PRAGMATIC LINGUISTICS APPLIED TO TRANSLATION

Posted on March 8, 2008 by Eddie

Category: Mission

Jim Harries, has just posted an excellent paper on his website which he has also submitted to the International Journal of Frontier Missions. I don't have the time to comment in detail on what he says, but it is a wide ranging paper covering everything from translation theory to post-colonial politics. You can find the paper here.

There is a temptation to think that Bible translators, missionaries and indeed all Christians live in a spiritual bubble divorced from the economic and political struggles of the countries they live and work in. Jim demonstrates very clearly that Bible translation is at its root a political activity because it challenges the established wisdom about which languages (and hence which people) are the most important and influential.

For the record, this paper is semi-technical. It is not written for translation specialists, but those not familiar with the field will need to read some bits carefully to follow the argument. While not everyone will agree with everything Jim says, the paper is certainly a well thought through and challenging look at the way much modern mission is carried out. If it has a weakness it is that it tries to do too much for the scope of one essay - no sooner have you got to grips with one theme than he rushes you on to another. Just a snippet to whet your appetite:

> *International languages have their place, in enabling international communication. The use of international languages in exacting close control over other linguistic communities is however like a cruel bludgeon to non-native speakers (especially those of very distant cultures) who are thereby obliged to accept their own backwardness and concede to not having a voice in their own community. This certainly applies to much of Sub-Saharan Africa, where country after country has seen no alternative but to adopt European languages to "officially" govern their own people.*