

Quality in Bible translation: notes of an outsider

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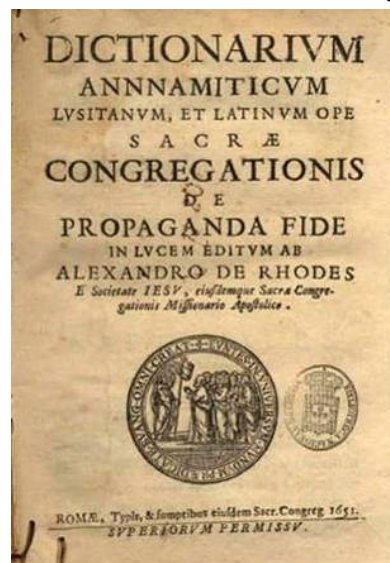
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1. Introduction

Translations of Old Testament Hebrew go back to the 3rd century BC when a Koine Greek version was prepared. Early translations were into major regional languages, Latin, Greek, Syriac etc. But the first translation into a minority language with a relatively small audience goes back to the 4th century translation of the bible into Gothic. Gospel fragments in English and other European languages go back to the 8th century, but the first complete vernacular translation was the 13th century French version. The entire Bible was translated into Czech around 1360.

The idea of translating biblical texts into minority languages of other cultures seems to begin in the early 17th century, with the Spanish colonists in the New World. The Spanish priest Bernardino de Sahagún attempted to translate the whole Bible into Nahuatl, but this was forbidden by the Inquisition in Seville in 1576 (Rodríguez Molinero & Vicente Castro 1986). During this early phase, from the 1600s onwards, there was no linguistic standard and orthographies reflected the writing systems of the home language of the translators. Issues such as tone were not addressed. Tone seems first to have been recognised by the Jesuit priest, De Rhodes (1651) who published the first dictionary of Vietnamese ('Annamite') in Rome in the mid-17th century (Photo 1) and his system of romanisation is still in use today.

Photo 1. De Rhodes' dictionary



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Although amateur bible translation still abounds, the realisation that the application of professional linguistics was required to devise orthographies which could be used systematically goes back to Kenneth Pike (1912-2000), the first president of SIL. Pike made significant advances in the analysis of unwritten languages, in particular the 'emic' and 'etic' distinction still in use both in linguistics and social science.

Since his era, an extensive organisation has grown up to study languages with a view to translation. In theory, the process of producing a reliable translation which can be read by the people whose language has been analysed is simple. Study the language, produce a basic phonological and grammatical sketch, devise orthography, test its acceptability and usability, feed it into a literacy programme, begin scriptural translation. This sequence is certainly part of the accepted procedures of most bible translation organisations.

But in reality this is not how things go. The problem with the orthodox procedures described above is that they take considerable time. Typically, up to twenty years were required to create a New Testament. Even within that time frame, the sequence of events was often not followed because of pressure to work on translation as rapidly as possible. Challenger organisations grew up, insisting that translation could proceed significantly faster, aided by new technology.

Bible translation in minority languages is almost sealed world. Experts were more likely to have expertise in biblical languages than in the target language of the translation. They were more insistent of theological accuracy than valid linguistic and cultural translation. They attend conferences with one another and argue over points which seem extremely arcane to outsiders, while missing major issues which affect the quality of translations.

The object of this paper is to draw attention to the factors generally glossed over which affect the quality of bible translation. The author is not a translator, but a descriptive linguist. However, over thirty-five years in the field, he has most commonly worked with literacy committees, which also function as translation bodies. His main field of operations is Nigeria, but has also worked in Ghana and NE India. The paper is intended to be critical, but also to suggest that better linguistics and greater literacy will lead to fewer unread bibles that stay on shelves.

2. Predatory organisations

Many countries have historically had only a single organisation concerned with translation. The first organisation in Britain was the Naval & Military Bible Society, founded in 1779. The Bible & Foreign Society was founded in 1804 and began its work by translating the Gospel of John into Mohawk in Canada. The Nigerian branch of the Bible Society was founded in 1966. It usually only picks up on existing projects, and does not work actively on the description of small languages or conduct primary research. In Catholic dominated countries, typically in the New World, there have been individual and usually amateur efforts since the 1600s, but these do not constitute an organisation with informed central principles.

SIL is the body which initiated formalised translation projects in Nigeria, beginning in 1964 and for a long period was the only organisation operating in the region. However, beginning in the 2000s, there was an efflorescence of NGOs which claimed to compete in translation. As of 2025, there are 38 named organisations operating in Nigeria. Since there is no central listing, there may be more. I have called these predatory organisations, since they claim to work with minority communities, although not necessarily with any discernible skills in;

- a) linguistics
- b) literacy
- c) translation

These organisations have grown up for one simple reason, the relatively large funds available for bible translation, from organisations based in the United States. Some of the motivations of these organisations are opaque indeed. It is believed that bible translation is connected with the 'end-times' a popular nexus of beliefs related to the rapture, which holds that the end of the world will come when scripture has been translated into all languages. Whether this is so or not, there is no doubt there are numerous organisations willing to fund translation with no understanding of the rationale for quality control. The product is the printed gospel, or more recently, the digital file.

One response has been the growth of organisations seeking to capture these funds. The other is the move towards oral translation, i.e. versions of scripture are simply recorded, which are not backstopped by a printed text. Oral translation has equally become popular because of the complete absence of quality control. It is impossible for an external consultant to check the reliability of the purported translation. As a consequence, inflated claims can be made without any substance.

3. Problems of linguistic competence

In the earliest era of formalised translation procedures, there was a strong insistence on intensive training in linguistics, ideally leading to a PhD. This is still considered desirable, but by the same token, the percentage of bible translators who are actually linguists has fallen dramatically. They now represent a small minority within the total translation enterprise and smaller organisations typically have no linguists at all. Many of those who oversee projects have extremely limited competence in linguistics and indeed do not seek to enhance their skills. They settle for a rather vague description of the phonology, tied even more shakily to an orthography, which may not even have been formally established.

The original argument for quality linguistics has not changed. Without a clear and accurate description of the target language, an orthography which is consistent and useable cannot be developed. Similarly, without a description of the morphosyntax of a language, it is impossible to establish rational principles for word division. Yet these are missing in most translation projects and the argument circulates that this is unnecessary. Look at English spelling, they say. The inconsistencies of English spelling grew up over many centuries and remain a challenge to teach. But a vast pedagogic enterprise is out there to overcome this hurdle. This can never be the same for languages where speakers are numbered in their thousands. Moreover, English is not a tone language. Virtually all Nigerian languages are tonal (as indeed the majority of those in the world) and tone is a key component of lexical and syntactic expression. To bypass this element of a language is to ensure comprehension is extremely limited.

Another argument often heard is that since bible translators are native speakers, they can be trusted to write their own language correctly and idiomatically. This can be easily falsified by sitting with such translation committees to create a consistent and readable transcription of non-scriptural material. Even projects which are more than a decade old often struggle to write unfamiliar words.

4. The issue of literacy

An outsider might consider it obvious that literacy skills would be intertwined with translation. Surely there is no point in a translation no-one can read. But the empirical data says otherwise. Most translation projects are *not* accompanied by a literacy programme. Few nation-states encourage literacy in minority vernaculars, which would require them to take on the financial responsibility for teachers and textbooks¹. Indeed, there is often a suspicion that the encouragement of vernacular literacy can lead to demands for political separatism.

Paradoxically then, most translation funders do not fund either linguistics or literacy. Even where an orthography has been established, without literacy, publications cannot be read. The bible is a special case, since the meaning of the text is already known, which dupes teams into believing it is being 'read'. As a linguist who frequently asks so-called literacy board members to translate non-biblical texts, my general experience is that they are unable to read them.

This failure to fund literacy is puzzling. What is the point of bibles no one can read? I can only assume there is a spiritual motivation which goes beyond the practicalities of this world. There is a thread on End Times sites which suggests a connection between translation and the end of the world;

The Christian gospel would be preached as a witness to all nations (Matthew 24:14; Mark 13:10; Revelation 14:6). Today, portions, or the entire Bible, have been translated into over 2,400 languages and dialects covering over 90% of the world's population

Perhaps then, the printed book is the product, and it brings prestige to the funder and to the community once it is on the shelf. If you are far away in another continent, perhaps the issue of literacy is simply not brought to your attention or you have no ears to hear. Certainly, the sort of statistics collated by Wycliffe International and quoted in Wikipedia and repeated by many other organisations, never estimate what percentages of translations are read or are even readable.

5. Problems of cultural competence

Kenneth Pike, the first president of SIL, was in no doubt about the importance of anthropology. In the early decades of SIL, the discipline was given considerable attention, especially in New Guinea and South America. Pike's most comprehensive publication, *Language in Relations to a Unified Theory of Human Behavior* (Pike 1967) argued that the same principles of emic and etic he applied to linguistics could be scaled up to all aspects of human behaviour, to create a unified human science. It seems to the present author this idea has much to recommend it, and the Human Relations Area Files (HRAF) programme, initiated by George Peter Murdoch at Yale University in 1949, which aimed to collect and synthesise ethnography across time and space, developed along similar lines. However, the reality is that professional anthropologists have lost interest in this type of wide-ranging comparative study and linguists have similarly dropped the integration of ethnography with their language descriptions.

There is, however, a subdiscipline, anthropological linguistics, which proposes that to interpret linguistic data we must be aware of the ethnography that informs it. Language implies worldview, something often known as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis. This was developed from a study of the Hopi language in North America which does not distinguish past and future morphologically, from which it was argued that the Hopi people had a quite different conception of time from the Judeo-Christian idea of unidirectional history (papers collected in Carroll 1956).

¹ I am glad to say this is slowly changing. Both in Nigeria and NE India, where I work, the last few years have seen state governments initiate programmes of local language teaching in schools.

This is a rather extreme example, but on a more practical level, the translation of all ideas of the supernatural becomes fraught with difficulties. African peoples are usually claimed to be monotheistic, in the sense that they accept the existence of a single universal deity who oversees the experienced universe. However, the African deity could not be more different from his Christian counterpart. In Africa, God is absent, and takes no interest in the day-to-day affairs of human beings. It is the rich panoply of spirits who engage with people, act malevolently or positively towards them, cure their diseases or work revenge on their enemies. To this extent, they correspond to the saints of the Catholic Church who are the intermediaries and intercede with the deity for petitioners. For Protestants, God can be addressed directly and responds directly to prayer. Bible translations in Africa typically use the vernacular term for the universal deity, apparently unaware the implication for readers is almost the precise opposite of the sense they want to convey.

Bible translators are generally unwilling to engage with ethnography and so make use of terms which somehow approximate to English/Greek/Hebrew words which may be shorn of their original associations by magical laundering. But this belief has no empirical basis, and is thus an item of faith.

6. Implausible versions of vernaculars

Bible translations are the subject of intense debate about faithfulness to the original. But the idea that they should generally reflect the way the language is spoken naturally is presumably reasonable. But any process which leads such natural translations is sabotaged from the beginning by various cultural presumptions. African, SE Asian and Amerindian languages have an entire word class, ideophones, which constitute their single most important expressive modality. Listen to any animated conversation in these areas and they run like a golden thread through speech, emphasising sound and sensory experience as well as states of mind. Embarrassingly, they are often absent from technical grammars of these languages, and are omitted in transcriptions of folk tales which so often form the basis of 'discourse' analysis. Somehow, the idea that ideophones are not 'real words' has been transmitted to translators and they consciously omit them².

More examples can be given, including the omission of idioms. African languages typically have large numbers of idioms which express emotional states, sensations and other experiences. Often these involve body parts, but not necessarily. Their existence is unpredictable and they cannot be elicited in a formal process³.

Although word-for-word translation is clearly never encouraged, it is often the outcome of inappropriate morphological analysis. Typically, in languages with complex synthetic morphology, words are broken into component elements, which are renamed clitics, particles, adverbs etc. A good example of this type of misanalysis applies to the Kambari languages of northwest Nigeria. A three-lect project which combined dictionary work and New Testament translation, was conducted by John and Janie Stark. The dictionaries they produced are extreme examples of disjunct morphology, splitting the verbal complex into unlikely individual words. A comparison with the grammar of Cicipu, another Kambari lect, by a professional linguist, Stuart McGill (2009) which describes the additive morphology of verbs illustrates all too plainly the errors derived from inadequate morphological analysis.

7. Two case studies: Eggon and Berom

As an example of how problematic practices play out in practice, I will recount the history of two bible translation projects. They are both based on direct personal experience. Neither are projects associated with SIL.

² Not only in Africa, of course. Vast grammars of the English language, which is relatively impoverished in respect of ideophones, for example the standard Oxford grammar, do not recognise a class of ideophones.

³ For example, I have been working with Boze, an East Kainji language for two decades, but only recently have begun to discover that it has a wide variety of expressions for psychological states and mental conditions. We must presume similar expressions exist in other African languages, but they are rarely if even reflected in even large dictionaries.

Eggon

Eggon is a medium-sized language spoken in Nassarawa State, Central Nigeria, between the towns of Nassarawa Eggon and Lafia. It is divided into seventeen dialects, which are only partly mutually intelligible (Terna 2020). Eggon was first evangelised in the 1930s by a Mr. Hepburn, who began the process of bible translation in a self-devised orthography. Mr. Hepburn remains much respected figure and is buried in the nearby hills. The translation represents the Wana dialect, although his draft dictionary also recognised dialect forms, such as Alogani and Alizaga. At some point, the translation was taken over by the Bible Society⁴, although no formal linguistic work was ever carried out to underpin the orthography, which does not mark tone and fails to make other key distinctions. There is some academic work on Eggon, principally by Maddieson (1982) and Sibomana (1985) but this was not taken into account by the projects. Timothy Terna, on whom I depend for this information, points out that key tense/aspect distinctions are made only by tone, as well as nominal number. The comprehensibility of the translation is thus difficult to assess but presumably it can only be 'read' by those already familiar with the meaning.

Not to be outdone, a rival organisation, the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT) has begun an entirely separate project. This is intended to be 'multi-dialectal', i.e. to include a mosaic of words from different dialects, in order to bring in as large a potential audience as possible. This project is equally not founded on any comprehensive linguistic analysis, nor on a sociolinguistic survey which might indicate whether this idea is acceptable. History is not an encouraging guide here. The first mosaic translation I can trace is the Union Igbo Bible (1909-1950) which mixed together lexicon from different Igbo dialects (Van den Bersselaar, 1997; Fulford 2002). It was not a success⁵ and was replaced by an Onitsha dialect version (see preface to Williamson 1970 for a more complete story). I think we may conclude from this that the Eggon people are similarly not being well-served.

Berom

Berom is a relatively large language spoken around Jos, Plateau State, Nigeria. It is divided into at least six major dialects and has perhaps half a million speakers. Missionaries came in the wake of the establishment of Jos as a centre on tin mining, and settled at Foron in 1914. They began translation shortly after that in the dialect spoken around the mission, but without the benefit of a dialect survey, and probably did not realise that Foron is a minority speech form. Berom orthography took its modern form with the entry into the project of Hanni Kuhn, a Swiss linguist, who together with Barnabas Dusu (†), devised a writing system which took account of tone plurals and other significant homographs. This system is summarised in Kuhn & Dusu (1985). Academic work on Berom by the French linguist Luc Bouquiaux (1970, 2001) which included both a dictionary and grammar, focused on the Du dialect, but as it was in French, it made little impact in Nigeria.

After completing the New Testament (1984) and working on the Old Testament, Hanni Kuhn retired and left Barnabas Dusu to finish the task. Andy Warren of the Bible Society assisted in the final stages and saw the bible through the press when it was published in 2009. I personally worked with Barnabas on the preparation of a dictionary and can testify to the accuracy of his transcription and tone-marking.

So far, so good. However, over the years, Barnabas had made a significant number of alterations to the orthography, to improve readability. These were not documented and were all kept in his head, so when he died, unexpectedly, information about them was lost. This period coincided with the collapse of teaching vernaculars in Plateau State, so that even the older generation, including members of the Berom Literacy Committee, cannot actually read Berom.

⁴ See the website [The Bible Society of Nigeria \(kingdom-project.org\)](http://The Bible Society of Nigeria (kingdom-project.org)) for an extremely inaccurate summary of the situation among the Eggon

⁵ One of the less scathing comments was from the Igbo linguist Nolue Emenanjo; 'a still born Esperanto ... manufactured at Egbu... by the super- human intelligence and misguided enthusiasm of Archdeacon Dennis!'

Two other factors in Berom have a significant impact on acceptability of the Berom bible. As mentioned above, the translation reflects the Foron dialect. In an era of respect for missionary decisions this was not a subject for comment, even though people must have considered it a strange choice. The dominant dialect of Berom is Vwang, i.e. that spoken around Vom. Around 2019, the Literacy Committee began agitating for either a new or adapted translation reflecting the forms in Vwang. Since there is a regular correspondence between $f \sim v$ and other sound changes, the visual appearance of a text in Vwang is distinctive. Speakers claimed, rightly or wrongly, they 'couldn't read' the Foron translation. This issue remains unresolved, partly because no organisation is willing to fund a new translation in a language which already has a complete bible. Nonetheless, given that other dialects of Berom, particularly Nincut, but also Rim and Tahos, are even more different from Foron than Vwang, the issue is unlikely to go away.

Equally problematic is the issue of language change. Berom has a system of nominal tone plurals and consonant mutation, both of which are marked in the existing orthography. In addition, number is marked morphologically on verbs. However, in the course of attempts to elicit the plurals of verbs and nouns for a new dictionary, it seemed that there has been rapid language change. The tone plurals on nouns seem to have been largely neutralised to a generic number marker *be-*, whereas the verb plurals are going out of use, even with the older generation. I have been unable to check this with a range of speakers, but assuming it is true, much of the bible will be difficult to interpret, even for Foron speakers.

8. Some conclusions

This paper examines translation practice, as opposed to theory, taking Nigeria as case studies. It is clear that most orthographies developed in recent years are not based on rigorous linguistics, or indeed any linguistics at all in many cases. However, since those responsible believe they can be read, this is essentially a magical belief, namely that God will somehow resolve this problem⁶. There is no evidence this is the case.

The argument is that we need to return to traditional sequencing of linguistics, literacy and translation, even if this takes longer than magical procedures. We need to think about issues such as language change, more extended views of morphosyntax and other aspects of technical linguistics if we are to reach professed goals.

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⁶ Thanks to an SIL staffer for making this analogy