

Adventures of Linguistic Proportions

STORIES ABOUT LINGUSTICS AND TRANSLATION

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A very unnatural word order!

Moise is a mother tongue translator (MTT) of the Mona language in Côte d'Ivoire. In 1999, he was participating in a discourse workshop run by Stephen Levinsohn. Moise found that, in natural texts in his language, one must always *introduce* people and things before talking more about them. For example, one Mona sentence read, "We went, and my father Zeiba, the place where his field is, we arrived there."

Think how many Bible sentences will have to be "turned around" to communicate clearly in Mona, such as Acts 13:4: "So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, Seleucia port, they went down there; and from there, Cyprus island, they sailed to it."

When Moise understood this, he exclaimed, "So *that's* why the draft translation into Mona sounds so unnatural!" He had known something didn't sound right, but it took deliberate study of his language to tell exactly what it was.

Isn't this supposed to be *true*?

Rudy Barlaan was translating the book of John in Isnag (Philippines), and gave it to his language helper to check it in the village. The helper came back and said, "It is very good, but... is it not a TRUE story? It sounds like fiction." "Why?" Rudy asked. The language helper didn't know why it sounded

fictional, and had no idea how to fix it. Panic gripped Rudy, and he thought he had better take the time to study how Isnag expressed fact vs. fiction in narratives.

Rudy found several key factors involving structure and some tiny words that were different in factual accounts than in folk tales. He then wrote up his discoveries in the *Journal of Philippine Linguistics*.

Not only did this help with Isnag, but also with other Philippine language translations. One other team was ready to print their New Testament, when they thought they'd better check this out. To their horror, they also had not made this fact/fiction distinction, and had to go back and revise the entire New Testament.

Nothing is happening!

Paul Kroeger was consulting with a church-sponsored translation project. Their language had been used in church for over 100 years. The MTTs were all well-educated professional people, in-

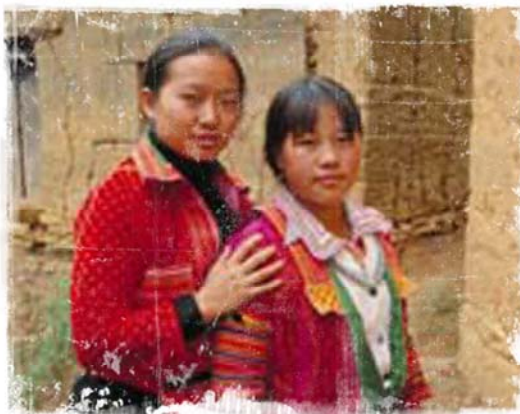
cluding one ordained priest, and all were fluent in speaking, reading and writing the target language.

However, they made a number of serious translation errors, often based on lack of linguistic awareness. For example, the language has no suffixes on the verb to indicate tense, but does have a separate particle marking perfective aspect. Several members of the committee insisted on inserting this particle in the translation.

The English text (TEV) attached something to the verb everywhere past tense was used, so they should too!

The result was something like "David *had* gone down to visit his brothers. He *had* gone into battle with Goliath, he *had* defeated him and *had* cut off his head. The end." Every event in the narrative was marked as background information. There were no main-line events, and so nothing ever really happened in the story!

"So *that's* why the draft translation into Mona sounds so unnatural!" He had known something didn't sound right, but it took deliberate study of his language to tell exactly what it was.



Everything is happening!

Uche Aaron, in a pertinent article in *Notes on Translation* (1998), tells of a similar case in Obolo in Nigeria. In Obolo, one verb form is used to begin a story, and another, “reduplicated,” verb form marks crucial turning points in the

Matthew with the effect that everything in these chapters was prominent. This resulted in a very high information rate that easily exhausted the listeners. Fortunately this was noticed after a discourse workshop and was rectified.



story. These forms don’t occur in English, and Aaron explains how two MTTs accidentally misused these:

One of our two translators used the simple initiating form all through his translation of Mark’s Gospel. The effect was that, to the listener, the stories of John the Baptist and Jesus were presented as ever starting, never moving forward, and never climaxing. The translation sounded childish and unbelievable. The second translator used mostly the stem-reduplicated verb form in his translation of the first chapters of

Don’t steal?

Roger Van Otterloo tells of the time he was discussing Scripture with his Kifuliiru friends and co-translators (Democratic Republic of Congo) and he uttered the sentence “Don’t steal from widows!” They started chuckling, and soon everyone was laughing uproariously. Roger was mystified and wondered if he’d used the wrong tone (Kifuliiru is a tonal language) or what. The Kifuliirus told him, no, the tone was fine, but what he said implied that

they *could* steal from everyone *besides* widows!

Roger found out that day that the last word in Kifuliiru is the focus, the main point, of the entire sentence. So you need to say “Those widows, don’t steal-from-them.” The “from-them” is a suffix on the verb, so the last word in the sentence is now “steal.”

Roger went back and checked all the New Testament that had been translated up to that point to make sure that everything sentence-final really was meant to be in focus. Many changes were in fact necessary.

Too many pronouns!

Helga Schroeder was teaching a discourse workshop in Kenya with five mother tongue translator teams. Their languages mostly do not use isolated personal pronouns (like “he, I, they”), but use prefixes or suffixes on the verb for both subjects and objects. Isolated pronouns only occur for reasons of focus, prominence, or disambiguation.

All the mother tongue translators in the workshop used English as the source language in translation. Since English uses isolated pronouns all the time, they also used a LOT of these isolated pronouns. The result was something that had the flavor of “He *himself* went to the river, and she *herself* saw him *himself*,” with most of the pronouns inappropriately emphasized.

After finding out the pattern of their *own* languages, all the translators went back to their translations and removed most of their isolated personal pronouns.

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