

Is the proliferation of Bible Translation organisations in Nigeria without technical proficiency helpful to language development?

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MOUNTAIN VIEW, JOS

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INTRODUCTION I

- Nigeria has some 520 languages at last count
- New ones are still being discovered while some are disappearing
- SIL estimates that around 200 have no scripture translations and thus no literacy or indeed technical investigations
- However, this figure includes moribund languages and languages with moribund projects, so in practice it must be higher
- Many of these are oral translation projects only, hence they have no written counterpart
- Nigeria is one of the global centres of language diversity, along with the island of New Guinea and the Amazon basin.
- Compared with these areas it is woefully under-researched
- Much of what has been done is highly inadequate

INTRODUCTION II

- Phonology, literacy and Bible translation form a nexus, for any useable output all three must be in place
- Phonology and morphosyntax require considerable technical skills, and training. Not something that can be picked up over a weekend
- As it happens, many languages of the Nigeria Middle Belt present considerable analytic difficulties in terms of tone and unusual sounds
- In contrast, say, to Polynesia
- Sometimes this requires years of work to sort out and to produce a practical orthography

ARE ALL LANGUAGES THE SAME?

- One of the more bizarre assumptions threaded through practice is that all languages are somehow the same in analytic terms and thus require the same level of technical input
- And thus, work on them can proceed at a broadly similar rate
- Hence translation schedules, so many verses per week
- i.e. translation could be speeded up by adding more translators [!]
- This is absolutely false. Some languages are way more difficult than others

PROLIFERATION OF BIBLE TRANSLATION ORGANISATIONS

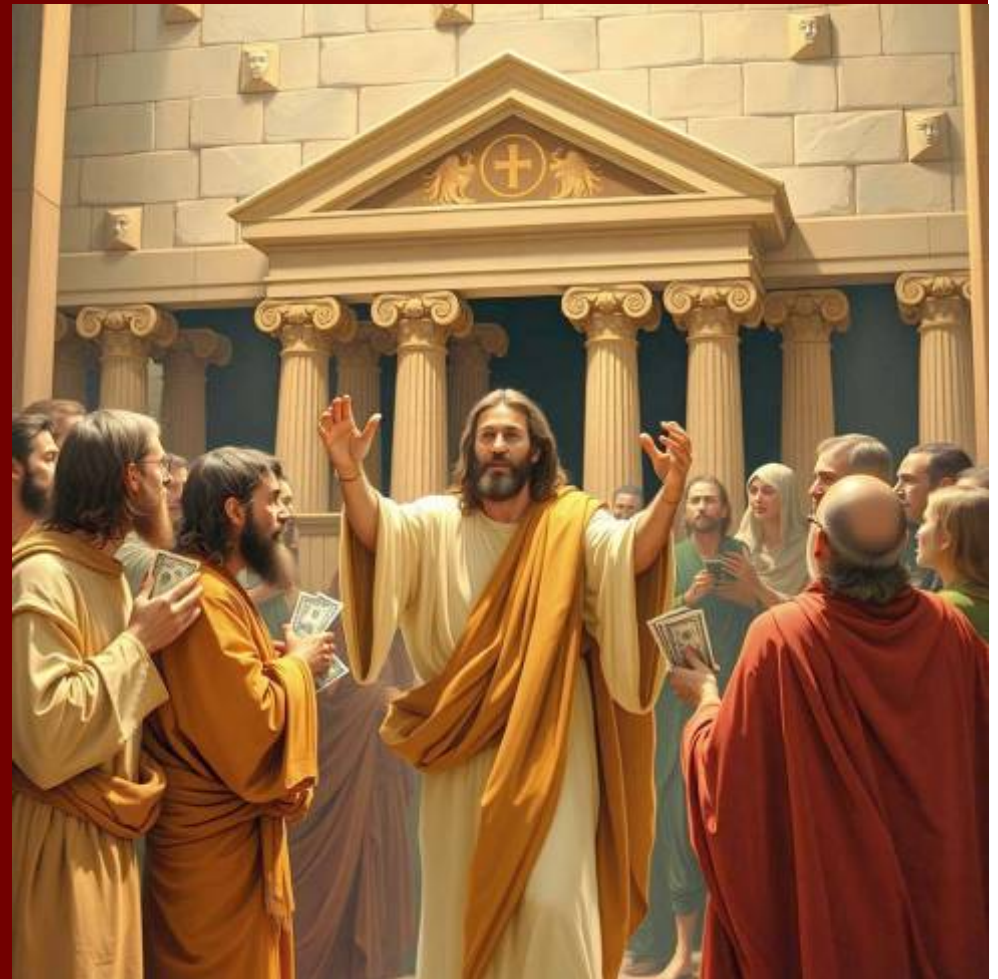
- The last decade has seen a massive increase in the number of bible translation organisations (BTOs)
- A list prepared has 38, though there may well be more
- Of these, 37 have no technical skills whatever
- Their work is thus effectively useless and misleading
- So what is behind the growth? The answer is simple. Money
- There is a whole ecosystem of highly ignorant organisations who have more money than they know what to do with
- So they hand it to plausible recipients
- Who buy expensive computers, SUVs and sometimes hire rather nice offices
- They all conclude that Oral Translation is the way forward because it requires no expertise

CHANGING ORIENTATION

- Jesus throws moneychangers out of the temple



- Jesus welcomes moneychangers into the temple



ORAL BIBLE TRANSLATION WITHOUT QUALITY CONTROL

- An aspect of bible translation which is most appealing to upcoming organisations is the complete lack of quality control
- Without a background analysis of the language, it is impossible to check individual speaker idiosyncrasies, dialect issues and semantics
- Obviously the funders have no interest in these issues, they are only interested in output, as if translation were an industrial product

COMMUNITY FRUSTRATION

- Many communities are frustrated because in fact they don't want only OBT, but an orthography for their language, literacy and in due course a printed translation
- Hence there is a prevalence of 'retrofitting', trying to develop a technical description and literacy subsequent to the start of a project
- The Anemoro community (north of Jos) is a good example. Let down by various initiatives, they have approached us for professional work on their language and we are trying to deliver

COMMUNITY PROJECTS

■ Guus [Sigidi]



■ LeMoro



■ Gura



■ Jaku



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BIBLE TRANSLATION WITHOUT LITERACY

- One of the bizarre aspects of the push for translation is the absence of any funding for literacy.
- You might think that translating the bible without simultaneously training people to read their language is a vain exercise. Apparently not.
- I can't say what the idea is here. Is the thinking that God magically gifts potential readers with the skill to read a printed text without training?
- Empirical evidence suggests this is not so
- Literacy is hard work

LINGUISTICS WITHOUT ANTHROPOLOGY

- One of the founders of SIL, Kenneth Pike, had strong views on the integration of linguistics and anthropology
- Indeed, his magnum opus, the *Integrated Theory of Human Behaviour*, provides a model of bringing together linguistic behaviour and behaviour in general, not unlike the modern idea of 'memes'
- SIL originally had a major anthropological research thread, but this has effectively collapsed completely
- Why? Well mainly because it is not funded, it doesn't contribute to the single goal, bible translation
- Yet it is easy to show that a failure to understand culture as embedded in language must lead to significant misinterpretation of texts
- Take for example, the endless debate about translating terms like 'holy spirit'

LINGUISTICS WITHOUT SOCIOLINGUISTICS

- Another one of the principles of language development is prior sociolinguistics
- Why? Because it is otherwise hard to know about dialects, approximate numbers of speakers, prestige of speech forms, use of language in education, markets, church etc.
- Needless to say, challenger organisations never, ever, do any of this. They take whatever speakers come along and present themselves
- It is hardly rocket science to see what errors can result
- Especially in false and inflated claims concerning the demand for literacy and translation
- Outcome. Boxes of unused bible translations

CIRCULATION OF FINDINGS FOR CRITIQUES

- Not all linguists are equally brilliant or have comparable analytic skills
- This is why circulation of preliminary findings for comment and criticism is essential
- Yet no culture of this exists and if you do circulate documents often no useful comment comes back
- Writing up results is essential; ; it helps you think through the argument
- Don't get offended, or fear to offend anyone. The culture of 'self-esteem' leads to fear of saying something critical
- Mistakes then go forward and unusable orthographies get off the ground

READ THE LITERATURE!

- When you see what is written, when you see what languages are chosen for survey or development, it is clear that the proposals are completely ignorant of previous work that has been done.
- This is arrogance of the worst type.
- Linguistics is science-like, we build on the insights of previous generations rather than ignore them
- Bernard of Chartres said this in the twelfth century
- Earlier work may be inadequate, but you need to explain why?
- Example. A challenger NGO with no technical skills, is invited to work with a language in Bauchi State
- Do they go online to check what has been written? Nope
- They ask the community, who, surprise, surprise, are unaware of any publications
- So they conclude nothing has been written

WHO IS AFRAID OF TONE?

- With the exception of Fulfulde, all Nigerian languages are tonal
- Some Jukunoid languages in the southeast have world records for numbers of tone heights
- Key distinctions in lexemes, pronouns, morphosyntax are only made by tone
- Yet most projects pay no attention to tone at all, put it off for further research which is never done
- Tone workshops are held and then the results are ignored
- Tone is just as important as vowels and consonants. We need to find practical solutions
- SE Asia is where tone is taken seriously, but in keeping with the tradition of not reading the literature, no one ever considers their solutions.

CONCLUSIONS

- Nigeria has seen a massive growth of organisations with no technical proficiency, pretending to represent the interests of various communities
- But it is simply not true. Rather, they are disrespecting these communities
- And frequently leave them hanging due to the ups and downs of funding
- Ideally, we need to weed out the useless ones and try and assist the marginally more useful ones to improve their standards
- Nigeria suffers from a major shortage of trained linguists willing to mentor the next generation
- Those results in turn are fed into literacy and thence into translation
- But that is the only way things will improve

WHAT IS TO BE DONE?

- Many people may agree privately with some of the observations in this presentation but are afraid to say so publicly, for fear of offending donors
- Time to step up to the plate, to agree on a strategy for preventing overlap, waste of funds and so on
- This is a massive waste of human resources.
- And if this means pointing out some organisations should not be in the business of bible translation, so be it
- Whether they will listen as the money rolls in remains an open question
- But I throw it open to the audience for potential solutions.

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