
The use and lack of use of translated Scriptures¹

Margaret Hill
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In Africa, quite a few Scripture translations have been completed, and we are now assessing their use. It is already possible to see some of the reasons why Scripture is being used or not. This is also a preoccupation of the United Bible Societies (UBS) at present, and strategy manager Dr. Jon Jeffery is doing research in this area. His research so far suggests the following reasons for lack of use of published Bibles or New Testaments (NT):

1. Lack of literacy

The UBS now sees this as a major obstacle to Scripture use and is working on ways of cooperating with other organizations in this area.

2. The language chosen is dying or of low status

Jeffery cited some Kenyan languages where most young people prefer to use Swahili or English. He wants this treated as a subject for market research before a project begins. He is particularly concerned about domains of language use, for example, in church, at home, mid-week prayer meetings. He feels that some languages that were viable for translation 50 years ago are no longer in need of mother-tongue Scriptures. He sees the spread of radio and TV as changing the picture in countries like Kenya or Uganda.

3. The translation is rejected by the church leaders

The UBS have many projects where the translation is a revision of an old Bible. They are finding it very hard to get people to accept the new. Sometimes translators have tried to use proper mother-tongue words where the original version had a loan word, for example, *angel*, and because the loan word is now part of Christian vocabulary, the mother-tongue word is not accepted. An example from Malawi: the original translation used *alteri* for altar but the new version used a Shona word. However, through the years, *alteri* had become the Christian altar, and the Shona word was only associated with spirit worship.

¹ This article is a revision of: Hill, Margaret. 2000-2001. "The use and lack of use of translated Scriptures" *Scripture in Use Today* 1:12-16; 2:2-4; 3:2-3.

4. Mechanical problems

Mechanical problems can include the wrong colour for a cover, or print that is too small. Some illustrations have not been acceptable; Jeffery cited Africanized ones and cartoon ones.

5. Lack of distribution

Jeffery is involved in market research to see who would buy Bibles when and where. They now try to fix the price of a Bible at that of a main meal for a family.

6. Lack of enculturation of the Bible

The UBS is now concerned that the Scriptures be relevant, addressing real life situations and so are working on a series of booklets about AIDS.

It is interesting to compare this list with the top reasons given in Nigeria by church leaders for lack of interest in mother-tongue translation:

1. The widespread use and knowledge of Hausa and English
2. Fear of mother tongue use, encouraging tribalism
3. Church leaders do not know how to read or teach in the local language
4. Local languages are perceived as inferior and inadequate for explaining biblical truths

Finally, a list from India by permission of Keith Benn:

1. Poor survey, resulting in a translation in an unacceptable dialect to the majority of readers
2. No graded reading materials to help people make the jump from a primer to the NT
3. Lack of promotion of the NT means that some speakers of the language don't know of its existence
4. Cross-cultural workers not aware of need for mother tongue
5. Lack of teaching of church leaders to use the mother tongue
6. Translation principles not understood so translation rejected
7. Lack of available literature in mother tongue pushes cross-cultural workers to encourage local people to learn major language
8. Illiteracy
9. Low prestige of mother tongue

10. Lack of knowledge about God's vision for them, not knowing that God wants them to be literate and to have an intimate knowledge of His Word. They do not know the expectations God has of them as priests (Revelation 1:6; 5:9–10; 1 Peter 2:9), as kings (Revelation 1:6; 5:10), as leaders (Joshua 1:6–9), as Christ's ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), and as evangelists (Matthew 28:19–20).

Here are seven conditions necessary for Scripture to be used, from Wayne Dye:

1. Spiritual hunger
2. Appropriate language
3. Acceptable translation
4. Accessible form
5. Understanding
6. Obtainable
7. Freedom to commit

Conclusion

So where does this leave us? Common factors emerge from these lists that affect Scripture use: level of literacy, prestige of the language, and attitude of church leaders.

Part 2

In part 1, we looked at a number of factors listed by different researchers to explain why mother-tongue Scriptures are not used. All of these factors can be put under one of seven headings proposed by Wayne Dye and, for our present purposes, turned around to the negative side:

Conditions that will prevent Scripture use:

1. Lack of spiritual hunger
2. Unacceptable language or dialect used for the intended audience
3. Translation not accepted and owned by the churches and community
4. General population does not have access to the translation
5. Lack of materials and teachers who can explain the basic message of the Scriptures.
6. Printed Scriptures cannot be easily bought by ordinary people
7. Strong opposition to commitment to Christ

Let's look at "Translation not accepted and owned by the churches and community," perhaps the most common problem I have met when travelling around Africa.

Who owns the translation project? This is a very important question, and unhappily the answer is quite often: the expatriate translation team. If we want the Scriptures to be used, it is essential that the translation is seen as owned by the speakers of the language. So how can this come about? Let's look at starting a project with this goal.

The whole question of ownership is far easier to get right at the beginning than to change after some years. Before any translation project begins, the leaders in that area need to be contacted. The key words are VISION SHARING. If there are churches in the area, then the top leaders of all Protestant denominations and the Catholic church need to be visited. This may well be best done by national Bible translation organizations' leaders, with or without expatriate translators experienced in this area.

They need to share the vision for the use of the mother tongue in translating and using the Scriptures. These leaders will quite reasonably want to know how this work will benefit their churches, and those who share must be prepared to show the possibilities for mother-tongue Scripture use resulting in church growth, etc. A strong argument is often that church members who understand the Scriptures properly in their heart language are less likely to fall prey to cults.

This stage takes time, and it is important that the leaders have time to process the possibility of mother-tongue Scriptures, discuss the question at church councils, etc. They need to be asked if they want this project and, if so, what will be their involvement. If, at this stage, the major players show no interest, it is best to continue with the vision-sharing without starting a translation project.

A translation that begins without the interest and involvement of church leaders is heading for Scripture use failure!

This, of course, does not apply where there is no church, or where all the church leaders come from another language group. Though in the latter case you would hope still to interest them in the project, and enlist their support.

How can the leaders be meaningfully involved from the beginning of the project?

1. Choice of translators

The ideal situation is where the different denominations each choose candidates for an assessment course. They need to be given criteria for the choice of candidates. They often need to understand clearly that the candidates do not all have to be pastors. After the course has ended, churches are informed which candidates have gifts from God to be good translators, and they make the final choice.



2. Choice of members for translation review committee(s)

If there are six different denominations in the language group, it is not usually practical to have six translators! However, all the churches can and should be represented on the review committees. In a church area, the denominations need to choose who should represent them on these committees. Then, of course, training needs to be given to these people.

Today in Africa, it seems to work best if all the members of these committees are influential people who will help bring about Scripture use. The translation does indeed need testing with non-readers, but this is often best done outside the setting of the review committees.

3. Financial involvement

Anyone who gives money for something is normally interested in the outcome! The churches should be involved in some material way in the project. This could be any or all of the following:

- **Pay the salaries (total or partial) of the translators and typist.**

It often seems to work well to have the church pay a percentage of the salary, and then outside funding pays the rest. It is also important that the translator comes under his church category for such things as local taxes, pension, etc.

- **The churches organize and host seminars**

Even in a poor country, the church regions can provide food and housing for participants attending Scripture Use seminars, training for review committees, etc.

- **Provide personnel**

The churches should be prepared to give some of their best people to work as translators. This may be a real sacrifice and shows a willingness to see the project work well.

4. Decision making

Apart from the very important area of choosing mother-tongue translators, the churches need to be involved in other decisions as they arise. Here are a couple of examples:

- **Order of books to be translated**

Obviously how ever much the local church leaders want Romans, it cannot be the first book the team translates! However, within reasonable limits, it is possible to make the order of books translated fit local needs. For example, a team may be asked to translate 1 Timothy as the first epistle because there are serious problems in the church connected with choosing deacons. If the translation can be seen as relevant to immediate needs, it is far more likely to be used.

Another reason would be to provide a liturgical church a set of readings from a particular book listed for the next year. If these are checked and printed out in time, this will usually ensure good use.

- **Style of Translation**

There are some NTs in Africa that are unlikely to be used by the churches until they are revised. The churches have rejected them as having too free a style. Clearly the leaders, and particularly the members of the translation committees, need to be taught translation principles. Having done that, though, their preference for translation style should be sought and accepted by the team. There are various other ways of making implicit information explicit, such as footnotes and background information booklets.

Part 3

In part two, we talked about the need for local ownership of translation. So what about this scenario? The work in a language called Mist in the country of Bingola was started 15 years ago by an expatriate team, Jack and Sue. They did a good job on the initial analysis of the language, and got to know and appreciate the skills of their two language helpers, so kept working with them when they started the translation. These two men were young, and although they both attended the local Baptist church, in the eyes of the church leaders, they were no more than participants in the young people's group. At that time, the director of the teams in Bingola somewhat discouraged members' over-involvement in local churches..

In addition, both Jack and Sue were introverts who much preferred working at a desk with a limited number of familiar people than going out and making contacts with leaders. The translation project continued, and Sue started a few classes for non-readers to teach them to read Mist, and there was good interest in this. However, the educated people were completely uninterested in reading their own language, though some encouraged the village women to go to classes.

After 15 years, the NT was ready for publication. By that time there were a few other books available such as the primer, folk stories, New Readers series, and a few other booklets. Jack and Sue had some trouble arranging the dedication of the NT, though the women from the literacy classes were very excited about it.

Finally the day came, and quite a few dignitaries turned up for the ceremony. At the end 30 copies were sold—all to literacy class members. Due to the age of their children who needed further education, Jack and Sue then left the field for the next five years or so.

A year after they left the field, a Scripture Use specialist named Tim was appointed to work in Bingola. One of his first jobs was checking the present use of printed NTs. He found that of the 5,000 copies of Mist that had been printed for a population of 100,000, only 50 had been sold. The rest were sitting in the capital city. He investigated the church situation amongst the Mist and found 60% of the Christians were Catholic, 30% were Baptist, and 10% belonged to various

small groups. At least 90% of the population considered themselves Christians, and the overall literacy rate was 30%.

So now what could be done? Put yourself into Tim's shoes a minute before you read on:

Tim began his work in the capital city by contacting the top church leaders, in this case the bishop of the Catholic diocese where Mist was spoken and the top Baptist leaders in the country. He also arranged to meet with the General Secretary of the Bingolan Bible Society, and in addition he made contact with the only mission working in that language group. In the case of the church leaders and the Bible society, he asked the entity director to go with him, together with the translation coordinator. At each meeting, Tim asked the leaders about the situation in the Mist area from their point of view. He then went on to ask how the Mist NT could help.

He heard over and over again from these people that they knew nothing about the NT, and couldn't recommend it until well-respected, Mist-speaking leaders had given their opinion of the translation. However, if the NT was acceptable, then they were all willing to encourage its use. They also shared various problems in the Mist area that could be addressed by church members studying the Scriptures in a language they understood.

Tim and his family then moved to the main town in the Mist area and began to make contact with the various leaders of the churches, educational system, and the traditional community. He attempted to make real friendships with many of these people. After some time spent making these initial contacts, beginning to learn the language, and study the culture, he was ready to discuss with the leaders the possibility of a meeting of all the church leaders to see what could be done with the Mist NT. After a long, open-ended discussion, the church leaders agreed to form a translation committee which would review the NT and decide if changes needed to be made or not. In addition, they asked Tim what needed to be done to help literates learn to read their own language.

As a result of this meeting, two things happened. First, a translation committee was set up which included the senior Baptist pastor and the priest in charge of the region, both speakers of Mist. After some meetings, they came to the conclusion that the translation was accurate in most places, but that some of the most important key biblical terms needed altering, such as Holy Spirit. Tim then had the difficult job of convincing funders that it was necessary to leave to one side the unused 4,950 NTs and reprint the NT in an acceptable form. He succeeded in doing this, and three years later a joyous dedication arranged by the Catholics and Baptists together, saw a revised NT published, which sold 2,000 copies the first day.

The second project that came out of the initial meeting with leaders was creating a transition guide to help educated Mist speakers to read their language. This was done with the help of a couple of headmasters who were members of the Mist language association. They added some interesting riddles at the end of the book, which helped to sell it. At this time, a literature committee was formed. Later a couple of writers' workshops held, and various interesting publications aimed at educated people started to come out in Mist. And so it went on....