

Layers of Languages: Revising perceptions of language use in Indonesia and beyond

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There's an Indonesian idiom that says, *seperti katak di bawah tempurung*, 'like a frog under a coconut shell'. One doesn't get a very wide view of the world living under a coconut shell. I would like to help the Bible translation movement jump out from under the coconut shell regarding the country of Indonesia, and there are implications for the wider world. Briefly,

We have a world-view narrowness problem.

We have an information problem.

The elephant in the room doesn't feel comfortable wearing one-size-fits-all clothes.

We have a world-view narrowness problem:

As a Bible translator and amateur linguist who has worked in Indonesia for over 30 years, I am embarrassed to show how long it has taken me to recognize our proverbial 'elephant'. Working in a little corner of Indonesia and primarily with one ethnic group for 25 years, didn't help me to see the larger picture about ethnic languages in this nation.²

Part of my slowness is because Americans are not well aware that there are different types of bilingualism. In particular, we do not expect that a person could be more fluent in their second-learned language than in their first-learned ethnic language, or that a person could have more than one 'mother tongue'. We have difficulty understanding a country where multi-lingualism is the norm, not the exception. We cross-cultural workers coming to Indonesia often fail to recognize how very different our adult-learned bilingualism is from the multi-lingualism possessed by our Indonesian friends. We have difficulty grasping that people in this country actively switch with ease between at least three 'language layers'— and I will explain what I mean by that throughout this paper. Right now, let's examine some of our 'under the coconut shell' assumptions.

¹ Gale and I joined Wycliffe Bible Translators in 1980. Our first translation project was for the Orya people of Papua, Indonesia. The Orya New Testament was published in 2005. That same year we started our second translation project, which eventually was named the Plain Indonesian Translation (Terjemahan Sederhana Indonesia). We joined Pioneer Bible Translators in 2009, and the TSI New Testament was published in 2014. In order to be able to publish the TSI, the Lord led us to establish a non-profit organization called Yayasan Alkitab BahasaKita. The name means 'the OurLanguage Bible Organization', and our web site is <http://albata.info>.

² Indonesia has 720 ethnic languages. Around 450 ethnic groups have no access to Scripture in their ethnic language. This number includes groups who at one time had Bibles or New Testaments, but now those translations are way overdue for revision. The 450 also includes languages that are threatened, moribund, or nearly extinct. My guess is that 50 isolated groups still have significant numbers who do not speak Indonesian beyond the basic greeting level. Those are the smallest and most isolated people groups, with populations as high as 2500 and as few as 200.

Under the coconut shell Assumptions ³	Getting out from under the coconut shell
The mother tongue is a full language, complete with religious terminology and ways to talk about other abstract topics.	All ethnic languages were full and robust in the past— before government entities, education, various companies, and the modern world came crashing in upon the ethnic societies. Nowadays it is common for younger Indonesians to only control everyday topics in their ethnic language. They still count themselves as native speakers, but watch what happens if the topic of conversation shifts to something more abstract— like economic ties between Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia. They either switch to Indonesian or make heavy use of borrowing from it.
The ethnic language is a speaker's 'mother tongue'— meaning their best-controlled language and their 'heart language'.	Indonesians don't have a term that literally corresponds to 'mother tongue'. The two terms they use are 'regional language/bahasa daerah' and 'clan language/bahasa suku'. Many of Indonesia's younger generation are clueless in explaining religious concepts in what we might call 'mom's ethnic language'. When they were growing up, that language was already not the default choice for the religious domain. The national language has total dominance of print and electronic media, and is the language which runs the culture, in arts, in government, in education, and in worship for all religions.⁴ No wonder that most of the people talk about spiritual concepts better in Indonesian.
Ethnic mother tongue speakers will welcome the addition of new religious vocabulary, and be happy to switch to using that language for church meetings, Bible reading, and prayer.	If Indonesians already are believers who worship in a church, read their Bible, and pray in Indonesian, it can take significant effort to develop their ethnic language in those areas. Plus, their church will likely not be 100% speakers of their ethnic language. Use of that tongue in church meetings would then exclude some in the body from understanding. It has become the firm cultural norm that formal

³ In my generalizations about Americans, I am talking about the average 'man on the street'. This might be a Christian who prays for Indonesian Bible-less groups using Joshua Project, but has never visited Indonesia. In my generalizations about bilingualism among ethnic language groups, I am including any group having had access to public education for 20 years. Exceptions to my generalizations are the more remote tribes.

⁴ Some religions in Indonesia make use of a foreign language for ritual, e.g., Arabic in Islam, Sanskrit or Pali in Buddhism.

	Indonesian is spoken in Sunday worship services. If we Westerners working in Indonesia are sensitive at all to our host culture, then we need to come to grips with the fact that our hosts are not going to change on this point. Indonesians generally see their ethnic language as part of their roots. Yet it is treated like an old shoe. They like it. It's comfortable around the house. But it is not something one wants to develop.
The national language is separate and distinct from the ethnic language.	Most of the ethnic languages of western and central Indonesia belong to the Western Malayo-Polynesian branch of the Austronesian language family, and thus share a significant number of cognates and some common features with Indonesian. The situation in eastern Indonesia is more diverse, as the ethnic languages are either Central-Eastern Malayo-Polynesian or non-Austronesian. In all the coastal areas of eastern Indonesia and wherever there are roads leading from the coast, ethnic groups have used localized Malay languages for generations, and a significant number of Malay loan words have entered ethnic languages.⁵ My main point in this heavy linguistic description is that ethnic languages have not been kept separate from the national language, and a large percentage of ethnic tongues are part of the same language family as the national language. <u>Most Indonesian people have at least three language 'layers':</u> The <u>lowest layer</u> is their home-village vernacular. (Many people have more than one language in this layer.) The <u>middle layer</u> is colloquial Indonesian, used for informal talk between people from different ethnic groups. And the <u>highest level</u> is formal Indonesian. This means that there is not the simple ethnic tongue/national language dichotomy that many Westerners assume.⁶

⁵ I thank Michael Martens for his help with the information in this paragraph.

⁶ For more information about the colloquial Indonesian, see my article on [Papuan Colloquial Indonesian](#). It is my belief that Western organizations planning for Bible translation have consistently overlooked the impact of the colloquial/mesolectal layer.

People are not bilingual at an early age.	Nowadays, from the time they start speaking, most Indonesians are multilingual as described above. The relative grasp of ethnic language versus colloquial Indonesian will vary widely. But the point is, the great majority are at least bilingual and often trilingual at an early age. Wherever there is multi-lingualism among the adults, the children will have adults speaking to them in colloquial Indonesian, and it is often the language of play. Before formal education starts, children are introduced to the formal Indonesian through programs for kids on TV. ⁷
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I find it interesting that many Americans who have lived in Indonesia long enough to learn everything in the right column often still think and act as if the left column were true. Please read on.

We have an information problem:

How many of us have realized that the Ethnologue and the Joshua Project contain seriously out-of-date information for Indonesia? We can't effectively pray for, or plan for Bible translation work if we don't start out with accurate information. Frog, meet elephant.

My first evidence about this information problem is Dr. Uli Kozok's March 2012 blog post, which I submit in full— with bold face emphasis added by me. Dr. Kozok is the head of the Indonesian Language Department at the University of Hawai'i.

[How many people speak Indonesian?](#)

According to [Ethnologue](#), Indonesian is a relatively small language of only 23 million speakers whereas Malay is said to have 39 million speakers. Wikipedia, which relies on the data provided by Ethnologue, cautions us that “the definition of a single language is to some extent arbitrary”. For this reason, “some mutually intelligible idioms with separate national standards or self-identification have been listed together, including Hindi-Urdu; [and] Indonesian and Malay”.

As Malay is the national language of Indonesia, Malaysia, and Brunei-Darussalam, it is spoken by a large number of people who on a day-to-day basis speak local languages. Some of the regional languages are huge. Javanese, for instance, has 85 million native speakers, and is the 12th most widely spoken language in the world. Madurese and Sundanese, the two other language spoken on the island of Java, add another 48 million people. Other regional languages (bahasa daerah) of Indonesia, aren't small either, Minangkabau, Balinese, Musi, Banjarese, Acehnese, Batawi, Sasak, Toba, Mandailing, and Makassarese are some more languages having between 1 and 6 million speakers.

Virtually all speakers of regional languages do also speak Indonesian. In many cases, they speak it more frequently, and often also better than their native tongue, as Indonesian is the preferred language of inter-ethnic communication. More than 90% of

⁷ For more information about the colloquial Indonesian, see my article on [Papuan Colloquial Indonesian](#). It is my belief that Western organizations planning for Bible translation have consistently overlooked the impact of the colloquial/mesolectal layer.

speakers of regional languages are literate. When they write, they will almost exclusively write in Indonesian, and the literature they read is entirely in Indonesian. The last newspaper in Javanese language was published about 75 years ago. The regional languages have also been heavily influenced by Indonesian, mainly in lexicon, but often also in phonology, morphology, and syntax.

As Indonesian is the sole language of instruction in Indonesia (besides a small number of so-called “international” schools where – mostly broken – English is used as the medium of instruction), and as schooling is compulsory and enforced, all Indonesians have to learn Indonesian at the latest by the age of seven. **When we ask Indonesians who grew up speaking mainly their mother tongue in the first years of their lives before they picked up the national language in school whether they consider themselves “native speakers” of Indonesian, the answer is almost always a clear “yes”.**

But the scenario as described above, is becoming increasingly rare. Most Indonesians nowadays grow up in a bilingual setting, and are from infant age on exposed to at least some Indonesian before they attend primary school. Code-switching is becoming the norm, not only for adults, but also for children.

The term “native speaker” has, like the term “mother tongue” many different definitions. As Pokorn (2005:6) has observed “The concept of “native speaker” is defined according to different criteria, and [...] there is no objective definition of the concept which would cover all potential native speakers and not even the majority of them.” **According to any of the definitions presented by Pokorn, the assumption according to which there are only 37 million “native speakers” of Malay-Indonesian is untenable.**

“A first language (also native language, mother tongue, arterial language, or L1) is the language(s) a person has learned from birth or within the critical period, or that a person speaks the best and so is often the basis for sociolinguistic identity. ” (Wikipedia)

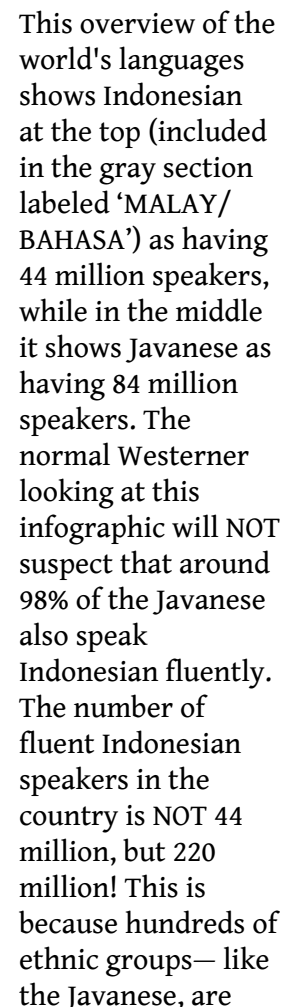
Indonesian-Malay is spoken predominantly in Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. The population of Indonesia is 237 million; Malaysia’s population is 27.5 million, and that of Brunei is 0.4 million. Another 3 million native speakers live in the southernmost province of Thailand, and the number of native speakers in Singapore exceeds 500,000. These are 268 million people who are either native speakers, or who, with very few exceptions, have learned Indonesian-Malay at school and are –more or less– “native speakers”. **It is either close to impossible (in Indonesia), or very hard (in Malaysia) to find an adult who is unable to speak Indonesian or Malay. The literacy rate of both countries is 92%. In Indonesia, all literates automatically speak Indonesian, and the percentage of adult speakers of Indonesian is approximately 95-97%.** In Malaysia, the number is lower as some older Chinese Malaysians are not very fluent in Malay. As a comparison, 96% of US Americans speak English. Those few people [in Indonesia] who do not speak Indonesian tend to live in the countryside of the island of Java. In other words, wherever you travel, you will most likely never encounter someone who does not speak Indonesian!

Even if we are very conservative and consider only two third of Malaysians and 85% of Indonesians as fluent speakers (either native, or near-native), there are still more than 215 million speakers of Malay-Indonesian. After Chinese (1300 million), English (508 million), Spanish (417 million), Arabic (280 million) and Russian (277 Million), Malay-Indonesian is the sixth most frequently spoken language in the world (the numbers above include second-language speakers).

Published on 10 March 2012 by Dr. Uli Kozok, University of Hawai’i at Manoa

This very recently published [infographic](#) graphically shows our information problem:

There are at least 7,102 known languages alive in the world today. Twenty-three of these languages are a mother tongue for more than 50 million people. The 23 languages make up the native tongue of 4.1 billion people. We represent each language within black borders and then provide the numbers of native speakers (in millions) by country. The colour of these countries shows how languages have taken root in many different regions



overwhelmingly multilingual.

I wrote the rough draft of this article while visiting Indonesia in November 2015. It happens that I spent three days in Salatiga, Central Java. I took the opportunity to survey the attitudes of 75 Christians from this city which is in the heart of the Javanese region.

Questions	55 rural Javanese pastors and friends	20 active church members in the city of Salatiga
At night when you pray before going to sleep, do you pray in Javanese or Indonesian?	15% use Javanese 85% use Indonesian	5% (one man) said he 'sometimes' uses Javanese. 95% use Indonesian
If your mother was Javanese, do you control Javanese equally as well as your mother does/did, or less well than your mother?	Only 30% claimed to know Javanese as well as their mother.	No one claimed to know Javanese as well as their mother does/did.
Compared with your generation, does the younger generation have less control of the Javanese language?	Laughter, and 100% agreement that the younger generation has less control of Javanese.	Same response. 100% agree that the younger generation has less control of Javanese.
Before entering 1st grade, do the children here know a lot of words in Indonesian? (meaning, informal language among friends)	40% said Yes.	100% said Yes.
If your child could only learn one language to live in the modern world, would you as their parent choose that the language be Javanese, Indonesian, or English?	1 man said Javanese. 30% said Indonesian. 50% said English, And 20% didn't vote.	Laughter again. The same man above said Indonesian. All the rest (95%) said English.

A typical Joshua Project prayer warrior looking at the infographic above would never imagine a language situation for Javanese like revealed in this informal survey. And what is true about Javanese is the case for hundreds of language groups— many of which are listed as Bible translation needs.

There was one more question from the informal survey I made.

	55 rural Javanese pastors and friends	20 active church members in the city of Salatiga
Would you like the Javanese Bible to be revised so that it	More laughter. 95% said Yes.	More laughter. 100% said Yes.

would be easier to understand?		
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The revised Javanese Bible was published in 1994, but none of the people I spoke with use it— and that includes the pastors. They explained to me that the translation was done using the high register of their language. Often there was a sad little shake of the head when telling me about the high register. Javanese has three registers, and they no longer use or understand the high/formal one. In effect, formal Indonesian has replaced formal Javanese as their default language for spiritual things— even (as seen above) for private prayers. Of course, everyone says that they would like to have a more understandable Javanese Bible translation. But if somebody actually made such a translation using mid-register Javanese, many would object that it would make sacred things sound too common, and references to God would become too familiar, or even impolite. If such a translation were made— as one of my Indonesian team members said, it would occupy a special place in a glass cabinet in their front rooms, but would not become the Bible they would use for serious study, and would seldom be used in their churches.⁸ Please note this important point: Most Javanese Christians are not willing to expend the effort it would take to learn religious vocabulary that would allow them to use their Javanese Bibles or to pray in that language.

Among the 84+ million Javanese, there are many seminaries, and there are several areas like Salatiga where Catholics and Protestants make up half the population.⁹ This thirteenth largest language group in the world includes many who are highly educated and technologically savvy. Both of the churches described above have all the modern electronics that churches in the USA have. I made a wireless connection from my Android tablet to the LCD projector positioned in the ceiling of the church on the outskirts of town. They taught me how to do it. The Javanese are not forlorn natives waiting for missionary Bible translators to come to shine the light of God's Word upon them. Why haven't Javanese seminary teachers and pastors made another more-understandable Javanese translation? It is because they have chosen another of their mother tongues (plural) for the religious/spiritual domain.

My personal experiences with language shift in Indonesia:

When we started working with the 1,450 Orya people in 1984, almost all the younger men could speak colloquial Indonesian, and almost no one could speak formal Indonesian. Older people, and a majority of the women were hesitant to speak Indonesian. Church meetings among the Orya— usually led by outsiders and always conducted in formal Indonesian, were lifeless and sparsely attended. Schools were beginning to be established in the area, but often the teachers were not at their posts for months at a time. There were many households where no one could read.

Fast-forward just 21 years to 2005 and the dedication of the Orya New Testament. Much had changed. Isaak Puhili (Kartidaya) and I had conducted an active adult literacy program in all the villages, which ended around the year 2001. Better roads and infrastructure had resulted in government grade schools being in regular operation. During the 4-day dedication event, not just men— but also one group of younger Orya women, could read and fill out the Bible study worksheets we had made for the event. Many of the younger generation had become very proficient in formal Indonesian. Almost

⁸ There is a small, liturgical denomination that uses Javanese in their services, and I assume they use the 1994 revision of the Bible. I was told that their members are mainly older people.

⁹ The Ethnologue gives the wrong impression also about the religion of the Javanese— listing Christianity as the only religion. The Joshua Project gives much better figures regarding the religion of the various Javanese groups, but I did not find an overall summary bringing together everything that is named Javanese. Considering the whole 84 million, Christians are definitely NOT in the majority.

every household had someone who could read. Many people had become believers through our spiritual retreats— which Isaak and I sponsored two times each year from 2002 to 2005.

The Orya people— then numbering around 1,800, were excited to receive their New Testaments. But it quickly became apparent that the Orya NT would not be used in most church services. First, the pastors of some of their churches are not Orya speakers. Secondly, in a church where an Orya man is in leadership, if just one non-Orya speaker shows up, then the language of wider communication must be used. Not to do so would be impolite. This is especially so with the likelihood that the visitor will be of high status— such as a village health worker or a school teacher. This is just business as usual, since the Orya people have been hearing formal Indonesian in their church services since the 1950s.

Even if Orya New Testaments are gathering dust now, I don't feel like I wasted 21 years. Here are some of the great things that happened as an outgrowth of the Orya translation program:¹⁰

- ❖ The cargo cult that was based on the trading of wives was defeated. Shamanism and various ceremonies to ward off demons have all but disappeared.
- ❖ Men and women learned to pray in Orya. Now they also pray fluently in formal Indonesian.
- ❖ The Orya people are famous in the province for composing worship songs in their language, and this is continuing.
- ❖ The Orya women have an organized a network of ecumenical fellowship groups covering all Orya villages. That is unique in the region surrounding Jayapura.
- ❖ Instead of Isaak and I, now the young people in the village of Garusa are sponsoring evangelistic retreats. They work to raise the needed funds themselves, with the goal to share the Gospel in all Orya villages and even beyond.

I have told my story in the hope that it will form a backdrop for several points that are discussed later in this paper. For now, let me say this: Lasting spiritual fruit among the multilingual Bible-less tribes in Indonesia is more likely to come as a result of the day-to-day incarnational *translating* of God's Word in their midst, rather than from achieving the final goal of publishing a New Testament in their language.

Language layers in Indonesia:

The 'under the coconut shell' concept of mother tongue and national language can be compared to a table with two separate serving dishes on it. We might have a big plate of bread (the mother tongue and the first-learned language), and next to that we might have a little bowl of cold cheese soup (symbolizing a language learned later in life, and one not as well controlled as the first language). The two dishes are separate. In contrast, Indonesians make pizza. The crust is a person's ethnic language. If the group is like the Orya people in 1984, then the crust has raised up so that it is nice and thick, as it only has a thin layer of sauce on it. (Let this symbolize that the people can use the language for all domains— including the spiritual.) But along comes the broader culture to add toppings to our pizza. First comes a thick layer of cheese (informal colloquial Indonesian), then meat toppings on top of that (formal Indonesian). The second and third layers become increasingly heavy with each generation, and eventually they compress the crust until it is paper-thin (symbolizing that each generation controls fewer and fewer domains of the ethnic language). The making of this pizza is inevitable, because the toppings come by way of government policy, education, all media, and have everything to

¹⁰ In my statement above, I do not mean to imply that our translation program was the only spiritual change agent. Over the years, Orya believers visited churches in the tri-city Jayapura area, and several of those churches reciprocated by sending evangelistic teams to the Orya area. Several evangelical denominations planted churches there.

do with advancement and earning a better living. And now let's add a further sprinkling of parmesan cheese, because *everyone* wants to learn English!

So, when an ethnic group has a 3-4 layer language pizza, which one is the 'heart language'? I remember back in 1980 as we joined Wycliffe and SIL, in one of the meetings where they oriented us in how to write our prayer letters, it was suggested that using 'heart language' was a good way to describe our work. And by now all the readers of this article will have heard stories of how people wept when they first heard God's Word in their 'heart language'. But for several years now I have been looking to see if any follow-up information is shared about the people who wept. The story always stops at the first hearing. One is always left to imagine how precious the Word will become to such a group.

In that meeting with twenty Javanese mentioned before, my presentation included slides of these verses from the Sermon on the Mount in the Plain Indonesian Translation (TSI).

“People who know that they have spiritual needs are truly blessed by God,
for they are the ones who will become citizens of God's kingdom.

People who mourn now are truly blessed by God,
for they are the ones who will be comforted by Him.

People who are humble are truly blessed by God,
for they are the ones who will inherit the earth that God has promised.

People who are more eager to do what is right than to eat and drink are truly blessed by God,
for they are the ones who will be satisfied by God.

There were audible reactions from the people— sighs and 'wow's. I asked them to tell me their reactions, and one man said, “I don't have to think about it a lot. I understand it immediately.” You will now expect me to close this story by saying that the Word of God had a powerful effect in their 'heart language'. I only wish that their emotional response had resulted in them immediately snapping up the copies of the TSI New Testament that we had for sale that evening!

In a three layer language pizza, which is the 'heart language'? I have noticed that in public meetings where formal Indonesian is being used, if someone gets mad, they switch from the formal layer down to colloquial Indonesian. Formal Indonesian just seems too polite to say what is on the heart in those situations. And on the crust layer of the pizza, I used to worry when Orya parents would switch from Orya into colloquial Indonesian (or even lower into Papuan Malay) to yell at their children. I worried that this indicated something about the children's lack of understanding of Orya. But no! The mom yelling at her son was not only venting her anger at what the child had done, but was using the change of language like a slap in the face to say, “I no longer consider you a member of my family when you act like that!”

Friends, our use of the term 'heart language' shows how firmly entrenched we are in our naive 'under the coconut shell' assumptions! Notice that we never talk about one person having plural 'heart languages'. The world as a whole doesn't use the term 'heart language', as you can see if you do a Google search on it. But we fell in love with the term because it helps us spin our Bible translation message. What we truly want in Bible translation is understanding— and that understanding (plus emotional response) can happen in any language a person readily understands. In the multi-layer language pizza of hundreds of ethnic languages in Indonesia, people have plural mother tongues (because mom was multilingual) and so they have plural heart languages. People have one heart, and a message must be understood before it affects the heart. People respond from the heart to whatever languages they understand.

Adjusting our eyes to a new horizon:

Pioneer Bible Translators has a goal that the translated Word will result in growing groups of believers— groups gathered around the translated Word. This vision is unlikely to happen for 400 Bible-less groups in Indonesia, because they are already multilingual like the Orya and the Javanese. PBT's web site states, "We will consider our ministry among a people group complete when a network of churches is using Scripture to grow, mature and multiply." Anyone reading this in the context of PBT's web site would assume that 'network of churches using Scripture' is talking about the newly translated Scripture, not the national-language Bible that is already available. This is only one example of many ways in which Bible translation agencies are stating things in terms that are 'under the coconut shell'. Let's stop doing that starting today. For the sake of our prayer partners, supporters, and new missionary recruits, we must start stating things in a way that will help them understand the true multilingual situation.

Since the adoption of Vision 2025 in 1999-2000, nearly all Bible translation organizations have abandoned the old Other Tongue Translator model— of which my work among the Orya would be an example. The new default mode became translation coordinators supervising cluster projects using Mother Tongue Translators (MTTs). All of the 5-6 MTT cluster projects currently active in Indonesia are by definition targeting ethnic groups that are already bilingual in Indonesian. Their pizza is already in the oven, and the crust is already thin. The MTT employees will probably make good progress, and their friends will enjoy the thought of their home-village language being preserved. But if the goal of the project is that there will be groups of believers gathered around the new translation, forget it! It ain't gonna happen. Even if you pump up the pizza crust with a bicycle pump, it won't stay inflated. Our Western donors would not enthusiastically support such projects— if they knew that the resulting New Testaments were unlikely to be faithfully studied and appreciated as more than an artifact of the local culture.

The Bible-less groups that most need our attention in Indonesia are the very ones the main translation agencies are most neglecting— the groups for whom the MTT method will not work because no one can be found among them who has a good grasp of Indonesian. These groups are also neglected because they are small, and because of their extreme remote locations. But it is only those groups who will enjoy ethnic language Scripture for long enough to realize the vision of growing bodies of believers gathered around the newly translated Word.

A huge advantage of the old and purportedly more expensive OTT method is that the translator lived with the people for long enough to learn their language. There was time to live out a Christian witness in their midst. The long awaited time came when I stood before a crowd of sneering followers of the false prophet of the cargo cult. The false prophet himself was there and had gathered the people at my request. The shaman who worked with him was also there. The three believers who had hiked in with me had prayed with me about the confrontation that was about to happen, and I had called Gale by satellite phone to tell her to ask our closest friends to pray. I preached rebuking the 40 people gathered there based on Orya Matthew 24 and Romans 1. I told them that if they wanted to follow the Lord, they would have to leave that village dedicated to adultery. The next day, the village became a ghost town.

I have a point to make with this story, and my purpose is NOT to glorify me. What caused the mass change of heart that day? God powerfully answered prayer, and no one who knows me would give any of the credit to my ability as an orator. However my message was strengthened because I spoke from God's Word. Was it more powerful because I read from the Orya translation? Perhaps, but I bet the people would have responded to our Plain Indonesian Translation just as well. Again, not wanting to

praise myself but speaking justly, I think that a good part of the reason for the response was because it was me who hiked in there, and because I had been serving the people for 17 years. I am the only foreigner who could rebuke them using the Orya language. As it happened, my visa was based on doing community health work. I had taught health classes, prayed for innumerable sick people, and personally taken dozens of people (their relatives) to the hospital in town. By now the people knew that I did not lie to them. So they talked it over after I left. They said, “He’s right. In our hearts we really know that the things we have been doing are wrong. Let’s leave this place.”

During my November 2015 time in Papua, I met with Boas (my Orya co-translator) and his son, Mesak. I also was in Papua in February 2015 when Mesak graduated with a degree in Law. On his graduation day he quoted John 15:5 to me in Orya as part of giving glory to the Lord for his graduation. So when I met them in November I said, “It has now been ten years since the Orya NT was published. It is time to start thinking about revising it.” I hoped that Mesak would be willing to lead a committee to do the revisions. He wasn’t interested. So I asked him, “Have you read the whole Orya NT.” No, he has not. I ended up just asking him to pray about it. Sigh.

Boas can now send text messages to me right from his village. He even has a Facebook page. Statistica.com estimates that there are currently 70.6 million Facebook users in Indonesia. Note: That’s way more than the Ethnologue claims to be speakers of Indonesian!

The SIL-sponsored New Testaments that have been completed in the lowlands of Papua include Orya, Berik, Kemtuik, and Sentani. None of those translations have caused ‘networks of churches’ to form actively using those translations in worship. Lowlands areas have roads, and the people are much more likely to be multilingual. The Bauzi are much more isolated in the swampy Mamberamo area and much less multilingual. They are using their translation in their worship services— which are 100% led by members of their group. Similarly, if isolated groups in Papua’s highlands have Scripture, they are using it.

Don’t miss the good news in what has been happening! God is reversing what He did at the Tower of Babel!¹¹ We no longer need to spend years and money translating the New Testament for Bible-less multilingual groups before we can begin effectively sharing the Gospel. There is no longer a language barrier for most ethnic groups in this country to understand the Gospel. God knew that we wouldn’t come anywhere close to fulfilling the 2025 Vision in Indonesia. He has his own time schedule, and it has pleased Him to hurry things along. As He did repeatedly in Israel’s past, God is doing things we didn’t imagine, and this calls for new thinking on our part.

**The elephant in the room doesn’t feel comfortable wearing one-size-fits-all clothes.
Let’s adopt a more people-centered approach.**

Given the existence of Indonesia’s three-layered language pizza, then here are a few of the logical implications:

- ❖ The Ethnologue should be revised to say that— out of a population of 250 million in Indonesia alone,¹² a conservative estimate of 220 million now use Indonesian as their default language

¹¹ This doesn’t mean the ethnic languages are disappearing totally. Those wanting to do pure linguistic research in them will still be able to do so for many years. Normally, Indonesia’s ethnic languages that are used for informal home-village talk are stable and will remain robust enough for normal linguist study.

¹² It is not helpful that the Ethnologue has lumped formal Indonesian, formal Malaysian, and the two corresponding colloquial middle layers together. Malay and Indonesian are different enough to warrant being considered separately, and the difference in the government and culture also demand that these language be considered separately.

for spiritual things. As far as the Lord makes it possible, information about all other language groups in Indonesia should be updated to include their relative multi-lingualism with regional Malays, colloquial Indonesian, and formal Indonesian.¹³

- ❖ The efforts of Bible translation agencies working in Indonesia should give greater focus to the languages where Bible translation in the ethnic language is more likely to have a long-lasting impact. I estimate that there are **50 isolated ethnic groups in Indonesia that are not yet functionally bilingual in the national language**. Let's reverse our priorities! Let's not just wait for these groups to become bilingual.¹⁴
- ❖ Indonesia's **multilingual groups which are still Bible-less** cannot effectively be reached by a one-size-fits-all approach. These groups are so incredibly diverse in every way! I propose that we partner with Indonesian organizations to do Scripture Engagement activities (for which we will need to provide training) before starting an MTT translation project— allowing us sufficient time to test the receptivity of each unreached multilingual group to Scripture in their ethnic tongue. 'Sufficient time' does not mean overnight or one week, but long enough to give them an example of fully checked Scripture in their language. While living among them, let's not just test the group's receptivity to vernacular Scripture, but simultaneously promote the use of the new Plain Indonesian New Testament (TSI).¹⁵ People generally know about the default formal Indonesian Bible (TB), but will need orientation on the advantages of also using a meaning-based translation— whether that will be in their ethnic tongue or the TSI. Using the TSI will allow us to teach that God's Word is meant to be understood, and we won't need to delay developing networks of churches using the Word. This approach will also give time for the Lord to lead us to his choice for those who will be employed as MTTs. Doing these things will not only enable us to do a better job reaching each ethnic group, but will also help us clearly communicate what we are doing with our financial supporters and prayer partners. When entering multilingual groups, let's start out saying that we are doing Scripture Engagement activities that could possibly lead to a Bible translation program.
- ❖ Some Indonesian **ethnic groups are no longer on the Bible translation radar** because they had Scripture in the past. But that was often 25 years ago, and sometimes 75-125 years ago. Some of our new recruits (wanting to start with Scripture Engagement as in the point above) should consider going to a group like the Batak Toba, which still uses their seriously outdated and hard to understand Scripture in the services of their mainline denomination. Or go to the over 36.7 million Sunda— whose old Bible translation had almost zero impact on this staunchly Muslim group. If we reached just 1% of the Sunda population with a new Bible translation, it would impact 367,000 people.¹⁶

¹³ The standard by which SIL measures language status— the 13 level EGIS scale, should be revised to not myopically focus on each ethnic language in isolation from its context, but to give a wider view of how each ethnic population is dealing with other dominant languages. For instance, the probable reason for tiny coastal languages in Papua becoming classified as 'Shifting' or 'Moribund' is that such groups have mixed with others— in both location and intermarriage, and it became more practical to use Papuan Malay as their basilect (lowest language layer) instead of their ethnic languages. It is not, as people might assume, that the national language (acrolect) has taken over due to education and other outside contact.

¹⁴ New recruits wanting to have a lasting impact should consider going to small groups. I have translated for both a small group and a huge group. Go to a small group if your goal is to witness in an incarnational manner among a people group. A good resource is Hong-Tae Jang's Comprehensive Planning document for Papua 2013-15, which can be obtained directly from him via his SIL address.

¹⁵ In strongly majority religion groups it may be best to precede the TSI with the Kitab Suci Injil.

¹⁶ I mentioned above that each of Indonesia's ethnic groups are incredibly diverse. Let me show a little of what that means for the two groups with out-of-date Scripture which I just mentioned. One will readily understand the challenge for doing Scripture Engagement among the staunchly Muslim Sunda. We can be thankful that there are scattered little house churches of believers among them. The challenges for SE among the Batak Toba would be quite

- ❖ Bible translation organizations should begin to **actively share our Bible translation vision with God's people in Indonesia**. This has NOT been done! Just like all of my generation of expat Bible translators, I came to Indonesia, immersed myself in my village work, and was never asked to help communicate the Bible translation vision in any of Indonesia's cities. Wycliffe's national organization in Indonesia, Kartidaya, doesn't even have a web site. In 2014-2015 I conducted seminars for Albata in 18 seminaries. I can tell you for certain that seminarians in this country have NO IDEA about Bible translation needs. They have never heard that becoming a Bible translator would be a career option for them. They don't even know how many ethnic languages there are in Indonesia. We must become intentional about sharing our vision and expertise with Indonesian Christians— dedicating personnel and time to this. They are the ones who will become the Scripture Engagement personnel and Other Tongue Translators that are needed! And the Body of Christ in Indonesia is well able to financially support those new workers— if we share our vision.
- ❖ For the most part, training to become a Bible translator in Indonesia has been available only to those who happened to be in the right place at the right time, or who were financially able to come and stay in Jakarta without having employment. Bible translation organizations need to make much more of our training available online. I can just see the eyebrows raising at that statement! But yes, other than Phonetics and with today's online learning platforms, all other parts of the Bible translation curriculum can be taught effectively online. Seminary curriculum in Indonesia is regulated by the government, and those regulations have made it impractical for seminaries to add concentrated courses in Bible translation. Albata already has a Bible translation course that teaches basic translation principles. Let's improve and expand online Bible translation training. Let's use that platform as one way to share the Bible translation vision. This is one significant way we can interest people in becoming Mother Tongue Translators for multilingual groups that we might otherwise overlook. Using online training is the only practical way we can give training in Scripture Engagement and Bible translation to the seminarians mentioned in the point above.

God has given us the vision of believers from every ethnic group around the throne— all singing Worthy is the Lamb. He did NOT tell us that we would need to translate Scripture into every ethnic language for that to be fulfilled. He said that the Gospel must be preached/proclaimed to every ethnic group. Just as it was certainly God who arranged that the Greek language would be the vehicle for Gospel proclamation in the first century, so now He has arranged that multilingual people groups in Indonesia can now understand the Gospel in one of their 'heart languages'— Indonesian. God has done the hard part— removing the barrier to understanding, now it's our job to do the preaching and proclaiming part. Jesus' coming could be closer than we thought!

Postscript:

The elephant in the room will keep getting fatter the longer we ignore him. I hope this article is not ignored. **But I urge that the information given here NOT be used to make blanket policies affecting translation programs.** I express this concern because of big changes that have taken place since the year 2000 within the Bible translation movement:

different. What if, for instance, a new translation team wanted to use the more correct pronunciation of 'Yahweh' in the Old Testament instead of 'Jahowa'?! The big challenge in this group would be to gain acceptance for a new translation. Then consider how different again it would be to work in one of the eight Bible-less and multilingual groups on Sumba Island. The Ethnologue lists them as Christian. But actually these groups are in bondage to Merapu— a religion of shamanism which trades in ancestor worship.

- ❖ The main Bible translation organizations and even other missions have been reorganized to be top-down in structure. We dropped Cameron Townsend's core value of being 'field driven' organizations.
- ❖ We are thankful that deep pocketed businessmen are investing heavily in Bible translation, but now this spiritual ministry is being transformed to run like a business. Becoming increasingly dependent on funding sources, we dropped Cameron Townsend's core value that "We trust God for the impossible."
- ❖ We want accelerated progress in finishing translation projects, but what happens any time we rush things? We dropped Cameron Townsend's core value that said "We use a scientific approach." (The term 'scientific' meant doing our linguistic and anthropological homework.)
- ❖ The trend has been that expat Bible translation personnel are increasingly more remote from the ethnic people being served. Instead of our being directly involved serving people— living incarnationally among them and learning their culture and language, we now work through employed MTT intermediaries. This remote approach is so firmly held as the ideal that some expat workers who have shown up on the mission field wanting to be directly involved in an ethnic culture have been forbidden to do so by their administrators. They have been told, "We don't do it that way anymore." Some of our organizations have all but lost Townsend's core value that said, "We pioneer."

On that last trip that I keep mentioning, I had the opportunity to meet with an Indonesian who holds a prominent position in a Bible organization. While speaking about some of the big changes in his organization, he said with a wry smile, "Organizations are like people. They get fat, and then undergo a heart bypass."

A Bible translation consultant with experience almost as long as mine saw an earlier draft of this paper and said this:

I share your concerns that our Bible translation strategy seems to have gone off course over the past several years. First, we selected an arbitrary completion date which forced us into a product oriented mindset (chunk out as much product as possible as quickly as possible with no real consideration of long-term impact) and then in order to meet our arbitrary completion date we gave significant control of the process to the people with deep pockets.

I find it ironic that the Scripture Engagement people are learning more and more that if we want our translations to have the transformational impact that is really the point of the whole venture, we need to take our time, develop people and culture centered approaches, and invest ourselves in a deep understanding of the contexts in which we work, out of which we can tailor our translation strategy and Scripture Engagement to the local needs and context. While that is happening the BT powers-that-be go lurching off into a git'er done, faster is better, one size fits all direction. I am afraid that we have come full-circle in our thinking, returning to the days when the Bible translation strategy focused on merely completing the translation and trusting that the Holy Spirit would take it from there. Unfortunately that didn't work in the 70s and 80s and I doubt that it is going to work now.

I am very concerned that we are potentially sacrificing the eternal well-being of the people among whom God is calling us to work for the sake of flashy numbers that look exciting on a powerpoint presentation. That might sound a bit melodramatic, but I fear it isn't.

I add that it hasn't just been the Scripture Engagement people who have objected to our new methods. Linguist experts, Bible translation consultants, and experienced field personnel have

repeatedly objected that our new methods will not lead to the quality that used to be the hallmark of our organizations, and which showed such respect for God's Word. Suddenly no one was listening.¹⁷

Don't interpret my friend's words to mean that we intentionally decided to cut corners. Instead, it was our naive '**under the coconut shell assumptions**' that led us to adopt an unwise 'vision'. Then, while blindly pursuing that 'vision' and because so many of our top administrators lack language-related field experience, the **same faulty assumptions** led us to 'modernize' our core values. The result— as seen from our fields (not just Indonesia but several others), has been a clear decline in the health and reputations of those organizations which most typify the new direction. We have lost many field workers because of this. And field worker morale is at an all-time low. Some of my friends still on the field tell me, "I just keep my head down and try to keep working." I never heard talk like that before the year 2000! The best way forward is to go back to our founding core values.

Bible translation is not a business, but a ministry. Good ministries focus on how to best serve people, rather than the factors of time and cost. And businesses don't need to ask, "How is the Lord leading?"

For further reading:

Fields, Phil. Papuan Colloquial Indonesian, [SIL Workpapers 2010-005](#).

Jang, Hong-Tae. Comprehensive Planning for Papua SE Partnership in FY2013-15 (unpublished)

Quinn, George. The Indonesian Language, from the introduction to The Learner's Dictionary of Today's Indonesian. Sydney: Allen & Unwin 2001 ISBN 1864485434

Sneddon, James N. The Indonesian language: its history and role in modern society. University of New South Wales Press Ltd. 2003 ISBN 0 86840 598 1. See particularly the section entitled Fallacies and Misconceptions starting on page 14.

Sources for the infographic of world languages:

<http://www.scmp.com/infographics/article/1810040/infographic-world-languages>

<http://cdn3.scmp.com/sites/default/files/2015/05/27/languages.png>

¹⁷ Another person reading this article likened the situation to a steamroller. One person is no match for a steamroller, but if we join together perhaps we can make our voices heard. Here is the link to this article at map.bloomfire.com. I urge you to join this site so that you can post comments and help develop the ideas I have shared. If a public post could in some way endanger your work, you may write to me via phil.fields 'at' pbt.org. I anticipate writing a follow-up post at the MAP site.