

Missiological aspects of voice transformation

David Nuagh, 2022

Abstract

In this digital age, it is easy to alter or even digitally recreate the sound of a voice actor. This article explores the missiological implications of doing voice transformation, and provides some practical pointers. It is best read before recording starts.

Voice acting introduces personality

Printed Scripture will carry the stamp of the translator to some extent. However, almost all first translations into a language will have gone through consultant checking and group review to ensure, amongst other things, a level of consistency and elimination of personal bias. Oral Scripture inevitably has the stamp of the voice actor(s). The Scripture Engagement world has developed ways of checking and reviewing this but we are some way from generally agreed standards and processes. The situation I would like to consider here is where the personality of the voice is perceived as needing to be hidden.

The main presenting reason is that the voice actor is fearful of persecution of themselves or their loved ones should their voice be recognised. In general terms this is a legitimate fear. Even believers who live in countries that currently do not experience persecution report that their relatives have negative experiences simply because their overseas relatives have expressed faith in Jesus Christ.

I personally believe that I should be willing to put myself in danger for the cause of Jesus Christ. I also recognise that many others have found themselves in real danger through no choosing of their own. I also believe that it is not our job to ask others to put themselves in danger for the gospel. Many are already traumatised enough. We need to respect choice in this regard. If a voice actor says, "No need to alter my voice. I am not afraid", then I respect that choice. If a voice actor expresses fear and asks for alteration then we also need to respect that choice.

Adequate planning is essential

In terms of project planning it is good to know the above things as soon as possible.

If we know before translation that the end product will be recorded, this can have an effect on the text. A translation consultant should be aware of this when helping a project. My first experience of recording Scripture was in a language of West Asia. The translator was also the recordist, and the text had already been consultant-checked. Every now and again, she would stop the recording and make a slight alteration to the pronunciation. This had to be corrected in the final text even though it had been finalised. I found out that at no point had anyone asked her to read the text out loud. It wasn't until this happened consciously that she realised that there were certain elements that needed to be changed. As she was the translator I felt confident to allow her to make the changes. If it had been a voice actor who was expressing their opinion then I would have had to pause the recording, make notes and pass them back to the translation team, which would have been time consuming and unnecessary.

Crucially we need to know if voice alteration is going to happen before finalising who is doing the recording and how it is going to be made.

Why the industry is unlikely to develop alteration software

I have had a look online to see if there are voice DISGUISE software options. I knew of one about 10 years ago but didn't keep a record of it as it was expensive. As far as I know it no longer seems to be available. Software that is available now focuses on voice alteration with effects which sound unnatural. This achieves the objective of disguise but is obviously not suitable for Scripture narration.

Ethical aspects of creating voice from old recordings

The 21st century is the era of deepfakes. For example, if you have an extended sample of voice recording from a public figure, you can use AI software to manipulate the recorded data to make other realistic-sounding speeches. This has serious implications in the legal world when asking if a voice recording could be used as evidence. Any recording used as evidence can now be challenged as to its authenticity. You may think you have heard someone express a controversial opinion, but unless you saw it live you may be easily misled.

Please note this is a different scenario from creating a generic voice recording from text. This makes sense when creating instructional videos, for example. However, it only works with major languages supported by the software you purchased.

What implications does this have for the missions community? As for myself, it makes me feel uneasy. However, in one situation the voice actor had passed away. I heard someone ask if in this case their existing recordings could be used to reconstruct Scripture narration. Surely this could be a solution?

My first uneasiness is **theological**. The message is not divorced from the messenger. God did not only send us a message, He sent us Jesus, a Person who lived (literally 'tabernacled' according to John 1) among us. We do not just read facts about Him in the Bible, but we

receive His Spirit in our hearts. So there should be a genuineness about voice recordings in my opinion. Maybe we can say of the voice actor who passed away, “that’s what they would have wanted”. Let us be sure that is the case before we go too far down this road.

Secondly, there is the question of **provenance**. Who made this recording? Is it an attempt by the West to influence us? This is especially important in parts of the world that follow a related majority religion. It is a common belief that the Gospel was inspired by God but the version that Christians have now has been corrupted over the years. This is one reason why people in such contexts are often reticent about engaging with Scripture. I don’t think it is going to help at all if the voice that is reading Scripture is not genuine and is a software reconstruction of old recordings. In this tradition, great emphasis is often placed on beautiful recitation, and if we are to make it easy for people to engage with Scripture I think it helps if it is genuine and beautiful. A deepfake is not going to achieve this.

Thirdly, the process has **associations** with deception and criminality. That doesn’t mean it cannot be used for good but in my opinion it should be used with great caution. I would suggest taking a step back for a while and look at the recording challenge in the context of a wider Scripture Engagement and mission plan.

Reverse engineering and how to avoid it

Often voice actors ask for their voice to be altered, unaware that any changes made can be reversed. Reverse engineering is simply doing in reverse the alteration that was originally done. The most simple example is this: if the recording was lowered one tone and then released then a third party could simply download or rerecord from an audio stream, load the result into an audio editor such as Audacity or Reaper and raise the recording one tone. They would then have something very similar to the original actor’s voice. This is quite easy for a hostile person to do with a laptop and free software. They would find it harder to do if a digital effect had been added such as chorus, reverb, or formant adjustments. However, these adjustments lead to an unnatural sound which in my opinion is never what people want. (Except in cases of recording voices of supernatural beings e.g. angels, Satan - sometimes people like to add effects. This might not always be desirable, but that is a different discussion.)

If you plan ahead (please do!) then you can ask a voice actor to ‘put on’ a voice. They can speak with a different accent or character to their normal voice. If the voice actor is professional they should be able to do this. It needs to be a genuine voice rather than something odd of course. With untrained voice actors this is not an ability that comes naturally. However, if the voice actor can disguise their voice in this way, a basic effect such as tone lowering can be added that forms a double layer of protection.

Is something better than nothing in terms of actor ability?

In the past I have used voice actors who were not very good but available (usually the translator). Sometimes I have been able to coach them to improve a little. This is not ideal but it might be better to have the Scripture read in a rather uninspiring monotone than not read at all, especially in contexts where printed Scripture is unlikely to find an audience. After all, written Scripture often does not contain many indications as to the emotion behind a text. Often the context can give hints as to how to portray the voice. For example in Matthew 2.7, Herod appears to tell the Magi that he would also like to worship Jesus. Context tells us he is lying and a good voice actor would be able to communicate this well.

Conclusion

The need to modify a voice for recording of Scripture is fraught with technical and missiological challenges. Adequate planning can help to ensure that these challenges can be avoided.

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