REASONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATION: DIGNITY

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Category: Theology and Purpose of Translation

It is difficult, close to impossible, for speakers of a prominent language like English to understand what it is like to have a minority language as your mother tongue. English speakers can assume that things will be translated for them, that they can get by in foreign countries even if they don't know the language and that people will accommodateÂ their needs. Things are very different for minority language speakers; they can't assume that they will be able to use their language away from their home area - they may even have to use a different language to go shopping in their hometown.

English speakers have access to all sorts of books, television programmes, newspapers, you name it. The same isn't true for most minority languages; many of them don't even have a usable alphabet, far less a broad literature. Then we come to the Bible. English language speakers are spoiled for choice, there are so many different versions of the Bible available to us that the church manages to divide into camps around which translation is the best. Yet, there are thousands of languages without a single word of Scripture - imagine what it's like to have a language so obscure that even God doesn't speak it.

The Bible (or Bible portions) is very often the first substantive document produced in a language. Alongside the Bible translation project, there will often be literacy work which includes the production of a wide range of literature. Bible translation conveys the message that the target language is important - and by extension so are the people who speak that language. In short, it gives them dignity.

Of course, this isn't the purpose of Bible translation, but in a world where globalised economic forces are driving us towards a global monoculture and squeezing out minorities, it is important to let people know that they have value as they are.

I guess I'll always remember the old Kouya guy, who when I presented him with a rough copy of one of the first books in the language exclaimed; "now we are like the other people, the Americans have paper, the Germans have paper, the French have paper and the Kouya have paper. We are the same as the others."

We English speakers will never understand the difference that bringing literacy, the Bible or the Jesus Film to an isolated language group makes. It goes far beyond a spiritual impact.

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