

Executive summary of the article ‘Language layers in Indonesia’

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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.

Many Americans do not understand modern multilingualism, and do not expect that a person can have more than one mother tongue. Further, we always suppose that a group’s ‘heart language’ is their ethnic language. But outside of Christians acquainted with our promotional lingo, the rest of the world does not use the term ‘heart language’. (Just see what you get if you Google it.) We in the Bible translation community made up that term, and now we have used it so long that we have come to believe that each person in the world has one and only one heart language. But in a multilingual situation, a person can have multiple mother tongues and heart languages, because they grew up hearing mom and everyone else speaking multiple languages.

People react from the heart to any message they readily understand. First and foremost, Bible translation is about understanding.

In a multilingual culture like Indonesia², the vast majority of people shift freely and fluently between three language layers:

- Lowest: For informal home village talk, they use their ethnic language.
- Mid: For informal inter-ethnic talk, they use colloquial Indonesian.
- High: And in formal contexts, they use formal Indonesian.

Indonesia’s multilingual people give and receive emotion laden messages in three languages. All three are their mother tongues and heart languages.

Our misunderstanding of multilingualism can be seen in the way we have collected and disseminated incomplete information in the Ethnologue, Joshua Project, and PeopleGroups.org. For instance, the 85 million Javanese people are nearly 100% also native speakers of Indonesian as well as being native speakers of Javanese. This is why our language databases wrongly say that only 23 or 44 million people in Indonesia are speakers of Indonesian. The truth is that over 220 million of Indonesia’s 250 million people are fluent in Indonesian.

Our promotional information about language groups needs to be revised. There is no longer a real communication barrier to understanding the Gospel for many Indonesia’s multilingual ethnic groups that are listed as Bible translation needs. One of their heart languages and mother tongues already has both a literal and a meaning based Bible translation. If we want to promote the understanding of God’s Word, the first thing we should do is to distribute the new meaning based New Testament translation (called the TSI) among all the rural ethnic groups.

Pioneer Bible Translator’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.” Wycliffe’s promotional videos state that

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, TSI). 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.

groups gathered around the new translation are “often the result.” That is the golden vision that motivates our financial supporters. They assume that each ethnic group has a singular heart language and that people of the group cannot understand God’s word without a new translation. They then assume that the new translation they help fund will be heavily used in worship and that the body of Christ will grow numerically because of it. But this is NOT going to happen today in Indonesia’s ethnic groups that are already multilingual. It has not been happening that way in that nation for the last 20 years when new translations have been given to multilingual groups, and it is not going to start happening— no matter how many Scripture Engagement activities for a new translation are undertaken. (See proofs for all my assertions in the full paper.) Here are some important reasons why networks of churches using the newly translated Scripture are NOT going to be the result in Indonesia’s multilingual groups:

- Church activities are by definition formal, and one expects to deal with Almighty God in one’s formal language.
- Most churches among multilingual ethnic groups have people from other ethnic backgrounds mixed in. Naturally, when there is a mixed audience, it is normal and polite for the national language to be used, so that everyone can understand.
- In most multilingual groups, people don’t normally discuss abstract concepts (including theological topics) using their ethnic language, even though they are truly native speakers of the ethnic language. They normally borrow terms from the national language for such topics. Even in private prayer, they predominantly use the national language. For such people, it can take significant effort to learn to speak correctly about concepts in the Bible and to pray in their ethnic language. Most Indonesians treat their ethnic tongue like an old shoe that one wears around the house. Their ethnic language is comfortable and they like it, but it is not something they want to develop. The area of language they expect to develop throughout their lives is the upper layer— the layer used in all education and media, not the lowest layer.

If you ask Christians in a multilingual ethnic group if they would like the New Testament translated for them, the answer will be Yes. Everyone is happy to see the language of their ethnic roots honored by a New Testament translation. But those books gather dust on a top shelf position in their bookshelves. Giving people top shelf cultural artifacts is nice, but not what our supporters thought they were funding.

There still are an estimated 50 ethnic groups in Indonesia where a Bible translation into their tribal languages would have a powerful and long lasting effect. Unfortunately, those are the very groups the Bible translation movement is neglecting! Since the year 2000, the Bible translation movement made the firm decision to focus on working with native Mother Tongue Translators (MTTs), which means that, by definition, the MTTs and their ethnic groups are already multilingual. But it is only the very isolated groups which are not yet bilingual in Indonesian who would fulfill our vision of growing networks of churches worshipping God in their ethnic languages.

Here, then, are main implications that spring from the facts I have documented in my longer paper on language layers:

- ❖ It is time to tell the truth to ourselves, our supporters, and our prayer partners about how multilingualism affects our work among ethnic groups. Our promotional materials and web sites should stop reinforcing what I call ‘under the coconut shell’ assumptions about multilingual Bibleless groups. If we don’t do this, sooner or later our organizations will be discredited.
- ❖ Bible translation organizations should prioritize ethnic groups in Indonesia that are not yet functionally bilingual, because only those groups will be spiritually transformed by the translations that we will make for them. These groups need to be reached with the old-fashioned Other Tongue Translator approach. We should not just wait for these groups to become multilingual.
- ❖ Understandable Scripture is available for all the multilingual ethnic groups in Indonesia, but currently many of those groups do not have access to it. More than Bible translation, we need Scripture Engagement for Indonesia’s 400 multilingual groups that do not have ethnic language Scripture. These groups are incredibly diverse, and many are resistant and unreached. It is possible that Scripture Engagement among some of these groups could lead to ethnic language Bible translations for them that would be so highly

valued as to make it worthwhile to do them. When entering such groups, let's tell our supporters, "We are doing Scripture Engagement activities that could possibly lead to a Bible translation program, and we are making sure that there are bodies of believers among them who have enduring access to Scriptures in their language of choice for spiritual things."

- ❖ Bible translation organizations should begin to actively share our Bible translation and Scripture Engagement 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. Indonesian Christians don't know how many Bible-less ethnic language groups there are in Indonesia. Seminarians in Indonesia have never heard that becoming a Bible translator would be a career option for them. 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.
- ❖ Bible translation organizations need to make much more Bible Translation and Scripture Engagement training available online in Indonesia. Let's use that platform as one way to share the Scriptural vision of people around God's throne from every ethnic group. This is one significant way we can interest Indonesian Christians in becoming Mother Tongue Translators for multilingual groups that we might otherwise overlook. Using online training is the only practical way we can give the training in Scripture Engagement and Bible translation mentioned in the point above.
- ❖ For the last sixteen years the Bible translation movement has been dominated by strategies to rush Bible translations into publication. What happens any time we rush things?! Naive 'under the coconut shell' assumptions led our organizational leaders to assume that we could quickly produce New Testaments for multilingual ethnic groups that would have a large impact for Christ. This looks great in Power Point presentations, but simply isn't true. The same assumptions led our organizations to modernize— dropping several of our founding 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. The best way forward is to go back to our founding core values. Those core values include being people centered, taking our time and working for quality, and relying on God.

Don't miss the good news in what has been happening! God is reversing what He did at the Tower of Babel! 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 has done— and is doing, things we didn't imagine. This calls for new thinking on our part, beginning now.