

EMERGING ISSUES IN BIBLE TRANSLATION INTO NIGERIAN LANGUAGES: INSIGHTS FROM SELECTED TRANSLATION PROJECTS

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Abstract

In recent times there has been an explosion of Bible translation into Nigerian languages. This explosion has been characterized by the increased involvement of local translation worker, unlike the earlier translation works that was dominated by expatriates. Although the increase in Bible translation activities and the increased involvement of local translators are positive developments, they come with the risk of less rigorous background sociolinguistic research, and the possibility that language politics among Nigerian ethnic nationalities and the attendant sentiments may percolate into the process of selecting languages to work on. There is therefore a need for an objective scholarly appraisal of the sociolinguistic dynamics involved. To this end, this article x-rays some critical sociolinguistic considerations that should guide the process of determining which Nigerian languages to translate the Bible into at a particular point in time. The article concludes, citing a number of specific instances, that some somewhat discomfiting Bible translation decision are being taken in Nigeria on the basis of unconvincing logic and sentimental grounds, leading to redundant or superfluous works which waste scarce resources. These include the Okun Bible, and ongoing translation projects in Kami, Gupa, Ọkọ and Ọsàyẹ́n. The article recommends the adoption of a central coordinating body to vet Bible translation decisions in Nigeria using strictly professional standard.

Keywords: Bible translation, local translators , Nigerian languages Okun Bible

Introduction

One of the core objectives of modern Christian proselytisation in Africa is the translation of the Bible into different languages. The spiritual objective is hinged on the notion that making the core Christian message available in all languages is critical to achieving what Christ commissioned the church to do in the instruction to make disciples of all nations. Traill (2019), alludes to a prevailing mantra in the Bible translation world which holds that people need the Bible in the language they sin in, and in their “heart language.” In line with this thinking, producing indigenous language translations of the Bible was a major prong in early missionary activities in Nigeria, and was the ultimate goal of early orthography development in major Nigerian languages (Are, 2018).

Today, there is an avalanche of highly motivated efforts towards translating the Bible into more Nigerian languages. As at 2022, twenty-seven Nigerian languages have full Bible translations (Vanguard Newspaper, 2022). Currently, 232 translation projects are in the pre-translation, preparatory stage (Tsar and Killam, 2024), while about 10 are in the completion stages (Bible society of Nigeria, 2024).

As efforts continue toward producing more and more Bible translations in Nigeria languages, it is clear to any discerning linguist that some issues have to be continually addressed. These include the choices of languages and dialects to work on, the matter of whether a translation is needed in the first place as well as the extent to which existing translation are actively used. It is imperative to address these issues because of the complexities associated with the language ecology of Nigeria which account for why even a basic matter such establishing the number of languages in Nigeria remain problematic. Continuing academic scrutiny of linguistic issues relating to past and ongoing Bible translation works in Nigeria could help complement the inputs of existing studies which are largely premised within proselytization sentimentalities and rhetoric. This current study objectively interrogates Bible translation decisions from the lens of relevant Sociolinguistic dynamics. This paper explains some sociolinguistic considerations that must inform bible translation decisions and highlight a few instances in Nigeria where some of these considerations appear not to have been considered. This is a process focused paper which dwells precisely on the aspect of the translation process where the choice of target languages is made. No translation product elements are interrogated.

The History of Bible Translations in Nigeria

The first indigenous language Bible, the Efik language Bible was produced 1868 (Warren-Rothlin, 2012) through the efforts of foreign missionaries. In 1888, the Yoruba Bible was published with very significant contribution from Samuel Ajayi-Crowther (Adamo, 2019). Ever since, twenty seven Nigerian language Bibles have been produced principally as a result of the works of the Bible Society of Nigeria and several other organisations such as the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust (NBTT), Language Development Facilitators (LDF), The Seed Company (TSC), Lutheran Bible Translators (LBT), International Bible Society (IBS) and CAPRO. These organisations operate on the basis of individual agenda though they have been known to often engage in collaborative work (Waren-Rothlin 2012). Today, the drive to produce Bibles in more Nigerian languages is going on at a breathtaking speed. As previously stated, there are up to 250 ongoing translation projects.

Proselytisers' Perspectives on the Imperative of Translating the Bible

The idea of presenting ancient Christian scripture in languages other than the original Classical Hebrew, Aramaic and Greek is an old one. There are several ancient efforts toward this, which include the Syriac translation of the Old Testament in the 2nd Century AD, and the Coptic, Gothic, Georgian, Armenian, Caucasian and Ethiopic Bibles, all produced between the 3rd Century AD and the 6th Century AD (Gray, 2018).

In Europe, an official Latin version of the Bible called the Vulgate was produced in the 4th and 5th century, and for quite a long time in Europe, all agitations to translate the Bible into other languages were ferociously resisted, but clandestine translation activities continued until the era of reformation which eventually led to breakthroughs like the momentous translations the King James English Bible (Gray, 2018).

All along, the driving principle behind translation efforts have been that the Christian message should be demystified and made freely available for people to access in their indigenous languages as a way of enhancing the reach of the gospel. Exponents of translation opine that rather than contaminate the sacred text (as those who resisted translation feared), Bible translation “Preserves the essence of Christianity as a religion without a fixed language, culture, or location. It empowers and yet relativises all languages and cultures, thereby furthering an equality in dignity among the speakers of all the languages of the world” (Kenmogne, 2022:112). This doctrine based on the indigenising principle, which relates to the view that people should be at home within their own culture as Christians, and that language is critical towards achieving this. This is because Bible translation in diverse languages “allows the languages that capture the sociocultural experience of a people to become the receptacle and vehicle of God’s message” (Kenmogne, 2022: 113). Kenmogne (2022) further argues that the critical factor why Christianity in North Africa did not survive the Arab invasion, and why early 15th Century missionary efforts in sub Saharan Africa failed was the absence of indigenisation via translations of the Bible into indigenous languages. On the contrary, the relative success of 19th century missionary efforts in Sub Saharan Africa could be largely attributed to linguistic indigenisation of the Bible and Christian liturgy.

With the above as the driving principle, the translation of the Bible into diverse languages is currently going on at a breathtaking rate, buoyed by the expansion of the faith in Africa and South America. As previously mentioned, in Nigeria alone, there are about 250 ongoing translation projects. Several questions would, naturally, arise in the mind of any linguist observing this trend. These would range from question regarding the accuracy of the orthography and translation, the dialect choices where standardisation is required, the vitality of the languages in question, the availability or otherwise of literacy in the languages concerned and so on. Indeed, the basic question of whether some language groups require or need the Bible in their languages/dialects is a germane one in the context of multilingualism and multiculturalism, where several persons and communities are able to function seamlessly across amorphous linguistic and cultural borders.

One cannot belittle the expertise of members of different Christian organisations involved in the myriads of efforts to translate the Bible into Nigerian languages. Indeed, some of the Linguists and translators working for these organisations have historically pioneered and strengthened studies of many Nigerian languages, and have contributed immensely to the development of orthographies. This article is simply an attempt to complement their efforts with some objective insights.

Principles and Standards in Choices of Target Languages

There are a number of principles based on Sociolinguistic considerations which this researcher believes should guide Bible translation decisions. For clarity, these principles are discussed in this section.

In a densely multilingual setting like Nigeria where there are hundreds of languages, it is simply not feasible to translate the Bible into all languages no matter the evangelistic fervor and enthusiasm of the translation workers. In view of this, informed decisions about choices of languages into which the Bible should be translated at any point in time must be made. Specific sociolinguistic and personnel considerations must guide such decisions as enshrined in articles eight and nine of translation principles and standards of the Forum of Bible Agencies International (FOBAIT, 2017).

In a situation where the goal is to reach as many people as possible with the Christian message, the number of speakers of the languages must be a critical consideration. This of course accounts for the existence of translations of the Bible in the major languages of Nigeria. The existing translations are generally in the most widely spoken languages, as obtainable on the YouVersion Bible AAp list. This includes Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Efik, Igala, Tiv, Gbayi, Berom, Fulfude, Urhobo and so on.

Giving that proselytization is committed strictly to winning converts into the Christian faith and ensuring the consistency of existing converts, resources that may achieve this are never considered wasted in Christian circles regardless of how paltry the success appears to be. This is a position clearly elucidated in Barnes (2005), using Christ's parable of the lost sheep as Biblical reference. However, where resources are not unlimited, as the case often is, it seems quite prudent to give immediate consideration to languages with wider reach before languages with limited reach.

This researcher firmly believes that language vitality is another factor that must be considered. This is often weighed in terms of its number of speakers, intergenerational transmission, and the use of the concerned language in various domains of society. There is a need to prioritise languages with vibrant communities of speakers to ensure the translation's long-term impact and sustainability. Where the language is critically endangered or even tittering precariously on the edge of becoming moribund, there will be no need to produce a Bible in it.

One must however observe that sometimes, having popular materials translated in threatened or endangered languages can be a measure towards reviving such a language. Indeed, some Bible scholars such as Rabali (2021) argue, using some fairly unconvincing theological arguments, that achieving language maintenance should be an ecclesiastical goal for Bible translators. However, one must emphatically state that the idea that language maintenance should be the objective of proselytisers is a very debatable idea.

Another factor that should be considered is whether the concerned languages have active literary/literacy traditions. There are languages for which orthographies exist but the speakers of the languages do not engage with written materials in the languages significantly. This could be due to the existence of

functional and acceptable alternative languages, the absence of any roles for the language beyond home use, and so on. It is even possible in some situations that very few members of the language group concerned are literate in such languages. In a situation like this, there are chances that Bible translations into such languages may only produce Bibles for the shelf which largely serve as artifacts until the languages concerned are allotted roles that encourage more active engagements with their writings.

The factor of language attitudes is also a critical consideration. Societal attitudes toward different languages can influence the responses of people to Bible translations. Such attitudes include the perceptions, preferences, and biases associated with each language within a multilingual community, and the accompanying language politics which must be navigated sensitively. For example, in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria, Hausa Bibles should naturally suffice because the language is a lingua franca in the area. Indeed, the initial decision of foreign missionaries to concentrate on the use of Hausa Bibles in this area was premised on this practical consideration (Norton, 2018). However as Are & Adamo (2019) observe, the language politics emanating from religious suspicions has created some measure of hostility to Hausa, necessitating the production of Bibles in indigenous Middle Belt languages. Christian proselytisers have to be sensitive as much as possible to such challenges as this in Bible translation decisions.

Dialectological appraisals are also critical to making error proof Bible translation decisions. One of the abiding challenges of language listing in Nigeria is the difficulties involved in determining whether to list some linguistic systems as languages or as dialectal variations in a language continuum. In the context of these challenges, the correct picture of things must be accurately determined to avoid unnecessary duplication of efforts and consequent waste of scarce resources. Often, there is a lot of language politics involved among the concerned people, and as previously stated, the sentimentalities involved may be difficult to ignore. But the delicate balancing act between taking people's sentiments into cognisance and being practical must be deftly managed. This requires adequate community engagement with linguistic communities, language activists, and cultural stakeholders to understand their language needs, aspirations, and priorities. There must be robust collaborations and consultations to ensure that translation efforts align with community interests and values, while being practical at the same time. As a corollary to this, it must be noted that in Nigeria, communities are often in heavily multilingual environments and are often engaging code mixing, code-switching, and borrowing as well as other linguistic dynamics associated with language in contact phenomena. These issues are germane when selecting languages for translation to ensure linguistic authenticity and cultural integrity.

Finally, it is very important that as much as possible, the sentiments of the language users concerned must not be allowed to outweigh professional assessments, and must not absolutely dictate decision making. In the modern world where language rights are loudly and vociferously touted, members of some linguistic communities may be influenced by advocacies for the right to

access literature and cultural resources in one's own language, and may push this agenda in their engagements with Christian language workers on the field. But it is highly doubtful whether such right concerns should be the principal burden of persons trying to propagate their faith.

This article does not assume that Christian language workers are ignorant of the above principles and standards. Indeed, many of them are versatile, highly trained language experts who in many cases (as previously mentioned) have pioneered the study of many Nigerian languages and are sustaining fresh and continuing insights into the linguistic geography of Nigeria. In this regard, the enormous contributions of organisations like SIL, the Joshua project, Wycliffe Bible Translators and others to the study of Nigeria's Linguistic ecology cannot be over stated. Despite this, a number of observations in recent time seem to suggest that there is a need to add new voices in the fray of scholarly discourse on Bible translation decisions in Nigeria. This need is made more urgent by the increasing local involvement in these translation works. While this has accelerated progress beyond the pace that was feasible when the work was essentially foreign driven (Wycliffe Bible Translators, 2024), there is also the possibility that this development will increase the risk that local language-politics and sentimentalities would percolate into decision making. This is not a negative verdict on the competence of local language workers. It is a practical acceptance of the stark reality that people could be influenced consciously or subconsciously by prevailing sentiments that drive language-politics in their environment. Some recent specific instances of concern are discussed below.

Selected Instances of Worrisome Bible Translation Decisions in Nigeria

In 2022, the Bible Society of Nigeria announced its completion of what it referred to as the Okun Bible. The report which appeared in the Vanguard Newspaper on 2nd November, 2022 claimed that the Okun language was a language spoken in Kogi, Kwara and Èkìtì states in Nigeria. There are a number of serious problems with this development. First, those who sponsored this project must have been given the impression that there is indeed a language called Okun language. This is an absolute fallacy. The term 'Okun' is a general referent to a group of Yoruba dialects predominantly, but not exclusively found in Kogi State. The individual dialects included are Bùnù, Ìjùmú, Owé, Òwòrò and Yàgbà (Ilori and Are, 2021). The point must be made that these are individual dialectal variations within the Yoruba language continuum for which the existing version of the Yoruba Bible, written in Òyó dialect, have served without any complaint or hitch for years, since the Òyó dialect is completely intelligible in Okun communities and is taught in schools as is the case in all Nigerian communities where dialects of the Yòrùbá dialect continuum are spoken. Indeed, the Òyó dialect plays certain social roles in Okun communities. For example, it is often preferred in very formal contexts to the indigenous dialects (Metiboba, 2015). This is an indication that the Òyó dialect is quite at home in Okun communities. Indeed, as Are (2002) opines, the Okun dialects are actually in recession among the younger generation, many of whom prefer to communicate in the Òyó dialect. Another related issue worth interrogating is

the choice of the Owé dialect as the representation of the Okun dialect cluster which, as previously mentioned, comprise of five different dialects. Although these dialects are mutually intelligible (Arokoyo, 2007), there is no evidence anywhere that members of the other four dialect groups within the cluster would find Owé any more intelligible or structurally or pragmatically more accessible than the Ọ̀yọ́ variant in which a Bible translation has existed since 1884.

The question that naturally arises is obvious: what then was the pressing imperative responsible for the investment of scarce resources by the Bible Society of Nigeria into the production of the so called Okun Bible, particularly in the face of other more pressing translation needs? Some unobtrusive inquiry made by this researcher suggests that this project, which one can safely refer to as absolute travesty, may not be unconnected with influence peddling buoyed by sentimental considerations. Even if this was not the case, an inadequate understanding of the linguistic situation in the concerned parts of North East Yòrùbá land, or a decision to ignore them, must have influenced the prioritisation of this most unnecessary project.

Another curious case is the case of Kami and Gupa languages. Recently, this researcher came in contact with a group of highly enthusiastic and highly motivated Bible translators working to produce Bibles in these languages of Niger state, Nigeria. There are certain sociolinguistic information about these two language groups that raise doubt about the need to expend resources on the projects without further clarity on the linguistic dynamics in the linguistic environment in question. In the first place, these languages (Kami and Gupa), along with other languages like Dibo and Kakanda are mutually intelligible (Decker and Abraham, 2022). It is also important to note that the speakers of these languages often use Nupe extensively in their daily interactions (Decker and Abraham, 2022). One is tempted to ask whether there are any practical communication reasons why the existing Nupe Bible would not suffice for these groups of people. In addition, considering the mutual intelligibility between Kami and Gupa, one wonders whether it is expedient in the face of scarce resources to have separate Bible translations for these languages. The critical point here is that it is highly doubtful whether there is adequate sentiment free knowledge of the actual sociolinguistic dynamics of the concerned environment to warrant the ongoing translation efforts.

This researcher raised these issues with one of the partakers in the translation project. He explained that there were some deep emotional and spiritual benefits associated with reading scriptures in one's own native tongue, citing some anecdotal evidences to prove his point. The truth of the matter is that what makes a reading material in any particular language to resonate strongly with a person's cognition is not the factor of ancestry. It relates more with the language exposures of the persons concerned from childhood through puberty to adulthood. It is highly doubtful whether exact understanding of the linguistic exposures of the average Kami and Gupa person is available anywhere. The contradictions and inconsistencies in studies of these languages and their linguistic ecology is all too obvious if one considers the positions Blench (2012) and (Decker and Abraham, 2022). This researcher believes that

there is a need to look more closely into the role of Nupe as a dominant and pervasive language in this environment. Perhaps, it could be as entrenched if not more entrenched in the cognition of the concerned peoples than their native tongues, particularly among the more exposed and mobile younger generation. This possibility is a critical consideration toward determining whether the Nupe Bible can have a cross-linguistic utility in the environment in question, in which case one can raise questions about the need for new translations.

Another case in question is that case of Ọkọ and Ọsàyẹn, spoken in in Ogori and Magongo in Ogori-Magongo Local government area, Kogi State. These two language names are listed as languages belonging to the Ọkọ-Eni-Ọsàyẹn cluster in Blench (2020). One fact must be clearly stated about Ọkọ and Ọsàyẹn: they are precisely the same language, albeit having some minute and inconsequential dialectal variation. However, while the people of Ogori refer to the language as Ọkọ, the people of Magongo refer to it as Ọsàyẹn. The above is based on this researchers first-hand knowledge of the communities involves, and interviews of native speaker informants conducted for the purpose of this research.

There is a Website dedicated to the development of Ọkọ. The link to the site is www.okolanguage.com. The site often publishes regular updates on Bible translation work in Ọkọ, with indications that they are referring to the language spoken in both Ogori and Magongo. Interestingly, this researcher recently discovered that there is a parallel ongoing work by the Nigeria Bible Translation Trust which is dedicated to producing a Bible in Ọsàyẹn. These are works on the same language. But while one uses the term favoured in Ogori (Ọkọ), the other one, which is run from an office in Magongo, prefers the term Ọsàyẹn. This is a somewhat discomfoting situation, particularly when one considers the criticality of unified efforts to avoid unnecessary duplications and waste of resources, not to talk about the fact that the existence of active literacy in either Ọkọ or Ọsàyẹn is highly doubtful.

Concluding Remarks

The beauty of the goal of making the Bible available in all languages is not contended in this paper. One must reiterate the fact that the essence of the submissions herein is to lend a voice to the success of Bible translation efforts by highlighting the criticality of adequate sociolinguistic knowledge to avoid redundant or superfluous efforts that merely waste scarce resources. The opportunity cost engendered by scarce resources requires knowledge-based, sentiment-free and rigorously drawn scales of preferences. While all organisations that are committed to new Bible translations in Nigerian languages are encouraged to continue their works, it is suggested here that a central clearing house for approval and coordination should be agreed upon. Such a body would be in a position to prevent duplications and advise on the viability, relevance and acceptability of translation projects, after subjecting proposals to scrutiny, based on solid professionalism.

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