Bible Translation in Algonquian Languages

ROBERT BRYCE

Canadian Bible Society

Translation is at the centre of any interchange between cultures; all the popular classics have been translated into various languages. The most translated book of all is the Bible. The first missionaries to central Canada engaged in a flurry of translation in order to bring the Bible to Native peoples in their own languages. There were translations of hymn books, prayer books, catechisms, books such as *The pilgrim's progress* (Bunyan 1886, 1900) and *The peep of day* (Mortimer 1884, 1913), Sunday lessons, New Testaments, and in some cases the entire Bible (e.g. Mason 1861). The translators were also pastors and teachers for their flocks. In those days they had to work hard as well to provide the necessities of life: they built their own homes; grew food and hunted and fished to supply their families' needs; cut and hauled wood for heating; and were involved in many other tasks. Yet they produced an abundance of translation seldom equalled, and immersed themselves in the languages and cultures of the peoples to whom they ministered.

In the decades that have passed since the work of the first missionaries in central Canada, we find that the churches by and large have simply reprinted their early work again and again. Photographic reproduction from copies of earlier printings has resulted in a deterioration of text quality. A portion of this work has gone out of print, and the effects of language change sometimes necessitate retranslation.

In the past few years a lot of translation work has been quietly going on here and there in Canada. Prior to 1985, the Canadian Bible Society contracted with Hank Spenst to conduct a survey of what was happening in the field of Native language translation in Canada. This survey showed that many translations had been undertaken, especially in the central Algonquian languages of Cree and Ojibwe, and in Inuktitut, but the efforts were uncoordinated. Beginning with a translation workshop in Winnipeg in 1985, the Canadian Bible Society embarked on a special initiative in Native language translation. This is probably one of the largest translation efforts since that of the first missionaries. The publishing aspect of these efforts was combined with the work of the translation office of the
Canadian Bible Society in Kitchener, Ontario. The dovetailing of field translation of texts and their publication has worked out so well that this process has become a model for projects in other countries.

Early translation work was often of the “formal correspondence” type. While reflecting the flavour of the source texts, this style of translation often bent the structure of the target language. The goal of current work is to provide translations into the contemporary languages as they are spoken by the people. This is often called “dynamic equivalence translation”; it attempts to translate the meaning of the text and not its external linguistic structure. I will illustrate this with a container analogy.

English is a very utilitarian language: I will symbolize it by a plain bucket of water. The container is the linguistic “shape” of the language; the water is the message. I will symbolize Cree as a shapely vase. In formal equivalence translation the transfer of meaning (the water) often results in a distortion of the Cree “vase” by the underlying structure of English imposed on the translation. The result is a flattened-out vase taking on some of the shape of the English “pail”. Much of the meaning is transferred, but some of it gets distorted in the process.

In dynamic equivalence translation the aim is to transfer every drop of “water” or meaning from the English to the Cree container without distorting the Cree language, that is, to retain the “vase” shape by using the natural forms of Cree speech.

If meaning is taken to be in the mind and not existing independent of human thought, then the process of decoding the words of the source language into their thought-meaning forms, and then translating these thoughts into the target language will give a better and more meaningful translation than what would result by merely trying to match meanings of words directly, as in formal equivalence translation. When experienced interpreters are working, they do not make word counts of what was said. They do not worry about the order of the words in English, nor about the structure or the length of the sentences. They do however, take the meanings of the words and transpose them into their own language using the natural structure and features of their language.

Martin Luther, the great reformer who translated the Bible into German for his people, strove to bridge the gap between the culture of Biblical times and that of Germany of his day; “I endeavored”, he said, “to make Moses so German that no one would suspect he was a Jew” (Bainton 1997:
Luther's aim was to make the translation come alive or be incarnate or fleshed out in the target language so that it spoke to the hearts of the people: it would be their language and not artificial "translationese".

In the 1800s, translation was a slow pen-and-ink-dominated process done by lamplight, probably after a busy day of other activities. Typesetting and printing was a complex process. Today the Canadian Bible Society projects are entirely computerized: texts are manipulated on computers; consistency can be checked by concordance programs; and there are programs for conversion from roman orthography to syllabics. Printing a publication is based on the use of tagged text which can be rapidly formatted in any desired way by swapping simple tags (such as \p to indicate paragraph style) for more complex Rich Text Format (RTF) coding. This RTF coded text then automatically formats when opened on a computer. Instead of hours of manual formatting, all that is left is some tuning-up of pagination, line breaks, etc. From this formatted text on computer disk, printing plates are made directly, skipping the old intermediate steps of paste-up and production of camera-ready copy.

With productions like the *Walking with Jesus* series the Canadian Bible Society has piggy-backed the Native language books on the back of English and French editions. This greatly reduces the considerable cost of producing Native language materials. Translations that were ready when the English and French series were printed were run along with them. Thousands of extra sheets were printed with the colour illustrations, but with the text space left blank. Then as each new dialect was readied for publication a few thousand copies could be printed at greatly reduced cost compared to a non piggy-backed production.

The Canadian Bible Society cooperates with other organizations, such as Wycliffe Bible Translators/Summer Institute of Linguistics (SIL), to publish work from their field teams. Some of the *Walking with Jesus* series (e.g. the East Cree edition) are the work of Wycliffe field teams.

Appended to this paper is a short list of some of the Canadian Bible Society publications in Native languages. It may be of interest that the Kativik School board asked for a special translation of *Walking with Jesus* into a dialect of Inuktitut so that this series of six booklets could be used for language teaching in its schools.

An important by-product of translation is language preservation. In spite of the accusations of the popular media that Christianity deprives
people of language and culture, the exact opposite is true: the translation of the Bible is a powerful force in preserving the language and all that is good in the culture of a people.¹

In a short paper one cannot really cover the entire field of translation. I have but drawn a few broad strokes to indicate something of what is occurring. Our Plains Cree translator Stan Cuthand is working on a new draft translation of the Old Testament. I am beginning to work with an Ojicree speaker on the translation of the New Testament into Oji-Cree (Northern Ojibwe). The Inuktitut translation team has completed the New Testament and is now working on the Old Testament. I am currently reviewing a draft translation of the Ojibwe Old Testament with a team in Red Lake, Ontario. This new thrust in translation parallels a renewed interest in the use and preservation of Native languages.

APPENDIX

Native Language Publications by the Canadian Bible Society

Walking with Jesus series (six booklets on the life of Christ), in English, French and various Native languages:

Book 1: The childhood of Jesus.
Book 2: Amazing events.
Book 3: Parables of Jesus.
Book 4: Teachings of Jesus.
Book 5: The death of Jesus.
Book 6: The resurrection of Jesus.

These have been published in the following dialects:

Algonquin (roman orthography) (SIL)
Atikamekw Cree (roman orthography) (SIL)
East Cree (Mistassini, syllables) (SIL)
Micmac (New Brunswick dialect) (SIL)
Micmac (Nova Scotia dialect) (SIL)
Micmac (Quebec dialect) (SIL)
Montagnais (SIL)
Moose Cree (syllabics)
Naskapi (syllabics) (SIL)
Ojibwe (Red Lake/Lac Seul dialect, roman orthography and syllabics)
Oji-Cree (forthcoming)
Swampy Cree (roman orthography and syllabics)
Western (Plains) Cree (roman orthography and syllabics)

¹This thesis is developed in detail by Lamin Sanneh in Translating the message: the missionary impact on culture (1989).
In addition to the Algonquian language family, the series is published in Inuktitut (syllabic), Yupik (roman and cyrillic orthographies), Mohawk, and Dogrib.


Western Cree Bible. Soon to be republished as a di-script (roman orthography and syllabics) with added section heads and some revisions in key terms.

REFERENCES


