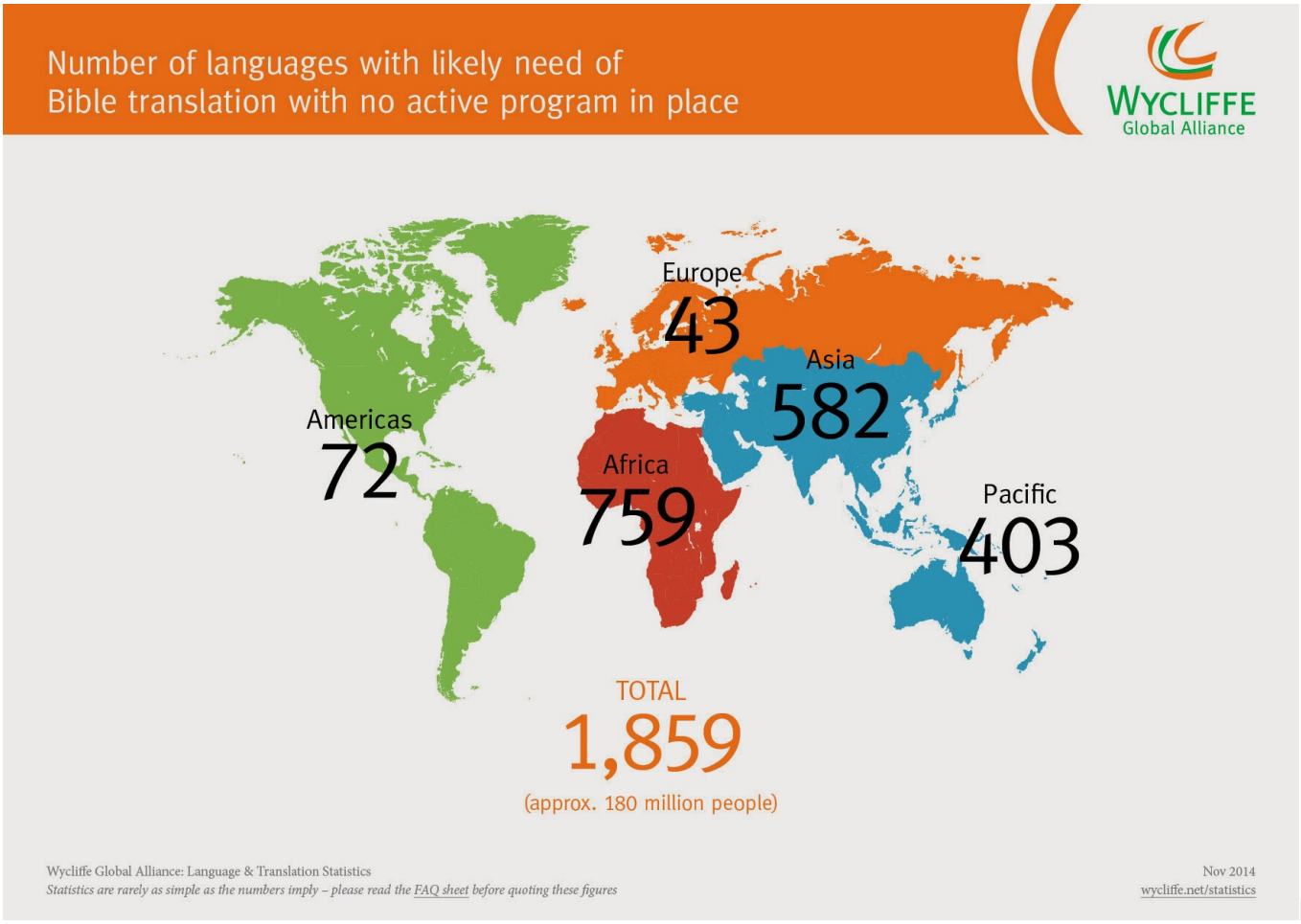
Wycliffe Bible Translators have recently published their latest translation statistics. The headline figures are:

- Complete Bible: 531
- New Testament: 1,329
- Portions: 1,023
- Total: 2,883

For translation needs the figures are:

- 180 million people speaking
- 1,860 languages.

Currently, we know of translation work going on in 2,195 languages in 130 countries. Wycliffe staff are involved in 78% of these ongoing translations.



However, what is really interesting is not the raw statistics, but some of the analysis behind them which can be found in a fascinating FAQ sheet, which answers some of the questions that I get asked whenever I speak about Bible Translation in churches. Here are a couple of examples.

> ***5. How are languages defined and counted?***
> *People and organisations have different ways to define a language depending on the purposes they have inÂ identifying that language as distinct from another. Some definitions are based on purely linguistic grounds - andÂ even these definitions will vary. Other definitions recognize that social, cultural, or political factors must also be taken into account. In addition, those who use the languages often have their own perspectives on what makes aÂ particular language uniquely theirs, or what makes their language different from another language.TheseÂ perspectives are frequently related to issues of heritage and identity much more than to the linguistic features ofÂ the language(s) in question.Â Academics recognise that languages are not always easily identified as discrete, countable units, but consist ofÂ features that extend across time, geography and social space.*

> *Every language is characterized by variation within the community that uses it. Those varieties, in turn, are more orÂ less divergent from one another. These divergent varieties are often referred to as dialects.Â For current statistics, Wycliffe Global Alliance uses the data from SILâ€™s Ethnologue (following the widely recognised ISO 639-Â 3 standard), focusing on 6901 languages that are in active useÂ as a first language. There are another 200 languages whereÂ there are no first language speakers. Some of these continue toÂ have second language speakers and in some contextsÂ successful efforts are being made to revive the use of the*
> *language.Â (further reading: see www.ethnologue.com/about/problemlanguage-identification)*
>
> ***7. How is translation need determined and counted?***
> *Translation need is not as simple as determining whichÂ languages do not have Scripture. A language is usuallyÂ considered in need of Scripture translation when the followingÂ three conditions are in place:*
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> - *there is at least one community which understands thatÂ language well and accepts it as their medium ofÂ communication,*
> - *existing Scriptures (if any) in that language are not adequateÂ for the community's basic spiritual needs, and*
> - *there are no other languages which people in the communityÂ understand well and accept as a medium of communicationÂ for which adequate Scriptures exist or are planned.*

On a slightly more geeky level, I found this question fascinating.

> ***9. Why arenâ€™t all languages without a full Bible listed as needing translation?***
> *It is people not languages that need Christ. There are a number of reasons why the Bible may not need to beÂ translated into a specific language. These include:*
>
> - *The language is no longer used in any community or its use is very weak (such as being used little inÂ everyday life, or being used only by a few older people).*
> - *In communities within which the language is used, the majority of those between the ages of 20 and 45 areÂ adequately proficient in another language available to the community, are already motivated to use it, andÂ Scriptures are or will be available in that language.*
>
> *At some level â€˜needâ€™ is still subjective. Wycliffe would notÂ state that a community does not need, or would not benefitÂ from translation. If translating Scripture into a dialect leadsÂ people deeper into relationship with Christ, then that's good,Â even if outsiders choose*

> *to prioritise elsewhere.*

This insight that it is 'people not languages who need Christ' (or Bible translation for that matter) is an important one. People are awkward and theyÂ make their own choices. It is not unusual for language communities to decide that they don't want to continue their own language and that is their choice to make, however much it upsets language geeks and threatens Bible translators with unemployment.

When I was a post-grad biologist my supervisor once told me that in conditions of equal food, water and temperature, the observed organism will do what it darn well pleases. If this is true of broad beans in a greenhouse (which is what I was working on), it is even more so of human populations. Missionary statistics, be they related to Bible translation, church planting or what have you, have to deal with this capacity for people to make choices which do not appear (to the outsider) to be rational or predictable. I've seen far too many presentations and articles by missionary statisticians which ignored this simple reality.

There's nowt so queer as folks.