
A table of contents for the *Africa Journal of Evangelical Theology* can be found here:

https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/articles_ajet-02.php

"A Single Anklet Does Not Resound":[1]

A Response to Mother Tongue Theological Education in Africa

By Ernst Wendland

Introduction

This article offers a brief personal response to two insightful articles that recently appeared in *AJET* 29.1 (2010) on the subject of "mother tongue theological education" (MTTE), with special reference to pastoral training in sub-Saharan Africa.[2] I strongly endorse what both authors wrote on this important subject and will simply complement their thoughts with a few of my own observations that have developed over the years and with the experience of being a teacher as well as a learner at the theological institution where I have been privileged to serve. Although we may work in the same general region of the continent, our situations will not be exactly the same. Therefore, my reflections on the topic of MTTE will probably not be equally applicable everywhere; on the other hand, there may be something in my experience that might prove helpful to those who happen to be teaching in similar circumstances. In short, I wish to advocate a combined, complementary, comparative, and contextual approach with regard to language strategy (to the extent possible) when teaching theology and theologically-related subjects in Africa.

Background

I first came to Northern Rhodesia (soon-to-be "Zambia") as an MK in 1962. My father's assignment was to establish a worker-training programme for the Lutheran Church of Central Africa (LCCA), so I got indirectly involved with this ministry at a relatively early (high-school) age. After graduating from a pre-seminary training college in America, I returned to Zambia to teach on an "emergency" (staff-shortage) basis in 1968 at the new Lutheran Bible Institute and Seminary in Lusaka. I also began my life-long vernacular language-learning process, depending mainly on students as my educators in both the Chewa (Nyanja) language and culture.[3] My particular teaching assignment

---

[1] This is my English translation of the Chewa (Nyanja) proverb *Mkwita umodzi sulira m'mwendo*, a saying that promotes social harmony and cooperation in the community, especially in relation to a particular task that is too large or extensive for a single person to accomplish alone. The "anklet" (*mkwita*) is a metal bangle that requires at least one more to clash (literally, "cry out") together as a person dances; of course, the more anklets that a person wears, the more prominent the common sound resulting from the joint action.

[2] The two articles are: Jim Harries, "The Prospects for Mother Tongue Theological Education in Western Kenya" (pp. 3-16) and Andrew Wildsmith, "Mother Tongue Theological Education in Africa: A Response to Jim Harries" (pp. 17-26).

[3] *Chewa* (technically *Chichewa*, referred to as *Nyanja* in Zambia) is a major SE Bantu language spoken by some 12 million first- and second-language users in the countries of (in order of number of speakers) Malawi, Zambia, Mozambique, and Zimbabwe.

was to introduce the study of biblical languages at the seminary level, beginning with NT Greek. But I soon realized that a similar emphasis needed to be given to using the abundant resources of Zambian languages in our theological training and publication ministries. With that goal in mind, as I simultaneously pursued a seminary degree on a part-time basis (during furloughs), I completed an MA in Linguistics and a PhD in African Languages & Literature at the University of Wisconsin (Madison). My dissertation[4] aimed at revealing the stylistic (oratorical & rhetorical) riches of a Bantu language, which should accordingly be utilized in the translation of Christian literature as well as in the teaching of theology.[5] This led naturally to the next step, involvement in Bible translation as a consultant for the United Bible Societies through secondment to the Bible Society of Zambia, and subsequently also to a staff appointment at the Centre for Bible Interpretation and Translation at the University of Stellenbosch.

The Strategy

In his article Wildsmith makes several recommendations that I would like to follow up on. The first is this, which pertains to the didactic procedure that I also wish to recommend from my teaching experience: "Is there any wisdom in including Mother Tongue Theological Education (MTTE) as well as English in training students in this college?" (p. 23). This is posed as a hypothetical question that arises from his "fictional story." But I have made a concerted effort to apply this principle in the various seminary classes that I teach (ATR/AICs, exegetical studies of selected OT and NT books, and introduction to biblical Hebrew and NT Greek).[6] My approach is combined, complementary, comparative, and contextual in nature - four "C"s. Let me explain:

My teaching method is first of all "combined" in that I do not teach any class either entirely in English or solely in a representative MT. Rather, I will use both during the same class - mostly English, the official language of our seminary (as in Zambia as a whole), but periodically and more or less spontaneously, whenever the need arises, in Nyanja. The two languages, in operation virtually together, serve as the figurative "anklets" referred to in the

---

[4] *Stylistic Form and Communicative Function in the Nyanja Radio Narratives of Julius Chongo* (1979).

[5] I present and exemplify this approach in *Translating the Literature of Scripture: A Literary-Rhetorical Approach to Bible Translation* (Dallas: SIL International, 2004).

[6] I might summarize our current theological worker-training programme as follows: 2 years of TEE (we aim to have students with at least a secondary school certificate and to be involved in congregational lay teaching or preaching activities) followed by a "selection exam"; selected students attend the *Lutheran Bible Institute* in Malawi for 3 years; LBI grads attend the *Lutheran Seminary* in Zambia for 3 years, followed by a vicar pastoral service year before ordination; annual continuing education courses at two academic levels (on the importance of this last component, see Richard J. Gehman, "Afterword: More on Mother Tongue Theological Education," *AJET* 29:2, 2012, p. 164).

title of this article. Thus, they both are necessary in order to articulate the desired "sound" - that is, communication which is at the same time more widely connected with the world at large and yet also more firmly grounded in the local cultural milieu.

This conjoined procedure is also "complementary" in relation to need, that is, whenever we (the students and I) get into discussing certain difficult concepts that arise in English, perhaps in the printed text that we happen to be following, I will break off to repeat or paraphrase the issue in Nyanja, which the students in turn may respond to, either in English or Nyanja. This is an instructive process for me too as a teacher, for if I find that if I encounter some difficulties in expressing the concept in the vernacular - for example, the nature of the "days" in Genesis 1 in relation to the theory of evolution - then I realize that I must take more time to develop the subject by way of explanation and/or expansion and exemplification in dialogue with the students.

The "comparative" aspect of this approach comes to the fore especially when making reference to the biblical languages. We often find that a certain Hebrew term or way of saying things turns out to be rather close to the corresponding Nyanja expression, much more so than the way it is stated or understood in English. Take the word "create," for example, in Hebrew (*bara'*); the corresponding verb in Nyanja (*-lenga*) likewise refers to an action that only God can perform, not human beings. Even certain aspects of morphology and syntax become clearer to students when these are related directly to and in a Bantu language like Nyanja (which all students speak, either as a mother-tongue or a second language).[7] For example, the verb *bara'* in Hebrew includes a 3rd person, sg. subject pronoun, unlike English morphological structure, but very like the Nyanja *a-da-lenga* "he-[past]-created." Similarly in Genesis 1:2 the syntactically front-shifted noun in focus "and-the-earth" (*w-ha'aretz*) can be more easily and naturally duplicated in the rhetorically flexible word order of Nyanja as opposed to the more rigid arrangement of English.

Finally, the qualifier "contextual" refers to the need not only to relate biblical concepts linguistically in a Bantu language, but also to link them

[7] In recent years there have been various initiatives aimed at learning the biblical languages by means of an *oral immersion* approach—in short, using biblical Hebrew (or Greek) to teach these languages (e.g., Paul Overland, "Orientation to Communicative Language Teaching for Biblical Hebrew," The Cohelet Project, 2008, accessed online on 18/10/2012 at http://seminary.ashland.edu/cohelet/Orientation CLT.pdf). While recognizing the benefits of such a "source language" focused approach to language learning, in the limited time available, I prefer a more "target (MT) language" oriented method—that is, one that proceeds *comparatively* (noting the major similarities and differences) between Hebrew/Greek forms in actual biblical texts (as soon as possible) and their Bantu (Nyanja) language functional, including idiomatic and pragmatic equivalents. The *oral* component thus materializes as the biblical text and its significant linguistic forms or literary features are discussed directly in the natural MT, rather than in broken Hebrew/Greek.

closely with an African sociocultural setting, rather than to risk possible misunderstanding through conceptual interference from a Western (English) perspective. This is much more easily done in a MT. For example, the balanced division of a day into "daytime" and "nighttime" (Gen. 1:4-5) is more readily grasped in a geographical environment where the two general periods of time do not vary all that much over the course of a year, such as in subtropical Zambia. In Nyanja there is even a lexical correspondence that highlights this balance—*usana* (day) and *usiku* (night). It then becomes easier to explain the Jewish concept where a new day (*tsiku*) begins in the evening ("And there was evening, and there was morning—the first day," v. 5c).

Why English—Nyanja?

In their *AJET* articles, Harries and Wildsmith list a number of the reasons why English appears to be the language of choice as a medium of instruction in a number of African countries. Indeed, there are some significant political and economic issues involved, such as the importance of linguistic unity as a tool for nation-building, and operating in a world language for generating more opportunities for social and financial advancement. However, I might mention several other, immediately practical reasons why *English* was chosen for use in our Lutheran Seminary:[8]

- We normally have students who speak several different MTs (on average, at least five different languages in any given three-year class).
- For several reasons relating to church (LCCA) history and development, only rarely do any of our students speak Bemba, the major language of Zambia, as a MT.
- English is the primary language of education in the three countries from which our students come—Malawi, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.
- English is widely spoken in Lusaka, the capital city of Zambia, where our seminary is located.
- Therefore, English is used, to a greater or lesser extent, in most if not all of the local congregations that students serve on Sundays as part of their practical training while they are at the seminary.

Why *Nyanja* then, from among the several Bantu languages available? There are several practical reasons:

- Nyanja is the most widely-spoken language, generally speaking, in the three countries being served by the LCCA.
- Studies have shown that Nyanja is also the language most readily learned as a "second language" by speakers in this region.
- Nyanja is the primary Bantu language spoken in the Lusaka area, and almost all local congregations offer worship services and conduct other congregational functions in Nyanja.
- The most important reason is this: Some 15 years ago the three-year Lutheran Bible Institute training programme was transferred from Lusaka

[8] See also Gehman, "Afterword," pp. 163-164.

to Lilongwe. Nyanja (Chewa) is the principal African language of Malawi, and so all non-Malawian students learn it (on average, quite well) while studying in that country.

Therefore, a dual linguistic procedure of theological education using both Nyanja and English in a combined, complementary, comparative, and contextual manner is an effective way of capitalizing upon the relative advantages of both languages in the overall educational process.

A Vital Link with Bible Translation

Several times in his essay, Wildsmith makes an important reference to the crucial work of Bible translation and its significance for theological training in Africa (e.g. pp. 24-25). I wish to underscore this emphasis in relation to the pedagogical method that I have suggested above. As part of my exegetical courses, for example, students are encouraged to compare certain key theological passages as well as critical Hebrew and Greek terms with various English versions, on the one hand, and the vernacular translations that may be available in their language on the other.[9] Where do the main differences in terms of form occur, and what is the significance of these with regard to semantic content and functional intent? Such comparative work inevitably provokes much discussion, usually in Nyanja (with the speakers of other languages referring to their own translations as well). Do the more idiomatic versions, whether in English or a Bantu language, distort the intended sense of the original text in any way? On the other hand, how badly are the more literal translations mis-understood and in which respects? How can any of the renderings be improved, with reference to the Hebrew or Greek text?[10] Such exegetical and translational discussions often lead to considerations of contemporary application as well. How might a new translation affect people's deeper (heart) understanding of the Scripture at that point and how this relates in turn to their daily lives?

Furthermore, Wildsmith asks, "Is there any benefit to including in our new curriculum a course on how to apply key Biblical and theological truths in African Mother Tongues?" (p. 22). I found this to be a very profitable exercise for students some years ago when I used to teach a series of dogmatics (church doctrine) courses. I called this component of the course "Vernacular

[9] Every student language represented usually has at least one translation and often two - an older, more literal "missionary" version plus a more recent "popular language" version. These two translations may be helpfully compared - the first generally representing the linguistic *form* of the biblical text, the second its *meaning* as stated in a more natural, even idiomatic target-language mode of expression.

[10] On the importance of including a thorough instruction in the biblical languages as part of any theological education programme, with an application also to Bible translation, see the article by Enoch Okode, "A Case for Biblical Languages: Are Hebrew and Greek Optional or Indispensable?" *AJET* 29:2, 2012, 91-106. Okode makes a significant case for answering this question with the latter option - most indispensable!

Theological Terms," in which students were asked to compile a little dictionary of key expressions that we encountered in the doctrinal textbook that we were using, including those that were also found in the Scriptures. We would evaluate the translation of these terms, comparing the expression of one Bantu language with that of another as well as with that found in the original English text (or the Hebrew/Greek biblical text). How clearly were these theological expressions conveyed in the vernacular, and which language might instruct or improve another in this regard? How well would average lay-people understand these concepts, and in cases of special difficulty, what sort of paraphrases ("inventing the necessary words" – p. 24) might be created to clarify them in Nyanja (using this as our base language)? The varied discussions that we used to have on these issues made this a very popular aspect of the doctrinal course as a whole. Students began to appreciate ("regain appropriate pride in" – p. 23) their own MT more as they progressively discovered that complex doctrinal terminology could also be expressed in their language, at times more clearly (if somewhat less concisely) than in English!

To briefly illustrate: one of the most difficult, but crucial theological expressions that we must deal with is that of "justification by faith", as in Romans 8:28: "For we maintain that a man (sic) is justified by faith apart from observing the law (NIV)" (λογιζόμεθα γὰρ δικαιοῦσθαι πίστει ἄνθρωπον χωρὶς ἔργων νόμου). The old Chewa (Nyanja) translation renders the Greek (presumably) quite literally (and almost incomprehensibly) as follows, in back-translation: "For we consider (think, whether correctly or not!) a person righteous because of faith, without works of a law." The new Chewa version is much more creative and dynamic, theologically as well as stylistically: "As you know, we see that a person is found that he is righteous in the eyes of God by believing, not by following the Laws, not at all." I can attest to the fact that a great deal of exegetical, hermeneutical, and linguistic effort was expended on this and similar passages over a considerable amount of time as the translation team and their closely associated reviewers labored back-and-forth over this wording to get it to express the desired meaning idiomatically in the vernacular. They also had to work against established biblical usage and traditional church terminology in order to forge a compromise that all were satisfied with in the end. This was communal MTTE in practice at its most essential level—with reference to the sacred Scriptures.

Taking this "vernacular connection" with Bible translation significantly further, Wildsmith makes the following suggestion: "…Bible translation and retranslation is usually an academic specialty beyond the resources of a single Bible college, but MT theological lecturers could be resource persons for a revised translation project initiated by the national Bible Society or other organizations doing Bible translation as their primary ministry" (p. 25). I could write a whole paper on this important point, but I will limit myself to several observations. It was rather easier for me, as I was also serving as the UBS Translation Consultant for Zambia (occasionally, as the need arose, also for

Malawi, Zimbabwe, and Botswana) to get MT speakers (plus one fellow instructor) in my seminary classes involved in any Bible translation that was currently being carried out in their language (or a closely related one). Over the years this included producing new or revised versions in the Nyanja (Chewa), Tonga, Bemba, Luvale, Nkoya, Lala, Mambwe-Lungu, Mbunda, Tumbuka, Lenje, and Lozi languages. A certain student's participation might be very limited (reviewing a draft translation) or extensive (actually preparing the first draft), but this experience always turned out to be most beneficial academically and rewarding spiritually: having the privilege of applying what one had learned in exegesis and biblical language classes to the actual translation of Scripture in one's MT! In many cases, this participation in a national Bible translation project would continue, to a greater or lesser extent as time allowed, once the student had graduated from the seminary and was serving as the pastor of a local parish.

One major disappointment, however, that I experienced over the years was this: I found it very difficult to get other theological training institutions involved in these translation programmes on behalf of the Bible Society of Zambia. I gave a number of promotional lectures and seminars at various schools in an effort to encourage one or more of their teaching staff to engage in this work, especially when we embarked upon the first major "study Bible" projects in the Chewa and Tonga languages (providing explanatory or descriptive notes for foreign or difficult portions of the vernacular text).[11] But after initial enthusiasm (during my presentations), interest soon waned for one reason or another, and I was left with the human resources of my own theological school where I was in a much better position to keep the flame burning. I pray that my national successor as TC for Zambia will have more success in this vital venture, which really puts MTs at the forefront, not only of theological education and development,[12] but more broadly, of "biblical communication" in the country!

---

[11] Study Bible notes (and other paratextual aids such as section headings, illustrations, a glossary or topical index) are needed to deal with cross-cultural mismatches that result in what Harries terms "interlinguistic incompatability, i.e., untranslatability" (p. 9). The world-view that underlies a Bantu language is often closer than English conceptualization to the biblical, ancient near eastern perspective on reality, but certain significant incongruities do occur. For example, the Genesis marriage principle that "a man will leave his father and mother and be united to his wife…" (2:24) sounds quite natural to the matrilocal Chewa people, but not to the patrilocal Tonga of southern Zambia (both are matrilineal ethnic groups).

[12] Theological "development" occurs as indigenous African perspectives are stimulated and the appropriate terminology generated during encounters with crucial, but often challenging biblical concepts—one of the most difficult (in my experience) occurring in the very beginning with "[the] Spirit of God" (*ruach elohim*) (Gen. 1:2).

Further Class Applications

My efforts to integrate MT teaching with regard to class usage and congregational application reflect on two more of Wildsmith's suggestions. The first pertains to general usage. I often noted when attending a worship service in a local vernacular (whether Nyanja or any other Zambian language) how poorly Scripture portions were publicly read. Admittedly, in some cases this was the result of a rather poor, dated, or literal translation. But there is no excuse for reading even a difficult translation badly—not if one makes the effort to practice reading the text aloud, well ahead of time. I therefore encouraged my students to do this—"to read their MT Bibles aloud with passion and clarity in church services so the audience can more easily grasp the meaning of the passage" (p. 25). This is not only a principle of good communication, it is more importantly a vital aspect of our respect for the Word of God and for the One who inspired it!

More specifically then, how can we work on "transposing theology learned in English into a series of sermons or Bible studies in a church that uses the local mother tongue" (p. 25)? As discussed earlier, one place to begin such an effort is when actually teaching a course on theology, or in my case, biblical exegesis (we focus together during three years of study on the books of Genesis, Psalms, Isaiah, Romans, Ephesians, Hebrews, and Revelation). When important passages and terms occur in class, after considering their meaning in the original text and in English, we discuss their vernacular equivalents in Nyanja, moving back and forth from English as the need arises. Major assignments then focus on some congregational application of what has been learned and discussed in class. For example, students must prepare a Bible study (or less often, a sermon) that is appropriate for presentation in the local Lusaka-area church that they happen to be serving at the time, whether in English or in Nyanja. Special attention should be given to those problematic communicational issues that arose in class discussion, and the presentation ought to reflect one or more of the solutions, clarifications, or explanations that we discovered together. The instructor, too, might take up an assignment with the assistance of one or more of his students, namely, research into some aspect of a MT (and its culture) which would prove helpful in improving his capacity to understand and communicate in the vernacular—whether teaching (proverbs, for example), preaching,[13] or even dramatic performance.[14]

---

[13] I made an effort to learn more about an indigenous, inductive manner of preaching when researching and writing the book *Preaching That Grabs the Heart: A Rhetorical-Stylistic Study of the Chichewa Revival Sermons of Shadrack Wame* (Kachere Monograph, Blantyre: CLAIM, 2000).

[14] I too learned to "recognize and express the value of African languages" (p. 24) and related cultural forms of expression when exploring Christian radio drama in Chichewa: *Sewero! Christian Drama and the Drama of Christianity in Africa* (Zomba: Kachere Series, 2005).

Taking this MT enrichment process a step further, it becomes the focus of the "final exam" of our Psalms course. Each student is asked to choose a favorite psalm and first of all write up for oral class presentation an exegesis of that pericope, with periodic reference to the Hebrew text on the one hand, and to the student's MT on the other (here not limited to Nyanja). The second part of the assignment is to prepare a poetic translation of that same psalm in the student's MT, demonstrating some of the stylistic resources of that language in this vernacular rendition. For those with a musical inclination (and for extra credit!), students will actually compose a song version of their translation, adapted as necessary to fit the rhythm or melody chosen. Some students include their wives and children in this compositional exercise, thus making it a family project also during its presentation in class. The students are encouraged then to try their versions out in a local congregation in order to generate wider feedback and also to stimulate similar Scripture-based musical composition among local choirs.

Conclusion

I was very encouraged to read the articles promoting MTTE in *AJET* 29.1. Both authors stated the case well, and in this reflection I have merely underscored some of their major concerns and recommendations. This includes doing everything feasible to make it possible (e.g. through a reduced workload – p. 23) for expatriate instructors to function effectively in the local vernacular as well as "the local world-view and culture based on it" (p. 19). I strongly support a "both-and" didactic approach - teaching theology, biblical exegesis, and related courses (homiletics, isagogics, symbolics, etc.) in English (or some other LWC) *as well as* in a major local MT - not separately, in one or the other language, but *simultaneously*, employing both languages in continual alternation (verbal "dialogue") as needed. This practice relates to passages from Acts and Revelation Wildsmith used to conclude his article. "What if Babel's curse is removed when we sing God's praises in a multitude of MTs that together form the heavenly language?" (p. 26). Given the uniqueness and particular expressive "genius" of each MT,[15] what better way to demonstrate the universal fellowship of believers than in continuous, concurrent joint choral acclamation to the eternal King, our Triune Creator-Redeemer-Sanctifier, *en masse* before his heavenly throne (Rev. 7:15)!

[15] "Each language has its own genius. That is to say, each language possesses certain distinctive features which give it a special character…" (Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation*, Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1969, pp. 3-4).