Abstract

It is a reasonable assumption that oral preference learners need to have access to a communicable rendering of the Bible which for them is an oral translation.

This is based upon the essential assumption that the effectiveness of any communication is in direct proportion to the amount of effort expended in context of meeting the anticipated needs and desires of the receivers. The more we condition our communication, with the least ambiguity for the receivers, the more effective the message will be. The more the receivers will understand the message, the more they are able to engage with it. When people engage, they naturally also will share it with others.

A society made up of predominantly oral preference learners naturally engages with new things that will affect their worldview significantly through their natural spoken communication domains. Even if literacy and multilingualism have become integrated parts of their society, they still need to engage in the most suitable domains possible. Granted, to do translation work, some of the people will interact with other languages and source materials which require some level of literacy. Literacy, orality and multilingualism each have a role. Yet, we should not dictate these roles for the people, using strategies that are based on statistics from research or related studies. Rather, we should help the people discover the best domains to function, from within their own situation.

We would be wise to consider that the language domains are predominantly oral and as such oral Scripture translation is to be considered essential and primary. Any translation strategy should empower the people to work in their own language domains and within their own worldview.

Premise and Assumption

General Bible translation is a process for preparing a communicable rendering of God's message in a receptor language that is clear, natural, and accurate as to God's intended meaning of the message. 'Language' is here the natural communication venue of a people--- a signed language, an oral language or a written language. These are actually all different from each other. The differences are in idiomatic expressions and forms (orthography and punctuation for written, intonation and communication art forms for speech, facial and body motions for speech and signing). As such it is a reasonable assumption that oral preference learners need to have access to an oral translation in order to have a communicable rendering of the Bible.

Background

This paper is based upon the author being involved in Scripture Engagement strategies since 1992, having experience with a great diversity of media and having been involved in many

projects with people groups worldwide from the Americas to Europe, Eurasia, Asia, the Pacific, as well as Africa. Since 2012 oral Scripture translation has become part of this picture through partnerships with local church communities, as well as regional and local ministry initiatives. Such projects were started in Botswana and Namibia in further partnership with SIL, Wycliffe Regional Translation Services of Wycliffe South Africa, The Seed Company, The Bible Society of Namibia and The San Partnership. Reports of the oral Scripture translation work, it's foundations and references regarding current developments can be found at http://www.engagingwiththeeternal.org/en/report-2012-october-18-22-himba-follow-through-survey-opuwo-area-namibia.

Recently, a resource has been developed to help oral preference learners to engage with relevant passages, one at a time. The whole Bible text has been indexed into over 2600 passages. The developers had significant experience working with oral preference learners. They, of course, acknowledge it to be a first version that will undoubtedly be improved over the years by applying what is learned as oral Scripture translation is unfolding and gaining momentum worldwide.

Several ministry partners have also worked together to develop (and are further refining) a software application that serves to assist in the workflow, recording, and archiving tasks involved in oral Scripture translation. The product is called 'Render' and is published by Faith Comes By Hearing. Since 2017 several projects around the world started to employ the first version of this software, which was developed without many best practices being available, as well as many people not understanding what oral Scripture translation is. As such it should be refined significantly over the next few years as best practices become more available.

What is Oral Scripture Translation?

Oral Scripture translation is a carefully planned translation process of the Scriptures, that creates a natural oral communication. It is vetted by Scripture translation consultants. From the start of the process, engagement of the audience with the Scriptures is essential to produce a quality translation. All translated passages are documented by way of audio or audiovisual media. As much as possible, passages will be units of Scripture that oral preference learners can easily engage with and internalize, for example complete stories, poems, songs or proverbs. A primary aim is for these passages to be released progressively, so they can be distributed right away and become references for Scripture engagement strategies in the broader context. They also form an oral Bible, so people can engage individually with the message. The recordings also serve as an archive and can be used for further reference, just like a book.

Why is it needed?

Foundational for God to establish His fellowship among any people, or to mature an already existing church, requires that the people should be able to engage personally with God. The message of the Bible is a crucial component for people to get to know about God. Through our natural God-given communication mechanisms, we engage with every issue of life one piece

at a time. Throughout the Biblical narrative this approach is demonstrated and is given like a 'best-practice' for us to follow. While written materials provided historically the best consistent record to be preserved, those scripts actually offer a less dynamic, less clear, and less natural communication than a spoken message does. A translation that follows a systematic grammar that is written down, using symbols on paper, has already lost its natural dynamics of spoken language. Typically, this makes it difficult for people to engage with the message itself. Instead of helping people understand and engage personally, the written grammar statements often need to be decoded by academically trained theologians into understandable concepts. A written text lends itself to study and academic-type analysis, which many people are not familiar with. So they may view the bible as the domain of experts - in contrast to the more easily accessible experience of hearing scripture well-told. Oral Scripture translation provides a natural communication in which concepts remain understandable.

An oral Scripture translation takes advantage of the dynamics of natural speech, uses relevant communication art forms and incorporates a natural internalization process. Thus, it produces a far more communicable account than a written translation.

With current technology, audio or audiovisual recordings for archival, reference, and distribution purposes are as feasible as any printed translation. Once an oral translation has been completed, it is possible for a high quality and accurate text for a printed version to be drawn from the audio or audiovisual media. Of course, adjustments need to be made to communicate in a written format.

Why is it needed specifically in our multi lingual world?

In my life as I grew up in a multilingual context, languages took on different roles without my realizing it. Of course, initially everything was only oral. I started learning to read in first grade when I was six years old, but only in Dutch, the national language. My regional language, Gronings, was only used in an oral fashion for daily life with family and friends, but never in school or church. When I was in my thirties, someone gave me a written copy of Luke in my regional language. It was difficult to read, but since I also had learned to read several other languages, I learned it quickly. Even though some things were more clear than in Dutch, it took a lot more effort to read my regional language. I only read it once or twice, since there were natural language domains where I felt more comfortable.

I found this to be true everywhere I met people. In Namibia a friend grew up using both Himba and Dhimba orally. He also spoke and read Herero and English. While he was interpreting Scripture stories for me, we came to a difficult passage and he tried to understand it in his Herero Bible. He quickly gave up, because even an oral dialogue with me in English was easier. He automatically shifted to a domain of language use that was most relevant for him.

In South Africa I met a young girl who was born to parents who were both deaf. Consequently, her first language was South African Sign and her second language was Xhosa. Later in school, she also learned English and a little Afrikaans. Sign remained primarily the language with her parents, while Xhosa was almost exclusively used orally in daily life. English and Afrikaans were only used where needed. She was responding to the natural domains where the different languages were used. Some things felt more comfortable in one language, while other things only were possible in another language. Some things were easier to engage with in one language than another. Some things were more clear in one language than another.

For example, when I order some food at the restaurant for my children, I will ask them what they want. Since I make the order, I relay what they have told me. Normally that will be in the same language, but if the South African girl would be ordering for her deaf parents, she would ask them using Sign and then relay the order in a spoken language. The focus is on relaying the message in the proper domain, so the restaurant employee can understand clearly and fill the order accurately. This is an essential element to how we want to transfer truth from the Bible to people in their most suitable domain of language.

From this we can conclude:

- Individuals naturally communicate in language domains that are most *comfortable*.

- They *automatically choose* their preferred domain for engaging with the message.

- They *automatically communicate* in the most relevant language as related to their audience.

- They *best understand in specific domains* and nobody understands everything well in all domains.

How does it work?

All people should be able to engage with individual Scripture passages one at a time and relate each new passage to previously learned and applied truths. Therefore, first of all, we should aim to translate Scripture passages in a panoramic fashion.

By 'panoramic' is meant that progressively we communicate the whole counsel of God passage by passage as relevant to the audience, instead of book by book (http://www.engagingwiththeeternal.org/en/why-i-love-panoramas-and-tapestries). The communication units can be narrative, proverbs or other forms, but they need to build on each other to help people from within their worldview engage with the truths. This way, from the start, people can engage with each individual passage and relate each new passage to previously learned and applied truths. They should start with suitable narratives that help people to be open to God and His story. It needs to be something they can relate to easily.

A great way to get started is by using a small set of relevant stories that give a simple but clear overview of God and His Word. This could be pictured by five sticks and a stone randomly put on the ground. It won't have any meaning until we order the sticks and stone. Once it looks like a stick person, everybody will identify it as such. There are not enough details to tell if it is a man or woman, an old or young person, or what ethnicity it represents. It is a basic but clear picture. It is a model of a principle we should follow when we tell people about God and the Bible. They need to have first a basic but clear picture about who God is and get a simple overview of the Biblical narrative. (http://www.engagingwiththeeternal.org/en/communicating-first-piece).

It is also like with our putting together a jig-saw puzzle, where we start with pieces that make sense to us or that we are familiar with. This translates in our work context to that we need to be conscious of what we have in common with the people we are serving. It demands that we build relationships, get to know the people, and learn to know about their worldview. As we learn, we can start putting pieces together and make a start. As soon as the people whom we're serving can become a part of putting the puzzle together, we'll do a lot better. After all, they need to be able to put the picture together from their perspective, since they are the ones that respond from their own cultural and worldview perspective. In this way, details will progressively come together. Over time their understanding will become clearer and clearer. As they engage passage by passage, it will provide a growing understanding of God and the overarching story of the Bible.

Second, we need to help people discover and utilize the most suitable communication art forms for each kind of passage. Often story telling may be an excellent venue, but as suitable, we should also consider other art forms like for example song, poetry, or chanting. Not all of Scripture is narrative, so we also need to recognize that it is important for people to utilize other forms of communicating like proverbs, rhetorical questions, and sermons. All these are valuable oral communication art forms and, as such, oral drafting and oral Scripture translation go hand in hand. Using these natural forms helps the listeners to internalize the truths of the Bible.

The internalizing of Scripture passages, as well as the retelling of these passages, are essential components in the drafting process of orally translating the Scriptures. Internalization means that we are making something, such as an idea, concept or an attitude, a part of the kind of person we are. This implies that we have to understand related issues fully and clearly. Once we internalize something, we are changed. It then becomes normally easy to share the issues with others. 'Engagement' in the common sense means to give serious attention to something, but in itself doesn't change the kind of person we are.

When I share a story, I may use a different communication art form, depending on who I am sharing it with. When I share a story with one of my deaf friends who has learned to read my lips, as he or she internalizes it, will pass it on to other deaf people using the art of signing. When a person from one specific Asian language wants to share, he or she might use their

traditional tonal singing, while other people groups may, for example, prefer drama or poetry. All these different forms in their proper context provide the best possible way for other people to engage with a passage. It also makes it easier and more natural to pass on to others a new idea, concept or attitude.

Both the engagement and internalization processes help people discover and apply the truths communicated in a passage. Understanding a passage and then telling it to others, automatically help the translation of a draft to become natural in its discourse. It also improves accuracy since issues that are out of place or not clear will become apparent. While, for deaf people, such a process would only be possible in their own natural sign language, for people who hear, this process needs to happen in their own natural spoken language (http://www.engagingwiththeeternal.org/en/about-internalization).

It is crucial that oral drafting and oral Scripture translation includes involvement of the community throughout the process. In their involvement, they can respond progressively to the truths they learn from the passages. By sharing these passages with others, more people internalize and engage, which helps the translators to further check the accuracy, naturalness, and clarity of the translation. It also serves to empower these translators to address in a natural fashion, within their own context, what we consider foundational translation issues.

As the people see a panorama of stories develop, it will help them mature in their understanding of the Scriptural meta-narrative, starting like a seed growing into a plant, that grows to maturity, blooms and consequently produces fruit. The resulting translation of this kind will have an excellent potential to bear fruit, as well as bring local ownership of the translation process and any resulting products. Since it incorporates Scripture engagement from the start, it serves right away as a foundation for to God build a healthy fellowship of believers. They can mature over time as more Scripture passages become available. The internalization and engagement processes encourage people to personally discover truths from Scripture and engage with God, instead of primarily or exclusively depending on teaching from others.

Which medium is best for a specific audience?

It would have been great to have been present and take in the full communication experience of any of the stories in the Bible. Just think of being present when God interacted with Noah. Can you imagine to watch David confront and defeat Goliath? Wouldn't it be amazing to watch Jesus call Lazarus from the grave? Even if you watch a movie or a live performance of a historical story, wouldn't it communicate more than only an audio recording? Also, wouldn't an audio recording communicate more than a written account?

When someone chooses to use a communication form with the least amount of expression, they force the audience to guess at the details. In order to be able to experience the event, or in other words, engage with the story, the audience needs sufficient details. Any audience, coming from their worldview perspective, typically must interpret a lot of implied and unclear

information. In such situations misinterpretation is highly probable. We need to make sure that we encourage people to use a most complete communication that is clear and detailed to their perspective.

For the deaf this means that it is essential to use complete body communication, since sign language is more than just the use of hands. For the blind, oral communication is essential, since intonation and timing all communicate. Yet, for those that can see and hear, academics sadly have accepted text as a standard, which is the least communicable form. For most people in the world, the preferred media will typically be at least an oral communication. For oral preference learners, an aural experience is essential and it should be more than just an audio recording of someone reading a text. The oral preference learners engage best with the natural spoken form of their language. While in some cultures written forms must accompany an oration in order to validate the message, in other cultures an oration is actually an important validation of the message.

Normally oral expressions are understood across a wide group of people from the same language. Exceptions will be languages that have been spoken in a variety of areas around the world or among language groups with great ethnic diversity, like Spanish, Portuguese, Chinese, English, or even Swahili, Hindi, and Indonesian. On the other hand, visual expressions differ typically more within a language, so there is a greater chance to miss-communicate through a published visual media. We would have to consider appropriate settings for visual materials, such as dress and environment, which obligates us to do a lot of interpretation. It is important to consider these factors in choosing a suitable media for an Oral Bible. Besides this, we need to consider feasibility, time, cost, and sustainability. Thus, audio may for most situations be the best option, especially recognizing that audio renditions also can be a suitable reference for live orations, which are a key component of an ongoing engagement strategy.

What the qualifications are needed for oral Bible translators?

God created us in a way that we normally learn most things best by a process of discovery that includes exposure, practice, repetition, validation by trusted sources and connecting new things to what we already know. These are also the characteristics that have been attributed to the term 'oral'. The oral Scripture translation process reflects these same characteristics and, in that context, an oral Bible translator is not trained academically for the task, but he or she is trained primarily by discovering and experiencing oral Bible translation. As such, an oral Bible translator can be completely illiterate and monolingual. Still, each team will need also people who have some literate skills and who are at least bilingual to the extent that they can work with the Bible in one form or another in a reference language. This more than likely will be the language of wider communication or a closely related language, but it can be completely in an oral fashion.

It is essential that this person has an openness to God and learn about Him. It is also very helpful if the person has a personal burden to see the Bible translated in his or her language. If a person comes with a lot of biases towards the Bible, God and Christianity in general, it is

important to help the person discover the truths from Scripture and not allowing these biases to become part of the translation.

As a person gains experience through translating simple oral passages, with proper coaching they can grow to become highly skilled in the same way a baby starts from not being able to do much to turning over, pushing up, crawling, walking, and by the age of two they run and even climb. The more of the training that can happen in an oral fashion, the more we can empower local teams to do the work well. Academic success doesn't mean that people grasp what has been taught. Even though they may be able to show knowledge, understanding may be lacking. For many, academic training based on performance scoring, may actually be a challenge in itself and as such discourage people. We may never see their real potential and even loose them, despite their great potential as an oral translation team member.

What does the oral Scripture translation process look like?

- We start with a workshop to help people understand oral Scripture translation.
- We guide them in their choosing initial passages relevant for their communities. Typically, they will choose passages that are narrative, but they might also include proverbs.
- Next, we guide them in their choosing how to express those passages in relevant communication art forms.
- The translators engage with and internalize each passage, so the Scripture story becomes part of them. As they discover the truths in the passage, they respond to what they learn.
- The translators orally tell or verbalize the story to others in the community.
- They coach the listeners to internalize, engage with, and also tell the story to a new audience in the community. This process naturally involves discussions. As the translators observe, they can further improve the accuracy, naturalness, and clarity of the translation.
- The translators continue this process of improving the translation until they feel they can make an initial audio recording for testing purposes. In case there is a peer translation team in a different geographical location, they also can listen and then respond with comments.
- As needed, the translation team will repeat this whole process until they are satisfied.
- Next, the passage should be reviewed by a translation consultant, using a phrase by phrase back translation in a language that the consultant knows. Most people may prefer to work with an onsite consultant, but if necessary this also can be done electronically.
- As the team progressively completes their process of approval of each passage, they can distribute and use it. Those users then can incorporate those passages in their Scripture engagement strategies and events, encouraging principles that are already modeled in the oral Scripture translation process.
- Once an initial panorama of stories provides a strong Scriptural foundation for a community, the translation team now could consider processing more complex passages. The narratives that have been internalized will become the foundation and anchors in the

Biblical context of those more complex passages. At that point, they also can more naturally evaluate and choose the use of other suitable local communication art forms.

- Finally, the remaining parts of the Bible might be translated as they fit in the panorama and putting each passage into its overall context, so that it will relate well to any printed Scriptures. This process provides the potential for people to translate every relevant passage and, consequently, complete the whole counsel of God. Since there will be many people that end up using print together with oral translation materials, it is also important to create an index that is compatible with written accounts.

It is essential to take the time to include all these practices of the oral Scripture translation process. Oral Scripture translation and Scripture engagement are inherently integrated strategies and in this context they should never be separated.

What oral Scripture translation is not.

Oral Scripture translation is not simply the preparation of a tool, such as an audio recording of Scripture. If prepared only as a product and made available as a recording, it has a large potential to disappoint us. It will just be like any other tool. There is no magic for success in any tool, including an oral Scripture translation product. When people follow a process that includes only some aspects of oral drafting, or if it is only a process in which a small group evaluates the translated passages without significant community interaction and engagement, then we should be very cautious to call it oral Scripture translation. Like with just about any process, such a product might have some success, when it is used wisely in a relevant strategy or when God in His providence redeems it (even in unlikely situations). However, that doesn't reflect an approach or strategy that facilitates real oral Scripture translation. The oral Scripture translation process requires Scripture engagement to be a component and in that context they are inherently integrated.

The oral Scripture translation process is also not looking to translate the passages following the sequence of complete books as we have them in our printed Bible, or presenting the passages in a chronological fashion, or also in the order that we understand currently Biblical materials were written.

- The challenges when following the sequence of the books as we have them in our printed Bible are:

  o we are forced to deal with all the key concepts in a particular book;
  o we have to deal with every aspect and idea communicated in a particular book;
  o the sequence of the books was put together by people without any consistent criteria that would warrant following such a sequence (and on top of that, there are several different sequences).

- The challenges when following a chronological order are:

  - we need to consider a logical order that helps people build on truths they already have learned, which not always fit a chronological order;
  - not everything in Scripture is clear where it fits in a chronological order;
  - there are many gaps that are difficult to explain in a sequential time line.

- The challenges when following the order that Biblical materials were written are:

  - the order may not be addressing issues in a sequence that makes sense in the worldview of the people;
  - we are not fully sure if the current order is completely accurate;
  - there are too many issues that such an order brings to light in an early stage for the people to deal with.

Why not call it oral Bible translation?

Oral Bible Translation has been referred to as a way of Bible storying where people bring together a panoramic overview of the Bible. Now that we are looking seriously at actual oral Bible translation, for several reasons I would suggest using 'Oral Scripture Translation'.

- First of all, many would consider using the phrase 'Oral Bible translation' only for the translation of a **complete** Bible, or at least the New Testament portion of it. Yet, when we may have translated only passages that form a panoramic Scripture overview, the use of the word 'Bible' is often criticized. As such, if we use the word 'Scripture', it will avoid any confusion about the materials being anything less than real translated Scripture, but not necessarily a complete Bible.
- Second, if we use 'Oral Scripture Translation', it helps us to get away from looking right away to Bible books as we know them and look at the relevant passages that can stand on their own.
- And third, it will help us to get away from the confusion of the meaning that currently has been attached to the term 'Oral Bible' in various academic publications and ministry public relation tools, as well as on various websites. The meaning there typically refers to specific versions of Bible storying or simply the audio recording of a printed Bible.

Respectfully submitted,

Durk Meijer, November 30, 2017