USING TRANSLATIONS IN TRANSLATION

Posted on July 31, 2008 by Eddie

Category: Methodology

The Highly Esteemed John Hobbins of Ancient Hebrew Poetry gave Kouya Chronicle a mention in a recent post (not without me dropping a gentle hint elsewhere). John writes:

> *Eddie prefers NLT to all other translations for his daily reading and I wouldnâ€™t doubt that he makes considerable use of it when going about translating the Bible into African languages.*

Now as regular readers of Kouya Chronicle know, I don't do any translation anymore - my job is to help others to it - but John raises an interesting point anyway. How much should existing translations in another language be used when you are translating the Bible?

Ideally of course, Bible translation should spring directly from the best Greek and Hebrew texts available and most translators I know would use the original languages as much as possible. However, there are times when I would encourage translators to turn to an existing translation.

1. When the translator doesn't know Greek or Hebrew and no one else is going to do the translation. The sad reality is that some people groups around the world will never have the services of a Greek or Hebrew specialist to translate the Scriptures for them. There are more and more training schools around the world where local people can study to be translators, but even these subsidised programmes can be out of reach for some communities. Given the choice of a community having to read an English or French Bible that they can barely understand, or seeing a local person with some schooling translate out of French or English - I'd go for the translation. It will be imperfect, but it's better than nothing and for many people nothing is the only other thing on offer for some people.
2. For inspiration. Sometimes you can understand the original text, you know pretty well what it means, but you have no idea how to express it in the language you are working in. You can either bang you head against a wall for hours seeking for inspiration or glance at a good translation into another language to get some ideas.
3. For comparison. Translation is an art as well as a science. Sometimes there are numerous ways in which you could express the original meaning in the new language. At this point, it is often worth looking at the translation that the target group are using at the moment. The Kouya church leaders used the French Louis Segonde version and they were not willing to accept a Kouya translation that was too far removed from the familiar sounding French. So, when we had a choice, we would often look at the Segonde and choose the alternative that sounded most like it. This wasn't always to our liking, but better a translation that the church leaders would use and accept than a translation that kept us happy but didn't get used in the church.

A Bible translator is a juggler; balancing the original languages, the constraints of the target language, his (or her) own feelings about how the translation should sound and the wishes of the

target community. In the end, compromises have to be made.

I hasten to add that not all of my colleagues will agree with this post - perhaps they would be so kind as to disagree (politely) in the comments section!