

LANGUAGE AND CULTURE

Eugene A. Nida

United Bible Society (EE.UU.)

ABSTRACT

This article collects the plenary conference given by Eugene A. Nida at the V International Congress “Translation, Text and Interferences” on Translation and Cultural Mediation, hold at the University of Cordoba (Spain), in which the author recounts that, along his career as a translator, it was of paramount importance to know the values of the different cultures he visited in order to understand how these cultures communicated meaningfully with one another and, consequently, be able to help their translators in their work of translating the Bible.

KEYWORDS: Eugene Nida, culture, biblical translation.

RESUMEN

El presente artículo recoge la conferencia plenaria que el profesor Eugene A. Nida pronunció en el V Congreso Internacional “Traducción, Texto e Interferencias” sobre Traducción y mediación cultural, celebrado entre el 13 y el 15 de diciembre de 2006 en la Universidad de Córdoba, donde relata que, a lo largo de su trayectoria como traductor, le resultó crucial conocer los valores de las distintas culturas que visitó para poder comprender cómo se comunicaban entre sí y, por ende, ser capaz de ayudar a los traductores de estas culturas en su labor de traducción de la Biblia.

PALABRAS CLAVE: Eugene Nida, cultura, traducción bíblica.

1. INTRODUCTION

After travelling around the world several times in order to help translators, I have met up with a number of cultures. It was crucial for me to know the values of these different people in order to understand how they communicate meaningfully with one another. Now, I would like to share with you some of the insights I gained from listening to them.

2. YIPOUNOU (CAMEROUN)

In one of my books I mentioned helping a translator improve a translation of the Gospel of John in Yipounou. I did not speak Yipounou, a Bantu language of West Africa, but I did know French and I could readily note how the translation into Yipounou was practically a word-for-word rendering of a popular French translation of the Gospel of John.

I also knew something about the way in which Bantu languages organize words into sentences and sentences into texts, so I arranged to meet the translator, who had learned Yipounou as the son of missionaries living in West Africa. Actually he had been asked to make the translation of the New Testament into Yipounou, but he was told to make his translation as close as possible to the standard French text. This was a typical kind of mistake, and the young man fully recognized the absurdity of such an approach to communicating. Accordingly, he was glad to be able to redo his translation and in this way produce a text that would be more accurate, understandable, and acceptable, because the revision could be so much better understood by the local people.

3. ETHIOPIA

We received an urgent request for a visit to a remote area in southern Ethiopia that could be reached only by overland travel by truck. The British missionaries were especially anxious to have advice about a newly proposed alphabet, and I was the only nearby translation consultant who might be able to help. Recent rains had made the roads almost impassable, but as soon as the roads had dried out, there was danger of fires of elephant grass, and that is precisely what happened. That very afternoon the road ahead was a wall of fire some forty feet high. We could not go back because the fire was advancing faster than we could retreat. So we simply had to drive the truck through the fire. We prepared as well as we could and chose a relatively level stretch of road. There we waited until we could dash through the blaze, throw dirt on the truck, and put out any lurking embers. Finally, we arrived at the village of the British mission.

We received a hero's welcome and greatly appreciated all the people did in trying to make our stay as helpful as possible because of the translation of the New Testament into one of the local languages. But I could not understand why one of the missionaries had a six-inch wide piece of pink cloth sewed to his shorts in order to cover his knees. Even though British shorts are usually

longer than either the French or the Belgian, but at least for one poor man, his wife found enough pink cloth to “sanctify” her husband's knees.

4. ZAMBUANGO, PHILIPPINES

In Zambuang, Philippines, I was asked to make a trip to some of the islands that link the Philippines to Sabah, but I had no idea that such a part of the world was so open to anyone having the money to buy the most modern fleet of small fast boats.

The boat leaving Zambuang for Sabah contained a number of people armed with sub-machine guns, and my host arranged for me to be met by guards with high-powered rifles. The amount of illegal imports between the Philippines and Sabah was enormous, and I frankly cannot think of a part of the world that seems less open to the Prince of Peace than the scores of tiny islands where fast ships mock the international harbours and the smugglers' hide-outs, but there are some exceptional people who nevertheless try to make the Gospel a reality in a place more like hell than heaven, and even to translate it into the indigenous languages for local people to understand.

5. BAFFIN LAND

When I received an invitation to participate in a two-week conference for Eastern Eskimo, I was also told to be prepared for 25 to 30 degrees below zero for outside temperatures, because that is precisely the kind of weather needed for travel in the Arctic. I thought the area would include plenty of igloos and dog sleds, but the town had a supermarket, many fine five-room houses, all with freezing storage space, and special places for powered sleds. The Junior College was as fine as any such school in Canada, and church attendance was more than 90 percent. The level of education of the western arctic population is exceptionally high, in fact, significantly above the level of general education in Canada, although Eskimos who want special training in the sciences go to universities in Canada, Europe, or the United States.

For a revised text of Eastern Eskimo the team members all had advanced training in biblical languages and theology. I had never met with such well trained participants in a conference for establishing principles and procedures for a new translation.

6. PONAPE, CENTRAL PACIFIC

For several weeks a conference on Bible translation and revision was held on the island of Ponape, in the Central Pacific, with Protestant and Roman Catholic translators. This was an interesting experience for me, and I was so appreciated by the local people that they celebrated their newly found sense of oneness by insisting on a series of banquets to proclaim their “new oneness”.

Accordingly, toward the end of the conference our hosts insisted on showing their sense of oneness by having a series of banquets in which each of the participants received as much as ten pounds of food, for example, steaming shellfish, roasted squid, juicy steaks of fish, delicious portions of roasted sweet potatoes, pineapples, breadfruit, bananas, coconuts, and endless drinks of coconut juice on tables flooded with tropical flowers. But nothing was wasted because people who prepared and served the banquets, arranged to take home with them anything that had not been consumed.

7. BURUNDI, EAST AFRICA

Five missions in East Africa joined for a one-day consultation to settle problems of translation that had been undertaken cooperatively by five different missions in Burundi. Year after year representatives of the five leading churches met, and finally they came together for a meeting, in which they hoped to resolve some of the difficult issues of theology and language. I was given very short notice of the meeting, but I did everything possible to be present in time for some of the critical issues.

When I arrived the evening before the joint and final meeting, I was amazed at the list of items on the agenda. In fact, I was so impressed by the number and seriousness of the agenda that I stayed up beyond midnight studying the issues.

Representatives of the five missions met the next morning at 9 a.m. The representative of the Pentecostal Churches declared that he and other people of his church believed the translators and revisers had done a fine piece of work in their final review. Although he and his colleagues did not agree with everything suggested, he urged the group to consider carefully some of the especially delicate issues, for this was not the time to delay crucial decisions that needed to be resolved in order to help people understand and appreciate what had been done.

Other representatives adopted the same attitude, and the meeting began, but these introductory words changed radically the underlying tensions that had crippled decision-making in the past. Other members on the revision

committee began to voice similar concerns, and I was amazed by the way in which representatives of the missions were apparently changing their earlier judgments. By four o'clock decisions on the agenda were completed, and like a surprise, earlier contentions rapidly disappeared, and within a few weeks a revised text was submitted to the Bible Societies for publication.

But there was also a tragedy in what took place. The decisions were all made by the missionaries and not in cooperation with the local Bantu Christian leaders. This was really their language, their revision, and their symbol of faith. Fortunately, the African leaders were able to rise above the evident superiority-complex of the missionaries, who did not fully appreciate the fact that the local language belonged to the local people.

8. CHIHUAHUA, MEXICO

I began my work as a specialist in translating by first learning the local Indian language, but I had real difficulties in getting bread, meat and fruit in the local place, two days horseback from Chihuahua. In fact, I soon became weak from lack of nutritious food, and there was simply no place that I could buy food without travelling by horseback for a day, and even then I was not sure that I could hire a horse. The place was especially difficult because it snowed almost every night and got increasingly colder day by day.

My good Indian friend, Ricardo, came to me and said, "If you don't get more and better food you are soon going to die. Why don't you hire a woman to find food for you, cook it, and make your cabin into a home rather than trying to live in a refrigerator?"

Ricardo was right about my difficulties in having living facilities, but if the Mexican Department of Education would not send hardware to the carpenter they had hired to make the school habitable, they certainly would not send help to me, when I tried to exist in what was more of a icebox than a cabin.

Accordingly, Ricardo asked, "Why don't you go back to the end of the railroad, which is only two day's horseback riding. There you will find stores where you can buy what you need, and maybe you can arrange good facilities in a nearby school, but you will freeze to death if you continue where you are".

I took his advice and returned to the end of the railroad, and began to look for a place to stay, but I couldn't find any. Accordingly, three weeks later, I boarded the train with my wrinkled clothes and my scribbled notes on the linguistic structures of the local Indian languages, and I was on my way home in Garden Grove, California.

I underwent one test after another, and I could only be reassured that with the proper medicine, food and rest, I would be well enough to start my studies in linguistics at the University of Michigan.

9. TETELCINGO, MEXICO

I was gathering data for my research in linguistics and had with me some fine young men from different tribes. I was especially interested in problems relating to expressions about sickness and death, but suddenly we heard people screaming from near the irrigation tank. Apparently someone was in trouble, so I and my helpers ran as fast as we could to see what had happened in the huge tank. Evidently someone was in serious trouble, and so we immediately jumped into the water, which was about three meters deep, but most of the people that had gathered on the edge of the tank refused to get into the water because they were afraid that evil spirits would then drown them.

We finally had to remove all the water from the tank in order to find the victim's body deep in the mud. But people in the village were so frightened about the spirit of the man that they didn't want to be even near the tank. We had to keep in mind the beliefs of these people in order to help them to translate into their local languages.

In Mexico, I met a number of remarkable persons with unusual linguistic skills. For example, there was a completely deaf woman who had developed a written form of her own language and taught it to all the women of her town (how I wished I could have studied her system of symbols and reasoning!). In Mexico, I also had the opportunity of meeting a brilliant Indian interpreter who on at least one occasion translated from memory a forty-five minute speech delivered the previous day.

10. CENTRAL AMERICA

When a strategic leader of a group of "outlaws" in Guatemala passed away, he left word that one of his followers should contact nearby missionaries who could pray for his soul. The outlaw had great respect for the honesty and integrity of the missionaries, and because of the missionaries' honest lives, he was certain that God would bless the outlaw's soul on its way to paradise.

Figurative language is one of the most effective ways of talking about mental and emotional states. For example, in Miskito (Honduras) peace is "having only one heart", but indecision may be expressed as "there are butterflies in my heart", while in Tarahumara (Mexico) being concerned is

expressed as “his thinking shut his mouth”. And in Chontal (Mexico) uncertainty becomes “Who knows where my heart went to?”

11. NORTHERN ECUADOR

Missionary friends whom I had been helping to solve some of the orthographic problems in the rare dialect, in which they had been working, let me off at a regular stop so that I could catch a bus to the capital of Ecuador. But I was shocked to see almost a hundred local Indians dead drunk. I had heard about such celebrations in honour of a local saint but this was overwhelming. I could not believe that people would sell themselves to such senselessness. The only person who was sane was the owner of the store specializing in various alcoholic drinks and so I introduced myself and asked him if I could ask him some questions. He was apparently happy to have someone to talk to, and he kindly tried to suggest the possible reasons for such behaviour: poverty and lack of education. In fact, he said that the people did not really know their own history.

According to tradition, earlier residents in the area had worshipped the five mountain peaks on the eastern horizon, and he named them for me and tried to explain the way they had benefited the people, but only at the price of honest interpersonal relations.

12. THAILAND

A mission in Thailand strongly urged me to accept an invitation to visit an area where there was considerable tension over the issue of speaking in Tongues, a form of speech consisting of long sequences of consonants and vowels that parallel the patterns of speech in actual languages, but which lack linguistic structures typical of meaningfully related words, phrases, and clauses. I was probably foolish to accept such an invitation, but I wanted to be helpful to those who wanted to know more about what some people called “Tongues” or “the language of heaven”.

The place where I was invited to speak was largely controlled by a strong-minded woman who did not want any discussion of Tongues and who was preparing without any technical assistance a new orthography for the local language. In fact, without any professional training in linguistics, she had worked out a new set of symbols for one of the local languages, which she alone claimed to speak “correctly”. In fact, she tried to employ the same orthography for both Tongues and “normal language”, and she had designated

a particular mid-week meeting in which she was certain that God would reveal by 3 a.m. the right manner to write both forms of language.

I was personally very interested in studying the phenomenon, and I found it very similar to the practice of Tongues in various parts of fundamentalist and fringe groups. The staging of the revealed orthography was quite fascinating because the leader of the mission seemed to instinctively know how to manipulate the audience, especially at the preordained time of 3 a.m. This time for presumed supernatural revelations involved a masterful use of timing in parading evil spirits around a darkened room.

The diversity of languages and cultures makes translation into local languages a very difficult task, but translators need to understand that behind the words there are powerful cultures that must not be ignored.