WORDS DON'T MEAN WHAT PEOPLE THINK THEY DO!

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Category: Observations

Each time I come to Madagascar I learn things that make me realise just how important this translation work is. There seems to be so much potential for misunderstanding between different Malagasy languages because a word can have one meaning in one language yet the exact same word has a different meaning in another language. Here is an example I discovered the other day: in Official Malagasy the word *hazo* means 'tree' or 'wood', but in the Tandroy language, the only meaning of *hazo* is 'coffin'! The Tandroy word for 'tree' or 'wood' is *hatae.* People may think they are understanding each other, but actually what each has understood may differ according to their language. The Masikoro word *trobo* means 'lost', but if you use that word when speaking with a Tandroy person you would really offend them because it is very rude.

This confusion between languages is not just a feature of everyday speech, it is also a problem when it comes to understanding the Bible. When people read the Bible in Official Malagasy, what they understand may differ depending on which language group they are from. For example *mino* means 'believe' in Official Malagasy, but in the Bara language it is the normal word for 'drink', and there are many other such examples, so that for many people in Madagascar, the message of salvation is not coming across clearly.

As you spend time reading your English Bible-with so many versions available-do spare a thought and a prayer for those who are still waiting for a Bible in their language and for the translators who are working so hard to make the Scriptures available to their own people group.