

***Minority languages and Bible translation:  
A recipe for theological enrichment***

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Minority languages into which the Bible has been translated often have grammatical or semantic structures that force translators to raise previously unasked questions about the meaning of the Scripture text. If the relevant translation issues are made accessible to a wider audience, these questions can raise theological awareness and deepen theological reflection in the Christian community in general. Three examples of such theological issues are given based on translation issues raised in Tok Pisin (inclusive/exclusive 'we' in Mark 4:38), Tuvan (an obligatory lexical choice between older and younger siblings in relation to the age of Jesus' brothers and sisters in the Gospels), and Gagauz (different possible renderings of 'light' that give different shades of meaning to the theological idea that God is light in the writings of John.)

Keywords: Bible translation, semantics, theology, Gagauz, Lak, Tok Pisin, Tuvan

Некоторые грамматические и семантические особенности миноритарных языков порой могут заставить переводчиков Библии задаваться вопросами относительно значения Священного текста, которые ранее у исследователей Библии не возникали. Если такие переводческие проблемы удастся донести до широкого круга читателей, то вопросы могут побудить христиан к более глубоким богословским размышлениям. В статье рассматриваются три подобных примера теологической проблематики, которые возникли в ходе перевода Библии на язык ток-писин (инклюзивное и эксклюзивное местоимения «мы» в Ев. от Марка 4:38), на тувинский язык (обязательный лексический выбор между старшими и младшими братьями и сестрами относительно возраста братьев и сестер Иисуса) и на гагаузский язык (разные возможности передачи

понятия «света», которые в Писаниях Иоанна придают разные оттенки значения богословской метафоры о том, что Бог есть свет).

Ключевые слова: перевод Библии, семантика, теология, гагаузский, лакский, ток-писин, тувинский

## 1. Introduction<sup>1</sup>

Usually, when people think about Bible translation activity, they assume that the main beneficiary of the translation is the community of minority language native speakers who now have direct access to the Holy Scriptures in their mother tongue. Bible translation is seen as enriching the materials available in the recipient language, as well as the theological worldview held by speakers of the language. While this is of course true, in this paper I make the case that there is also a potential unseen beneficiary that could profit from Bible translation into minority languages. This secondary beneficiary is the worldwide community of Christians, both lay people and scholars, who are interested in the meaning of the Scriptures in both their original context and in their application to everyday life. As I explain below, Bible translation into minority languages forces the translation team to deal with important shades of meaning that may be concealed by the linguistic structure of Standard Average European languages, such as English, French or Russian, or more controversially, even by the structure of the original source languages of Scripture. If the translation team makes public the results of its work in a way that is accessible to a wider audience, one that is outside of the receptor language group, the interesting findings may prompt deeper theological reflection among the audience than had previously been possible due to the restrictions imposed on Scripture by the languages in which most people in the world read the Bible. In this way, Bible

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translation into minority languages in fact has the potential to enrich Christian theology in general. This is one more benefit that comes from studying and documenting minority languages that has not yet been noted in the literature on language documentation. A similar point was recently made by Zetzsche [2013], but this was in a popular magazine, not a scholarly venue, and may not have been noticed by the worldwide community of language scholars.

In any field where one works with multiple languages, whether translation proper or other forms of scholarship, one always encounters lexico-semantic structural differences between these languages. As Brown & Hoyle [2005: 29] put it, “One cannot find two natural languages in which there is semantic and grammatical isomorphism between the lexica of the two languages.” For example, the Russian word *жертва* [žertva] can be translated into English as either ‘sacrifice’ or ‘victim’, depending on the context of its use. Likewise, the seemingly simple English preposition *for* turns out not to be as simple as it first seems when one wants to render it into Spanish, where the prepositions *por* and *para* are both available as translation equivalents depending on the context [Delbecque 1995]. In translation work, it is often both a tremendous joy and an agonizing labor to first recognize these distinctions in the source language and then to find felicitous ways to render them in the recipient language. Translators working with majority languages like the ones listed in the preceding sentences are accustomed to the presence of such challenges in their work. However, whenever translation activity involves a new pair of languages, it can be expected that new challenges of this sort will arise that may have never been encountered before because the specific semantic configurations of these two languages, each encoding a distinct view of the world, had previously not been set side by side as is done in translation work.

In Bible translation into minority languages, the process of wrestling with just such semantic nuances and non-isomorphisms between source and receptor language raises theological questions that have often gone unnoticed by professional theologians and Bible commentators who work only with Greek/Hebrew and majority

languages. The language we use to reflect on Scripture is to some degree responsible for the kind of reflection that we can have (this claim is based on the weak form of the Whorf-Sapir hypothesis). In other words, language affects our theological thinking because it shapes the linguistically structured categories that we use to organize this theological thinking.

One well-known example of this is the issue of God's gender. When one reads the Hebrew Bible, one finds that God is referred to with *hu'* (e.g., Exodus 34:14; Psalm 95:7), the 3sg personal pronoun that patterns with references to men but not women. This particular referential device thus to a certain degree associates God with the concept of maleness in Hebrew.<sup>2</sup> This is not the case in languages that do not differentiate for gender in their pronominal system, such as the Turkic family or other typologically similar languages. Thus, in Tuvan, a south Siberian Turkic language, the 3sg personal/distal demonstrative pronoun is *ol* 'he/she/it/that one'. Because this pronoun does not pattern with features that have anything to do with either maleness or femaleness in Tuvan, readers of the Tuvan Bible are not pre-determined by this element of their language's structure to attribute any biological gender to God. Now, it may still be the case that some Tuvans do attribute biological gender to God, but their pronominal system does not have anything to do with this, unlike that of Hebrew.

The Hebrew/Tuvan difference in pronominal patterning is an example of how the structure of one language (Tuvan) fails to transfer a semantic/referential property that is present in another language (Hebrew) in the Bible. Of greater interest in the present article are cases in which the source language of the Bible (or intermediary majority language) has fewer semantic distinctions

<sup>2</sup> This claim is not in any way intended to deny that some other features of ancient Hebrew may depict God as having characteristics typically associated with femaleness. It may also be noted that in terms of linguistic markedness, the male pronoun *hu'* appears to be unmarked in relation to the more marked pronoun *hi'* that is usually used to refer to women in Hebrew.



Bible translation into minority languages helps to uncover many such semantic distinctions that may not have been previously noticed by Bible scholars because they are underspecified in the Greek and Hebrew source texts. This forces the translator/exegete to engage in an extra level of exegetical/theological reflection that maybe no-one else has ever engaged in before in the history of Biblical studies. In turn, this leads to more insights, as well as more questions, on the meaning of Holy Scripture and on methods for interpreting it — an expansion of the hermeneutical spiral [Osborne 1991].

Minority language Bible translation is thus an important tool for engaging with Scripture on a deeper level, in that this activity leads to the asking of questions that have not yet been asked by previous Bible researchers. Some of these questions (such as the one in the Lak example above), may be linguistically interesting but not particularly important to Christian theology. Other questions based on newly encountered linguistic distinctions, however, may have direct relevance to cardinal issues of Christian theology. When these questions are asked aloud (or in print, as is usually the case for Bible translators and scholars) it is not only minority peoples that benefit as the translation recipients, but also the translators themselves and potentially all Christians who are exposed to this translation work! This is yet one more way in which intentional applied linguistic analysis of minority languages and translation work into them can impact the global community.

In what follows, I present three detailed examples of small languages around the world (Tok Pisin, Tuvan, and Gagauz) whose semantic properties caused Bible translators to stop, think and pose important theological questions. It is possible that at least some of these interesting questions had never before been asked by Bible scholars prior to the Bible translation project in which they were raised. The first two instances (Tok Pisin and Tuvan/Turkic) are widely known within the Bible translation and linguistic communities, while the third one (Gagauz) is probably not yet well known in either community.

## 2. Tok Pisin: Who does ‘we’ really mean?

In ancient Greek, as well as in the other European languages, there is a simple 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun that means ‘we’, or more technically, ‘I (speaker) and others with me’. In Greek, this is *hēmeis*, in French *nous*, in Russian *мы*, in German *wir*, and so forth, and each of these languages has a corresponding 1pl agreement form in the verb paradigm. In other languages, however, the semantic/referential properties of the 1<sup>st</sup> person plural pronoun and associated verbal agreement forms are more complex. Thus, Tok Pisin (ISO: tpi), a creole language of wider communication in Papua New Guinea, has several 1pl pronouns that differ in terms of their inclusion of the hearer/addressee in the speaker’s group [Romaine 1992]. In other words, Tok Pisin differentiates between inclusive and exclusive 1pl pronouns.

- (2) a. Inclusive = *yumi(pela)* ‘we (I and others including you my hearers)’  
 b. Exclusive = *mipela* ‘we (I and others but NOT including you my hearers)’

The Tok Pisin speaker therefore has an obligatory binary choice whenever s/he is about to make a 1pl reference. If s/he wants to refer to a group that includes both the speaker and the hearer, s/he would use *yumipela* ‘1pl incl’. If, on the other hand, the speaker wants to refer to a group that does not include the hearer, s/he would use *mipela* ‘1pl excl’.

This pronominal distinction in Tok Pisin becomes important theologically when we look at the New Testament accounts of how Jesus calmed the storm on Lake Galilee. The version of this story provided below comes from the Gospel of Mark 4:37-38:

*And a great windstorm arose, and the waves were breaking into the boat, so that the boat was already filling. But he [Jesus] was in the stern,*

*asleep on the cushion. And they woke him and said to him, “Teacher, do you not care that we are perishing [Gk. apollumetha]?”*<sup>4</sup>

The relevant question here is who exactly Jesus’ disciples have in mind when they say ‘we are perishing’. See Bratcher & Nida [1961] for an early discussion of the pronominal reference in this passage. Do they mean everyone in the boat including Jesus? Or only themselves but not Jesus? This issue is not raised by the original ancient Greek encoding of the pronominal element, nor by the English translation, since neither Greek nor English distinguishes between inclusive and exclusive 1pl forms. The semantic structure of Greek and English would not lead a speaker of these languages to pose such a question in the first place.

But the structure of Tok Pisin does. Rendering this passage into Tok Pisin forces the translator to decide whether this ‘we’ is given as the inclusive 1pl *yumi(pela)* or as the exclusive 1pl *mipela*. No middle ground is possible in this case; a hard choice must be made. The specific Tok Pisin pronoun chosen of course has significant theological implications. If the inclusive *yumipela* is chosen, this implies that the disciples believe Jesus to be in imminent danger of drowning together with them, and are surprised that He Himself is not worried about this. The emotion appealed to by the disciples in this case is Jesus’ instinct of self-preservation, and shows that at this point, they do not yet conceive of Jesus as God Incarnate. If the exclusive *mipela* is chosen, this conveys either that the disciples are incredibly self-centered or that they already have a very high Christology and believe that the storm would not hurt Jesus even if the boat sinks and all the disciples drown. They are in this case invoking Jesus’ mercy to them, even as they express their belief that He is superhuman and in no danger of mortal harm.

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<sup>4</sup> Except for where otherwise stated, all English Scripture citations in this paper are taken from the fairly literal English Standard Version.



The Tok Pisin translation of the Bible chose the inclusive 1pl pronoun *yumi* in this passage.

*Na Jisas i stap long stan bilong bot, na em i slip long wanpela pilo. Orait ol i kirapim em na ol i tok, «Tisa, klostu yumi laik lus, na ating yu no wari liklik long yumi bai i dai?» (Tok Pisin, Mark 4:38)*

This is not a decision that can be said to be correct or incorrect in an absolute sense. As we have seen, the Greek source text of this passage does not provide the semantic information necessary for making a choice between the inclusive and exclusive forms; in linguistic terms, this information is semantically underspecified in the source text. See Mundhenk [2004] on the issue of implicit and explicit information in Bible translation. But a choice had to be made due to the structural-semantic demands of the receptor language, and the translation team had to look to the wider context of the Gospels to make an informed decision on which pronoun to use. In turn, this choice has theological consequences for the interpretation of the rest of the Tok Pisin Gospels.

We see that much theology is contained in a simple pronoun choice and serious theological reflection is needed to render this element wisely in Tok Pisin. Either choice carries with it weighty implications that shape a Bible reader's perception of Jesus through the eyes of His disciples. Were it not for the translation of the Bible into Tok Pisin or another language with an obligatory inclusive/exclusive distinction in 1pl pronouns, the worldwide Christian community may never have been forced to wrestle with this issue in the Gospels.

### 3. Tuvan: Sibling age

For the second case study, we return to the Tuvan language (ISO: tyv), which I had already cited in the introduction in connection with the pronominal encoding of "God's gender". The present question has to do with how the Tuvan language

divides up its kinship terms for brothers and sisters, and the theological effect that this has on referring to Jesus' siblings in the Gospels.

In ancient Greek, the kin term *adelphos* means 'brother, male sibling' while the kin term *adelfē* means 'sister, female sibling'. Both of these terms can also be used to refer to more distant relatives of the specified gender. Just like in English and other European languages, the age of the brother or sister is not in any way indicated in the kin term itself. The brother or sister can be older, younger, or the same age as the speaker or referent. In other languages, however, the terms used to refer to siblings are necessarily differentiated by the sibling's age in relation to the speaker or referent.<sup>5</sup>

Tuvan and other Turkic languages differentiate these kin terms in this fashion. The relevant Tuvan kin terms are:<sup>6</sup>

- |                    |                   |
|--------------------|-------------------|
| (3) a. <i>akiy</i> | 'older brother'   |
| b. <i>ugbay</i>    | 'older sister'    |
| c. <i>dunmay</i>   | 'younger sibling' |

As in Greek, these three Tuvan words are also used for extended kin (cousins, uncles, aunts, etc.), as well as for fictive kin relations. There is no single word that means simply 'brother' or 'sister' in Tuvan. The sibling has to be either older or younger than the speaker or referent. In the case of (c), even the biological gender of the sibling is underspecified, but it is clear that this sibling is younger than the speaker or referent. This lexical encoding of relative age in these terms reflects an important component of the

<sup>5</sup> Yet other languages have even further semantic distinctions for choosing the appropriate term, such as the gender of the speaker, but these are not examined in this paper.

<sup>6</sup> Tuvan is officially written with a Cyrillic-based alphabet. For ease of reference, I here transcribe Tuvan words with the standard transcription system used in the contemporary Turcological literature [Johanson, Csató 1998].

Tuvan social system, in which it is vital to treat one's interlocutor appropriately to their age [Voinov 2013].

For those translating the Bible into Tuvan and other languages with the feature of relative age marked semantically on its kin terms, an important theological question arises when deciding which kin term to use to render Jesus' brothers and sisters. See Clark [1995] on the general issue of elders and younger in the Gospels. Let us take the following two examples from the Gospels:

*Is not this the carpenter, the son of Mary and brother [adelphos] of James and Joses and Judas and Simon? And are not his sisters [adelphai] here with us?" And they took offense at him. (Mark 6:3)*

*Jesus' brothers [adelphoi] said to him, "Leave here and go to Judea, that your disciples also may see the works you are doing." (John 7:3)*

In both of these passages, and in all other references to Jesus' brothers and sisters in the New Testament, there is no clear indication in the Greek text as to whether or not Jesus' brothers and sisters were older or younger than him. This question is closely related to the issue of whether or not they were full siblings, half siblings, or cousins of Jesus.

The traditional divide on this issue comes along confessional lines. Eastern Orthodox and Roman Catholic Christians have historically interpreted Jesus' brothers and sisters to be older than him, whether as his half-brothers and half-sisters from Joseph's previous marriage or as his cousins. This interpretation is in keeping with the doctrine of the perpetual virginity of Mary, the mother of Jesus. Protestants, on the other hand, have historically come down on the side of these being Jesus' full siblings, children of Joseph and Mary, who are therefore younger than Jesus since he was Mary's firstborn child.

Now, where this issue is left unresolved in the actual wording of the Greek original and European majority language translations, the semantics of kinship terms in Tuvan demands that the translator make a choice to designate Jesus' brothers and sisters as either older or younger than him. Fence-sitting is impossible on this issue in Tuvan; the language's semantic structure will not allow it. Thus, the receptor language forces the translator to reflect on this issue and to come to some decision concerning what to put in the text of passages that refer to Jesus' siblings. In making this decision, the translator attempts to figure out from other factors (both textual and contextual) what the original authors of the Gospel narratives would have recognized as being the correct age-specific term to describe Jesus' brothers and sisters in terms of their relative age to him; since the Gospels were most likely written within living memory of Jesus and his brothers and sisters, the Gospel authors would have probably known whether Jesus was older or younger than them.

Whatever decision the translator makes, it is likely a good idea to somehow let the readership know that the other option is also fully available based on the semantic ambiguity of the original Greek kin term. Thus, if the translator chooses to put 'older brother/older sister' in the text, a footnote stating that another possible translation of this word is 'younger brother/younger sister' would go a long way toward bringing the issue to the readers' attention. Now, a simple footnote like this would not by any means fully lay out the confessional issues involved (and this is probably a good thing, unless the translation is intended to be confessional), but it would definitely alert the attentive reader that there is a deeper issue to be examined in relation to the age of Jesus' siblings. If one reads only the Greek original or one of the standard European language translations of these passages, one would not necessarily be alerted to the fact that there is more to 'brothers' than meets the eye from a theological perspective. One could get this information from reading commentaries on the text, but not from the text itself. Thus, the lexical choice forced by the semantic structure of

kin terms in a language like Tuvan is a natural means of raising awareness of deeper theological issues related to the text of the New Testament, especially since no Biblical commentaries yet exist in Tuvan.

In the published Tuvan translation of the Bible, the translation team chose the ‘younger sibling’ interpretation for Jesus’ brothers and sisters since the expected readership consist primarily of Protestants. No footnote or explanation of the lexical choice between younger and older siblings was added to the translation, since the Tuvan edition was not meant to be a study Bible. But if this had been done, it could have increased the Tuvan readers’ awareness of this issue and possibly alerted them to the various theological implications of the various choices.

#### 4. Gagauz: The nature of spiritual light

The third example is not as categorical as the previous two but its theological import is no less. It too exemplifies how the specific language into which the Bible is translated structures the semantic categories and imagery that the Biblical text projects to readers, and how a minority language’s semantic distinctions can enrich theological reflection on the meaning of Scripture more than when the relevant terms are read in the original Greek or in a European language translation.

In ancient Greek, the word *phōs* means ‘light’, as from the sun, a candle, or a lamp. The imagery of ‘light’ is a very important part of Christian teaching about God, Christ, and the Christian life, especially in the writings of the Apostle John [Pelikan 1962]. The Johannine writings include metaphorical references to spiritual light such as the following:

*Jesus spoke to them, saying, “I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will not walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.”* (John 8:12)

*God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.*  
(1 John 1:5)

*The darkness is passing away and the true light is already shining. Whoever says he is in the light and hates his brother is still in darkness. Whoever loves his brother abides in the light, and in him there is no cause for stumbling. (1 John 2:8-10)*

In the Gagauz language (ISO: gag) of Moldova, however, the concept of ‘light’ is not unitary. There are two main words, *şafk* and *aydınnık*, which are both usually translated as ‘light’, but each represents a different aspect of ‘light’ and the two occur in different physical contexts. Thus, *şafk* indicates a physical object that emits light, a discrete light source. *Aydınnık* on the other hand indicates not the specific light source but rather the general condition in which the physical world is visible, i.e., ‘illumination, light-ness’. Usually this is associated with the condition produced by the sun, so *aydınnık* can also frequently be translated as ‘daylight’.

Turning to the difference that these two words for ‘light’ make in the translation of the Bible, we find that in some cases, the choice of correct term is fairly straightforward. For example, a lamp (Matthew 5:15) or the heavenly bodies (Genesis 1) are discrete light sources and each is therefore a *şafk*, while the resulting physical state that they produce is *aydınnık*. Thus, a back-translation of Matthew 5:15 in the Gagauz New Testament reads:

*People do not light a lamp [şafk] and put it under a basket, but on a candleholder, and it gives light [aydınnık] to all who are inside.*

A more provocative and difficult question arises when we consider which of these terms is the more appropriate for rendering the idea of light in metaphorical reference to God and Jesus. In passages such as John 8:12, 1 John 1:5 and 1 John 2:8-10, is God to be metaphorically pictured as a discrete light source? Or as the general illumination by which things in the world are visible? For example, should the Gagauz version of John 8:12 have

Jesus saying “I am the *şafk* of the world” or “I am the *aydınnık* of the world”?

Although one might quickly dismiss this very question as inconsequential, it should be noted that each term will produce a somewhat different image, with potentially different theological repercussions (see McElhanon [2005: 42] for a brief discussion of some of the metonymies and conceptual metaphors related to light and darkness in the Bible). Thus, if in this passage Jesus is said to be a *şafk*, this may indicate to readers that he stands out amidst spiritual darkness and easily attracts attention to himself by being very different from his surroundings (probably in terms of his behavior and teaching.) If, on the other hand, Jesus is said in the Gagauz translation to be the *aydınnık* of the world, this might be taken by readers to mean that he permeates the universe, and makes all other things in the world intelligible.<sup>7</sup>

Other theological interpretations of each of these metaphors are of course possible. The main point of this brief discussion is that if this semantic distinction between different types/qualities of light had not been uncovered by Bible translation into Gagauz, the question of the exact metaphorical meaning of ‘light’ as it relates to God may have never even been asked. The original Greek source term φως does not lead one to question what specific shade of meaning was originally intended by the Apostle John; neither does the translation of this term in majority European languages, such as *light* (English), *svet* (Russian), or *luz* (Spanish). It is the particular semantic structuring of a specific minority language’s lexicon, with its fairly rigid distinction between *şafk* and *aydınnık*, that forces the theologian to more seriously contemplate the deeper potential meanings of the Biblical ‘light’ metaphor in relation to God. At the same time, it is quite possible that this forced distinction

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<sup>7</sup> The Gagauz translation of the New Testament, published by the Institute for Bible Translation in 2006, uses *aydınnık* in John 8:12, 1 Jn 1:5 and 1 Jn 2:8-10, but *şafk* in certain other metaphorical passages that refer to God/Jesus, such as in Matthew 4:16.

between different types of light may make the receptor language translation say something narrower than what was originally intended by the author.<sup>8</sup> Since the Greek language did not have this specific semantic distinction between different aspects of 'light', the author may have simply thought of light holistically in all of its manifestations without breaking it apart into various components. Therefore, making an obligatory choice in rendering 'light' into one of these narrower receptor language terms may in some way be a partial betrayal of authorial intent. But it is usually very difficult to definitively establish what the actual authorial intent was in such cases due to a lack of direct evidence.

## 5. Conclusion

In this paper, I have made the claim that Bible translation into minority languages can enrich theological reflection on the meaning of Scripture in a way that is not done by studying the Bible in either the original languages or translations into European majority languages. This of course is not in any way meant to denigrate the priority of the original languages in serious study of the Scriptures, nor the tremendous value that majority language Bible translations have in the world. Rather, my paper suggests that understudied minority languages also have value for advancing Christian theological thought due to the specific manner in which these languages express such thought in the Holy Scriptures.

A parallel can be drawn to something in the realm of physics: a prism that refracts light. White light is made up of the entire color spectrum of light, but these color components are unnoticed by the human eye. When white light is refracted through a prism, however, the different color components become visible. Various languages act similarly to a prism in that they bring out various aspects of meaning in a text, including the text of Scripture, even though these aspects of meaning may be concealed under the

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<sup>8</sup> I am grateful to Joshua Jensen for pointing this out in personal communication.



surface in the original text or in majority language translations due to semantic underspecification. Like the different faces of a prism, the semantic structure of different languages is conducive for focusing attention on different aspects of the text.

This is yet one more reason why understudied minority languages should be studied more, and one more demonstration of the usefulness of Bible translation to more than just the specific receptor language into which the translation is being done. The more we translate the Bible into “exotic” languages, the more it is that interesting and relevant questions of interpretation and theology are raised, from which the entire Christian world can profit if these questions are made public in accessible venues.

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