

# Language Matters



An annual publication of SIL Ethiopia

April 2012

*In this issue*

*Adult Literacy*

*Mother-Tongue-Based  
Multilingual Education*

*Choosing a Language  
Standard*

*The Translation Task*

*... and more*

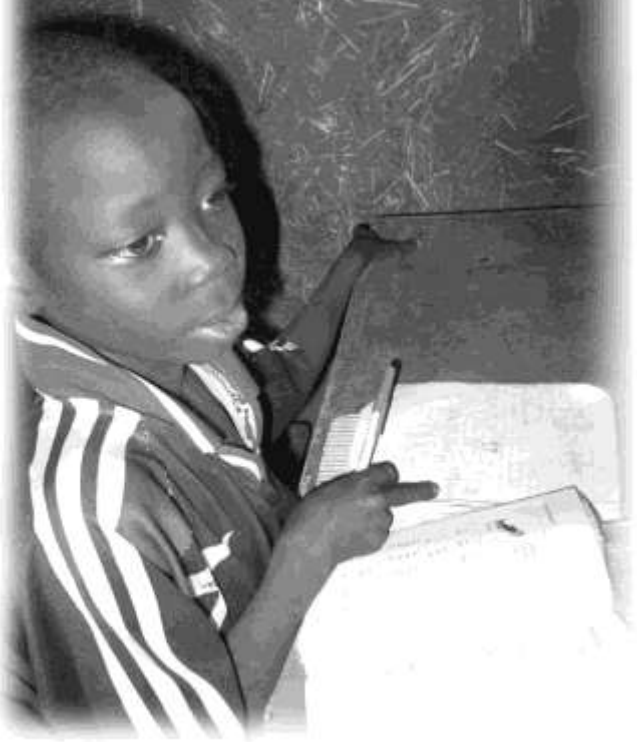
April 2012

We hope you enjoy this first edition of our annual journal. It will give you an introduction to our organization and our work. In the future we hope to include more articles in Amharic.

If you have any comments or questions, please contact us.

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# Who Is SIL?

*Editorial*

SIL International is a nonprofit organization committed to serving language communities worldwide as they develop the skills and capacity necessary to preserve and revitalize their languages. As an international nongovernmental organization (INGO), SIL actively participates in networks and partnerships—with government organizations, local groups and other INGOs—that are vital to the support of minority language communities in their own language development efforts.

Growing out of one man's concern for people who spoke languages lacking written alphabets, SIL was started by W. Cameron Townsend in 1934 as a small summer linguistics training program. It has expanded to an organization of more than 5,500 people from over 60 countries. SIL has conducted linguistic analysis in more than 2,590 languages spoken by 1.7 billion people in nearly 100 countries. SIL makes its services available to all, without regard to religious belief, political

ideology, gender, race or ethnic background. Language research and documentation are core contributions SIL makes to the world's understanding of languages, and these areas of study involve more than 80 full-time language assessment specialists. As a leader in research of the world's languages, SIL has surveyed over 2,500 languages, contributing unique and significant data to *The Ethnologue: Languages of the World*, a reference volume cataloging the world's known living languages. Approximately 3,000 languages still need assessment.



*Partners in  
Language Development*

# The pivotal role of Language

*Dr. Alemayehu Hailu*

Without the development of indigenous languages and without creating a literate environment and encouraging people to read and write in their own languages, development of a country will be difficult. To that end, in the longstanding history of our organization, SIL Ethiopia, we have been endeavoring to accomplish our tasks of language development and multilingual education for many years now. SIL members have been partnering on many levels with Ethiopian institutions since the early 1970s.

As partners in language development in the country, our main focus is on minority languages. We have been working with universities and government ministry offices, especially on the linguistics aspects of other languages.

Among the major activities our organization commits itself to, the following are fundamentals:

- Linguistic research
- Literacy and language development with special emphasis on mother-tongue-language translation
- Training
- Mother-tongue-based multilingual education in primary schools

**Linguistic Research:** The organization works together with government ministries in the survey of language and dialect distribution. In this regard we assist and collaborate with academia that works toward the same goal.

**Language Development:** By language development we mean the process of formalizing the use of a previously unwritten language. This benefits the community in such a way that the language can be used in schools, and in mother-tongue-based multilingual education programs. Accordingly, significant outcomes are being observed in two of the regions where we are involved. These are Southern Nations Nationalities and Peoples Region (SNNPR) in the Bench Maji Zone, where we are working in six languages, and

in Benishangul Gumuz where we are working in five languages.

**Translation:** SIL Ethiopia provides technical assistance to communities wishing to produce translations of approved titles of practical topics, high quality literature, and works of high moral value.

**Training:** The organization offers a variety of short-term training opportunities: for mother-tongue teachers and mother-tongue curriculum writers; also lexicography, linguistics, anthropology and culture preservation training, etc.

**Multilingual Education:** We train teachers who are native speakers of developing languages, introducing them to pedagogical concepts of mother-tongue-based multilingual education. This often includes using their own recently developed orthography (writing system) so that they can also serve as writers of various education materials for children. We also train formal primary teachers according to mother-tongue teaching and learning principles. This aids in the establishment of pilot schools that can, in turn, administer mother-tongue education.

Currently, SIL Ethiopia is working in a number of local languages including Baale, Bench, Bertha, Dizin, Gumuz, Komo, Mao, Me'en, Sheko, Shinasha and Suri. In striving to create a literate environment, we believe that citizens will be able to contribute significantly to the ongoing, overall development of the country.



*Dr. Alemayehu Hailu  
SIL Regional Director for  
Southern and Eastern Africa*



*Script consultation in the Suri language*

## At the Heart of our Service

As linguists it is easy sometimes for us to treat a language as a *thing*. We are usually interested in the various parts and pieces of a language in order to discover how it conveys meaning to others. Languages, however, are not isolated elements that exist on their own. They are an integral part of the people who speak them, influencing the ways we interact with others and understand the world around us. Language is the main way we express our feelings, share our thoughts, and learn from the experiences of others. Our language is intricately intertwined with our identity. Therefore, when we value and respect a language, we give value and respect to the people who speak it. When people see that their language is also useful for sharing knowledge through such means as education, they also see that they are valuable.

SIL's motto is "Partners in Language Development." While we work with many different partners who are interested in developing languages so they may be written, read, preserved, documented, or revived, we realize that each of these languages represents people. It is these people who are at the heart of our service, as we develop the language of a given community. The ultimate impact we hope to achieve in any community through the development of a given language is that the people will come to value themselves in healthy ways, thereby creating a foundation to improve their lives in the present and future generations. As SIL Ethiopia, we consider it a privilege to work in a country that values her languages. We hope the contributions made through this journal will not end with these pages, but that they will inspire others to develop Ethiopian languages in new and better ways, to the benefit of her people.



*Michael Bryant  
Language Programs Director  
SIL Ethiopia*

# የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ለህፃናት ትምህርት ምን ይጠቅማል?

መስፍን ደራሽ

**በ** አፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ መማር በህፃናት ግላዊና ሁለንተናዊ የትምህርት ዕድገት ላይ ከፍተኛ አስተዋጽኦ እንዳለው ብዙ ጥናቶች አመለክተዋል። ቀጥሎ ያሉት ሀሳቦች ከColin Baker 2006 እ.ኤ.አ እና ከJim Cummins 2004 እ.ኤ.አ ጽሁፎች ላይ የተቀነጨቡና ወደ አማርኛ የተለወጡ ጥቂት ሀሳቦች ናቸው።

## የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ትምህርት በህፃናት የቋንቋ እና የትምህርት ዕድገት ወሳኝ የሆነ አዎንታዊ ውጤት ያመጣል።

ህፃናት ሁለት ወይም ሶስት ቋንቋዎች በመጀመሪያ ደረጃ ትምህርታቸው ቢማሩ ቋንቋዎችን የመረዳትና አጥጋቢ በሆነ ደረጃ የመጠቀም ችሎታቸው ያድጋል። ሁለት ቋንቋዎችን ለመማር በሚያደርጉት ጥረት ብዙ ልምዶችን የሚያካብቱ ከመሆኑም ሌላ የመጻፍና የማንበብ ችሎታቸው ይገነባል። በሌላ በኩልም የሁለቱ ቋንቋዎችን አሠራር ልዩነትና አንድነት ለማገናዘብ ያስችላቸዋል።

በአለፉት 35 ዓመታት በዚህ ጉዳይ ላይ የተሰሩ ከ150 የሚበልጡ ምርምሮችና ጥናቶች ሁሉ

ከዓመታት በፊት ነገ የተባሉ ፈላስፋ ያሉትን ዋና ጉዳይ ያጠናክራሉ። እኚህ ፈላስፋ “አንድ ቋንቋ ብቻ የሚያውቅ ሰው ቋንቋ አያውቀውም” በለው ተናግሯል። ይህም ማለት አንድ ቋንቋ የሚያውቅ ሰው ቋንቋውን በሚገባ ለመረዳት ሌላ ቋንቋ ቢያውቅና ሁለቱን ቋንቋዎች በማነፃፀር ቢገነዘብ የቋንቋዎቹን ጥንካሬና ድክመት ለመረዳት ያስችለዋል የሚል ጽንሰ ሀሳብ የያዘ አባባል ነው።

## የህጻናት የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ዕድገት የሁለተኛ እና የሶስተኛ ቋንቋ ትምህርት ዕድገትን አመላካች ነው።

በአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ላይ ጥሩ መሰረት ያላቸው ህፃናት ወደ ትምህርት ቤት ሲመጡ ጠንካራ የማንበብና የመጻፍ ችሎታ ለመገንባት ያስችላቸዋል። ወላጆችና አሳዳጊዎች ለልጆቻቸው ጊዜ በመስጠት ተረት፣ ታሪክ ወዘተ በህፃናቱ የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ቢያስተምሩባቸው ህፃናቱ የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋውን በቂ ቃላትና ጽንሰ ሀሳብ ስለሚያዳብሩ ትምህርት ቤት ሲገቡ ጥሩ የቋንቋ ዝግጅት ይኖራቸዋል። ትምህርታቸውን በቀላሉ ሊረዱ ይችላሉ። በዚህ መሠረት ህፃናቱ በቤታቸው ያገኙት የቋንቋ ዕውቀትና ክህሎት በትምህርት ቤት የትምህርት ቋንቋ ዕድገታቸው ላይ አዎንታዊ ተጽዕኖ ይኖራቸዋል። የህፃናትን የጽንሰ ሀሳብ ግንዛቤና የማሰብ ችሎታ በተመለከተ ህፃናት የሚማሯቸው ሁለት ወይም ሶስት ቋንቋዎች ተደጋጋፊና ግንኙነት ያላቸው ናቸው።

## የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋን በትምህርት ቤት ሲስፋፋ የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋው ብቻ ሳይሆን በትምህርት ቤት ውስጥ ሕጻናት የሚጠቀሙባቸውን ሌሎች የትምህርት ቋንቋዎች እንዲዳብሩ ይረዳል።

ይህን በተመለከተ እስካሁን የተደረጉ ጥናቶች ሁሉ በትምህርት ቤት የሚሰጡ ሁለት ወይም ሶስት ቋንቋዎች ተደጋጋፊ በመሆናቸው የህፃናትን የቋንቋ ችሎታ የሚያዳብሩ መሆናቸውን ያረጋግጣሉ። ይህም ሊሆን የሚችለው የማንኛውም ሁለት ወይም ሶስት ቋንቋዎች ክህሎት የተገናኙ ከመሆናቸውም ሌላ



ተደጋጋፊዎች ስለሆኑ ነው። ትምህርት ቤቶች የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ትምህርትን በሚገባ ካስተማሩ ህፃናት በትምህርታቸው ውጤታማ ይሆናሉ። በአንጻሩ ህፃናት የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋን እንዲማሩ ካልተደረጉና ቋንቋቸውን እንዲያገለብቱ ካልተበረታቱ የሰብዕናቸውና የዕንሰ ሀሳብ ዕውቀት መሠረታቸው የተበላሸ ይሆናል።

**በት/ቤቱ ውስጥ ለአነስተኛ ቋንቋዎች የትምህርት ጊዜ መስጠት ሌሎች የትምህርት ቋንቋዎችን አይጎዳም።**

አልፎ አልፎ አንዳንድ ወላጆችና የትምህርት ባለሙያዎች ለአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ በትምህርት ውስጥ የመግሪያ ጊዜ መስጠት የሌሎችን የትምህርት ቋንቋዎችን ጊዜ ስለሚያባክን ጉዳት ይኖረዋል ብለው ያምናሉ። ነገር ግን በዓለም ዙሪያ በብዙ ሀገሮች የተካሄዱ ትምህርታዊ ምርምሮች እንደሚያመለክቱት ከሆነ በጥሩ ሁኔታ የታቀደ ሁለትዮሽ የቋንቋ ትምህርት (Bilingual or Multilingual Education) በሌሎች ትላልቅ የትምህርት ቋንቋዎች ላይ ምንም ዓይነት ተጽዕኖ የማያመጣና ይልቁንም አነስተኛ የመፃፍና የማንበብ ክህሎቶችን በእጅጉ የሚያሳድግ መሆኑን ያረጋግጣል።

**ህፃናት በአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ሲማሩ የሚማሩት ቋንቋውን ብቻ ሳይሆን በሌሎች ትላልቅ የትምህርት ቋንቋዎች ውስጥ የሚገለገሉባቸውን ጽንሰ ሀሳቦችንና ክህሎቶችን ነው።**

ለምሳሌ በአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋቸው ስንት ሰዓት እንደሆነ መግለጽ የሚችሉ ሕፃናት ሰዓትን የመግለጽ ጽንሰ ሀሳብን ይረዳሉ። ስለዚህም በሌሎች ቋንቋዎች ሰዓትን የመግለጽ ዕንሰ ሀሳብ መማር አያስፈልጋቸውም። የሚያስፈልጋቸው የሌላውን ቋንቋ ስርዓተ አወቃቀር (Structure) ማወቅ ብቻ ነው። በዚህ መሰረት ከፍ እያሉ ሲሄዱ በአንድ ቋንቋ የተነበበን ጽንሰ ሀሳብ ዋናውን ከደጋፊው ጽንሰ ሀሳብ የመለየት፣ ምክንያትና ውጤት የማወቅ፣ በተፈጥሮ እውነት የሆነውንና የግለሰቦች ሀሳብ የሆነውን የመረዳት፣ የድርጊቶችን ቅደም ተከተላዊ ሂደት የመለየት ክህሎቶችን በአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ ከተማሩ በቀላሉ ሌሎች ቋንቋዎች ለማማር በሚያደርጉት ጥረት ክህሎቱን ማወቅና መጠቅም ይችላሉ።

**የህፃናት የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋዎች በአግባቡ ካልተያዘ በቀላሉ ሊጠፋ ይችላል።**

ህፃናት በመጀመሪያ ዕድሜዎቻቸው አካባቢ ሌሎች



ቋንቋዎችን በቀላሉ መናገርና ማዳመጥ እንደሚችሉ ይታወቃል። ነገር ግን በዚህ መጠንና ፍጥነት ሕፃናት የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋቸውን ሊረሱና ሊጠፋቸው እንደሚችሉና በየቤታቸው እንኳን ቋንቋቸውን መናገር እንደሚያዳግታቸው ልንረዳ ይገባል። ስለዚህ ህፃናት የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋቸውን እንዳይረሱና መጠቀም እንዲችሉ ት/ቤቶችና ወላጆች አስፈላጊውን እንክብካቤ እንዲያድርጉላቸው ያስፈልጋል።

**የህፃናትን የአፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ በት/ቤት ውስጥ አለመቀበል ህፃናቱን አለመቀበል ነው።**

በቀጥታም ሆነ በተዘዋዋሪ ሕፃናት ቋንቋቸውንና ባህላቸውን ወደ ትምህርት ቤት ይዘው እንዳይመጡ በተደረጉ ቁጥር ለትምህርት ቤታቸውም ሆነ ለትምህርቱ ያላቸውን ፍቅር የሚያጡ ከመሆኑም ሌላ የማንነታቸው መሰረታዊ ስብዕና እንደጣሉ ይሰማቸዋል። በመሆኑም በትምህርታቸው ላይ በብቃት ተሳታፊ መሆን አይችሉም። አይፈቅዱም።

መምህራን የሕፃናት ተማሪዎችን አፍ መፍቻ ቋንቋ በቸልተኝነት መመልከት የለባቸውም። ይልቁንም ቋንቋዎቻቸውንና ባህሎቻቸውን ሊያከብሩላቸውና ሊንከባከቡላቸው ይገባል።

ህፃናትን በማይናገሩት፣ በማይሰሙትና በማይገባቸው ቋንቋ ለማስተማር ማስገደድ ትምህርቱን እንዲጠሉት ከማድረግም በላይ ለወደፊቱ ምርታማ ዜጋ ሆነው እንዳያድጉ ያደርጋቸዋል።

የህፃናት ትምህርት ከአካባቢያቸው በጣም በራቀ ሁኔታና ጉዳይ ላይ ሲያተኩር ሕፃናቱ አካባቢያቸውን፣ ባህላቸውን የአደጉበትን ህብረተሰብ እንዲንቁና ትኩረት እንዳይሰጡት ያደርጋል።

# Make it Meaningful

## Ideas on carrying out adult literacy programs in Ethiopia

Aija Katriina Ahlberg

### Defining literacy

What do we mean when we talk about literacy? As my mother tongue is Finnish, I obviously go to my English-Finnish dictionary first. There I find a definition that says *luku- ja kirjoitustaito*, which directly translates into English as “skill to read and write.”

One of my two Amharic dictionaries follows the Finnish and states መጻፍና ማንበብ, whereas my second dictionary translates literacy as መሰረተ ጥምህርት.

The latter is the everyday Amharic expression for literacy that everyone was using, at least in Konso, where I had my first experience in nonformal adult literacy programs, more than a decade ago.

The Amharic expression መሰረተ ጥምህርት which refers to adult and nonformal literacy, seems to have got it right, ahead of global academic trends. Roughly 20 years ago, educators started to emphasize the need to define literacy broadly, including at least basic math and possibly other basic life-managing skills. This reflects the understanding that reading and writing is always learned in a context. Thus, the term *basic*

education came to the forefront, and some scholars even argued that the term *literacy* should be abandoned completely and replaced by *basic education*. So as we can see, incidentally, the current trend happens to be in perfect line with the old trend in Amharic, which has used the term መሰረተ ጥምህርት since the beginning of the history of such activities in this country.

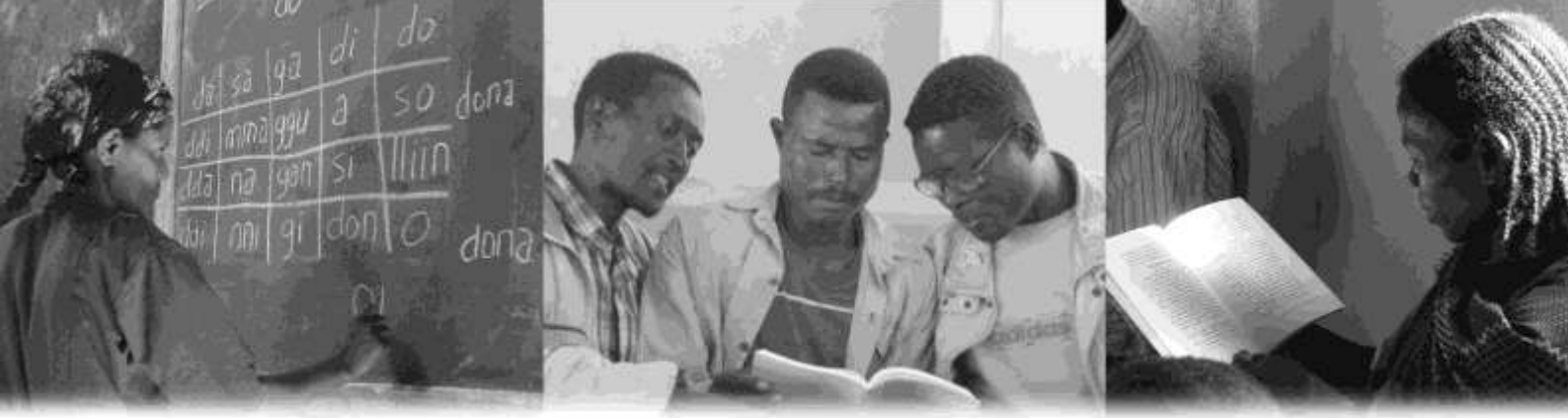
Call it *literacy* or *basic education*, the understanding of the full meaning of the term is crucial.

As we will see below, the way one understands the term determines the approach to tackling the task of literacy: the teaching of reading, writing and whatever else is deemed essential.

As my main research tool in this paper, I am using the four concepts given for literacy by the three Juliets in their book *Developing Adult Literacy* by Juliet McCaffery, Juliet Merrifield, and Juliet Millican. Toward the end I also refer to the ethnographic work by Alemayehu Hailu Gebre et al. My ultimate goal is to search for insights on how to carry out meaningful and fruitful adult literacy programs in the Ethiopian context. And to come back to the terminology issue, I use the term *literacy* rather







than *basic education* in order to be in line with the two books that I keep referring to. Yet I want to emphasize that the term needs to be understood as much more than encoding and decoding symbols in a vacuum.

### *Four concepts of literacy*

The four concepts of literacy as used in the book *Developing Adult Literacy* by Juliet McCaffery et al. are:

- literacy as skills
- literacy as tasks
- literacy as social practice
- literacy as critical reflection

So what do the concepts include? Below is a brief account of each, referring frequently to the book.

**Literacy as skills** emphasizes the competency of reading and writing as such – and thus can be seen as closest to the mere word *literacy* in its narrow sense, as opposed to the wider expression *basic education*. When literacy is seen as a skill, the teaching concentrates on the technical side of decoding and encoding, and does not pay attention to how the students intend to use their reading and writing skills. Thus, the teaching materials can be ready-made and the details of the curriculum planned ahead of time, without considering the specific needs of a particular student group. This obviously makes planning and carrying out a literacy program simple, but probably not very

influential. At its worst, the students acquire the skills, but soon lose them again as a result of lack of opportunities to use them in their everyday lives.

**Literacy as tasks** makes an attempt to widen the concept of literacy from pure technical skills of decoding and encoding symbols. It sees the importance of any literacy program to take into account the reading and writing tasks that the learners will encounter in their everyday lives. The concept of *literacy as tasks* is closely related to functional adult literacy programs, in which literacy is taught as part of a wider curriculum, including also practical skills training. Yet the drawback that still remains is the tendency of functional literacy programs to define the tasks of the learner ahead of time without consulting the learners themselves (McCaffery et al. p. 37).

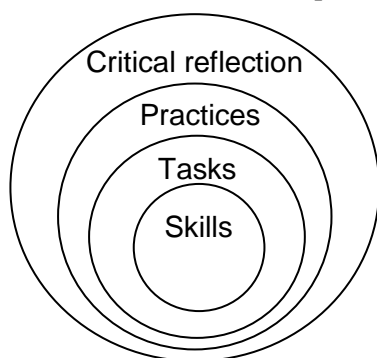


**Literacy as social practices** goes one step further than the two concepts above. It sees literacy involving values, attitudes, and social relationships, and emphasizes that literacy practices are connected to a wide variety of domains of life such as home and family, school, workplace, religious institutions, communities and social groups etc. Thus, according to the *social practices* concept, in any literacy program, the specific literacy needs of a particular student group have to be carefully taken into account in preparing the curriculum. The ideal is to have the learners themselves define their needs, to participate in planning the curriculum and in bringing materials to class. This idea is closely related to the use of ethnographic study in designing a learner-centered literacy program. I will refer to ethnography further below.

**Literacy as critical reflection** emphasizes the role of literacy for empowerment, yet stating that literacy skills as such, are not enough to fulfill this goal. Therefore, the facilitator needs to take an active role to lead the students into realization of the problem areas and critical reflection of how to act for change. In the 1970's, the well-known educator Paulo Freire developed this concept and the teaching methodologies related to it.

### *Making adult literacy programs meaningful*

Each of the four concepts gives insights into designing adult literacy programs. It is not helpful – and mercifully not necessary either – to pick one and toss the rest into the rubbish bin. McCaffery et.al. illustrate the relationship of the four in a diagram placing one inside another, assuming the skills being present in each concept, and the rest of the three each adding a special flavor to the overall concept of literacy.



Source: McCaffery et al. 2007. p. 41

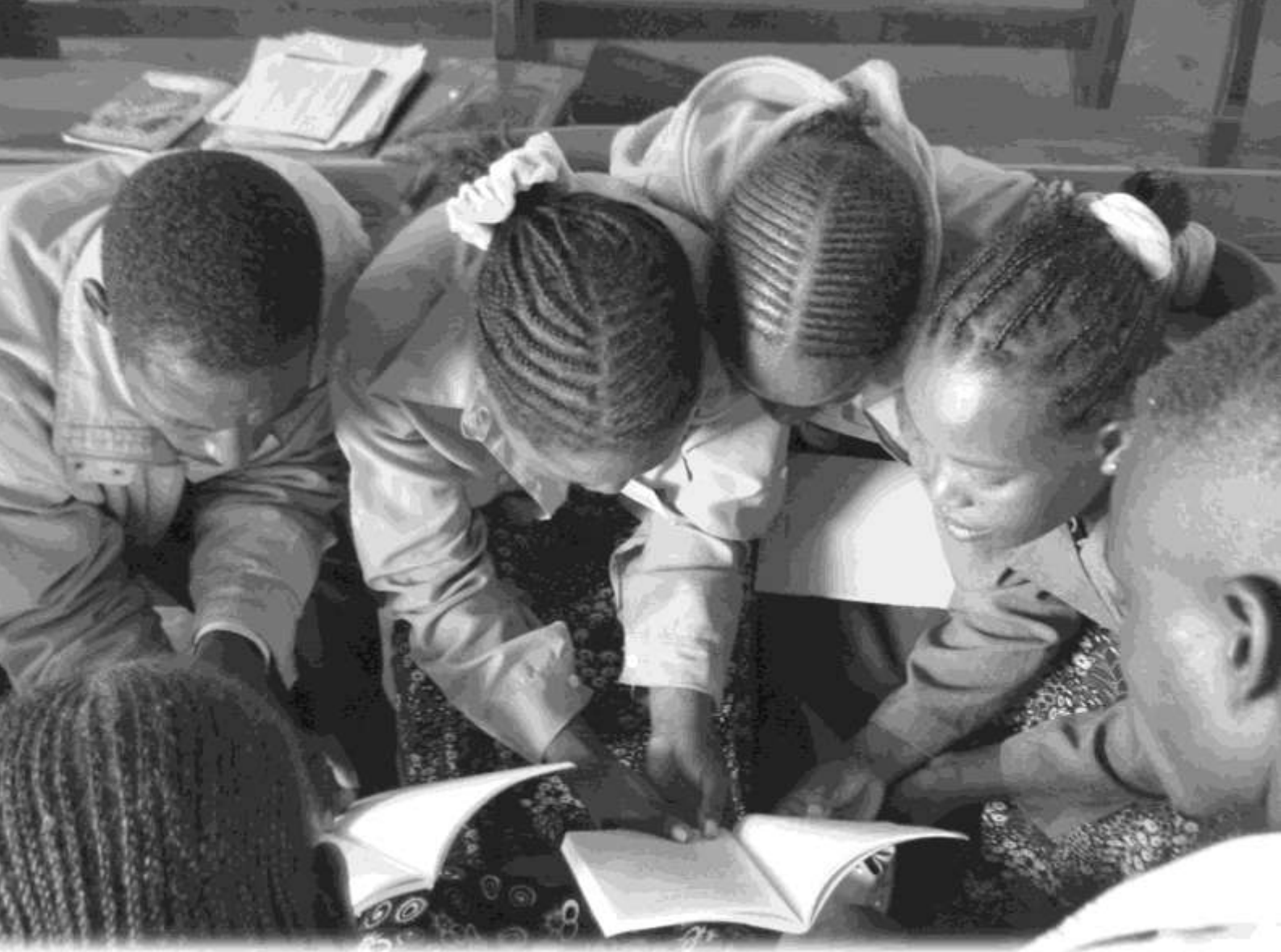
We do well if we take this view of combining elements of the different concepts, when we design literacy programs. I particularly wish to emphasize the importance of combining a sound technical skills teaching with the social practices concept of letting the learners themselves participate in molding the curriculum (or content of the program) to suit their particular needs. This is because I have seen the drawback of getting too enthusiastic about the functional role of literacy at the cost of technical skills. The emphasis on the functional component may lead into a program where the learners are

taught how to manage their time, to run a business, to do handicrafts or other income-generating activities and so forth. The end result will be that the learner accomplishes the program with several practical skills, but without learning the basic skills of decoding and encoding symbols, that is, the skills of reading and writing.

### *The power of ethnography as a means of program design*

Finally, I want to advocate the *ethnographic approach* for curriculum and overall program design for adult literacy programs. Using ethnography for designing a literacy program goes in line with the *literacy as social practices* concept. This approach at work in the Ethiopian context is successfully demonstrated by Alemayehu Hailu Gebre et al. in their book *Everyday Literacies in Africa*\*. The whole book is well worth reading, but let me just highlight one of the authors' emphases. It makes a clear point for adult learners as already skillful individuals who, in spite of (and in some cases merely because of) the lack of exhaustive reading and writing skills, have developed practical strategies to deal with situations where they need to use literacy and numeracy in order to manage their own everyday lives. The ethnographic approach emphasizes that any given literacy program design needs to recognize these

\* Alemayehu Hailu Gebre, Alan Rogers, Brian Street, and George Openjuru, *Everyday Literacies in Africa – Ethnographic Studies of Literacy and Numeracy Practices in Ethiopia*, Fountain Publishers, Kampala, 2009; the book explains the basic concepts and principles of ethnography, reports and analyses 12 case studies from different parts of Ethiopia carried out by workshop participants of a series of LETTER workshops arranged by Adult and Non-formal Education Association in Ethiopia in 2007-2008.



strategies, and build the teaching on the wealth of knowledge that is already available within the student group. I dare to believe that one of the major reasons for high drop out rates, and failure of reaching the desired outcomes of adult literacy programs, is the lack of considering the importance of recognizing the background, needs, and former knowledge of the learners.

### Conclusion

There is a Finnish proverb: *Helpommin sanottu kuin tehty*. In English it means “To tell how is easier than to do accordingly” or in Amharic መመከር ቀላል፤ መተግበር ከባድ.

It is very true in this context! As long as literacy is seen merely as a skill to teach learners to encode and decode symbols, it is easy to design programs, prepare materials and train teachers to run classes with an exact plan of how to teach each lesson. However, as I have pointed out here, with strong support from contemporary educators, we need to take seriously the *real* literacy needs of adult learners. We need to make the effort of designing

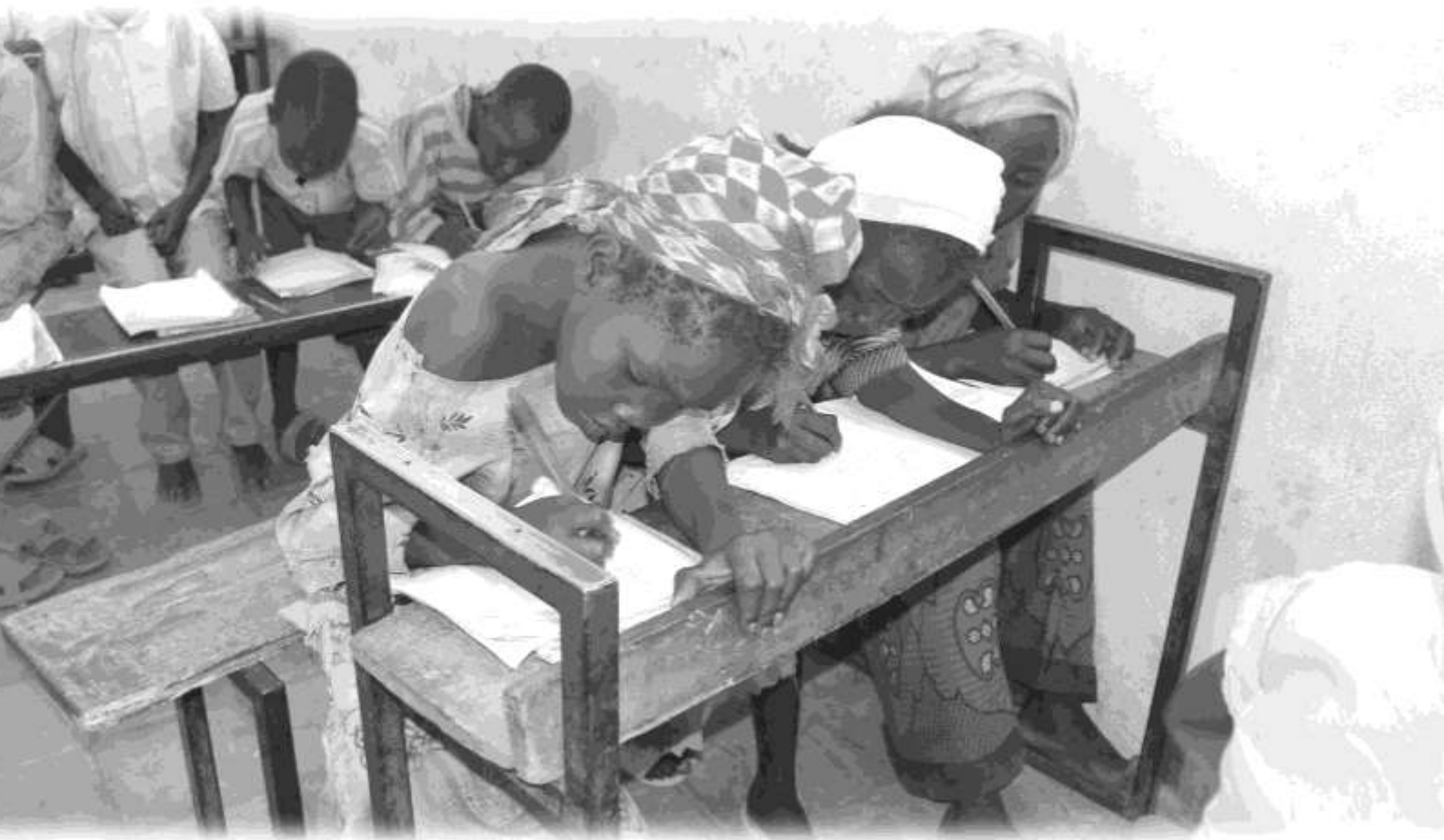
each literacy program as unique and in line with the context of that particular group of learners. It is not easy, but definitely worth the effort. And the best thing is: this approach takes us into an adventure without clear *right* and *wrong* answers; an exciting and endless process of creating and learning together something new!

### References

Juliet Mc Caffery, Juliet Merrifield, and Juliet Millican, *Developing Adult Literacy – Approaches to Planning, Implementing, and Delivering literacy Initiatives*, Oxfam GB 2007



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# *Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education*

*Mesfin Derash*

**M**other-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education has become an important concept in the field of primary education in many parts of the world. Obviously, many African countries are multilingual and multicultural states. Ethiopia, as one of these countries, has diverse ethnic societies that have their own indigenous languages belonging to different language groups: Omotic, Cushitic, Nilo Saharan and Semitic. In Ethiopia, the commencement of modern education dates back to the time of the withdrawal of Italian forces from the country in 1941. Since then, modern education has been given due emphasis, and schools were opened in many of

the capital cities of the provinces. However, the education system had been much centralized and the medium of instruction remained Amharic, which is the lingua franca of the country, and English, which is a foreign language.

After the downfall of the Marxist military government in 1990, however, significant changes have been made in the education arena. Among these changes were the significant opportunities offered to local indigenous languages. They were given the right to teach their mother tongue as a subject or use it as a medium of instruction. To that end, the current education and training policy has created a conducive environment for primary



*Components of a Successful MLE Program*

school children to learn in their mother tongue. The teaching and learning process in the first language (mother tongue) according to recent mother tongue Language learning development is known as *Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education* (MTBMLE or MLE for short). Thus, the following short article tries to explain the concept of MLE.

### *What is MLE?*

**A**mong the many factors involved in achieving quality education, language is considered to be foundational. It is the key to communication and understanding of what is going on in the classroom.

MLE, therefore, refers to the use of mother tongue as a subject or as a medium of instruction in primary schools. It is a structured program of language learning and cognitive development that provides a strong educational foundation (Diane Dekker and et al., 2009). MLE is also a type of education that deals with the bridging from mother tongue to one or more other languages. The major purpose of MLE is to develop appropriate cognitive and reasoning skills that enable children to make use of their own language equally in

schools with the languages for wider communication that are used nationally or internationally. In an appropriate application of MLE, the children's environment, culture and psychological makeup are significant features. Accordingly, MLE is a curriculum and teaching methodology that applies the *first language first* principle (Susan Malone 2003). Given that the process of teaching and learning involves much listening and speaking in the beginning years, followed by reading and writing, it will be imperative to talk to children and to let them speak in the classrooms in the language they know best and easily communicate in. Obviously, this is the mother tongue or first language of the children (L1). The use of mother tongue (L1) in the beginning school years doesn't mean getting rid of other school languages such as Amharic or English, that will be used in later years as a subject or as medium of instruction. It is rather to let children begin learning, not only in a language they already know, but also with lesson contents they are familiar with from their environment and cultural background. Then they can systematically and gradually move to new languages and contents. According to *Education For All* (EFA) 2005 report by Carol Benson, however, many developing

countries abandon the use of their own language in schools and allow foreign languages to dominate the education system. On the contrary, the case in Ethiopia is different nowadays, as every ethnic community has the right to use their own language in primary schools, provided that the necessary preparations are made. Currently, more than 23 nationality languages are being taught as a subject or used as a medium of instruction. It would be essential for all of us as education professionals, including teachers, to be aware of the following points taken from the writings of Diane Dekker, et.al.2009. According to Dekker, Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education:

- begins with learners' first language as a medium of instruction and builds good bridges to other languages while maintaining the use of L1 for as long as possible;
- builds on what we know about how children learn best. It begins with the known and moves to unknown by building on the child's prior knowledge using his/her world or real knowledge and moving to new knowledge;
- uses cultural concepts to teach basic concepts or the prescribed curriculum
- builds on the vocabulary that the child possesses and then adds the L2 (second language) vocabulary equivalent for what the child has learned;
- allows the child to continue building cognitive skills in a language the child is already using for meta-cognitive processes;
- emphasises understanding meaning and communication as well as emphasizing skills development (accuracy and fluency).

### *The Importance of MLE in Primary Schools*

The importance MLE in the beginning years of schooling cannot be overstated. MLE is necessary because children whose mother tongue, local culture and environments are not used in school will be exposed to many problems in their education. Among the various difficulties that exist when learners' first language is not used in the classroom, the following are worth mentioning:

- i. there will be high dropout rates
- ii. it results in high repetition rates
- iii. it creates lack of interest on the part of the learners and
- iv. it delays understanding by avoiding use of the language students think in, etc.

As it has been said elsewhere in this paper, learning should begin with what the child knows and understands. It is a proven fact that children learn best when they use the language they already understand well.

Learning to read and write is easier in a familiar language and academic concepts are best learned and understood through the first language (L1). Using the mother tongue first builds a strong foundation in both language learning and understanding a concept and provides a good bridge to the second and third languages (Susan Malone 2003).

In general, education theory suggests that children learn best if teaching and learning start in a familiar language with familiar lesson contents. Learning should begin with what a child already knows and understands. The sequence to carry out MLE according to some scholars is as follows:

- First, continued development of oral L1 so that the language for thinking continues and is not silenced. If the language of thinking is silenced, the learners' thinking will also be silenced.
- Second, learners begin to develop literacy skills in their L1 while continuing development of their oral L1.
- While continued development of orality in L1 is ongoing, development of oral L2\* will begin.





- While oral L1 and L2 are ongoing and literacy in L1 continues, literacy in L2 is introduced.
- While oral and literate growth of L1 continues, L2 is strengthened, oral L3\*\* is introduced.
- While oral L1, L2, and L3 continue to progress, and literacy skills in L1 and L2 continue to increase with comprehension and academic skills, development occurs in all three languages.

\*L2 Language 2

\*\*L3 Language 3

In summary, Mother-Tongue-Based Multilingual Education is vital in enhancing the cognitive development of children. This approach doesn't have any intention of abandoning other school languages such as English. It rather provides a more solid ground for better performance and achievement of other languages in the subsequent stages of education.

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## ***How can the Millennium Development Goals be met through the development of local languages?***

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The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) focus the work of advocates, aid workers, governments and NGOs as they partner with local communities. Language development plays a significant role in giving communities tools for meeting these goals.

Many of the world's poorest people speak mother tongues that are neither national nor international languages. Poverty, lack of access to primary education, inequality and disease are daily challenges for them.

*Can the development of minority languages become key to helping people create their own way of successfully meeting the challenges in their lives?*

*Can writing systems for mother-tongue languages and multilingual education become tools for people to build a better present and a better future?*

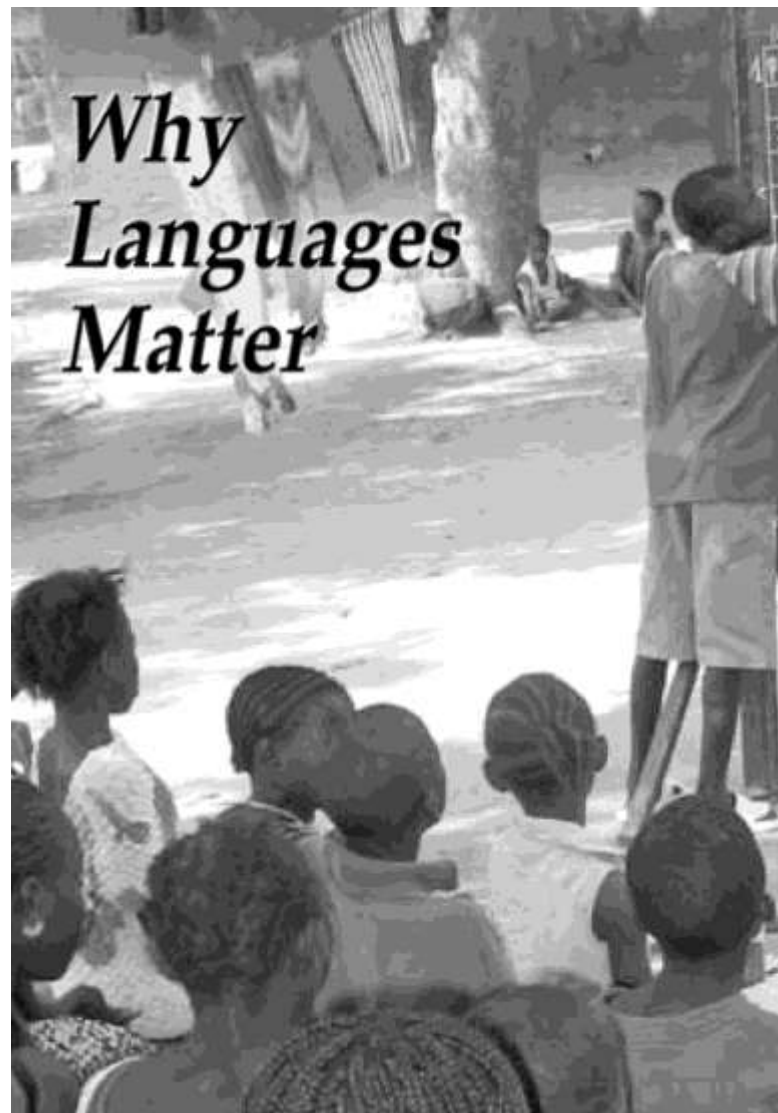
*Are the long-term results worth the investment of money and time?*

The answer to each of these questions is a resounding **yes!**

**E**ight goals were adopted by 189 United Nations member states to be achieved by 2015. As expressed below, SIL views local language development as essential in reaching these goals.

### **1 Eradicate Extreme Poverty and Hunger**

Income improvement and hunger relief within ethnolinguistic communities is achieved when life-changing information is communicated in a language that people understand well. Higher



literacy rates often result in higher per capita incomes.

### **2 Achieve Universal Primary Education**

Primary education programs that begin in the mother tongue help students gain literacy and numeracy skills more quickly. When taught in their local language, students readily transfer literacy skills to official languages of education, acquiring essential tools for life-long learning. The results are the growth of self-esteem and a community that is better equipped to become literate in languages of wider communication.

### **3 Promote Gender Equality and Empower Women**

Nearly two-thirds of the world's 875 million illiterate people are women. In ethnolinguistic communities, boys are often encouraged to interact with others in languages of wider communication. Girls, however, are typically expected to stay close to home where the local language is often the only





language used. Research shows that girls and women who are educated in languages familiar to them stay in school longer and perform better academically than those who do not get mother tongue instruction.

#### 4 Reduce Child Mortality

The mortality rate for children under five years of age is reduced when information about disease prevention and treatment is presented in local languages. Conversely, poor understanding can lead to dangerous or even fatal misinformation. Ethnolinguistic communities can combat diarrhea, malaria and other common illnesses when they have the resources and capability to obtain essential health knowledge.

#### 5 Improve Maternal Health

A mother is better able to care for herself and her family when she is literate in her mother tongue and has access to health information in a language she understands well. Language development

facilitates the introduction of new concepts and the accurate translation of new terminology.

#### 6 Combat HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Other Diseases

People in ethnolinguistic communities are vulnerable to HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases due in part to the lack of essential information in the mother tongue. Reading materials in local languages that discuss hygiene, nutrition, and the prevention and treatment of diseases have proven to be effective in improving general health and life expectancy. The availability of culturally relevant information dispels misconceptions surrounding HIV/AIDS.

#### 7 Ensure Environmental Sustainability

Environmental preservation principles are communicated through literature in language development programs. As local populations learn appropriate technology while drawing on traditional knowledge of flora and fauna, they meet economic needs while protecting the environment.

#### 8 Develop a Global Partnership for Development

Global partnerships among ethnolinguistic minority communities and national and international societies require communication and mutual understanding. Mother tongue revitalization ensures that a language continues to serve the changing goals of its speakers. It provides a bridge for the community to meet its broader multilingual goals by acquiring a language of wider communication. Language development facilitates the broader exchange of traditional knowledge and makes the benefits of global information and communications technologies available.

Around the world, communities are discovering that by using their own language in new arenas of their lives, they are developing solutions to the challenges stated in the MDGs. Through language development SIL International® assists in strengthening ethnolinguistic communities worldwide.

SIL recognizes that multilingualism promotes unity in diversity and international understanding.

As a nongovernmental organization, SIL has special consultative status with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) and with the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) of the United Nations. SIL is a founding member of Maaya, the World Network for Linguistic Diversity.

# Choosing a Language Standard

Andreas Joswig

A major component for language development is language standardization. A language cannot hope to reach a satisfactory level of development if no agreed upon standard for using the language exists. A standard in this sense means that all speakers of the language community agree to use their language in a specific way. This only applies to written and oral communication which is intended to be used across the whole language area. Specific products for language standardization are an approved orthography and a dictionary.

Defining a language standard in many cases implies that one dialect is chosen out of several dialects of the language area. This may not be easy to accept for the speakers of the other language varieties. This paper is intended to serve as a basis for explaining the process and value of standardization to the speakers of a language community.

## Important Principles

### **Standardization needs to happen for all languages**

It may be assumed that standardization only needs to take place when the language has several dialects which are spoken by people living in different parts of the language area. But standardization also needs to happen when there is only one major dialect for a language. In any case, each word needs to be spelled in the same way; even within a dialect, people may have different ideas on how to spell words. But usually only one spelling will be accepted as the standard for each language. On a higher level, even people from the same dialect will have to agree on which characters to use for their orthographies, and which spelling rules are to be

applied. So even in the simplest language situations, there is a need to negotiate between different people of the language community and to come to a firm decision on the language standard.

### ***There is no clear-cut line between language and dialect***

Most language situations are rather complex. Only rarely is it possible to identify a language that is spoken in a uniform way by all the people of the language community. Most often, the speakers use different varieties which have more or less significant differences from each other. In simple cases, these different varieties just use some different words for talking about the same things. Often, however, there are even structural differences between the language varieties, like different grammatical forms, or even a different set of sounds. When the differences are too serious, people from those different language varieties will find it rather difficult communicating with each other.

Usually a language is defined as a communication system that can be mutually understood by all people who speak that language. Therefore, a

dialect can be seen as a minor variety of a language, which implies that people from the same language are supposed to understand each other, even if they use different dialects. But it is not always easy to decide how well the speakers of different dialects understand each other. Often it appears to be more important how the people feel about what their language is, and what it is not.

Sometimes people insist that they speak the same language, but there are dialects where the people cannot understand each other anymore. This may be the situation in Oromo, but also elsewhere in the world

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*It is not always easy to decide how well the speakers of different dialects understand each other.*

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for the Kurdic people. Other situations show just the opposite: Two dialects could easily understand each other, but the people insist that they speak different languages. This may be the situation with the different varieties of Gamo in Ethiopia, but this is also found elsewhere in the world.

In any case, at some stage the people will have to decide which language varieties can be seen as the same, and which have to be seen as different languages. This may be a difficult and sometimes painful decision, as it has to do with ethnic identity, politics, and often also economics.

### ***Each language needs to have a standard***

It is not an option **not** to create a standard for a language, once it is decided to use it in various public functions. If government authorities are using the language, if it is being used in school as a medium of instruction, or if literature is created for the whole language community, a standard needs to be in place. All documents have to be written in the same orthography to allow easy reading. The same words should always be used for the same concepts across the language area. It will not be possible to allow two or three widely-used standards for the same language area, as these will ultimately develop into various different languages, and the various standards will inevitably result in a split between languages. This is all the more inevitable if these language standards are along the lines of dialect variation. If two or three language standards are allowed to live side by side within the same language community, this will in the long run be deadly for the unity of the language. It is possible to allow variation for limited purposes, like

separate school material to allow first-graders to acquire the standard, or special literature to serve as a language monument for specific dialects. But all in all, the standard needs to be set, and it needs to be clear.

### ***Only one dialect can serve as the standard for the whole language***

This principle may be difficult to accept. In theory, it should be possible to create a consensus standard by mixing elements of various dialects together. Some words are taken from one dialect, and some from another, some grammatical forms and structures from one, and some from another. This should keep all speakers of the language community happy, as no dialect is set above the others, and all see their variety somehow represented in the standard.

Unfortunately, this does not work. It has been tried already in various situations in the world, and in most cases it has failed more or less spectacularly\*. If the language standard is a mix of various dialects, it will suffer from several problems:

- Nobody will recognize this language standard as their own, because for all people it contains

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\* An example for this is the written standard for the five different Romansh languages in Switzerland. For this standardization process it was decided to create a new form of Romansh which combined forms of all five languages. Twenty years after the creation of this written standard, it today is mainly used by government authorities and in school, but the ordinary people reject it as "artificial" and refuse to use it. See: [http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/specials/romansh/Controversy\\_rages\\_over\\_standardised\\_Romansh.html?cid=41074](http://www.swissinfo.ch/eng/specials/romansh/Controversy_rages_over_standardised_Romansh.html?cid=41074)



foreign elements. This may have positive effects, like a feeling of equality among all the speakers, but in the long run it will prevent any speaker of the language community from becoming endeared to the standard language, and it will find little support.

- The fact that nobody actually speaks the standard has the negative effect that also nobody really knows how to use it. All people feel insecure about the correct standard, and there is no one they can ask.
- A mixed-language standard sounds artificial and is difficult to learn.
- Some features of the dialects which are to be mixed may interfere with each other in ways that the standard will have unclear situations or utterances which just cannot be uttered.

For that reason, it has been recognized that the standard language needs to be based on one dialect of the language, which should only be subject to very minor modifications. Any attempt to create a standard that somehow contains material from all the dialects in equal measure is doomed to fail.

#### ***The dialect chosen as the language standard needs to be chosen carefully***

Obviously, it is not an easy task to select a dialect which will serve as the language standard, especially when there are several sizeable varieties within the language community. If possible, the standard dialect should have all the following characteristics, with the highest priority on the first in the list:

1. The dialect needs to be easily understandable by all the other language varieties. Often this will imply that the dialect is spoken in a somewhat central location and not somewhere on the fringes of the language area.

Intelligibility testing will give the best information on this criterion.

2. The dialect needs to have a high status among all the speakers of the language community. Dialects which are considered “funny” by the other speakers, or which are associated with lower class people, will have difficulties in being accepted by the other speakers.
3. The dialect should be spoken by a majority of the language speakers, or at least by a sufficiently large group which is able to support the standardization process by its sheer numbers.

Often, of course, the criteria will give conflicting evidence. The largest variety may have the lowest status, or the most prestigious variety cannot be understood by the other speakers. And often politics will play a role in the selection of the standard dialect, like the location of the political leaders of the language community. So it may well be that the dialect choice will not have an ideal or optimal outcome.

#### ***The language community needs to make the decision***

The decision on which dialect is to be chosen as the standard always needs to be made by authorized members of the language community, be it a political representation, or an assembly of many speakers of the language. The decision cannot be made by an outside linguist. The linguist can provide data about intelligibility, number of speakers, and prestige, if such information is available. But in the end, there needs to be a decision by an authorized body representing the language community, so that the community really can buy in into the decision. This is crucial for the standardization to be successful.

## *Some Examples from Other Places*

There are already a good number of well developed literary languages on this planet. Most of these languages actually have to deal with quite complex dialect situations. Often the standardization has happened centuries ago, and the speakers of these languages by now have accepted the decision, even if their dialect has not been chosen as the standard. English, German, French, Arabic, Russian, Chinese, even Swahili or Amharic by now have developed a standard which is accepted by all speakers of the language, even if

they themselves speak quite differently. Here are a few examples of how standardization has happened in some languages:

#### ***English***

The English language has a vast number of different dialects, which are spoken all over the world. American English, British English, Australian English and even Nigerian English all sound quite different from each other, and mutual intelligibility cannot be taken for granted in all cases. The greatest variety of dialects can actually

be found in England itself, where people from the various regions show very significant differences in the vocabulary, grammar and pronunciation. A person from York and a person from Dorset would find communication very difficult if they could not resort to Standard English.

Standard English developed from the speech variety of the higher class people around London, which was always the seat of government in the second millennium. All government decrees were written in that variety, and all writers used this variety for books and newspapers. In school, students now learn to read and write that variety, although they do not cease to speak their local dialects at home.

The situation of English is complicated by the fact that it is spoken by people in different states, with different governments. So there is no overall-body with the authority to standardize the whole English language. In effect, this has created a number of different standards which we now call American, British or Australian English. Most likely, in a few centuries, citizens of these countries will find themselves speaking different languages.

### **German**

Except for a few situations where the German language is spoken by small communities outside Europe, the German language has always been confined to Central Europe. Within this area, a vast number of different dialects developed over the past 2000 years. Some of these dialects actually changed into different languages, like Dutch, English, or Afrikaans, before the standardization process took hold.

In the Middle Ages communication between the people of different dialects in Germany was getting increasingly difficult, and by 1500 many books were written with very different orthographies. It was at that time that the printing press was invented and that Martin Luther translated the Bible into German. He chose the Saxonian dialect of his supporting Duke as the language of the translation, and this was found to be both acceptable and understandable by all Germans from all regions. Within a short time, the language of the Bible translation was established as Standard



*Without being able to use standard German, footballers Klinsmann and Ballack would not have been able to talk to each other.*

German, and the fragmentation of the German language area was stopped. People still speak very different dialects in Germany. Someone from Hamburg in the North would have great difficulties understanding a person from Cologne at the Rhine River, or from the mountains of Bavaria. Right now it is only Standard German, which all German students pick up in their first years in school, which keeps the unity of the German language intact. This standard is also accepted, with very few modifications, by the people of Austria and Switzerland, although none of them ever speak anything resembling standard German at home.

### *Some Lessons from These Examples*

These two examples (and many more) show that a standard language has a very positive effect on preserving the unity of a language. At the same time, it shows that those speaking a different variety than the standard do not have to fear that they have to give up using their varieties in the local context. Even after 500 years with the influence of Standard German, the dialects are still very strong. In all rural areas of Germany, the original dialects are still maintained, and people speak them freely. There are newspapers, theatres, Radio and TV broadcasts, even Bible translations in German dialects. The dialects still play an important role in defining the local tribal culture in Germany. At the same time, all Germans know when and how to use Standard German in the appropriate context.

The German example shows also that without standardization, eventually the varieties of a language will drift apart, so that different languages emerge, like Dutch, English or Afrikaans. So if the speakers of a language community do not have the courage to agree on a common standard, the unity of the language will eventually be lost.

Again, none of the major languages developed their standards by mixing elements of different dialects. They all agreed on the selection of one dialect as the basis for the standard, and over time, the people from the other varieties were ready to accept this.

A final lesson to be learned is that a language standard, in

principle, can even serve a language community whose individual dialects are not mutually intelligible. This is certainly the case for the English or German language area. It takes a lot of effort, but the creation of a language standard can keep languages together, which would otherwise have drifted apart. It can also serve as a symbol of ethnic unity, where the individual speech varieties would not be able to serve that purpose.

### *Some Ideas for Off-Standard Varieties*

In spite of the very good reasons for choosing one dialect as the standard for a whole language community, this decision never comes easily for the speakers of the other varieties. There is the strong feeling of set-back in prestige in comparison with the other variety, and the fear that one's own variety will undergo a period of decline, or may even disappear fully. Also there is the very real fear that the students of the dialect will have more difficulties in school than those whose dialect is now the standard.

### *Affirming Prestige*

For those people managing the standardization, it is very important to realize the feelings of those whose dialects are not selected as standard. It is even more important to affirm these speakers, and to also publicly affirm the value of their dialects. It needs to be pointed out that these speakers are making an important, but still difficult sacrifice for the good of the whole language community.

Much emphasis must be given to the fact that choosing a dialect standard does not imply that all people now have to speak like this in all contexts. There is still a place for the dialect, and the speakers should be encouraged to use their dialects in all appropriate contexts.

### *Continued Use of the Dialect*

The fact that a standard exists for a language community does not imply that this standard has to govern all communication in that language. In most cases, the standard will have an impact on wide-range written communication, on TV and radio broadcasts, and on education. The standard usually has no influence whatsoever on oral communication within a dialect area, and can also be ignored for oral or written public communication, when it is intended for speakers of the dialect area alone. So, in principle, there is nothing against

publications and broadcasts in a dialect variety, as long as this is clearly marked as dialect. Therefore, a dialect community which has the desire to keep a dialect alive and to maintain it as a vehicle for the local culture, will find little difficulties in doing so. With or without such dialect maintenance measures, the dialectal variation of the language area will not be reduced by the introduction of a language standard. The dialects will stay alive, without immediate danger of them departing from the wider language community. This needs to be pointed out to all representatives of the language community before the decision of a language standard is being made.

### *Some Special Arrangements for Students*

In a case where the people speaking a dialect have difficulties understanding the standard language, students in primary schools may indeed be at a disadvantage. If the differences between dialect and standard are significant, the advantage of becoming literate in the mother tongue may be lost. In that case it needs to be considered to have special teaching materials for these dialect speakers for the first grade (and maybe the second), which starts out in the home dialect and gradually introduces the student to standard vocabulary, spelling and structure. At the latest after the second grade, the students should be able to be taught in the standard language.

### *Conclusion*

Standardization of languages is a good thing. A standardized language has better chances of surviving intact, and at the same time it will provide a roof for the maintenance of other language varieties. Still, making the decision about a language standard can be difficult, and this decision needs to be approached with care and with an understanding for the feelings and fears of those whose dialects are not chosen.



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# Is Translation Possible?

Dr. Daniel Hankore

Since 1960 many scholars have attempted to give a theoretical definition of *translation* in order to provide a comprehensive theoretical term and framework. However, there is no unanimity achieved so far over the universal theoretical principle of translation. This is because most of the suggested theories deal with translation methods, giving a framework of principles, rules and guidelines rather than describing what translation actually is. This makes each of them less qualified to be recognized as a theory<sup>1</sup> because, generally, a theory provides an explanation about a phenomenon and gives a prediction about the same, rather than how it should be done.

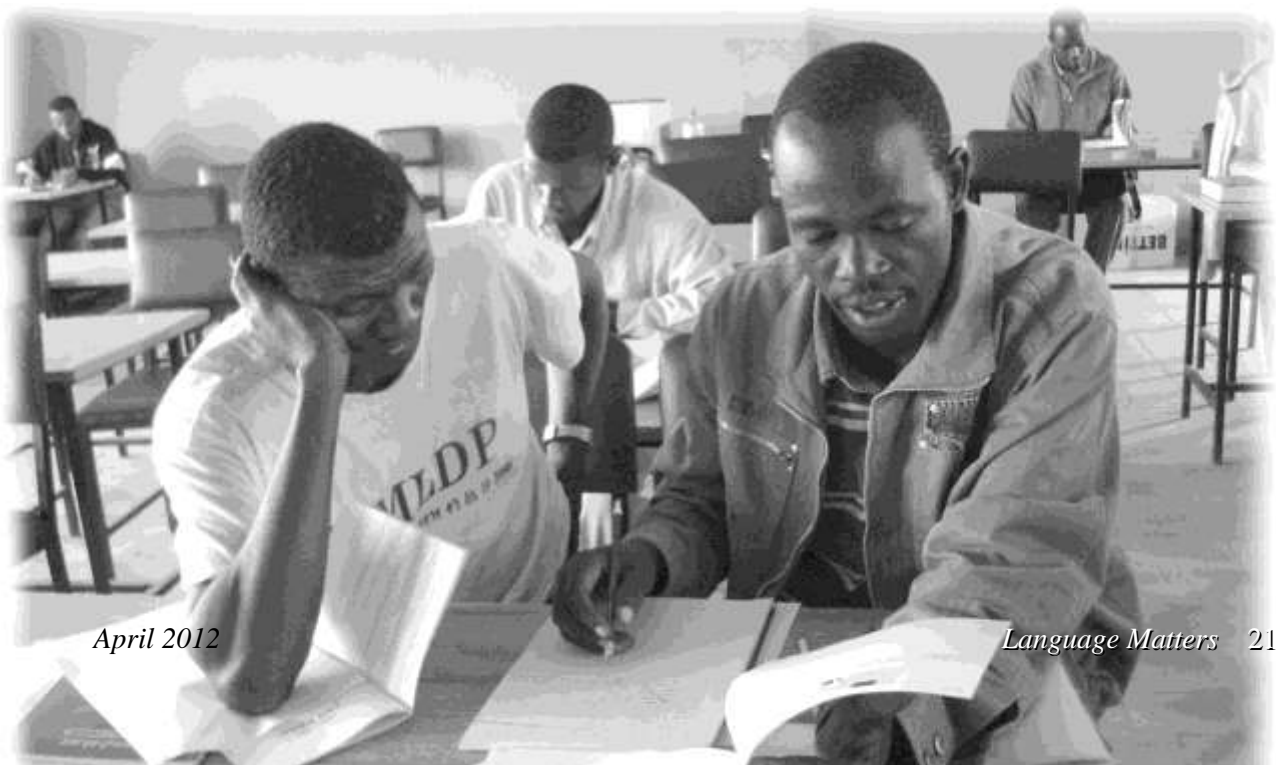
Besides the theoretical debate, there is also a debate going on between accurate translatability and untranslatability of texts (Hickey 1998: 2). In this article I will attempt to argue that despite all the comprehensive theoretical problems of translation, translating a message from one language into another language is possible.

The current common term used as a title for the discipline of interpreting and translating a message from one language to another language is known as “Translation Studies” (Shuttleworth 1997: 188). During the early 1970s some scholars used the term “Translatology” to refer to the same discipline. The *Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics* explains

that in applied linguistics the term ‘Translatology’ subsumes both the process of interpretation and translation of oral and written texts. It also describes the oral translation of a written text or a written translation of an oral message into another language as “sight translation” (Crystal 1990: 472). However, the term “Translatology” has not been accepted by English speaking scholars because they consider it as an unsuccessful neologism<sup>2</sup> (Shuttleworth 1997: 188).

Shuttleworth summarizes how different scholars attempted to describe what translation is and lists them as follows:

- Overt vs. covert translation or domesticating vs. foreignizing translation
- Diagrammatic translation
- Inter-semiotic translation
- Paraphrase and pseudo-translation
- Replacement of textual material in one language (Source Language) by equivalent Textual material in another language (Target Language)
- An interpretation of verbal signs by means of some other language or inter-lingual translation
- Conveying of meaning from one set of language signs to another set of language signs



- A translation aimed at maintaining the effect of the original message in the translation which becomes a secondary communication both in terms of meaning and style (See Shuttleworth 1997: 181 for further insight about this categorization)

Gentzler suggests that translation could be categorized into three areas:

**Intralingual translation** which denotes paraphrasing of signs of one language with other signs of the same language;

**Interlingual translation** which denotes interpretation and translation of signs from one language with signs of another language;

**Intersemiotic translation** which denotes the process of conveying verbal signs from one language into non-verbal signs of another language, such as from language signs into music and art signs (Gentzler 2001: 1).

Gentzler also categorizes the translation theories which were introduced since mid-sixteenth century into five: (1) “[T]he North American translation workshop; (2) the ‘science’ of translation; (3) early translation studies; (4) polysystem theory; and (5) deconstruction”(See Gentzler 2001: 2).

Most of these descriptions are normative in a sense that they tend to give guidance about what translation is supposed to be, rather than simply describing what translation is. They are prescriptive not descriptive (Shuttleworth 1997: 182; Hickey 1998: 2). This distinction between prescriptive and descriptive definitions of translation is based on what one intends to define: “Translation” as the process, or as the final product of the process. For example, on the one hand, some scholars base their definition on the final product of the translation process, and they avoid the prescriptive feature in their description (Shuttleworth 1997: 182). On the other hand, some scholars propose a more comprehensive prescriptive definition of the current translation process, based on the final product, which varies according to the particular response to the needs it intends to address by the translation (Shuttleworth 1997: 182; Hickey 1998: 2).

However, all the above mentioned categorizations are based on the analogy of capturing a particular feature of the translation task. Hence, they are not comprehensive in terms of conceptualizing the multifaceted task of

the translation process (Shuttleworth 1997: 181). Consequently it has been proved that it is a challenge to establish a translation theory which comprises the sub-theories of translation: translation as a process; translation as a product; translation as a function-oriented target text (skopos theory); and translation didactics or instructions about how and what to do in translation (Shuttleworth 1997: 187). In terms of applied translation it is impossible to exclude the above translation features one from the other (Gentzler 2001: 1).

The multidisciplinary approach describes translation as an interdisciplinary task which involves cultural anthropology, different types of linguistic studies including socio and psycholinguistics, literature studies, different types of translation, including machine translation, history, etc. (Shuttleworth 1997: 184; Gentzler 201: 1, 108, 203). Gutt (Gutt 2000), approaches translation studies from the relevance theoretic<sup>3</sup> perspective and describes it as an inferential communication, hence there is no need for a comprehensive translation theory. The debate continues between those who argue that translation is simply a practical application which cannot be described as a theory, and those who contend that a descriptive theory of the translation can be established (Hickey 1998: 2; Gentzler 2001: 76-79, 82). In addition, there is a debate between accurate translatability and untranslatability of texts (Hickey 1998: 2).

It is an indisputable fact that languages are different in grammatical configuration which might have been caused by conceptual incompatibility. Nevertheless, it is evident that ostensive translation between languages takes place effectively (Hickey 1998: 1-2; Shuttleworth 1997: 180). Conceptual incompatibility across languages, which might have been caused by cultural differences or non-existence of things in both language communities, cannot be a hindrance for translating the intended message of a text. Such incompatibility can be compensated for by different translation techniques, once a translator has understood the intended message of the source text and any particular translation problem(s) he encounters in the translation process (see Shuttleworth 1997: 180-181; Nida and Taber 1969: 2, 98).

A translator must be conversant with the source text side, the target text side, and the social, cultural, and political differences between the two. All of these factors influence the mental and public representation of the texts (Wendland 1973; Wendland 2008; Wilt &

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Wendland 2008). Translation is a negotiation between the source text — its connection to other source literature, its language use, and its culture as implicated in the text and target text — and the cultural, social, and political situation, concepts of translation, previous translation of the same source text, other texts, etc of the receptor language (Gentzler 2001:4). In the process of all the translation tasks, the translator’s mental representation of the source text is dominant, because translators always aim to translate a text from the author’s point of view. (Gentzler 2001: 9, 13-14; Shuttleworth 1997: 178). Of course, getting at the meaning of the source text is decisively inferential. In other words, one important feature regarding interpreting the source text is that it is inferential. We do not naturally limit our analysis to what is explicitly said, but also analyse what is not said, or said only by implication. (Gentzler 2001: 3). However, the process of inferencing is decisively constrained by the public representation of the author of the source text and his/her point of view about the texts. Therefore, it is crucial for translators to continue searching to access the cultural, social, political, institutional and experiential phenomena which influenced the source text. Richards observes this feature of the translation task when he claims that “translators, with proper education and practice, can come to know the proper methodology to achieve the correct understanding of the primary text” (Hickey 1998: 6; Gentzler 2001: 14). Some of the relevant questions a translator should ask regarding the source text are:

What does the source text and its translation intend to achieve?

- How do they attempt to achieve it?
- How do both the writers of the source text and the translated texts organize their public representation in terms of “cooperating with their readers, being polite and relevant?”
- How is the inter-cultural difference treated? (Hickey 1998: 5).

Thus, the final product reflects the translator’s conclusion, achieved by his choice and decision, after exhausting all the possible resources which help to understand the source text correctly (Shuttleworth 1997: 178). Thus, it is possible that a well-equipped translator can make correct mental representation and public representation of the source text, hence creating an interpretive resemblance between both source text and receptor text (Hickey 1998: 6, Gutt 2000: 105).

Translation may involve beginning with a source text which is culturally, temporally, geographically, and historically remote from the target community for which it will be translated. It is therefore necessary to have access to information regarding the contemporary cultural institutions, political and social situation, geographical and environmental phenomena, etc. of the source text. This will guide the translator in reconstructing the original message, and thus will result in a more transparent target text. It will also help the recipients of the target text to interact with the cultural constraints of the source language, in order to better understand the intended message.

Ideally, the final product of a translation should be acceptable to all concerned parties. Experience shows that, in order to achieve this goal, the translation process requires a collaborative effort. A translator must be ready and willing to cooperate with all the interested parties as well as other translation experts.

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<sup>1</sup> A theory is not prescriptive which tells how a phenomenon should happen or should be done rather it is descriptive which attempts to account or to explain what happens and why happens.

<sup>2</sup> Neologism denotes a newly coined term supposed to be accepted in the main stream language, eventually being entered to the common use.

<sup>3</sup> Relevance theory is a communication theory which recognizes that mental faculty of the human being, which has the capacity to draw relevant inferential conclusions from the behavior of people, and enables people to communicate with each other. Communicators exploit this cognitive capacity so that they do not need to say everything to the audience.



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# The Translation Task

Mary Breeze and Kelly Blacksten

Is translation merely restating the same words in another language? Why can't we just use those online translators in a word-for-word rendering of our text? You probably already know the answer to that question. If you've ever used an online translator, you'll know that you are likely to get all sorts of funny results. For example I entered the text "Hang in there!" which is an English idiom expressing an encouragement for someone to persevere. The French online translator gave me "Soyez suspendus dans là!" which means "Be suspended in there!" Not quite the same thing.

So, assuming that we need real, live human beings for the task, what kinds of skills do they need? And what about the people who are checking the translation for accuracy? Let's look at a few ideas about the needed competencies, as well as some considerations about the translation task itself.

## *What competencies are needed for translation?*

- An understanding of both the *source* and the *target* languages
- At least a general knowledge of the subject matter being translated
- Understanding of basic translation and communication principles
- Ability to show a non-biased or objective view of the subject
- Basic understanding of cultural worldview differences

## *What competencies are needed for checking translated materials?*

- All of the above, except the first point  
*A knowledge of the target language is not essential because the checker will generally be provided with a back translation into a known language.*

- Understanding of checking procedures (outlined below)
- Able to ask relevant questions and encourage people to think for themselves

Concerning the translation task, here are just three aspects to keep in mind.

### *1. Relevance:*

#### *Consider your audience*

Suppose you were asked to translate an article titled "Improving the Benefits of the Food We Eat," and the target audience is a rural semiliterate community in Ethiopia. What questions might you have before starting?

People give attention to what they think will be the most relevant for them, so selecting suitable materials is important. The following questions should be considered:

- Who are your intended audience (age, level of education, level of reading ability, etc.)?
- How relevant is the topic to them?
- What are the audience's felt needs and interests?
- Does the material connect in some way with what the audience already knows? If not, you need to make a *bridge* between what they already know, and the new ideas you are introducing.

### *2. Reliability and accuracy of the original text*

Questions that need to be asked regarding the source text:

- What sources of information were used in writing the original text? Are those sources reliable?



- Have any technical or scientific facts been checked by an expert? For example, have health facts been checked by a doctor or a nurse?
- Who is the original author? Have they given permission to translate the material?

### 3. Content

The content of the material can pose many unique challenges. Consider this sample translation exercise and see what problems/concerns you encounter.

You have been asked to translate or paraphrase the following excerpt from an article in *Footsteps* magazine, a publication of Tear Fund. The target audience is an adult literacy class in a rural area where crops are being destroyed by insects and disease. Write down problems that you might encounter as you translate. Here is the article:

#### ***Natural Pest Management***

*Natural pest management is a method of controlling pests without using chemicals. Instead, other insects, birds, animals, plants or mechanical techniques are used.*

*Chemical pesticides have many disadvantages. Although they remove the pest, they also kill many of the insects that are useful to the crop, can pollute the soil and water supplies, and make people sick. The benefits of chemical pesticides decrease over time as pests become resistant to them. This means that the pesticide kills the weaker pests, leaving the strongest to breed a new generation which is immune to the pesticide.*

#### ***Natural pest controls – Plants***

*Companion planting is an effective way of controlling pests. It involves arranging different plants in alternate rows. For example, if melons are planted next to radishes, beetles will not move between rows of melons because they do not like the taste of radishes.*

## Potential problems/concerns identified with the text on natural pest management

<i>Problem/Concern</i>	<i>Solution</i>
Original text is not clear. We do not have all the background necessary to understand it.	Make sure you understand the text first. Go to other sources or authorities and ask questions. Ask the original author, if possible.
Complex grammatical structures have been used.	Since the audience is a literacy class, the level of language needs to be simplified. Break the sentences down into more simplified clauses for ease in translation.
Some concepts may be unknown or there may be no direct translation into the target language for words such as “pest,” “pesticide,” “chemical” etc.	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use a descriptive phrase. Example: Pest = those that destroy crops</li> <li>2. Use a borrowed/loan word or a foreign word. If it is a borrowed word that is already known in the language, it can be used without an explanation. If it is a foreign word that you are introducing into the language, then an explanation is probably needed.</li> <li>3. Extend the meaning of existing words/terms. Example: In Koorete, there was no word for “column” so they extended the meaning of the existing word “furrow” (from ploughing) to include the concept of columns.</li> <li>4. Create new terminology. Example: Instead of borrowing the word “triangle,” one language group created a new term “three-sided shape.”</li> </ol>



### Word Mismatch

Another potential problem in translation is *word mismatch*. There will be some overlap of meaning for a single word between two languages, but there will probably also be some different areas of meaning for the same word. You need to be aware of word mismatch, and avoid using a word-for-word equivalent, which makes no sense in the target language.

Example: the English word *run* and the Amharic word መሮጥ.

*Run* has many meanings in English:

- to *run* a foot race
- to *run* out of sugar
- colours in a cloth can *run*
- as a result of washing
- a print *run* of 500 copies
- a *run* in your stocking
- running* water
- to *run* away/flee

But only a few of the English meanings overlap or match the meanings of መሮጥ in Amharic.



# Checking translated texts

## What should you look for when checking?

### Checking content

- Is the language the right level of difficulty for the audience? Check length of sentences, difficulty of grammatical structures, etc. Will the concepts be easily understood by the audience? If the audience is highly educated, will the level of language appeal to them, or is it too simple?
- Do the main teaching points come through clearly? To find out, ask, “What are the main teaching points of this material? What does this story illustrate?”
- Is there any jargon that might be inappropriate or unclear? Depending on the frequency of use and the number of new terms being introduced, you may need to add a glossary of terms at the back of the publication. The use of a footnote *may* be appropriate *if* the intended audience knows how to use footnotes, but they are probably not a good idea for early readers.
- Do other new technical terms convey the right sense and are they being used consistently? Consistency is very important!
- Is the content culturally appropriate? (This will usually require testing in the culture it is intended for.) If materials are deemed to be culturally inappropriate, how can they be adapted?
- Have idioms or figures of speech been translated in a way that communicates the intended meaning?

### How to check

#### **Get a back translation**

A back translation is a very literal rendering of the translation, back into the original source language, or into another language that both the translator and the checker understand. It is a way to check what someone understands from the translated text. Back translations can be done in writing or orally. Ideally, the person back-translating should be an objective third party who has not seen the text before, and they should refer only to the translation, not to the original text.

#### **If possible meet face to face**

If you are checking a written back translation, study it and note your questions ahead of time, marking anything you want to draw attention to during the checking session. Then meet with the translator(s) face to face to discuss.

### **Ask relevant questions**

Your questions should be formulated so that the answer will reveal what you are looking for. Sometimes it will be necessary to point out problems and mistakes, but asking questions is much less intimidating. Remember to comment on points that you think have been handled well. Encouragement is a very important part of the checking process.

#### *Examples of relevant questions to ask*

1. What is the main point of this sentence/paragraph?
2. I notice that this phrase is not in the original text. Why have you added it?
3. Which part of the text is that translated from?
4. I noticed an idiom in the original text. How have you dealt with that? Do you understand the intended meaning of this idiom?
5. In general, ask *content* questions rather than *yes/no* questions, so that the translator can identify his/her own errors.

### *Three Final Considerations*

#### **1. Formatting issues**

Besides checking the content, when materials are going to be printed and distributed, they need to be correctly spelled and formatted. This also needs checking.

- Are all words correctly spelled and is the punctuation correct?
- Are spellings, including those of proper names, and punctuation being used consistently?
- Are word breaks correct?
- Are quotation marks being used correctly?

#### **2. Design issues**

In addition to the relevance, content, and formatting issues, consideration must be given to the appropriateness of the illustrations, graphics, or photos that are used in a publication.

- Do the visuals match the text?
- Are the visuals correct/accurate? Are they age-appropriate for the audience?
- If using graphs or charts, is the information contained in them historically/factually correct?
- Visual literacy—how does the reader interpret

## Try Your Hand at *Checking*

Compare the original text below with the back translation. What problems do you find in the translation? What questions would you ask if you were checking it?

### **Original Text**

*In the first centuries of the Christian church, the Bible was translated into Latin so that the common people could understand it, but over time, the common people no longer spoke Latin. The church continued to use the Latin Scriptures because they thought it was a holy, powerful language. Common people couldn't understand Scripture and their faith suffered.*

*Finally, in England in the late 1300s, John Wycliffe decided to translate the Bible into English. The church leaders said to him, "How can you convey the ideas of the Bible in a barbaric language like English?" When he translated the Bible into a language that people could understand, the church grew.*

### **Back Translation**

*When the church first began, people translated the Bible from Greek into Latin because at that time the common language was Latin. But after a while no one spoke Latin any more. The church leaders went on using the Bible written in Latin because they thought it was the best language. Ordinary people could not understand Latin so they stopped going to church.*

*After a long time, John Wycliffe was born in England and he was forced to translate the Bible into English. The church leaders were all ignorant and they said to him, "How can you use the language of savage people?" But when he finished his work and people could understand it, they all left the church.*

these images? Are they culturally appropriate? This may require some testing among members of the target community. (See below.)

### **3. Testing**

After translation work has been checked and corrected, it next needs to be tested. Testing refers to the process of seeing what members of the intended audience understand from the translation. This should always be done *before* you go to the expense of printing the materials! Testing can be done in the following ways:

- After having read the materials, ask the person to retell the story or information in his own words.
- Ask questions to find out if the original author's meaning is clear. Questions need to be asked in a culturally sensitive way.
- Ask questions about the pictures. What do people perceive in the picture? Are the pictures useful?
- Show a sample cover if it is a book. Is it attractive to the target audience? Is it the right colour? Is the title appropriate?

### *In Conclusion*

As the 18th Century French historian and philosopher Voltaire once said, "Woe to the makers of literal translations, who by rendering every word weaken the meaning! It is indeed by so doing that we can say the letter kills and the spirit gives life." A word-for-word equivalent, in most cases, simply will not do. Let us strive to bring our translated texts to life. The translation task is not always straightforward, but I want to encourage you: Hang in there!



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*trans•la•tion n.  
the rendering of  
something written or  
spoken in one language  
in words of a different  
language*



*Humor is the  
first gift to  
perish in a  
foreign  
language.*

Virginia Woolf  
English author  
and publisher



*Translation is  
the other side  
of a tapestry.*

Miguel Cervantes  
Spanish  
novelist, poet  
and playwright



*Woe to the  
makers of  
literal  
translations,  
who by  
rendering  
every word  
weaken the  
meaning! It  
is indeed by  
so doing that  
we can say  
the letter  
kills and the  
spirit gives  
life.*

Voltaire  
French historian  
and philosopher



*Say what we  
may of the  
inadequacy of  
translation,  
yet the work  
is and will  
always be one  
of the  
weightiest  
and worthiest  
undertakings  
in the general  
concerns of  
the world.*

Johann  
Wolfgang von  
Goethe  
German author,  
artist, biologist  
and theoretical  
physicist



*The limits of  
my language  
mean the  
limits of my  
world.*

Ludwig  
Wittgenstein  
Austrian  
philosopher



*Translation is  
not a matter  
of words  
only: it is a  
matter of  
making  
intelligible a  
whole  
culture.*

Anthony Burgess  
English novelist  
and critic

*Many critics, no defenders,  
translators have but two  
regrets:  
when we hit,  
no one remembers,  
when we miss,  
no one forgets.*

Anonymous

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*cover photo by Andreas Neudorf*