HEART LANGUAGE PROBLEMS

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We might have to revisit some of the way we talk about and publicise mission work and translation. Things are a little more complex than easy sound bites might suggest.
Category: Language and Society

Someone recently said to me that they thought it was great that I had a vision to see the Bible translated into everyone's heart language. At which point I found myself thinking, "Do I?"

The thing is, languages are tricky things and terms like "heart language" are pretty well meaningless in situations where people speak more than one language - which is most of the world.

My complacency about language was first challenged when I realised that in three Kouya villages (out of 12) most people didn't actually speak Kouya. They were Kouya people, lived in Kouya villages, but spoke another langauge, Gouro. Over a number of generations, the people of those villages, had made a choice (conscious or unconscious) to use a different language.

We naively think that language is about communication, but there is far more to it than that. The language we use and the way that we use it defines us in relation to other people. If I were to write, "Hello to Jason Isaacs", most readers of Kouyanet would think that I was (for some strange reason) greeting a star of screen and television. However, a small number of initiates, would understand the true meaning and realise that they we are members of the same select group (if you don't know what I'm going on about - I'm sure the answer will turn up in the comments).

This phenomenon extends beyond the use of catch phrases in English to the way in which people use whole languages. The Kouya people of three villages used Gouro because it was a better way to communicate with neighbouring people and with the increasing number of Gouro women who married Kouya men. The functionality of communication was more important than their ethnic identity as Kouya.

Other people choose to use a language because they want to adopt a new identity. Many educated, people in the developing world will use English, French or another major language in preference to their mother tongue because of the cachet of sophistication that comes with it.

Also, in the growing cities of the world, families will often choose to use a third language because neither husband nor wife speaks the other's language adequately. In these cases, the children are likely to grow up speaking a language which is not the first language of either of their parents. The term "mother tongue" is of little use in situations like this.

Missionaries and Bible translators often talk about communicating to people in their "heart language" or the "language that they understand the best". Sometimes, the meanings of these terms are straight forward, but not always. We have to realise that in a changing world, people choose to use languages for a variety of reasons and the language that they prefer to use may not be the one that they understand the best (whatever that actually means). Just to make things more complex; people who speak multiple languages might prefer to use different ones in different contexts.Â Â It is not our job to insist that people use one language or another; that is their prerogative.

What this means in practice, is that mission workers have to do some serious socio-linguistic studies to discern which is the best language to communicate in; especially in cities. It also means that we

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