

## Advances in Bible Translation for the Deaf

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Bible translation is the red-headed stepchild of missionary work. That is to say, it is often ignored or overlooked in the grand scheme of missions, not fitting well into the usual missions definition of “evangelism, discipleship, and church planting.” This is because, just as most Christian workers in the world serve among already reached people groups, most missionaries (those Christian workers ministering cross-culturally) work among people groups who already have access to the Bible in their language. If missionaries are the minority of Christian workers, then Bible translators are the minority of missionaries, serving people groups who do not have access to God’s Word.

Wycliffe Bible Translators states that there are 7099 living languages but only about 2900 of them have even a portion of God’s Word and only about 1400 a complete New Testament. While many translations are underway, Wycliffe has identified 1600 languages that need a Bible translation but where no translation project has begun.

For those of us who read the Bible in English, we are blessed with a multitude of translations in every style, degree of literalness, and reading level we could possibly want. That is not the case in the world’s 7098 other languages. It is hard for us to imagine the difficulty of understanding God’s message without the Bible. For many of the 1400 languages that have a New Testament, the text is stilted, formal, literal, or otherwise difficult to understand. The problem for semi-literate and illiterate people is even harder.

For the last several years, I have been focused on alleviating this problem for the deaf in Latin America. Many people who do not work with the deaf ask, “Why can’t they just read a regular Bible?” In the United States, and a handful of other rich countries, the deaf usually receive an adequate education. For those fortunate few, the answer is of course that they can read a regular Bible. However, the vast majority of the deaf in the world face closed doors to even basic education. A reading level sufficient to understand a regular Bible is rare.

My team and I have been working on producing a written translation of the New Testament into simplified Spanish for the deaf in the 21 countries and territories where Spanish is the dominant language used in education. The aim of the project is to produce a true translation (not a summary or a set of children’s Bible stories) which faithfully communicates the full message of the source text, but does so at about a second grade reading level. By making adjustments to the syntax and vocabulary to address specific difficulties of the deaf, understanding can be facilitated. This allows many of the deaf to read the text with some understanding.

How to write a text that is easy to read and understand is a problem that has been studied and solved: mainly you need to use short sentences and a limited vocabulary. Short sentences require the author to avoid subordinate clauses and other complex syntactic structures. Limited vocabulary increases the chance that the reader will know or can learn the words used in the text. What has not been extensively studied is how to simplify an existing text to comply with those goals. That is to say, translating a text so that it becomes easy to read and understand is much more difficult than writing such a text.

My research has developed a methodology for simplifying the Biblical text without leaving out any meaning. Additionally, we have developed ways to further clarify the meaning

across the cultural divide between the Biblical authors' world (1<sup>st</sup> century, middle eastern, Jewish, literate) and the reader's (21<sup>st</sup> century, Western, post-Christian, semi-literate).

A key step in our methodology is to separate out each thought in a text then expressing each thought as a separate sentence. This has the effect of eliminating complex structures connecting various clauses. This can best be illustrated with an example. Consider James 1.1 which reads (literally) "James of-God and of-Lord Jesus Christ slave to the twelve tribes which-are in the dispersion greetings". Here are the individual thoughts explicitly stated in this verse.

1. James is a slave of God and Jesus Christ.
2. Jesus Christ is Lord.
3. The twelve tribes are dispersed.
4. James greets the twelve tribes.

Additional information is implicit: The document is a letter (implied by the formal wording which was commonly used for first century letters) and James is the author. Both of those points might be lost on 21<sup>st</sup> century readers, especially those with limited formal education.

Another problem with the text is the meaning of "the twelve tribes which are in the dispersion". Some commentators take it to mean "the Jewish people, who literally have spread out over the world". Others take it as a poetic expression meaning "all God's people everywhere". A translator who wishes to make the text clear must choose one of these meanings; a literal translation of the Greek gives the reader only words without meaning.

Putting all this together, our translation reads (back translated from the Spanish):

My name is James.

I am writing this letter.

I serve God and the Lord Jesus Christ.

I write to all God's people everywhere in the world.

I greet you.

Another important task in the translation process is to identify permitted vocabulary (based on the understanding of test audiences) then only use those words. (Proper nouns, of course, must remain, and some key biblical concepts require a specific word, which must be defined in terms of simpler words.)

There are several problems specific to a translation for the deaf. One is the use of pronouns. As speakers of English, we are generally used to substituting a pronoun such as "he" rather than repeating a person's name in a sentence or paragraph. This is problematic for deaf readers, since signed languages rarely use pronouns. Instead, the participants in a sentence are identified by the directionality of the verb or a line of sight. For example, the verb "to help" can be signed moving from the speaker toward the listener, meaning "I help you". Moving the sign in the other direction means "you help me". Thus, deaf readers often have difficulty identifying the referent of a pronoun.

This particular problem is easily overcome by repeating the proper name rather than replacing it with a pronoun. This is exactly what many historic denominations have been doing in recent years to avoid identifying God as male. One can hear utterances such as "We praise God for God's goodness" rather than "We praise God for His goodness" in those churches. It sounds awkward and is in fact not stylistically normal, but perfectly correct by all the rules of grammar and syntax.

Substituting names for pronouns is one example of the adjustments we have made to the form of the text in order to conserve its meaning. This has resulted in a translation that has been welcomed by the deaf community. As one deaf person said, “Finally, a Bible I can read!” In fact, the translation has been well received by literate, hearing people as well, due to its clarity. Our plan is to finish the New Testament and make it available in all 21 target countries, not just to the deaf, but to all Spanish readers who desire a clear and easy to read translation.

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