



Bible availability around the world

A consideration of Bible availability around the world. Examples from four continents illustrate the impact the translated Word can have on individuals and whole communities.



Simon Crisp

Dr Simon Crisp is Director of Translation Services at United Bible Societies.

Like all statistics, we can interpret figures on the availability of the Bible in several different ways. According to the latest *Scripture Language Report* produced each year by the American Bible Society, some part of the Bible has been translated and published in 2,527 of the world's languages (469 of these have a whole Bible, and a further 1,231 have a complete New Testament). If we take the total number of languages in the world to be approximately 6,900¹ – the figure varies in different sources, largely because it is not always clear what constitutes a language as opposed to a dialect – this means that there are roughly 4,400 languages which have no part of the Bible.

From one point of view this is a pretty depressing picture. After more than 2,000 years of translation activity, less than half of the world's languages have even one book of the Bible available. Looked at from another point of view, though, the picture is by no means so bleak. Speakers of the 469 languages with a whole Bible actually account for well over half of the world's population, and the 2,527 languages with at least one Bible book take that figure to something over 95 per cent. And there are more than 2,000 Bible translation projects currently in progress. Not all of these of course are in languages where there is no Scripture, but many are. Even so, and even after many centuries of concerted effort, there are still millions of people (perhaps as many as 300 million in total) who have no access to a single word of Scripture in their mother tongue.

The pace of Bible translation has increased hugely over the four centuries since the King James Bible was published (see attached charts), and with the modern

growth of computer technology and communications it has accelerated even more. But we should not think that the task of Bible translation is coming to an end. Experience shows that as long as there are churches there will be a continuing need for translations of the Bible. As Christian communities grow they inevitably revise their first efforts at translation, produce new translations of different kinds for different purposes (Bible study, liturgy, evangelism), and increasingly require translations in new formats and new media. Like any living organism, Bible translation is continually developing and renewing itself.

So we can see that to speak of 'Bible availability' is not as simple as it might at first appear. Is the Bible 'available' if only one book has been translated? Is it 'available' if the only translation is in archaic or unnatural language and can barely be understood? Is it 'available' if a print translation has been published, but most of the population is illiterate? Is it 'available' if the cost of the book puts it beyond the reach of most of its potential readers?

Clearly, whatever measure we use, we cannot be satisfied if the Bible is simply available. And yet the evidence shows that when a community has access to the Scriptures in its own language the impact can be enormous. Let us look at some examples of this.

The Urak Lawoi community

The Urak Lawoi are a community of some 8,000 to 10,000 subsistence strand-dwellers on Thailand's Southwest coast.² Their name means 'sea people'

and their life centres on the sea, to the extent that they are known in the tourist industry as 'sea gypsies'. Traditionally semi-migratory, they own very little land. Their livelihood consists almost entirely in fishing and diving with compressed air. Some are now finding employment in the lower rungs of the tourism industry. Their income from the sea has been severely limited through the designation of many of their traditional fishing grounds as national parks, and through being excluded from many others by tourist operators. Their tenure even of their villages is constantly challenged by moneyed interests because of its potential for tourism revenue. In some places they have lost their beach-front land and live squashed into unsanitary quarters eking out a living from cleaning hotel rooms and taking tourists on boat rides.

Bible translation into the Urak Lawoi language goes back as far as the late 1960s when an Australian–New Zealand missionary couple began to translate the New Testament. Today, Ethim Pramongkit is the principal translator. He has been working for nearly 20 years, first on the New Testament and then, since 1998, on the entire Old Testament. Although he has only four years of primary education, Ethim – a paraplegic – has become a competent translator who works independently, uses a computer and Paratext translation software, communicates with the Bible Society by email, and with his translation consultant through Skype.

The translated Scriptures only really began to have an impact on the community following the devastating Boxing Day tsunami in December 2004. Although all the villages of the Urak Lawoi were in the tsunami region, most were in sheltered locations rather than in the direct path of the worst devastation, and there was no loss of life. Nevertheless, most of their boats were wrecked, many houses were damaged or destroyed and the people's confidence in the sea as their source of life was dented. Christian groups were in the forefront of providing aid and rehabilitation – supplies, new boats, new or repaired houses. The Thailand Bible Society was also actively involved in the relief effort. The result of this holistic response was a significant turning to Christ. Suddenly the New Testament was in demand and much of the stock has been distributed right down the coast. Audio Scriptures were also produced and distributed, along with literacy and New Reader Selections. And as the Christian community grew, Bible translation work gained a new impetus.

The impact of this translation on the Urak Lawoi community is very clear. In the short term, there is always a sense of pride, self-worth and community which comes when a new book is published in the mother tongue of people who to some extent are ignored by the majority society. There has also been an increase in literacy, both in the local language and in the national language, among the Urak Lawoi. This can only help this unique language and culture survive in the longer term.

As soon as new material becomes available it can be used by the local church communities in their teaching and worship programmes. Publications in 'diglot' format (parallel texts in Urak Lawoi and Thai) cater for the mixed nature of the congregations. The hope is that, in time, these congregations will be strengthened by leaders who are biblically educated and capable of engaging their own society and its problems with the hope inherent in the gospel. This has happened to some extent, but its full development will take more time.

One of the outcomes of the movement has been a flowering of indigenous hymn- and song-writing. Having the Scriptures available will hopefully ensure that these new songs of worship can draw on sound scriptural principles and wording.

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Albania

If the Urak Lawoi are a small community whose language and way of life are under threat, the Albanians are very different. They number 3.5 million, and their unique language is not being threatened in any way.³ However, Albanian is one of the last official national languages in Europe without its own modern Bible translation – the last translation of the New Testament dates from 1872. A third of the Albanian population is Christian (mainly Orthodox and Catholic, with a small Protestant minority), the remaining two-thirds are of Muslim background. But communist atheism has had a long-standing and deep impact – many people have lost their faith and lack a sense of direction and purpose. At the same time, Albania is a young society, and the young people, who have not grown up under an atheist regime, are more open to the gospel than the older generation.

Soon after the collapse of communism and the establishment of a Bible Society in Albania, work began on an inter-confessional Bible translation. From the very beginning of the project, the translators came from the three major Church traditions: Orthodox, Catholic and Protestant. The members of the translation team were officially approved by their churches, and received training from a United Bible Societies translation consultant through seminars on exegesis and translation methodology before and during their work. With this expertise and experience in place, the New Testament was published in 2007. Work is now continuing on the Old Testament in the same way, keeping the momentum of inter-confessional collaboration. A dynamic translation of the whole Bible will reach out to the nation at a time of change.

Notes

1. The SIL Ethnologue claims to catalogue 'all of the world's 6909 known living languages'.
2. Information about Bible translation work in Urak Lawoi was provided by UBS Translation Consultant Dr Stephen Pattimore.
3. Information about Bible translation work in Albanian was provided by Mr Altin Hysi, General Secretary of the Bible Society in Albania.
4. Information about Bible translation work in Kumam was provided by UBS Translation Consultant Dr Anastasia Boniface Malle.
5. Information about Bible translation work in Mayan was provided by UBS Translation Consultant Rev Dr Edesio Sanchez-Cetina.

The New Testament has been well accepted by all the churches. It is being used in many ways: church services, evangelistic outreach, Bible study groups, etc. Although it is an inter-confessional translation and not all the wishes of the different churches could be satisfied regarding the different choices for individual biblical terms, the churches have still been very positive because they realise that it is a text their members can understand. The overall comment has been: 'the Albanian of this New Testament flows'.

For the first time, the Albanian people will be able to read the Bible in a language which is clear and natural to them. The churches' ministry and liturgy will no longer be hampered by the lack of a modern translation.

The new inter-confessional translation will bring together people and churches that would normally not interact with each other.

The ultimate goal of translation is to bring about genuine, long-term change among individuals and whole communities.

The Kumam people of Uganda

Moving from the Adriatic coast to the plains of North-Western Uganda we find the Kumam people.⁴

Numbering some 300,000, they maintain a traditional way of life based on animal husbandry. There is a strong Kumam-speaking church which shows a particular interest in Bible translation, first of all, of course, because this is their first Bible in their own language, and secondly, because Bible translation has helped in the development of the Kumam language, which has been in danger of being overshadowed by its neighbours. The Bible translation has helped cultivate delight in a culture which was somewhat sidelined by major ethnic groups within the same language family. While in some communities Bible translation is seen as the work just of the Bible Society, the Kumam Church has regarded the translation work as its own. So when the New Testament was launched in March 2007 there was an overwhelming demand for copies – and an instant demand to start translation of the Old Testament.

What is the impact of the Bible translation in Kumam? In the immediate future, the church will be provided with an evangelistic tool in the language of the people. Pastors can read the Scripture lessons in Kumam, the liturgy can be translated into Kumam. In songs, Bible studies and even during sermons the language will be in tune with key terms used in the Bible. One pastor testifies: 'I remember before our Bible was out, whenever I preached in my mother tongue I would find it hard to express correctly terms like justification, atonement, redemption and the like. But since the Bible is out I am provided with right words, and I am able to use these words and then explain in depth what they mean.'

It is believed that, in the longer term, use of the Bible in Kumam will help the work of reconciliation among peoples. The Kumam community borders Karamojong and has suffered from cattle raiding over the years. Many Nilotic groups make their living from animal husbandry. It is also part of their cultural pride. To be robbed of their cattle by their neighbours has created a lot of animosity, bitterness and a sense of revenge for the loss of property and cultural pride. Since the Karamojong have also just received the Bible in their own language, it is believed that use of the Bible will help to bring about reconciliation between the two communities. This is not simply a subjective statement. It is a reality that we anticipate by learning from other pastoral communities in East Africa. In Tanzania, for example, before the spread of the gospel the Iraqw community would not even intermarry with the Maasai because of the effect of cattle raiding. But the gospel has transformed the two communities, cases of cattle raiding are now rare and they live in harmony.

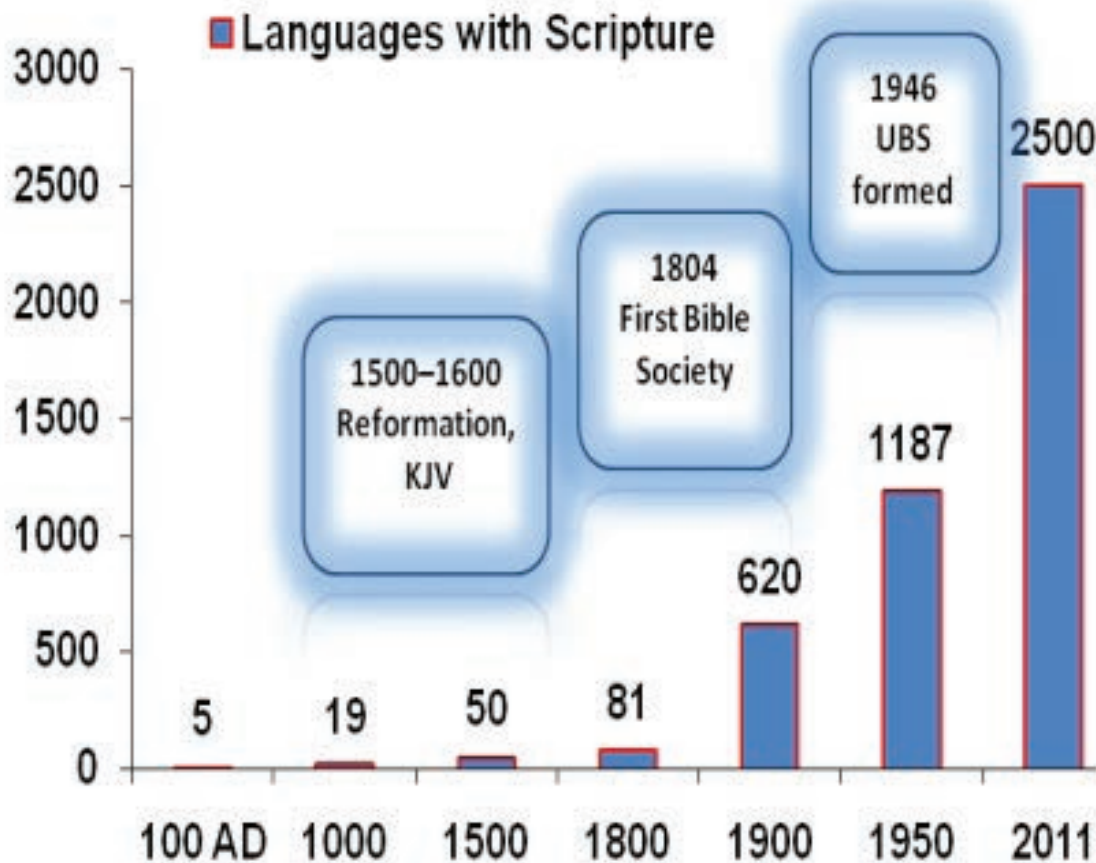
The Maya people of Mexico

Many more examples like this can be found around the world. Small and forgotten language communities are affirmed, churches grow, ethnic tensions are reduced – even the population figures can change. This happened in the case of the Maya in Mexico.⁵ Before the Mayan Bible was published and distributed, Mexico's official 10 yearly census put the number of Maya speakers at about half a million. But 10 years after the Bible was published, the census for 2000 showed that the number had more than doubled.

The cause of this apparently phenomenal growth was not simply an increase in the birth rate. The printing of the Bible in their language showed the Maya people that they were now beginning to develop a written literature. As a result, Mayan radio programmes and news bulletins came onto the air, while newspapers began sprouting Mayan sections. The effect of all this was that the Mayans became proud of their language traditions and culture and were no longer ashamed of declaring openly that they were Mayans – hence the apparent huge rise in the Mayan population.

Conclusion

As we have seen, there is a continuing need for Bible translation around the world. Making a translation 'available' – whatever that might really mean – is only the first stage in a process that takes years of commitment. There can be no short cuts in this work if communities and individuals are to encounter God's Word in a language they fully understand. The ultimate goal of translation is not to produce satisfying statistics, but to bring about genuine, long-term change among individuals and whole communities. Personal faith, church growth, community development and pride are, as we have seen, the real stories behind the statistics.



There are 6,600 languages in the world (6.9 billion people)

2500 languages have some part of the Scripture translated

Translation in progress: About 2000 languages

Translation work not started: 2,252 languages (353 million people)