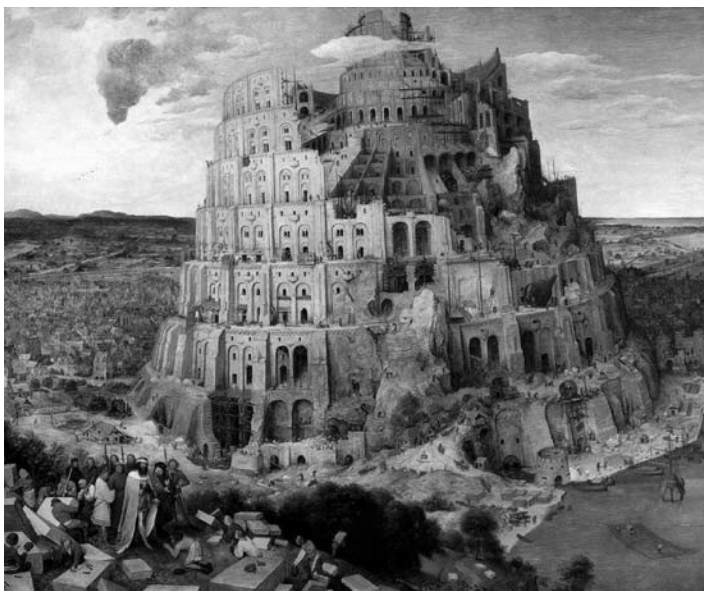

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Beyond Babel: Pentecost and Mission

So embedded in Western lore is the subject of Flemish artist Pieter Bruegel the Elder's famous painting featured below that we recognize it at once as the Tower of Babel, evoking the account in Genesis 11:1-9 of how human accord was divinely mutated into linguistic pandemonium and cultural fragmentation. Its New Testament counterpart is the story of Pentecost, found in Acts 2, the inauguration at last of God's promised reversal of the Babel effect. Far from favoring the



monotonous standardization of cultures and languages being wrought by the juggernaut of globalization, God demonstrated through Pentecost that the confusion of intrahuman discourse was not to be mitigated through some global monolingual scheme but through God's revelation of himself in the mother tongue of every tribe and nation. It is not surprising, then, that two thousand years after the event marking the Holy Spirit's dramatic initiation of the church there should be the proliferation of translations highlighted in Harriet Hill's superb update on the current and projected state of mother-tongue Bible translations.

Continued next page

On Page

- 59 **Revisiting Azusa Street: A Centennial Retrospect**
Edith L. Blumhofer
- 64 **"Waiting on the Gift": An Insider Looks Back on One Hundred Years of Pentecostal Witness**
Grant McClung
- 66 **The Azusa Street Mission and Latin American Pentecostalism**
Douglas Petersen
- 67 **Reading the Bible in the Global South**
Philip Jenkins
- 73 **African Initiated Christianity in Eastern Europe: Church of the "Embassy of God" in Ukraine**
J. Kwabena Asamoah-Gyadu
- 75 **Three Waves of Christian Renewal: A 100-Year Snapshot**
Todd M. Johnson
- 77 **The United Bible Societies and World Mission**
Samuel Escobar
- 82 **The Vernacular Treasure: A Century of Mother-Tongue Bible Translation**
Harriet Hill
- 84 **Noteworthy**
- 88 **My Pilgrimage in Mission**
Michael Louis Fitzgerald, M.Afr.
- 92 **The Legacy of Paul and Clara Gebauer**
Allan Effa
- 96 **Developments in Theological Education in South East Asia**
Gerald H. Anderson
- 97 **Book Reviews**
- 110 **Dissertation Notices**
- 112 **Book Notes**

of Missionary Research

The Vernacular Treasure: A Century of Mother-Tongue Bible Translation

Harriet Hill

We celebrate the centennial of the birth of American Pentecostalism, which in turn celebrates Pentecost—the outpouring of the Holy Spirit when people miraculously heard the wonders of God in their mother tongue. That the Holy Spirit broke through the ordinary language of communication and spoke to people in their mother tongue shows the importance of people’s linguistic and ethnic identity in the plan of God. This point is underlined again in the Book of Revelation, where the multitudes gathered around God’s throne include saints “from every tribe and language” (5:9; see also 7:9). When God speaks to us in the language we learned in our mother’s arms, the message of his acceptance of our identity penetrates the very fiber of our being. Ask anyone who has recently received God’s Word in his or her mother tongue for the first time. It awakens something that has been nearly extinguished inside and brings tears to the eyes.

The need for people to have God’s Word in their mother tongue has been recognized throughout the church’s history. Although church growth is influenced by a variety of factors, times of increased emphasis on mother-tongue Scriptures, such as the Reformation, often correlate with times of church growth. Times when mother-tongue Scriptures were neglected in the communication of the Gospel, such as the early Middle Ages in Europe, often correlate with times of spiritual stagnation. Churches that experienced persecution and isolation from the rest of the Christian world, such as those in Madagascar and China, have often endured and even multiplied if they had Scriptures in local languages.¹ In contrast, churches without Scripture in local languages, even those at centers of Christianity like Alexandria, have disappeared from the map.² These correlations were evident before 1906. But now from the 100 years since 1906, what can we learn about the relationship between mother-tongue Scriptures and church growth?

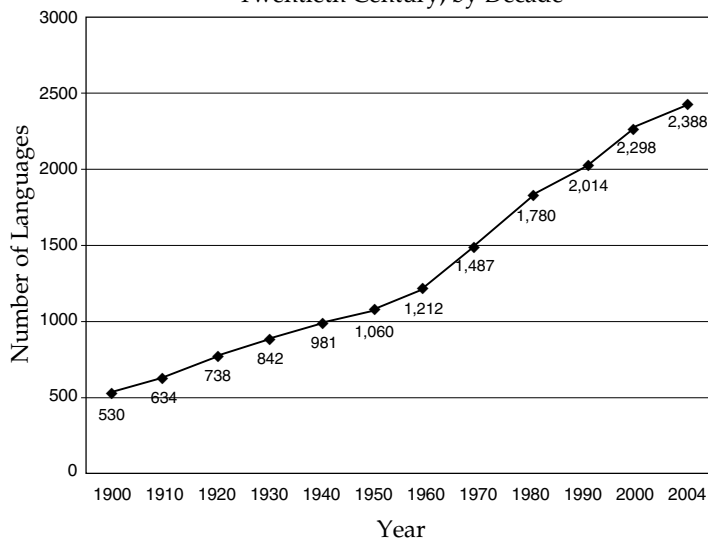
Great Progress

During the first 1,800 years of Christianity, Scripture was translated into about 70 languages. During the nineteenth century, the number of people called to missionary service increased dramatically. Wherever they went, they encountered a language barrier. If they intended to communicate, they had to learn the local language, and in order to communicate God’s Word, they had to translate it into the local language. The result was Scripture in 460 more languages during the nineteenth century, a quantum and unprecedented leap.³

In the twentieth century, the pace of Bible translation accelerated even more. Between 1900 and the year 2000, a total of 1,768 more language communities received Scripture in their mother tongue for the first time. By the year 2004 the number of languages with Scripture totaled 2,388. Within the twentieth century, the momentum of Scripture translation increased dramatically after 1960, jumping from an average of 11.4 languages per

Harriet Hill has been involved in Bible translation with SIL since 1978, working primarily in Côte d’Ivoire, West Africa. She is now serving as Scripture Use Coordinator for SIL International and Wycliffe Bible Translators International.

Table 1. Languages with Some Scripture in the Twentieth Century, by Decade



year for the years 1900–1960 to an average of 27.2 per year for 1960–2000. (See table 1.⁴)

Even at this rate, however, it would take another 125 to 150 years to begin translation in all of the world’s remaining languages that need it. In 1999 SIL International and Wycliffe Bible Translators International decided that this pace was unacceptable. They formulated Vision 2025, which states, “By the year 2025, together with partners worldwide, we aim to see a Bible translation program begun in all the remaining languages that need one.” This vision called for a radical rethinking of the way Bible translation is carried out. As the firstfruits of this vision, translation organizations are working more intentionally with partners, recruiting and training translators from all nations of the world, and working with clusters of related languages rather than with one language at a time. Under the impetus of Vision 2025, the number of new translation project starts has increased from an average of 25 per year in the period 1990–93 to 64 per year in the period 2001–4. If this rate is sustained, every language in the world that needs Scripture will have a translation project started by 2037—significant progress, though still short of Vision 2025. Happily, the number of new project starts continues to rise.

Greatly Improved Methods

The way Bible translation is done changed dramatically over the course of the twentieth century. Typically in the early 1900s pioneer missionaries were the first to bring the Gospel to an isolated people group. They ministered to that group for life, of necessity learning their language in order to communicate. Bible translation was one of their many responsibilities, often crowded off the agenda by the seemingly more pressing needs of evangelization and discipleship.⁵ They received no training in linguistics, anthropology, or translation, because these sci-

ences had not yet taken their modern form. They drafted the translation themselves, often quite literally, calling on the cook or gardener for help with the language when necessary. They published the Scripture “without note or comment,” in part because extratextual helps had been used in very divisive ways in the past, and in part because they believed Scripture alone would communicate.⁶ They were the first to develop writing systems, compile dictionaries, and publish literature in the languages in which they worked. Once printed, Scriptures were greatly appreciated by the growing church, and becoming literate was considered part of becoming Christian. In the long term, the vernacular Scriptures caused the church to grow and the culture to be revitalized.⁷

By the end of the twentieth century and now in the twenty-first, typical Bible translators spend years training in linguistics, sociolinguistics, anthropology, literacy, and translation—fields that their predecessors helped develop through their long-term, in-depth exposure to local languages and cultures.⁸ They belong to one of the many organizations that specialize in Bible translation,⁹ and they have access to resources prepared specifically for translators: *United Bible Societies (UBS) Handbooks, Translator’s Notes, The Bible Translator, Notes on Translation*, and the *Journal of Translation*. The available resources are cumbersome to transport, so missionaries have all of them at their fingertips in electronic form, as well as many computer tools that assist them in language analysis and translation, including Field Works, Translator’s Workplace, Paratext, and Biblical Analysis Research Tool (BART). A fair amount of their time is given to learning these computer tools. They may even use computer programs to import a translation from a related language to use as a first draft. Non-Roman scripts no longer stymie their work. Computer programs can handle them all: right to left, left to right, from Arabic script to Cyrillic, and anything in between.

Today, translators are increasingly mother-tongue speakers of the language, with expatriate missionaries serving as technical advisers. Rather than translating literally, they endeavor to communicate the meaning of the original text in a way that is natural in the receptor language.¹⁰ They include extratextual helps, realizing that the audience will need some of the background information assumed by the original authors in order to be able to

Today, translators are increasingly mother-tongue speakers of the language, with expatriate missionaries serving as technical advisers.

correctly understand the text. A translation consultant checks their work, asking a mother-tongue speaker to translate it back into the language of wider communication. Places where the meaning of the back translation does not resemble the meaning of the original are investigated to assure that the translation is accurate. The consultant also questions areas where the translation seems to follow the grammatical structure of the source text to assure that the translation is natural.

The translated Scriptures may be prepared in printed form, but not necessarily. They may equally appear on cassette, video,

or film, or they may be memorized and told in person. Literacy is no longer viewed as a prerequisite to genuine Christian experience. Most likely a church is already established in the community. It functions using Scriptures in a language of wider communication, a practice that takes a surprising amount of effort to modify so that mother-tongue Scriptures can take their rightful place alongside Scriptures in other languages. Education, government offices, cybercafés, cell phones, televisions, radios, and transportation link the community to the wider world, resulting in widespread multilingualism.

New Challenges

During the twentieth century, Bible translation became a specialized field, a development that had both positive and negative effects. On the positive side, the quality of the product improved significantly, and mother-tongue Scriptures were completed more quickly. Although there is always room for improvement, Bible translation agencies, by and large, now know how to translate Scriptures well. The task is daunting, but doable.

A negative effect of specialization is that churches contracted Bible translation out to specialists, which created an unexpected problem. The strong link that had existed throughout the nineteenth century between Bible translation and the church was broken, and without the church’s direct involvement in the process, people often did not make use of the Scriptures when they became available. Translations in the nineteenth century of an inferior quality were used widely in the churches. Translations of superior quality in the twentieth century often sat in storehouses, rejected by those for whom they were intended.¹¹

Wayne Dye carried out a study in 1980 exploring this situation.¹² In the era of the three-self church and the moratorium on missions, people thought that with “the availability of the written Scriptures in the vernacular, local converts appropriated the gospel without running it through Western filters first.”¹³ The Bible translation strategy upheld this view, expecting that giving people Scripture in their own language would result in a completely indigenous church, unstained by expatriate involvement.¹⁴ Dye’s findings confirmed growing suspicions that this model was not accurate. In one community, the Gospels were published just as the expatriate translation team left the area for several years. Having left the community with Scripture in the mother tongue and no outside involvement, the translators eagerly anticipated the development of a wonderfully indigenous church. When they returned, however, they found that the church had stagnated. The model did not produce the anticipated results. In over half the language communities Dye researched, the translated Scriptures were not used. Where Bible translation led to church growth, it was always accompanied by personal witness and Bible teaching. A subsequent study by David Landin showed that the attitude of mission and church leaders toward mother-tongue Scriptures was the most significant factor affecting their use.¹⁵ The contract model jeopardized this important link between church leaders and mother-tongue Scriptures.

Bible translators realized that translated Scriptures sitting in warehouses fell short of their goal. Their real goal was that receptors *use* these Scriptures to draw closer to God. UBS refers to this goal as Scripture engagement; SIL and Wycliffe refer to it as Scripture use. Global sociolinguistic factors in fact militate against vernacular languages, making the use of mother-tongue Scriptures the premier challenge for Bible translation in the twenty-first century.

Effect of Colonialism on Vernacular Languages

Two factors in the twentieth century had a significant effect on the languages people use in their Christian experience: colonialism and modernity. Colonialism embraced cultural evolution, the idea that societies move from savagery to barbarism and finally become civilized. The colonial agenda was to impart the three C's: to Christianize, commercialize, and civilize.¹⁶ Local languages, if recognized as languages at all, were perceived to imprison people in their "barbaric" past. Many missionaries in this era set out with the noble intention of "civilizing" the people they went to serve by teaching them Western culture and languages.

Languages serve two purposes: communication and identification. Surprisingly, the latter is often the stronger. The colonizers designed language policies intended to develop national identities in the states they had created. Among the languages of potentially rival ethnic groups, European languages were neutral and allowed people to communicate with each other and the colonial power. At the same time, they created a sense of national identity. Tribal languages and identities were perceived as working against this national unity and identity and so were strongly discouraged.

A widespread colonial practice aimed at discouraging the use of mother tongues was to outlaw them in schools. In Côte d'Ivoire, for example, any child caught speaking the mother tongue on the school grounds was forced to wear a humiliating

necklace made of snail shells. If the child could find someone else speaking the mother tongue, he or she could pass the necklace on to that child. At the end of the day, whoever had the necklace was beaten. This strategy used peer pressure and physical pain to inculcate in children a loathing and embarrassment of the mother tongue during their formative years. Once these feelings are imprinted on the emotions of a people, they are difficult to dislodge. Ngugi wa Thiong'o from Kenya refers to this practice as the cultural bomb: "The effect of a cultural bomb is to annihilate a people's belief in their names, in their languages, in their environment, in their heritage of struggle, in their unity, in their capacities and ultimately in themselves. It makes them see their past as one wasteland of non-achievement and it makes them want to distance themselves from that wasteland. It makes them want to identify with that which is furthest removed from themselves; for instance, with other peoples' languages rather than their own. . . . We who went through that school system were meant to graduate with a hatred of the people and the culture and the values of the language of our daily humiliation and punishment."¹⁷

In research among university students in Abidjan, Côte d'Ivoire, in the early 1990s, I asked the students what languages they spoke. They replied with the European languages they knew but omitted the Ivorian ones. When I asked one Bété student about this fact, he referred to his language as a "pile of borrowings, not a language at all." In fact, it is a very complex and rich language. Political independence from the colonial powers

was much easier to obtain than freedom from negative colonial attitudes toward one's language, culture, and identity.

Effect of Modernization

Colonizers used force to denigrate mother tongues. Modernization has not needed to resort to forceful measures. The draw of the urban centers, with their promise of a better life, brings people into heterogeneous and multilingual living situations.¹⁸ Between the years 1900 and 2000, the percentage of the world's population living in urban centers increased from 14.4 percent to 47.6 percent.¹⁹ Nearly half the world's population now lives in urban centers, a number that continues to rise. Villages are emptied of their youth as economic opportunities are concentrated in cities. Communication puts even those in remote villages in touch with Hollywood. I will never forget the uncanny sensation I had, on one visit to Mali, when the early morning silence in Bamako was broken by the sound of Michael Jackson singing, "Don't matter if you're black or white." I thought, "What on earth is he doing here?" But he was there, and everywhere else, too.

Modernization functions on standardization, not diversity, as technology reduces processes into units that can be reproduced on a mass scale. The pull of modernity is strong. People voluntarily abandon their ethnic distinctives in the quest to belong to and benefit from modernity. For example, the Adioukrou of Côte d'Ivoire, with whom I lived for many years,

abandoned their mother-tongue schools in the 1940s, believing that French schools would lead to a better future. An increasing number of the world's smaller languages are dying out under this pressure.²⁰ *Ethnologue*, SIL International's comprehensive listing of all known living languages, now categorizes 515 of the world's 6,912 languages as nearly extinct.²¹

Mother-tongue Scriptures have quite a different reception in this climate than they did in earlier eras. Drawing examples primarily from the nineteenth century, Lamin Sanneh speaks of the powerful effect vernacular Scriptures had on local populations to ignite vernacular reform and revitalize local cultures.²² He contrasts this pattern with the effect of Islam on local languages, where Arabic serves as a "*cordon sanitaire* to insulate society against esteem for the vernacular," and predicts that "everywhere that such an attitude toward the vernacular exists, we can predict that Christian renewal will have minimal impact."²³ In the twentieth century, however, colonialism and modernization helped produce negative attitudes toward vernacular languages in ways similar to Islam, albeit for very different reasons. The church has grown in the global South despite these negative attitudes, but Christians have often had little appetite for vernacular Scriptures. Rather than fostering a vernacular renewal, churches often have the opposite effect.

When congregations are multilingual, many churches resort to using languages of wider communication. Because people are able to buy and sell in the market using a language of wider communication, church leaders assume that they are also able to

understand the things of God in that language. This is not necessarily the case. In Carol McKinney's research among the Bajju in Nigeria, 21 percent of the respondents could not give a reasonable answer to the question "Who is Jesus?" These were people who went to church daily all their lives. Church was conducted in Hausa rather than the mother tongue, and comprehension suffered. McKinney comments, "Knowledge of Jesus clearly correlated with language ability in Hausa."²⁴

Christianity by Diffusion or by Incarnation?

Christianity can be spread by diffusion, in which the new replaces the old, or by incarnation, in which the new is expressed in terms of the old. The diffusion model sees little or no value in the old, and so replaces it without remorse. The unity of the global church is pursued at the cost of local particularities. Bible translation in vernacular languages is incongruent with this model. It is not cost-effective, nor does it promote standardization. It is perceived to work against the unity of the church.

Incarnation involves the conversion of the old. It values the contribution of each culture to the body of Christ and upholds unity in diversity. The *World Christian Encyclopedia*, for example, affirms "the centrality of indigenous cultures to local expressions of Christianity, of the right to exist of minority tribes and peoples, of their autonomy in their own areas, of their importance from the Christian standpoint vis-a-vis the world's dominant peoples and cultures, and of the need to reduce the imperialistic influence of these latter (especially Western culture) in non-Western local churches and lands."²⁵

Mother-tongue Scriptures are needed today both for comprehension and so that the Gospel message can permeate, revitalize, and transform local cultures. Research among the Dega of Ghana shows that vernacular Scriptures increased their appallingly low level of self-respect, freed them from beliefs that hindered their development, opened the door to literacy and to numeracy, transformed traditional ceremonies, and allowed all segments of the society to apply Scripture to daily life.²⁶ Andrew Walls challenges us: "Perhaps a comparative history of translation would be an illuminating way of approaching the history of Christian mission and expansion—not only in the geographical and statistical sense of the spread of the Church, but the dynamic expansion of the influence of Christ within the Church that comes from the attempts at the radical application of his mind within particular cultures." This radical application of Christ's mind within a culture happens best when Scriptures are in the mother tongue. Without a theology that is grounded in local realities, the church remains foreign and fragile. Although the center of gravity of the church has shifted from the North to the South numerically, theological reflection remains primarily a

Western endeavor. Walls summarizes, "The language you use to talk to your wife should be the language you use to pray to God, and the language you use to pray ought to be the language in which you do theology."²⁷

Many church congregations today are multilingual, but this fact does not mean that they need to function exclusively in a language of wider communication. Alan Tippett recommends that churches find a balance between embracing their ethnic diversity and experiencing their unity in Christ.²⁸ By assuring that all members of the church receive spiritual food in a language they understand and identify with, the church can grow both quantitatively and qualitatively.

Which model will the church in the twenty-first century choose—diffusion or incarnation? Although there are strong global pressures against local languages, will the church be a voice that helps people uncover their love for their vernacular treasure? Throughout Africa church leaders have used the creed below to fan the nearly-extinguished fire of their natural love for their own language and identity. In simple terms, it provides a theology of language and culture. It can encourage churches everywhere to work more intentionally with, and with deeper appreciation for, the vernacular treasures in their midst.

We believe that—

- God wants to communicate with us in a way we can understand.
- The diversity of languages is compatible with the plan of God: He likes unity in diversity.
- No language is better than another to communicate with God.
- God has shown us through the incarnation that he wants to come to our level to reach us.
- The Gospel must penetrate people's worldview and this is done best in the mother tongue.
- Christians cannot mature in their faith unless they have access to the Word in a language they understand and like to use.
- No church can last long without the Word of God in a language the people understand.
- Church leaders must see that all members of their congregations receive spiritual food in a language they understand, regardless of social class, gender, or age.
- The more church leaders encourage the use of Scripture in the mother tongue, the more the members will use it.
- Culture is a part of God's plan.
- Christianity can be lived out in any culture.
- The Gospel transforms and redeems cultures.
- Christianity is expressed differently in different cultures.
- Christians are united by love, not similarity.²⁹

Notes

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