
If the food is ready and the people are hungry, don't put it in the freezer...!

Reducing the time from translation desk to Scripture engagement

Richard Margetts

© 2012

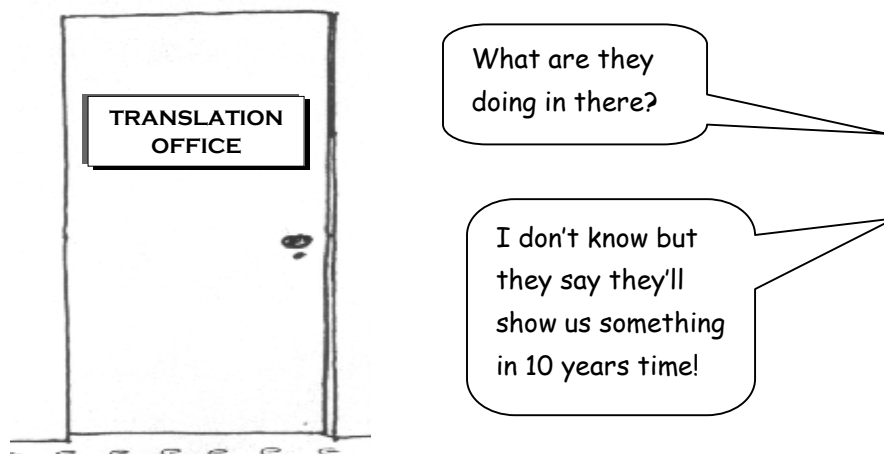
*"If the food is ready and the people are hungry,
don't put it in the freezer and tell them to come back later."*

The title of this article sprang from a discussion we had during a training course for Scripture Engagement practitioners in Yaoundé, Cameroon. From their experience of working with Bible translation teams across francophone Africa, the participants knew that it could take a very long time before completed portions (such as individual Bible books) got from the translator's desk and into the hands of the people. The 'food' would be 'put in the freezer' waiting for the day when it would finally be served to those hungry to receive it.



Here we are not referring to Scripture which is still in draft form, books that have yet to be checked by a translation consultant, or where there are outstanding decisions to be taken on important key terms. To distribute such 'undercooked food' could be dangerous and could put people off the food altogether. No, what we are focussing on here is rather the 'food that is ready', i.e. translations that have gone through the necessary checks, translated portions that are genuinely finished but which have not yet made it out the door. In some cases it can be several years before a finished Bible book is published and made available for the people for whom it is intended.

The cartoon below is caricature of the reality but it does illustrate how people in the local community can view such a situation.



So why does this happen? If the people are hungry for God's Word in their own language, why would a translation team take this spiritual food and store it away in the freezer for another day? What is causing the delay? Isn't there something we can do to reduce the time from translation desk to Scripture engagement?

Bible translators face all kinds of pressures and there is never enough time to do all the things they would like to do, so this article is not an attempt to make them feel guilty or inadequate, but rather a concern to raise the issue for discussion in programme planning and for dialogue between translation teams and Scripture Engagement workers.

Why are translated Bible portions “put in the freezer”?

Translated Bible portions might be stored away for long periods rather than getting to the people for some of the following reasons:

1. The **programme plan** might be putting most of the focus on the medium term goal, e.g. the publication of a complete New Testament, and does not allow for the extra time needed for the team to work on publishing many intermediate portions. There might be time for a gospel or two and a couple of epistles, but not much more than that.
2. The translated portions might be **98% ready** for publication but the translators move on to translate other portions before finishing the remaining 2% of the work on those that are almost ready. They'll go back and apply the finishing touches to each book before the publication of the whole Bible or New Testament.
3. Sometimes no one in the translation team is **sufficiently trained** to produce printed Scripture booklets or to record audio Scripture. The perception is that this is difficult and time-consuming, a job for a specialist rather than the ordinary translator. As a result, translated Scripture is stored away, waiting for someone from outside the team to come and help.
4. **Funds** are often limited and little provision has been made for the costs of making portions of translated Scripture available on a regular basis, whether in print or audio forms. Sometimes there is the assumption that any kind of Scripture publication is bound to be costly. People aren't asking, “We don't have all the funds we would have liked, but since we really must get this Scripture out to the people, what can we do with what we have...?”
5. **Local church and mission leaders** might see themselves as distant from the translation team's decisions and do not realise they have an important role in encouraging the team to get translations out into the church and community. No one is coming to the translation team, saying, “We could really use 1 & 2 Timothy in our church next year. I know it's almost ready. Any chance of getting some copies for us as soon as it's finished?”
6. Some translators envision Scripture engagement happening primarily in the **medium to long term** after the whole NT or Bible is available rather than something to be actively

encouraged along the way.¹ As a result, there might be a disconnect between the work of the translators in the translation office and the everyday use of the Scriptures in the churches.

7. Other translators see the need for ongoing Scripture engagement but **do not feel gifted or equipped** in this area themselves. With all their other work pressures, they find it hard to make the needed connections with the churches and other organisations and long for others to join the team who can concentrate more on this side of the ministry.
8. It could be that **administrators and consultants** in the local Bible translation organisation haven't been putting much emphasis on the value of getting Scripture available and used by the people soon after it has been translated. Sometimes they are constrained by organisational priorities at a higher level or by limitations set by donors.
9. In some cases the translation project is a **partnership** between several organisations: the role of the translation team might be to provide the **raw text** and it is for their partner organisations to publish it. There might be a bottleneck in getting the Scriptures available for use by the people if partners are facing personnel or funding crises.
10. There may not be many **readers**, not much **literacy** happening, and not much of a focus on audio as a primary means of providing Scripture access. Because of this, there would seem to be little incentive to publish a lot of Scripture along the way. Translation work continues with the hope that one day there will be readers to make use of it.
11. There might be outstanding **orthography issues** to resolve, so the team is reluctant to publish much before there is agreement on how the language is written.

How can translators get the food to the people more quickly?

Having identified some of the reasons for 'keeping the food in the freezer', now let's consider ways of overcoming these barriers. What could translation teams and Scripture Engagement workers do to reduce the time from translation desk to Scripture engagement? Here are a few suggestions:

1. Cultivate an ongoing **Scripture engagement focus** within the Bible translation organisation and language teams, so that everything is done with the impact of the Scriptures in mind: not just for the end of the project, but as much as possible along the way.
2. Involve church and mission leaders in **strong local partnerships** so that the translation teams are not working in isolation but see the translation work integrated within the life and ministry of the church. Ensure church leaders have a key part to play in deciding the order of Bible books to translate and how they will be published and put to use.

¹ This is perhaps more of a tendency in specialist Bible translation organisations. It is less likely to be the case when the work of the translators is tightly bound together with evangelism and discipleship as part of a church-planting ministry.

3. Develop **programme plans** that allow for print and audio publication of Bible portions on a regular basis during the life of each translation project.

Examples:

- Translation team A is working on the book of Genesis. After completing the translation of Genesis 1-11, they produce a set of 6 radio programmes based on these chapters which are then broadcast on local FM radio stations. Then after translating Genesis 12-23, they produce another 6 programmes. The same happens after translating Genesis 24-36 and Genesis 37-50. They then publish a printed booklet containing the whole of Genesis.
- Translation team B has just completed translating the book of Luke. They then work on adapting the translation for dubbing the JESUS film (both visual and audio version) which is used by churches and missions around the region.
- Translation team C has finished the letter to the Romans. With the help of local musicians, they organise a song-writing workshop where participants compose 10 songs with lyrics coming directly from the newly translated Scripture. These songs are then distributed by MP3 files on telephones and on the radio, together with the audio narration of the book of Romans.
- Translation team D is finalising the gospel of John for publication. A local pastor writes a Bible study guide with a set of questions for each chapter.
- Translation team E has 1 Corinthians ready for publication. They print out 50 copies, one for each of the 50 churches in their region. They also record the text for distribution on solar-powered audio players which are being used by listening groups. Pastor Y agrees to preach from 1 Corinthians on his weekly local-language radio programme using the newly translated Scriptures.

4. Include **funds** for regular Scripture publication and Scripture engagement promotion, but be ready with **creative strategies** to make Scripture available even if funds are limited.

Examples:

- If funds for printing are limited, print one copy per church, giving limited permission for the churches to make photocopies if they need more.
- Make the booklets available in electronic format (e.g. PDF documents) that churches and missions can print out. These could be emailed to the relevant people or made available for download via a website.
- If doing a multi-voice dramatised audio recording with sound effects and music would not be feasible for each book as it becomes available, find the person who reads with the best expression and do a single voice recording. A full multi-voice

recording could be done in the future.² These audio files could be made available free of charge for radio, telephone distribution and audio players.

5. Provide **training** for all translation teams in desktop publishing and basic Scripture recording. The more complicated this is, the less likely it will be put into practice, so devise methods that will be as straightforward as possible to follow. Current software advances are making this easier than ever. Provide user-friendly “How To” guides and videos that translators can use to take them through the steps of text to formatted booklet and text to audio file, remembering that this will be a process they use perhaps only two or three times a year and so might forget after a training workshop.
6. **Translation teams** with several members should **work out the responsibility of each** when it comes to the publication of Scripture portions and promoting Scripture engagement. It might be that one person is more technically-gifted and best able at producing the printed booklets and editing audio files. Another might be better at communication and public speaking. Another might feel more at ease getting on their motorbike and travelling to visit lots of church leaders with news of the translation.
7. Investigate possibilities of **outsourcing** aspects of the print and audio publication. Are there local Christian ministries or partner organisations who could take this on, e.g. a local Christian media organisation?
8. If there are outstanding **orthography issues** which would prevent formal print publications on a large scale, consider audio distribution as a priority (MP3 files for telephone, radio, audio players, etc.) and limited print-runs with the tentative orthography (clearly marked as such).
9. **Communicate** on a regular basis with churches and mission partners so that as many people as possible know what Scripture is already available, what portions are being translated now, and what will be translated in the coming year. This could take the form of newsletters, email updates or announcements in church or on the radio, e.g. “Please pray for the translators who are nearing the end of the work on the book of Genesis. We hope that this will be available in April next year in time for the children’s Sunday school to begin their series on the life of Abraham.”
10. **Share news and ideas** of what’s happening in other languages. When team A sees the impact of what team B has been doing to facilitate Scripture availability and engagement, they are often more motivated and encouraged to try something themselves.
11. One of the best ways of reducing the time from translation desk to Scripture engagement is to have **additional team members, partners or volunteers** whose role is just that: taking the raw text from the translators and getting it out to the people, promoting and facilitating Scripture engagement along the way.

² Note that for some people groups, a high quality audio product will be a priority to encourage engagement with the Scriptures and that shortcuts taken might lead to fewer listeners if the audio is perceived as not ‘engageable’ enough.

Conclusion

Bible translators have the privilege of expressing the living word of God in the language people best understand. It is the spiritual food we cannot live without (Matthew 4:4), it refreshes the soul, makes wise the simple, brings joy to the heart, gives insight for living, is more precious than gold and sweeter than honey (Psalm 19:7-10). Without it we are left hungry and malnourished, starved of the truth that points us to Jesus. So if the people are hungry and the food is ready, let's not put it into the freezer and tell people to come back later. Let's find creative ways of getting the translated Scriptures out there, readily available as soon as possible so people can engage with the Bible and encounter God in life-changing ways.

This document is available for download at: <http://www.scripture-engagement.org>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the author and not necessarily those of the Forum of Bible Agencies International or its member organizations.