THINGS HOME MISSION CAN LEARN: SPEAK

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Category: Church: UK

When we first went to live with the Kouya, we spent the best part of two years concentrating on learning to speak the language. On an intellectual level, it was the hardest thing I've ever done in my life. Emotionally, it wasn't a bundle of laughs either, forcing yourself to go out and talk to people, knowing that you are unlikely to understand or be understand and that it is almost certain that people will laugh at you, is hard going. However, if we were going to be involved in helping to translate the New Testament into Kouya, we had to have a good knowledge of the language.

People involved in mission in England also need to speak the language of the people around them.

Before I get into what I mean by this, let me say a few things that this isn't.

- I don't mean that church leaders should try and be cool and speak like teenagers. There is nothing quite so embarrassing - don't do it.
- I am not suggesting that a minister who was brought up in Devon and now works in Newcastle should try to speak in a Geordie accent. You aren't going to fool anyone doing that!
- Nor do I mean that we should drop longÂ *Christian words* such as justification and sanctification. People fully understand that all areas of life have technical vocabulary. You should, however, explain words like these when you use them.

Basically, all I'm suggesting is that people doing mission in England need to speak straightforward English.

Let me go back to our Kouya experience to illustrate what I mean and why I say it.

Rather embarrassingly, we became something of a tourist attraction in the village of Gouabafla. Family and friends visiting the village would come to our house to see if it was true that a white family were there and trying to learn the language. We didn't particularly enjoy being stared at, but it did give more opportunities for language practice. However, one day after a couple of years in the village, when someone expressed astonishment at the toubabous (white people) speaking Kouya, on of our neighbours spoke up and said, "they aren't toubabous, they are Kouya".

Language and identity are intimately bound together and by learning to speak the Kouya language, we had to some extent become Kouyas. I always tell language learning students that their job is not so much to learn to speak a language, but to become a member of the community of people who speak that language. Language doesn't just communicate, it also says something about who you are.

This is why I believe that native-English speakers who are working on mission in the UK need to think about language learning. It's not so much that they won't be understood, but by the use of "Christianese" they can mark themselves out as being strange. When we use the strange jargon that is part of church life, we give a message about Christians being a bit weird and different to everyone else. The messages are subtle, but human beings are finely attuned to picking up this sort of thing

and reacting to it.

To a newcomer, a phrase such as "we will now enter into a time of worship" conveys far more background information about the person using it than it does about what is going to happen next in the service. Similarly, theÂ *mystical passive* that is part of church life ("may God's presence be known" rather than "may you know that God is here with us") serves as as "in-group" language, and helps to exclude the visitor.

There is no real value or importance in these types of language use, it's just the sort of thing that all groups drift into over time. However, if our desire is to draw people into our group so that they can understand the message, we need make sure that we speak in a way that doesn't mark us out as weird. There are enough obstacles to people becoming believers, without us adding a barrier of Christianese for people to overcome.

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