

INTERNATIONAL ORALITY NETWORK

THE INTERRELATIONSHIP
OF ORALITY
AND BIBLE TRANSLATION

A CHAPTER FOR PUBLICATION

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Introduction

The interrelationship of orality and Bible translation is critical because of the shared aim of Bible translators and practitioners of orality. The shared goal is expressed most clearly by the emphasis on Unreached People Groups (UPG) by mission agencies (many of whom are proponents of orality) and the emphasis on Vision 2025 of Wycliffe Bible Translators and SIL International.¹ These two emphases share the concern that those who have little or no access to the Scripture may hear, understand, and respond to the gospel. Because of the ultimate importance of this goal the interrelationship of orality and Bible translation must be maximized. Failure to maximize the resources and personnel these entities represent will result in many lost opportunities to impact unreached masses of the world.

The Limitations of Literate Missionaries Serving in an Oral World

Various statistics convey the number of people in the world who prefer an oral style of learning. “The cultures of most minority language groups can be characterized as oral ...² Jim Slack reported, “one-third to one-half” of the world’s population prefer oral

¹ David Payne, “FAQs for Bible Translators on Storying,” in World Wide Scripture Use Consultation: CD from the meeting at Horsleys Green, UK, March 25-31, 2006, by the Office of the International Coordinator for Storying and Orality Wycliffe International and SIL International, 1.

² Rick Brown, Val Carleton, Harriet Hill, Margaret Hill, Doris Porter, and Marcia Wesler, “Aiming for Impact: We Are What We Celebrate” Intercom January-April 2006, 3.

learning styles.³ Herbert V. Klem stated, "Perhaps as much as 70% of the world's population is not likely to take an interest in the Bible if we take a literary approach to teaching...."⁴ The massive numbers of people in the world who prefer an oral learning style deserve an appropriate response.

The high literacy rates of missionary-sending countries have been a major influence on the communication styles prevalent in the methodologies of missionaries. Prior education has biased literate missionaries toward written styles of communication, printed media, as well as printed Bibles.⁵ However, regardless of the style preference missionaries bring to the Great Commission task the needs of the target audience are the primary consideration. Literacy, Bible translation, and theological education are three examples of literate missionary approaches which reinforce literate approaches.

Literacy programs provide a logical and useful response to illiteracy. However, individuals define their own needs for literacy based on their cultural and personal preferences. As many as 60-70% of adult illiterates in Africa do not have any desire to learn how to read.⁶ Reporting this reality is not meant to disparage the positive results of literacy programs. Instead this is a call to consider the needs of oral communicators who are yet to benefit from cross-cultural gospel communication. Even

³ James B. Slack and J. O. Terry, Chronological Bible Storying: A Methodology for Presenting the Gospel to Oral Communicators, New Orleans Baptist Theological Seminary 1998 Edition International Mission Board of the Southern Baptist Convention, 6.

⁴ Herbert V. Klem, Oral Communication of the Scripture: Insights From African Oral Art (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 1982), xiii.

⁵ David J. Hesselgrave, Communicating Christ Cross-Culturally, 2d ed. (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1991), 538-39.

⁶Klem, 159.

if there were enough literacy programs, many oral communicators would still choose not to participate. Literacy programs cannot provide an adequate answer for the needs of oral communicators.

Bible translation projects have made huge gains in language development and printing culturally appropriate and meaningful Bible translations. However, of the 6,912 spoken languages in the world, 2,529 do not have any Scriptures.⁷ Even if these languages had printed Scriptures immediately available, the needs of oral learners would still be unmet. If the Bible is translated but presented with primarily literate communication processes, huge segments of the population still have no real access to Scripture. Therefore, Scripture availability is not as crucial as the even more daunting task of providing reproducible models of processing biblical material with oral learners. Bible translators have a great influence on which media are chosen to introduce and teach the Scriptures. Orality and Bible translation are both stakeholders in developing sustainable methods of teaching the Scriptures.

Current methods of theological education largely reflect the learning preferences of mission-sending countries. Theological institutions produce graduates for church ministry and Bible translation. Most often they are steeped in systematic theology and expositional teaching although they serve among those who prefer an oral learning style. Even if church leaders and Bible translators are well trained, they still lack an appropriate communication model to deliver their biblical knowledge to oral learners. Oral processing models should be taught in institutions which serve population segments

⁷“Bulletin Board,” Intercom January-April 2006, 11.

with significant numbers of oral communicators. The current approach to theological education cannot meet the needs of vast numbers of oral communicators.

Literacy, Bible translation, and theological education have accomplished a great deal in providing avenues for the gospel to be communicated. However, all three of these enterprises have their limitations based on their beginnings as literate Western missionary imports. Without a change of direction, most cross-cultural gospel presentations will continue to be directed at literate learners while the needs of oral learners are overlooked.

Do you have to choose between orality and literacy?

The individuals who been exposed to the Bible through orality demonstrate how orality and Bible translation are complementary. Five testimonies from this writer's experience in Africa illustrate how oral and literate approaches support one another.

The wife of a Bible translator described herself as uneducated, or one who "had never seen a blackboard." She attended a literacy class which used the text of Genesis in her mother-tongue and Chronological Bible stories. Hearing and understanding the stories encouraged her to read and gave her confidence to learn.

In Uganda a woman explained her new interaction with the Bible using oral processing tools like questions and dialogue. She said, "People read the Bible but then they just put it down. Even when we hear the Bible read to us we often understand little. Now that I know the Bible stories by heart I can understand and tell others."

Soon after Genesis was printed for a language group in Southern Sudan, the Bible translation team began to train church leaders with Chronological Bible Storying. After learning about twelve stories, one elder made a startling statement, "The Bible

stories have become *vuru*.” He explained, “*Vuru* is the essential history of your clan. *Vuru* tells of your origins, correct and incorrect behaviors, and is a guide to solving problems. Without *vuru* a person cannot know how to live. Without the *vuru* of God a person cannot know God or how to obey him. This is why people are not able to obey God. They do not know the *vuru* of God.” Twelve oral Bible stories helped this elder see the “history of God” in a way he had ever known from the printed Scriptures. The testimony illustrates that merely possessing printed Scriptures does not meet the need of cultural relevance within an oral culture.

A Bible translator from the Democratic Republic of Congo with twenty years of experience gave his testimony at the end of a week of introduction to Chronological Bible Storying. He said, “I have been translating the Bible for years but this week I have learned so much I never knew about the Bible. I have already translated all these passages but I learned so much more by discussing them orally.”

A literate gentleman in Uganda has learned Chronological Bible stories and tells them weekly in his home. With joy and surprise he shared, “I am not an educated person and I never thought of myself as someone who can teach. Now I am learning and I am able to teach others who are also able to teach.”

Neither Bible translation nor orality alone can accomplish the job of providing access to the Scriptures for all the people of the world in their heart language. However, there are ways that Bible translators and proponents of orality can assist one another in accomplishing this shared goal of providing access to the Word of God for all. There are two dangers that prohibit the interrelationship of orality and Bible translation. The goal

of this paper is to propose practical suggestions for interaction between practitioners of orality and Bible translation.

The Danger of Product-Orientation Rather Than Impact-Orientation

Although Scripture products are valuable, impacting the lives of people is more critical. For example, printed Scriptures without significant literacy levels will not likely change the average person's access to the Scriptures. A multi-decade project like completing a New Testament might bypass the actual needs of the people in a language group.

A recent article, "Aiming for Impact: We Are What We Celebrate," reflected the potential danger of production goals within Bible translation. New Testament completion is the goal most often celebrated within Bible translation projects. "Yet the completion of a New Testament does not guarantee that any of our ends have been achieved in that community."⁸ Here the "ends" referred to are the organizational goals of access to Scripture that is appropriate, adequate, and available in ways that the community can sustain.

The article suggested probing questions to help Bible translators evaluate their own motivations and uncover attitudes which support product-orientation.⁹ Possible

⁸Rick Brown, 2.

⁹Ibid., 3. The questions were as follows: Can we search our hearts and ask ourselves some hard questions? Have we come to prize printed New Testaments above all else, whether the community will use them or not, and regardless of what they and our partners are requesting? Would we rather produce a bare New Testament than a spiritually adequate and culturally appropriate selection of Old Testament and New Testament portions with supplementary helps that is likely to have greater impact but might not have the same prestige in the eyes of our supporters? Are we willing to see and celebrate impact oriented milestones like those mentioned in our Ends Policy? Are we willing to strive for impact goals, whose realization depends on God, the participation of our partners, and on the receptivity of the community, rather than focusing on production goals, which we can manage and control ourselves?

solutions to transition away from product orientation were offered including: recognizing the role of orality and diglossia, avoidance of production goals, and celebrating impact milestones and impact-oriented products. The publication of the article is a sign of changing attitudes. Product-orientation is a trap to avoid.

The Danger of a Simplistic View of Cross-Cultural Communication

The idea that oral communication methods are the silver bullet to complete the task of communicating the gospel cross-culturally is equally dangerous. The cross-cultural communication process is far more complicated than many practitioners of orality seem to admit. Many proponents of Chronological Bible Storying are not aware of the safeguards for accuracy developed by Bible translators.¹⁰ The use of oral communication does not eliminate the distance between the culture of the Bible and the culture of the target audience. Translation problems like biblical key terms, figurative language, and unknown ideas exist in both oral and literate communication.¹¹

Reproducibility is highly valued by oralists. Handling translation problems in meaningful and natural language contributes to the reproducibility of stories. A simplistic view of the cross-cultural communication process will likely produce oral products which may be non-communicative or erroneous. Meanwhile, oral-friendly checking procedures are available from the Bible translation process.

¹⁰Payne, 7.

¹¹However, orality offers a freedom unknown to Bible translators since difficult or non-essential material can sometimes be eliminated from oral products so as to reduce the number translation problems. Nevertheless significant translation problems still remain. Payne, 7.

Those involved in oral communication strategies are sometimes intimidated by the expertise and terminology of those who use translation principles and processes.

Some oralists respond with a look of surprise when they are referred to as Bible translators. In light of this fact, consider the following definition of translation by Beekman and Callow:

When, however, a message in one language is communicated in a different language, then translation is involved. It is not necessary that the means used to communicate the original message be the same as that in the translation. Thus, an oral message may be translated into another language using semaphore or Morse code, or a written message may be translated orally. The means used to symbolize the message is not an essential component of translation. For example, the words that Jesus spoke in Aramaic were translated by the gospel authors into Greek, and at the same time the form was changed from speech to writing. In other words, the oral presentation of the message was committed to a written form along with the translation process.

It can be seen from the above that the translation process involves (1) at least two languages and (2) a message.¹²

This definition demonstrates how those involved in Chronological Bible Storying are indeed doing translation. Employing translation principles and processes in the use of oral communication strategies is appropriate and necessary. To think of this task as anything other than translation is to ignore the obvious. Knowledge of Bible translation procedures will help oralists to implement and adapt those procedures for oral approaches.

¹² John Beekman and John Callow, Translating the Word of God with Scripture and Topical Indexes Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1984, page 4.

Oral Procedures in Bible Translation

Several persons have written about the employment of oral procedures within the Bible translation process. These examples are evidence of the practical relationship between orality and Bible translation.

Philip A. Noss brought attention to the importance of orality in the transmission and reception of a message across languages. A strong emphasis on translation and literacy persisted for more than fifty years among the Gbaya of Cameroon. These efforts produced a New Testament, Luther's catechism, a songbook, and numerous tracts in Gbaya.¹³ In the early 1970's a new effort to produce an Old Testament and a revision of the New Testament began with a surprising discovery.

The translators soon came to realize that in spite of the emphasis of the early missionaries on reading, for the majority of the Gbaya, even for those who knew how to read and write, most communication remained oral. Communication in daily life was almost always the spoken word, and even across great distances messages were more often sent by word of mouth than by pen and ink. The translators therefore made a conscious effort to model their written translation on the oral form.¹⁴

Noss concluded his article with this advice for Bible translators among previously oral language groups.

In conclusion, the Receptor Story cannot be ignored by the translator because, whether he is aware or not, the literary context within which the new message is received will affect the response of the receptor (cf. Stine 1974:104). The form of narrative, and poetry, in the receptor language must determine the form to be used in the translated Scriptures, both on the highest levels of discourse and at the basic levels of syntax and lexicon.¹⁵

¹³ Philip A. Noss, "The Oral Story and Bible Translation," The Bible Translator 32 No. 3 (July 1981) : 302.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid., 317. Carla Bartsch made a similar point. "Yet the translator needs to blend into written style those features of the target language's oral style which make it useful in the many situations where it

Among the Gbaya, decades of emphasis on reading failed to alter preferences for oral communication patterns. Although this writer appreciates the Noss's advice, there is a need to go beyond his proposal. The resistance of the Gbaya to literate communication is an opportunity to engage them in the oral forms they utilize best. Why not accept the high value of oral communication within the culture and harness that highly effective vehicle for communicating Scripture? To ignore the communication preference of the Gbaya is to force a Western literate communication style upon them and deprive them of the best indigenous vehicle for communicating the gospel. Failure to utilize the communicative potential of stories, proverbs, and songs among oral peoples like the Gbaya will identify the gospel as a powerless Western import without a vehicle to travel on indigenous communication pathways.

After nineteen years among the Yali of Irian Jaya in Indonesia, John Wilson admitted his own early lack of appreciation of "the great significance of oral culture for Bible translation." He advised that a negative bias against oral cultures has often led to a failure to consider their potential usefulness for communicating Scriptural truth. Instead, the oral medium should not be thought of as lesser quality but as a different means of communication. "If we make use of oral skills, we make it possible for members of oral societies to understand, appreciate and accept the biblical message for themselves."¹⁶ The use of oral medium is not merely a methodology for translation but also a means of

can be used orally." Carla Bartsch, "Oral Style, Written Style, and Bible Translation." Notes on Translation 11 No. 3 (1997) : 48.

¹⁶John Wilson, "Focus on Translators: Oral Culture and Written Scripture," The Bible Translator 44 No. 2 (April 1993) : 235.

“allowing the message of the Bible to be at home within the context of an oral culture.”¹⁷

Even the readers in oral societies possess an oral perspective which should not be discounted in choosing appropriate media. Wilson explained the positive impact of several oral uses of Scripture he had observed: storytelling, apprenticeship, oral reading, and Scripture in song.¹⁸

Martin Culy wrote of the “Top-Down Approach to Translation.” Traditionally Bible translation has been thought of as a “bottom-up approach” beginning from the words, phrases, and clauses of the source text and building up to a reasonably accurate rough draft which is inevitably lacking in naturalness. Afterwards the translator will try to revise the draft to make it more natural. This process makes it very difficult to produce quality translations.¹⁹

In contrast the “top-down approach” begins from an oral exegetical overview instead of the printed source text. The result is that the mother-tongue translator can produce a highly natural draft from the first attempt. Inaccuracies can be corrected later but the highly natural beginning draft is preserved. This process takes advantage of the memory skills of non-Westerners who “excel at internalizing ‘chunks’ of information.”²⁰ The “top-down approach” does not require the mother-tongue translator to be proficient

¹⁷Ibid., 236.

¹⁸Ibid., 240-241. Storytelling took place informally at firesides in the evenings in a similar way that the Yali had always told tales and sung traditional songs. Apprenticeship involved the on-the-job training in which elders taught oral Scripture to younger believers in the same way a traditional medicine man would train a novice in the rites of healing and cleansing. The Yali have produced highly memorable songs employing assonance, parallelism, repetition which allow wide participation in communicating the biblical message.

¹⁹Martin M. Culy, “The Top-Down Approach to Translation,” Notes on Translation 7 No. 3 (1993) : 32.

²⁰Ibid., 37.

at exegesis. Culy's suggestion provides an opportunity for oral communicators to make a meaningful contribution to the Bible translation process.

In societies where literacy is a recent arrival, the "experts" in language are still the storytellers. The lack of highly literate persons encouraged Rev. Euan Fry to tap into the skills of less educated but highly skilled oral communicators. Fry developed an oral process of utilizing a team of bilingual English speaking translators and an ex-patriot who knows the receptor language. First, they listen to the story read in English and then discuss it in their mother tongue. Second, a team member acts as storyteller. The retelling is recorded on cassette and replayed to the group to accomplish a complete review. The ex-patriot is on hand to help with an explanation of the English text while the mother tongue speakers excel at processing the story orally. Third, team members correct inaccuracies and make suggestions about clarity and naturalness. The freedom of the group to interact is enhanced by an outdoor location natural for storytelling in the culture. Fourth, a new draft is produced and recorded to be made available for wider use and checking. Finally, the story was produced in audio and in printed form. Sometimes the booklet was used with the cassette as a tool to assist them in beginning to learn to read.²¹

Christine Kilham called for starting translation orally with indigenous art like song or drama. Her conclusions demonstrated the necessity of combining oral and literate approaches. She suggested that an early emphasis on literacy was important but should not become an all consuming goal. Oral approaches were needed for the first portions of

²¹ Rev. Euan Fry, "An Oral Approach to Translation," The Bible Translator 30 No. 2 (April 1979) : 214-17.

Scripture and in ongoing efforts to serve non-literates. While literacy was encouraged, significant time must pass for a good written style to develop among those who are becoming literate. Kilham saw the ideal as having a variety of media throughout acknowledging there may never be more than a small nucleus of literates. However, the small literate nucleus can provide a “permanent reference base” between literate, semi-literate, and oral communicators in the community.²² Kilham has recognized the urgent need for oral media throughout a language project as well as the development of good writers to facilitate the pathway to the ultimate goal of written Scripture.

Bible Translation Procedures in Oral Approaches

A few examples of oral procedures from Bible translation have been presented. This writer suggests a few Bible translation procedures for use within oral approaches. Currently these procedures are in use by this writer in producing Chronological Bible Stories in Northern Uganda.

At the beginning of the project, language and culture learning were the entire focus. After eight months of language study and with some ability to communicate in the Lugbara language, cross-cultural experiences provided a growing awareness of spiritual needs. Although the Lugbara Bible was completed in 1966, the lack of an appropriate orthography, tone marks, and literacy training prohibit many people from understanding and applying the Bible in a culturally relevant way.

The first efforts at orality were to teach thirty Bible stories in English to a select group of Lugbara speakers with better than average English skills. This biblical

²²Christine Kilham, “A Written Style for Oral Communicators?” Notes on Translation No. 123 (December 1987) : 45-46.

panorama beginning with Creation and ending with the Day of Pentecost was presented in two weeks.²³ Obviously English was a barrier to a more complete understanding but the collective impact of the stories produced an enthusiastic response. After hearing thirty stories, six of the eight Lugbara speakers wanted to tell the stories to their families and neighbors. The six Lugbara speakers agreed to become story crafters and to lead storytelling groups in their homes. Three ex-patriot missionaries acted as facilitators for the story crafting process and Chronological Bible Storying group leadership.

This is a description of the story crafting process. Each Bible story was discussed thoroughly with a story crafter. The study of language and culture helped the facilitators illuminate potential problems. Translation problems like metaphors, idioms, and other figures of speech within the stories were explained to the story crafter.²⁴ The story crafters asked questions about the stories to clarify their own understanding. Oral drafting began by dividing the story into logical chunks. A reasonably accurate cassette recording was made of each of the chunks sequentially. The story crafter then used the recording to learn the entire story. After several oral revisions of the story, the story crafter arrived at a draft with which he or she was comfortable.

²³ Loewen suggested twenty-six Bible stories as a credible beginning point for witness for several reasons: 1. The series of stories gave a relatively “whole” message although language study was yet underway and key terms were not yet chosen. 2. The stories demonstrated the cultural relevance for the form and the message of the Scriptures. 3. The series provided an expandable framework to anchor the later translation of the Book of Mark. 4. The framework prevented harmful restructuring of the new message. 5. Retelling and dramatization of the stories brought local application and helped the translation process. 6. The relevant and accepted narratives were helpful for new literates. 7. The narrative form of the message was similar to folk tales which provided an immediate way everyone could participate in sharing the Good News. Loewen, Jacob A., “Bible Stories: Message and Matrix,” Practical Anthropology 11 No. 2 (March –April 1964): 49-54.

²⁴ A basic introduction to translation and translation can be found in the text by Katherine Barnwell, Translation Principles: An Introductory Course in Translation Principles, Third Edition (Dallas: Summer Institute of Linguistics, 1992).

The next stage of the process involved checking the oral draft.²⁵ The oral draft was transcribed or keyboarded from the tape. Next, the oral draft was back-translated orally or in writing by a person other than the story crafter. The facilitator took the back-translation(s) and checked the content for accuracy and translation principles. The translation principles were used to generate open-ended questions to check the crafter's knowledge of the figurative language and content. The answers to the checking questions exposed weaknesses needing revision. After these revisions were discussed with the story crafter a new oral draft was recorded. The back-translation and recorded story were handed to other literate checkers who were sympathetic to the story crafting process. These literate checkers offered further insights about culture, language, organization, and flow for improvement of the stories.

After the literate story checking process, the checked story was presented orally to the other story crafters over a number of sessions. Hearing a new Bible story generated a good amount of discussion and more insights. These insights were related to word choices based on various Lugbara dialects, cultural implications, and consistency issues with other stories. The group acted out a drama based on the new story. The drama served to help decide the proper way to form direct speech with emotions like joy, anger, sadness, embarrassment, and surprise as well as appropriate natural expressions for story sequencing and dialogue. Another key ingredient in the checking process was that each story crafter taught the new story to their group each week. The story groups acted as "community testing" sessions. The dialogue questions which follow the story help

²⁵ David Payne, 5-6.

determine how the stories are being comprehended.²⁶ Each week the story crafters met to discuss problems and solutions. By the end of this process the group reached an agreement about the story and the story crafter then made a new recording taking into consideration any further revisions. The copied and corrected recording acted as a standard for the preparation of all the storytellers.

Conclusion

The interrelationship of orality and Bible translation is critical due to the importance of Scripture for all people. This subject demands attention because of the reality that masses of people within 2,529 language groups have no access to Scripture. Meanwhile the majority of the people in the world prefer oral presentation styles. The unspoken message of literate missionaries has been “become literate like us and then you can hear and respond to the gospel.” Literate processes alone will not address the needs of those who need to hear.

Orality and Bible translation need not be practiced in isolation. This writer’s personal experience with orality and Bible translation affirms that even those who are literate are benefiting from processing Scripture orally. Literate mother-tongue Bible translators have gained new understanding of Scripture never before gleaned from literate tools. Semi-literates and oral communicators are discovering their own roles in sharing the gospel message through orality. Even literacy has been encouraged by uses of orality.

²⁶ Ten questions are used in the storytelling groups to guide the dialogue. 1. Where did the story happen? 2. Who are the people in the story? 3. How does the story begin? 4. What happened next? 5. What does God do or say in the story? 6. How do people respond to God? 7. How are we like those people? How are we not like those people? 8. What does that show us about God? 9. Now that we know the story, how do we change? 10. What should we pray to God about?

Members of the Bible translation community have demonstrated the usefulness of oral procedures in Bible translation. Partnerships like OneStory are implementing Bible translation procedures within oral contexts.²⁷ Legitimate models for the use of orality and Bible translation are under experimentation. Ultimately Bible translation must utilize orality to reach a large segment of the intended audience. Conversely, oral approaches inherently involve Bible translation and can benefit from checking processes. With this evidence in mind what steps should be taken?

First, proponents of orality should investigate and learn more about Bible translation. Most Bible translators are ready to share information and expertise. Attending a translation principles course or sitting in on a translation checking session could be enlightening. Implementing the checking processes mentioned here are steps towards greater effectiveness.

Second, the practitioners of Bible translation should likewise learn more about orality. However, oral methods are learned by practice rather than by study. Experimenting with Chronological Bible Storying with your family or work associates may seem frightening, but doing so will help you enter the world of oral learners. Of course, it will be easy to dismiss this suggestion since your “program” is already set. However, those with whom you experiment will benefit greatly and learn with you as you experience a communication style preferred by masses of unreached people.

²⁷ OneStory is a global partnership managed by Campus Crusade for Christ, the International Mission Board, Trans World Radio, Wycliffe International, and Youth With A Mission. These agencies have a common motivation, goal, and focus in reaching the least-reached people groups and Bibleless language groups of the world. Each organization brings a unique set of strengths to a partnership centered on Bible storying.

Third, training materials are needed to equip those who are currently using orality but are yet unfamiliar with the checking processes from Bible translation. Materials needed include a set of core Bible stories along with translation principles, explanations of the back-translation process, and examples of checking questions.

This writer has observed the communication challenge of mother-tongue Bible translators in their own language context. This observation forced the realization that a non-bilingual missionary is even more vulnerable to make mistakes in communication, most of which he or she will never become aware. For that reason, among others, this writer will continue to pursue the interrelationship of orality and Bible translation.

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