
Why compete?

Creating New Functions for the Use of the New Testament¹

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“Well, are they using it [the New Testament] in church?”

I do not know how many times I have been asked that question since I returned overseas—four years after the Galat New Testament was dedicated. It could not have been a better sociolinguistic setting for using literature in the traditional language—good attitudes toward the language, use of the language in the church, high value of the usefulness of Scripture in daily lives, and a community-owned translation project. Yet when I attended church in the village for the first time, I was disappointed. Only a few Galat² New Testaments were in sight, and the Scripture was read in the national language.

Then later that week I attended an informal Bible study where several people held dog-eared New Testaments.

Were they using the New Testament in church? No. But were they using it elsewhere? Yes. As I reflected upon the situation, I realized that this pattern of Scripture use was the same as the pattern of language use in the Galat community. I realized that in order to encourage the use of literature in the traditional language, I needed to gear my efforts toward creating new functions for literature use in domains that were appropriate in the Galat community, rather than compete with existing functions.

Defining language spread

Many studies of traditional languages functioning within multilingual settings focus on language maintenance and language shift. However, literature-use activities involve the opposite process—language spread. Cooper (1982:6) defines language spread as the “proportion of a communication network that adopts a given language or language variety for a given communication function.”

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² Galat is the pseudonym used to identify a speech community in Southeast Asia.

Our efforts are directed at increasing the number of users of traditional-language literature. Introducing literature into the traditional language creates a new function that did not exist before. The purpose of literature-use activities is to encourage the adoption of the written language for certain communicative functions.

Lieberson (1982:37) states that the reshaping of these communication functions may occur in two ways. First, it may occur because a new function is created. In the Galat community, the national language spread because the government introduced new social institutions—markets, schools, and government offices—that required the use of the national language. The national language did not replace the traditional language in the Galat community, but spread through the creation of new functions for language use. Those who want to participate in these new institutions must learn the national language.

The second way a language may spread is by taking the place of another language for a specific function. As people use the national language for functions that were formerly reserved for their own language, shift to the national language occurs. The national language spreads at the expense of the traditional language.

In order to promote the use of traditional-language literature, we can create new functions for its use, or we can concentrate activities on promoting traditional-language literature use in functions normally reserved for the national language. However, the principle of conservation of language use implies that creating new functions is more fruitful than trying to encourage the use of the traditional language in a function for which another language is currently used.

Conservation of language use

One of the principles of language spread that Lieberson (1982:39–41) mentions is the conservation of language use, which means that once language-use patterns are established, they will tend to perpetuate themselves. In other words, it is difficult to change a pattern of language use once that pattern has been established. The availability of Scripture in the traditional language is not enough to ensure shifting the patterns of language use already established in the church. Ferguson (1982) suggests that the language used in religion is highly dependent upon other aspects of language spread, such as economic, political, and demographic factors.

Language used for a particular function in a multilingual setting is dependent upon several factors, including the medium of communication (spoken or written), perceived formality of communicative purposes, and domain of use.

Fishman (1972) uses the concept of domain to describe the social setting of language use. Factors that determine domains are the role relations among the participants, the setting, and the topic. Within domains there are certain behavioral constraints on language use; speakers perceive certain languages as more appropriate for certain domains. Examples of the role relationships, settings, and topics associated with each domain are illustrated in Table 1.

Domain	Role relationship	Setting	Topic
Family	Parent/child	House	Chores
Friendship	Friends	Porch	Family
Neighborhood	Neighbors	Community store	Gossip
Transactions	Buying fish	Market	Price of fish
Education	Teacher/student	School	Grades
Government	Officer/clerk	District office	Work arrangements
Employment	Boss/employee	Office	Business

Table 1: Domains, role relationships, settings, and topics

People are often not consciously aware of language choice. Rather, there are unspoken rules as to which language is appropriate for which domains. People switch to the appropriate language for the appropriate domain. Sometimes people switch languages depending on the topic, even though other factors remain the same. For instance, when I meet with Galat leaders to discuss business, we normally communicate in the national language. In this setting, our role relationship is advisor-committee, the setting is an office, and the topic is work arrangements. However, as soon as the business discussions are over and the coffee is brought in, the language of conversation changes to Galat. Although we are in the same setting, the role relationship has changed to that of friends, with the topics centering on neighborhood and family.

In some communities, these domains of use have become compartmentalized on a societal level resulting in diglossia. Often, in a diglossic situation, one language will tend to take on formal functions, and the other, nonformal functions. Formal functions in a society are those often associated with formal institutions within a community, such as government and education. Written communication also tends to be perceived as a formal function.

Language use may also change depending on the medium. Certain media, such as reading and writing, are often associated with the language of education, and the spoken medium with another. Lieberson (1982) states that people may also use different languages for in-group communication and between-group communication. Understanding which languages are perceived as appropriate for which domain, function, and medium is important in promoting traditional-language literature in a multilingual setting.

In the Galat community, informality and in-group communication characterize the family, friendship, and neighborhood domains for communication. Consequently, Galat is spoken almost exclusively in those domains. Although most written communication is in the national language, letters to friends and family, personal testimonies, and written prayer requests are in Galat. In the other domains, the national language is generally used if known to both

speakers. The division of language use even in these domains tends to be patterned according to the formality of the situation. At schools in the Galat area, the formal teaching is in the national language, while explanations will often be in Galat. The language outside the classroom among school friends is informal, so Galat is spoken (Harris 1990).

The language used in church depends on which domain the Galat perceive the church to belong. In one denomination, the church is a community institution, with the community leaders making decisions regarding the programs of the church. Pastors are generally from the same ethnic group and under the authority of the community leaders. Often announcements on Sunday mornings are conducted according to the format of a town meeting in which all the village activities for the following week are discussed. In this case, the church is perceived as belonging in the neighborhood domain, and the language used for most activities is Galat. Announcements, singing, preaching, and testimonies are all in Galat. Only the reading of the Scripture is in the national language, which is normally used for written language in the community. It is also the only formal ritual in the church (Harris 1995).

Local churches of other denominations working in the Galat area are considered missions by the denominations. Authority for the programs of these churches lies outside the Galat community, and pastors are generally from a different ethnic group. In these churches, the national language is used almost exclusively. This language use follows the pattern for communication for other non-neighborhood institutions within the Galat community. It is also interesting to note that the churches considered as outside institutions are what some would classify as high church. They are more liturgical in nature and, therefore, more formal. Thus, language use may also reflect the formal-informal pattern as well.

Within all churches in the Galat area, the national language is used if there are members present who speak a different language. This again follows the function of the national language for between-group communication. However, on more than one occasion I have watched the leader of the service scan the congregation. If only Galat speakers were present on that particular Sunday, the language of the service would switch to Galat.

Creating new functions for traditional-language literature

In the Galat community the traditional language is used for informal, in-group communication in the domains of family, friends, and neighborhood. Understanding the language use within the community, I can concentrate literature-use activities on creating new functions in the appropriate domains, using the appropriate media. It may be that traditional-language literature use will spread to some of the functions now reserved for the national language, but creating new functions, rather than competing for existing ones, is more appropriate in the Galat setting.

Among the Galat, reading Scripture in church is perceived as a formal function. It is, therefore, more expedient to concentrate efforts on reinforcing a function in a domain that people already perceive as appropriate for Galat, such as home group study. Galat pastors and leaders can create study guides that address issues that are relevant to the Galat church. In order to help people in their study of Scripture, they are planning to complete a handbook discussing

historical, geographical, and cultural issues in the Bible that are particularly relevant for Galat understanding of the Scriptures. They can also use the informal medium of spoken communication through cassettes to provide study guides, Scripture reading, and other practical teaching.

Community leaders have suggested a newsletter describing area activities, thus creating a new function in the neighborhood domain. Village-level literacy and development projects are another area in which a new function in the neighborhood domain can be created for the traditional language. Other informal education programs, such as preschools, are also new functions that can be created for traditional-language use. Although all formal education is in the national language, I have recently helped a school prepare materials for teaching Galat as a subject in school. Along with this is the development and use of traditional-language literature for a new function.

Galat community leaders have also suggested visiting older members of the Galat community and recording ethnohistory. In addition, they want to record some of the old traditions and stories for their children. As an in-group communication function, it is appropriate for the books to be written in Galat, with perhaps a translation in the national language.

Conclusion

Understanding patterns of language use within the Galat community allows me to concentrate my efforts to promote traditional-language literature where they will be most effective. Creating new functions within the domains already reserved for Galat, rather than competing with the national language in established functions, I am able not only to broaden the use of traditional-language literature, but also to reinforce the present diglossia in the community and contribute to language maintenance.

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