REASONS FOR BIBLE TRANSLATION: COMPREHENSION

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The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a column of army ants!
Category: Observations

This one is fairly self-explanatory; people understand the Bible better when it is available to them in their mother-tongue. If you don't believe me, just head over to Bible Gateway and try reading a passage in a language that you understand, but which isn't your first language.

Though we might like to pretend otherwise, the Bible is a difficult book full of complex literary forms that arose in a very different time and culture to our own. We find it difficult enough to get to grips with whatever it was that Ezekiel is saying half the time and we get to read it in English. Imagine wrestling with some of the minor prophets in a language that you are only half familiar with. To add to the problem, the Bible is chock full of technical language; even if you speak English well, you might struggle to understand what propitiation or justification mean. Often, these terms can be translated into other languages with more clarity than they have in English. When translating the book of Ruth, I was concerned about how we would render the Hebrew termÂ *goel* (kinsman-redeemer in the NIV). However, I discovered that the Kouya have the same system of levirate marriage (look it up) as the Jews in Ruth's time and have a perfectly common term to use. At that point, the Kouya translation is actually far better than anything available in English.

The thing is, even simple issues can be misunderstood when you reading the Bible in a foreign language. Early on in our time among the Kouya, we heard a sermon on the Baptism of Jesus. Reading in French, he came to the saying: "The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like a dove." The problem was, the preacher didn't know what a dove was. He knew about pigeons - he kept them - but he didn't realise that they are more or less the same thing as doves. So searching in his mind, he came up with what he thought was the right answer in Kouya. The Holy Spirit descended on Jesus like *army-ants*. I've no idea why he came up with that translation, but I know from experience that being covered in army ants is not a pleasant feeling! This certainly helped reinforce the view of God as unpleasant and out to get us which was common in some of the churches.

OK, the case is made. It is better for people to read the Bible in their mother tongue.

Or is it?

- Not everyone has a mother tongue. For those of us who grew up speaking one language and learned others in later life, the notion of the mother tongue is very obvious. However, for people who grow up speaking numerous languages, the question is not always clear. Some people use different languages in different domains and are equally comfortable in all of them, as long as they stick to that domain. They may use language 1 at home, language 2 at school and language 3 at work. They don't know home vocabulary in language 3, but they don't know work vocabulary in language 1 or 2. It is quite possible (and not uncommon) for people to prefer to use a language other than their home language at church. Their church language may not be their "mother tongue", but it is the language they master best in a religious context. Reading the Bible in their "mother tongue" may help these people, but others just find it confusing.
- Some communities are multilingual and churches in these settings have to come up with a

language policy that serves everyone. It may simply not be possible to do the Bible reading in every language represented in the congregation. In these cases, it may be necessary to come up with a compromise where everyone (at least in church services) agrees to use the same language.
- Some churches are riddled with ethnic distrust and suspicion. The highest priority in these situations is uniting Christians and whereas having everyone using their own language can exacerbate the problem.

Don't get me wrong, I am all in favour of people reading the Bible in their mother tongue when that is possible. Bible translation should be a priority for the church, but things aren't quite as simple as saying that the mother tongue is always the best option. One final example; if the mother tongue is always best, why were the Gospels written in Greek, when Jesus and the first disciples spoke Aramaic? More on this topic tomorrow.

This is the third post in a short series exploring why we should translate the Bible into minority languages.

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