

What is a Living Language?

A language is defined as *living* when there are people still alive who learned it by transmission from parent to child, as the primary language of day-to-day communication. Living languages are commonly referred to as a person's "first language" or "mother tongue".

How is a language defined?

People and organisations have different ways to define a language depending on the purposes they have in identifying that language as distinct from another. Some base their definition on purely linguistic grounds. Others recognize that social, cultural, or political factors must also be taken into account. In addition, speakers themselves often have their own perspectives on what makes a particular language uniquely theirs. These perspectives are frequently related to issues of heritage and identity much more than to the linguistic features of the language(s) in question.

Academics recognise that languages are not always easily identified as discrete, countable units, but consist of features that extend across time, geography, and social space.

Every language is characterized by variation within the speech community that uses it. Those varieties, in turn, are more or less divergent from one another. These divergent varieties are often referred to as dialects.

(further reading: "The problem of language identification" at http://www.ethnologue.com/ethno_docs/introduction.asp)

Why can't Wycliffe be certain about the number of languages?

Because languages are dynamic and variable and undergo constant change, the total number of living languages in the world regularly changes and cannot be known precisely. As knowledge of the world's languages has increased, so has the number of identified languages. At the same time, the rate at which languages are going out of use is increasing.

Why does the Wycliffe count of languages differ from the public 'SIL Ethnologue' count?

SIL International manages three key data systems that store and report language-related information, one of which is the Ethnologue. The underlying Data System for the Ethnologue stores and reports information about the languages of the world. The data is continually updated and published as a printed book (with an online version at Ethnologue.com) every four years. It is generally more helpful to provide the count of living languages at the same time period as other statistics being released rather than quoting the count from the last public Ethnologue edition. This enables other statistics that are released more frequently than the public Ethnologue to relate directly to the number of known languages at the time of each release. Wycliffe provides regularly updated Ethnologue data on countries and on language communities at www.thewordislife.net

Is the term 'language community' different from 'people group'?

When people ask about distinct people groups one of the questions to ask is "How do you want to distinguish them?" The language they speak is one distinguishing characteristic. The term language community refers to all speakers of a particular language, regardless of geographical base or cultural differences.

Also see <http://www.joshuaproject.net/what-is-a-people-group.php>

How does Wycliffe know whether a language community needs translation and how much it needs?

A language is considered in need of Scripture translation when the following three contexts are in place:

- there is at least one community which understands that language well and accepts it as their medium of communication,
- existing Scriptures (if any) in that language are not adequate for the community's basic spiritual needs, and
- there are no other languages which people in the community understand well and accept as a medium of communication for which adequate Scriptures exist or are planned.

A translation need may exist because of the following circumstances:

- there are no Scriptures in the language(s) people in a community understand well and accept as a medium of communication;
- existing Scriptures are not adequate because they were not translated in a way that is accurate, natural and communicative;
- existing Scriptures are not adequate because they were translated many years ago and the language has significantly changed;
- existing Scriptures are not adequate because they do not address the basic spiritual needs of the community;
- existing Scriptures are not adequate because they do not reflect adequate academic research.
- existing Scriptures are in a language used within the community, but a significant segment of the people in the community do not understand that language well; or
- existing Scriptures are in a language people in the community understand well, but they do not accept that language as a medium of communication;

Why don't all languages need the Bible translated?

It is people not languages that need Christ. There are a number of reasons why the Bible may not need to be translated into a specific language. These include:

- The language is no longer spoken in any community or its use is very weak (such as being used little in everyday life, or being used only by a few older people).
- In communities within which the language is spoken, the majority of those between the ages of 20 and 45 are adequately proficient in another language available to the community, are motivated to use it, and adequate Scriptures are or will be available in that language.

What is a scripture portion?

A Scripture portion is sometimes defined differently across the various agencies involved with Bible translation. For Wycliffe, a Scripture portion could refer to a whole book, a selection of Scripture from within a book, or a selection of Scripture from across several books.

How is the worldwide figure for “likely need of Scripture translation” calculated?

Two methods have been used to calculate the potential number of *remaining* languages that may need Scripture translation. The figure refers to languages without a translation program in place rather than active program (see below) Most years these two methods confirm with each other a similar number.

The first method takes the original projection of 3,000 languages developed in 1999 and subtracts the number of “new starts” each year since then. The original 3,000 number came from adding the 1,500 languages we expected would need translation based on reasonable research and a projection of 1,500 languages from those that still needed to be surveyed. So this number is a hybrid of solid data (number of program starts) subtracted from a general estimate.

The second method (used in the current Wycliffe International statistics) is the data taken from the current global database where language teams enter the translation status of the language communities – marking them as one of the following: Adequate Scripture; Unlikely Need of Translation; Likely Need of Translation; or Unknown Translation Need.

What is meant by the term “active language program”?

An active language program refers to those languages in which work is happening. This may be in the beginning stages, covering basic language analysis or development e.g. determining alphabet, preparing dictionaries etc, or it may include the work of translating Scripture or other important community information related to areas such as health or government policies. It could also include continued linguistic research, training and consultative services after the initial translation work has been completed.

What are “cluster languages”?

A language program cluster exists where two or more teams working on different languages work together using a shared language development strategy, shared personnel and shared resources.

Languages may be grouped together to form a cluster based on:

- linguistic relatedness
- social relationships
- geographic proximity
- number of churches/denominations working among the same languages

Why would scripture need to be revised?

Languages are dynamic in nature and change over time. Today's speakers do not use a number of the words and phrases used in previous generations. It is therefore quite common that over time a completed New Testament or Bible is no readily understandable for modern speakers and readers, and as such becomes a re-translation need.

What is Wycliffe's approach or methodology to Bible translation?

Translation, according to the dictionary is "the rendering of something in another language or into one's own from another language." Even though people tend to focus on the process of going from one language to another, the process itself has a lot in common with everyday communication.

For example, imagine that you've heard or read something you find very interesting and you want to tell a friend. In order to effectively communicate your thoughts – even in the same language – you shape what you want to say based on your knowledge of your friend and what he or she might know about the subject. In translation, your thoughts would be communicated in another language, but the essence of the communication process is very similar. Part of the translation process is the study of the biblical text in order to know what needs to be communicated, but it also includes studying how the person reading or hearing the translation will understand or interpret it according to his or her worldview and cultural setting.

Translation, then, is more than finding out what the biblical text says and saying it in the other language. Translation is a process of discovering what was understood in the original setting and discerning the degree to which readers or hearers in the new context will be able to arrive at a similar understanding.

Wycliffe does not endorse any Scripture version or translation as the ideal model to follow. Translation is by nature contextual, so "good translation" considers many contextual factors which help inform the decision process regarding the appropriate translation style and products.

For more information on translation methods see: <http://www.sil.org/translation/stages.htm>

Who else is involved in Bible Translation?

There are a number of organisations across the world involved in translating Scripture into mother tongue languages. Some of these are national, others international. Some of the international translation agencies include: United Bible Societies; Wycliffe Bible Translators International; Pioneer Bible Translators; Lutheran Bible Translators.

In addition other agencies are involved in getting Scripture accessible to people in their mother-tongue, using non-print media. Wycliffe partners with many of these agencies. Some of these agencies include: Faith Comes by Hearing; The JESUS Film; The Luke Partnership; Audio Scripture Ministries; One Story.

For more information and articles see www.forum-intl.org and www.thewordislife.net