A NATURAL WE!

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Sometimes translating the simplest of words can be more complicated than it might, at first, seem.
Category: Madagascar

One of the issues which confronts anyone involved in Bible Translation is the sheer number of decisions to be made. You only have to compare a few different English translations to see that in any given passage there is quite a bit of variety between the various versions. Iâ€™m not even talking about passages where there may be different theological interpretations, Iâ€™m talking about how languages have lots of ways of saying the same thing. For example â€˜he got upâ€™, â€˜he stood upâ€™ and â€˜he got to his feetâ€™ can all describe the same action. It may not matter which expression you use, but you still have to choose. Depending on the context, one expression may be more appropriate than another, it may make the sentence flow better or else it just sounds right. But often these decisions can be fairly arbitrary-one word or expression can be used just as well as another-since most languages can say the same thing in several different ways. The translators simply have to make a choice.

Now some languages have features which mean that the translators have to make choices that those translating into English, French or Italian for example *donâ€™t* have to make. I have often come across this working with the Tandroy translators in Madagascar. Many languages in the world (including all the Malagasy languages) make a distinction between what is known as

â€˜inclusiveâ€™ and â€˜exclusiveâ€™ 1st person plural (â€˜weâ€™). In other words, does the â€˜weâ€™ include the person or persons being addressed or not? 'Inclusive we' includes the person you are talking to, but the 'exclusive we' doesn't, it effectively means "us, but not you".

The thing is, the original Greek does not make this distinction; neither does English or French. So how do Tandroy speakers decide when to use *tikaÃ±e* (inclusive we) and when to use *zahay* (exclusive we)? Well generally it is instinctive; it is usually quite obvious to a native speaker which â€˜weâ€™ is natural in the context, so most of the time this doesnâ€™t pose a problem for translation. However, there are some passages, like in Mark 4.38, when an exegetical decision has to be made: Jesus is asleep in the boat when a storm blows up when the disciples say â€˜Teacher, donâ€™t you care if *we* drown?â€™ is Jesus included in the â€˜weâ€™ or not? Did the disciples think he was going to drown, too? Neither Greek nor English have to make this explicit, and so the reader has to make up their own mind about whether or not Jesus is included in this â€˜weâ€™ (or maybe the reader doesnâ€™t even consider that because the language doesnâ€™t force them to think about it.) But in Tandroy the translators canâ€™t leave it conveniently ambiguous, they *have* to choose between *zahay* and *tikaÃ±e*. In the end they chose to use *tikaÃ±e* (including Jesus) because they thought it most likely that the disciples really believed they were all in danger of drowning. Translators in some languages also went with an inclusive â€˜weâ€™ whilst those in other languages came to the opposite conclusion.

As I said, most of the time this is not a problem as the translators know instinctively which â€˜weâ€™ is required. But a couple of weeks ago as I was checking through the translation of Acts in Tandroy, this came up lots of times in the first few chapters, particularly in Peterâ€™s long speech in Acts 2. Here are some examples.

Acts 1.17 he (referring to Judas) **was one of *our* number and shared in this ministry**

Here Peter is speaking to the group of around 120 believes about choosing an apostle to replace Judas. It would seem in this context that â€˜one of our numberâ€™ refers specifically to the apostles, so we chose to use the exclusive form.

Acts 2.32-33 God has raised this Jesus to life, and *we* are all witnesses of the fact. Exalted to the right hand of God, he has received from the Father the promised Holy Spirit and has poured out what you now see and hear.

At Pentecost, Peter is speaking to the large crowd that had just witnessed the miracle of everyone hearing the Good News in their own language. The â€˜weâ€™ here refers to Peter and the other disciples who had witnessed the resurrection, so exclusive form again.

Acts 2.37 When the people heard this, they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, â€œBrothers, what shall *we* do?â€

This one is instinctive for native speakers: the people were asking Peter what they should do, so since this doesnâ€™t include Peter, therefore the â€˜weâ€™ is exclusive.**Â**

Acts 4.16 â€œWhat are *we* going to do with these men?â€ they asked. â€œEverybody living in Jerusalem knows they have done an outstanding miracle, and *we* cannot deny it.â€

Again, this is instinctive: the members of the Sandhedrin are discussing this among themselves so the â€˜weâ€™ includes everyone in the room, so itâ€™s the inclusive â€˜weâ€™.

Of course the average Bible commentaries donâ€™t offer any help with this dilemma, because itâ€™s not an issue for their American or European audiences; (though we can refer to Bible translation helps and manuals) and when you compare the Protestant, Catholic and Ecumenical translations in Official Malagasy, they donâ€™t always agree on thisâ€¦

Why donâ€™t you try an interesting exercise the next time you sit down and read your Bible? Every time you come across â€˜weâ€™ or â€˜ourâ€™ in a passage, stop and think whether the â€˜weâ€™ is inclusive (including the addressees) or whether it is exclusive.

Another interesting thing to try would be to stop every time you read the word â€˜youâ€™ and ask yourself whether this is â€˜youâ€™ singular or â€˜youâ€™ plural. Most languages distinguish between the two, but English doesnâ€™t, although it used to. (Check in French or in the Greek if you can.) We as English speakers can be in danger of individualising passages which were actually addressed to a group or community of people. So beware: the grammar of a language really can influence how you are understanding Scripture.