

Engaging African Multilingualism with Scripture

John L. Ommani, 2021

Introduction

Multilingualism in Africa is a pervasive phenomenon that requires attention and a missiological response. A modern average Kenyan is fluent in at least two languages. How does this impact our ministry in Bible translation?

Many people can speak their heritage language but are not fluent readers of it. They do not identify with any one language as a single heart language. So how do we minister in such a context?

Ministry context for language development organizations

SIL, like many other organizations that strive to develop unwritten or undocumented languages, traditionally focused on local languages where the local language was seen metaphorically as the “language of the heart.” This was seen as the most effective language for communicating deeply as well as for learning new concepts. How well does this “language of the heart” metaphor capture reality for people today in an increasingly globalizing, urbanizing, migrating world where life is experienced through a mosaic of different languages?

This was the challenge set before the organizers of the Multilingualism, Urbanization and Scripture Engagement (MUSE) Conference. Representatives from SIL’s work on six continents converged in Bangkok, Thailand, to explore what it means to engage with multilingual contexts.

Imagine growing up in an environment of multiple languages, then you are certainly told you have one heart language. Which one is it? When I went to school in the 1970s, it was forbidden and punishable by caning if I was found speaking local language within the school premises. We were drilled to think logically in English and Kiswahili. The local language was reserved for casual issues and playing with other boys back in the village. At church, songs and announcements were in the local language because they were casual issues. Prayers and the sermon were in Kiswahili because talking to God and hearing from him was a serious matter of life and death. How easy is it for me now to shift and do the opposite? I have tried, but I must confess it is not easy.

Perspectives on Multilingualism¹

Multilingualism can be viewed from individual and societal perspectives. On the individual level, it refers to the ability to speak multiple languages. On a societal level, it refers to the coexistence of several languages in a given context, typically used in a patterned way. All situations are not alike, as degrees and characteristics of multilingualism vary among individuals and communities.

Many missionaries, educators, church workers, policy makers and others tend to ignore multilingualism. When acknowledged, it can be treated as either an annoyance or a problem to be overcome. For the above group, the general approach is “use a language of wider communication wherever possible”, even when it stretches the limits of comprehension. Bible translators, Scripture engagement workers and others interested in life transformation are more likely to take an opposite approach: “Use the local language wherever possible”, even if it stretches established patterns of language use.

These different approaches stem from underlying beliefs we have about language, and we encounter them in everyday life. Languages are more than utilitarian “containers” and “codes” for capturing concepts and conveying information. Rather they are the primary means of thinking about our world and creatively expressing ourselves. They shape our understanding, making it possible to think critically and progressively.

Languages also serve simultaneously as markers of identity, and thus somehow intrinsically form part of who we are. Languages are not barriers to be overcome but treasures to be employed for people’s enjoyment. For multilingual speakers, it is not possible to identify a single language for a given context that will allow for the greatest emotive and cognitive impact, while others can only be expected to communicate on a more surface level in a way less likely to result in changes of behaviour, resolve or identity. It is not always possible to count or distinguish between individual languages as we would marbles. The complexity of human communication is greater and more integrated than the naming of individual languages suggests.

To encourage meaningful interaction with the life-changing Word of God, how do individual and community repertoires of multiple languages fit into the multilingualism picture? Have we been missing something in our traditional understanding of “language of the heart”? What issues are we trying to capture when we refer to “language of the heart”? Is it reasonable to think that people will always best engage with Scripture in only one language variety?

Should we be thinking of multiple languages as multiple resources for individuals and communities to engage with Scripture? How do we think more rightly about “minority language communities experiencing transformation flowing from God’s Word into the Church and society through their languages?”

¹ This section borrows heavily from “What is multilingualism (and why does it matter)?” a two-page “discussion starter” used by the MUSE Task Force, originally drafted by Steve Quakenbush.

Assumptions about Language²

Human beings carry with them many assumptions in almost every context of life. Assumptions about language include:

1. Heart language is always the traditional language, often equivalent to the name of the ethnic group of the people.
2. Heart language is always the L1 (first language).
3. Heart language is always the 'mother-tongue'.
4. Heart language is always one's preferred language.
5. Heart language is typically associated with the low functions of language.
6. Heart language is always the one preferred for literacy or written Scripture.
7. Heart language is always singular.
8. Heart language is always related to our identity in a "one language = one identity" type of relationship.

Factors that determine the language of choice

The above assumptions as seen by cognitive schemas, operate to affect the language speakers' responses and behaviours. Their pattern of thought and behaviour draw from organised categories of stored information and the relationship for which the information is most important and relevant for.

1. **Communication:** Most multilingual speakers find themselves living and dealing with people from other speech communities.
2. **Social-Cultural Factors:** Language defines people without forcing anyone to say what ethnic group they belong to.
3. **Economic factors:** People need to be able to operate in the marketplace.
4. **Political factors:** Politics often affects how people view social life and relations in the community.
5. **Practical Factors:** These are very many, including lack of reading materials.
6. **Leadership factors:** Leaders influence people to act, respond, relate, and view things in a certain way.
7. **Institutional factors:** Structures through which people learn and use language.
8. **Religious and denominational Factors:** Who are the sponsors and what do they want?
9. **Proficiency factor:** Am I able to read?
10. **Preference factor:** What do I prefer?
11. **Indeterminate language state:** Language choice is a very emotive issue.

² This section builds on "A Summary of MUSE Learnings" by Steve Quakenbush.

12. **Policy factors:** Is there policy concerning language use?

Multilingualism from a missiological perspective

What is the most important thing for us in ministry as we seek to reach communities? Is it the language we use, or is it transformation as a result of communicating the truth in an understandable media and form? Our response to this question will determine how we manoeuvre within the unfolding scenario of multilingualism in our various contexts.



STAGES OF SOCIAL TRANSFORMATION

(Adapted from Plueddemann 2009, 191)

We have to think missionally to for us to respond rationally. Language is a tool available for contributing to transformation. We can use each language for the glory of God. In this light, a missional church will see multilingualism as a God-given opportunity to implement strategies for the mission of God. Various approaches should be considered to help people understand and use Scriptures effectively.

Lessons learned and steps to take

Here are some lessons learned about Scripture engagement in multilingual settings and steps that can be taken to encourage Scripture use in multilingual contexts:

1. People engage with the Bible in different languages in different situations. They might choose to use a use a different language for their personal or family devotions from what they use at church.
2. Small groups provide the opportunity for SE in languages other than those used during the main church service. Bible study groups can be formed based on speech communities.

3. For many people, changing their current 'choice' of language or Bible version can help facilitate transformational Scripture engagement. It might be that they will understand the Scriptures much better in using the Bible in a different language or translation.
4. Leaders need to consider seriously how to encourage people to engage with God's Word in the language(s) they understand best. Sometimes leaders have not taken the time to reflect on this, and they should be encouraged to think through the implications of multilingualism for the people in their congregation.
5. These topics need to be covered in Bible colleges and theological seminaries.
6. We can play a part in facilitating training for church interpreters.
7. It can be helpful for churches to establish language policies, setting out what to do regarding language use in different church contexts. For example, if almost everyone in a church speaks the local language but one or two individuals do not, what would be a good policy for language use during the main church service?
8. Audio Scriptures in local languages are often very much appreciated in multilingual contexts. They can be used individually, in families, and on local radio stations, even when a language of wider communication is used for church services.
9. Today's technology makes it easier to provide the Scriptures in multilingual formats, for example Bible apps with two or more languages, where both can be viewed on the screen at the same time.
10. There is a need to significantly improve marketing and distribution of all the available Bible translations in multilingual towns.
11. Churches could elevate the status of minority language for worship and church services.
12. Churches in towns are not always aware that there are still people waiting for translated Scriptures they can understand.
13. We must not forget that the situation will keep changing.

Conclusion

Language plays a fundamental role in shaping identity and culture. We are increasingly realizing that in multilingual societies, negotiation of identity can be even more complex. Dealing with complexity can be difficult, but — starting with global consultations, research initiatives and conferences like MUSE — SIL is enthusiastically facing the challenges. We therefore need stay focused on our core task involving the development of minority language resources, but also consider ways to help people benefit fully from the various languages God has allowed them to acquire.

*John Ommani is a Scripture Engagement consultant, based in Nairobi, Kenya.
He is also Global Scripture Access Services Director for SIL International.*

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