

# Language and Mission

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All they asked was that we should continue to remember the poor, the very thing I was eager to do. (Gal 2:10)

## Pentecost

For over three and a half centuries God worked to put in place an international language that would be spoken and understood virtually everywhere in the eastern Mediterranean world where Christ was born. His purpose in doing this was to prepare the world for the gospel.

But it was precisely in the context of having such a language available that He poured out the Holy Spirit on His disciples at Pentecost, giving them the ability to speak still other languages. Making Greek almost universally understood in the ancient world fulfilled one part of God's plan, but that was not enough. He wanted His servants to use local languages as well as international ones.

In today's world, the distribution of Greek long ago would compare with the almost universal knowledge of English, or in Central and South America with the widespread knowledge of Spanish or Portuguese.

## North America

The United States has followed the lead of Great Britain in spreading the knowledge of English in much of the world today, but even in the United States there are many who do not speak it. The 2000 United States census states that, of the 280,000 or so Navajos counted, over 7000 of them speak only Navajo. (The exact number is 7616.) Who is going to reach these people for Christ? Well, it could be Baptists, or Pentecostals, maybe Catholics, but it will not be Adventists unless we approach them using the only language they know, i.e., Navajo.

With this situation in view, we in North America have prepared an adaptation of *Steps to Christ* (actually *Steps to Jesus*), which brings together excerpts that are especially attractive, combined with Bible verses emphasizing the points made, and brought together with some original content. The name of the resulting booklet is *Jesus Hoł Yi'ashgo* [*Walking With Jesus*]. It has 112 pages of text, plus a brief appendix. It has English on the left side of each page opening and Navajo on the right. This will make it accessible to almost all Navajos, since one third of this group prefer English, one third prefer Navajo, and one third do equally well in either language.

I say "almost all" because there are still those 7000 people who speak only Navajo and may or may not be able to read their language. For these, and for any other Navajos who are interested, we prepared an audio book as a companion volume. The audio book comes on two CDs and contains the full text of each of the twelve chapters in Navajo only.

For those living in towns, and for any tourists that might come across the booklet, we have a companion web site where people can go for announcements and further study materials. One can read the booklet online, listen to the booklet online, and read a series of study papers on topics drawn from the excellent 2000 Navajo Bible, *Diyin God Bizaad*. The URL for this web site is [www.thebooklet.org](http://www.thebooklet.org).

## South America

Could similar ideas be implemented elsewhere? Yes, but not everywhere. There is a special set of circumstances where a bilingual approach makes sense – mostly in North and South America, but not everywhere in North and South America.

### Eastern South America

In Brazil, which has the largest number of languages of any South American country as these are listed in the Ethnologue ([www.ethnologue.org](http://www.ethnologue.org)),<sup>1</sup> more than one in six of these languages are extinct or have no known speakers. Only seven Native languages in Brazil still have speakers numbering in five figures. See table 1 (below). Where a minority language is no longer well maintained and the national language is understood, it is entirely appropriate to use the national language for outreach.

Table 1  
Native Languages with 10,000 or  
More Speakers in Brazil

| Language  | Speakers |
|-----------|----------|
| Caló      | 10,000   |
| Mundurukú | 10,100   |
| Guajajara | 15,000   |
| Kaiwá     | 18,000   |
| Macushi   | 19,000   |
| Terêna    | 15,000   |
| Ticuna    | 32,600   |

Only two minority language groups in Brazil have a million or more speakers and both of these are of European origin. Hunsrik (3,000,000) is a form of German, while Talian (4,000,000) is a form of Italian. Many other European and Asian languages are spoken in Brazil, but in smaller numbers.

### Western South America

In western South America the situation is different. There one can find small Native groups, it is true, but also some very large ones (with a million or more speakers). These are located in especially four countries – Ecuador, Peru, Bolivia, and Paraguay. We now consider each in turn.

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<sup>1</sup> It takes 26 pages to print the Ethnologue listing for Brazil.

*Ecuador.* The Native language spoken most widely in Ecuador is Chimborazo Highland Quichua, with 1,000,000 speakers. I don't know how many of these also speak Spanish, but this is something we should find out. It will not be 100%.

*Peru.* Ayacucho Quechua has almost a million speakers (900,000) and Cuzco Quechua has a million and a half (1,500,000). Both of these groups are especially interesting, because in both cases fully one person in three has no functional knowledge of Spanish.

*Bolivia.* Bolivia is primarily known for its Aymara speakers, who number almost two million (1,790,000), but there are far more speakers of South Bolivian Quechua, who number almost three million (2,780,000). To put these numbers in perspective, the number of Spanish speakers in Bolivia is 3,480,000.

*Paraguay.* In a population of about six million (5,904,000), more than four and a half million (4,650,000) people speak Guaraní. Outside the capital fewer than half speak Spanish. And yet the literacy rate in Paraguay is between 81% and 90%. Sociolinguistic factors will determine which language to use in different situations, but surely there is a role for Seventh-day Adventist literature in Guaraní. Ideally this would be published in bilingual editions using both Guaraní and Spanish together. Perhaps there are already materials in the field that we can use there. If so, I praise God.

*Summary.* For the reader's convenience I now bring together a list of the languages mentioned in this section. See table 2 (below).

Table 2  
Major Indian Languages of Bolivia, Paraguay, and Peru

| Country  | Population | Language                     | Speakers  | Percent Total Population | Percent Rural Monolingual | Official Language | Bible |
|----------|------------|------------------------------|-----------|--------------------------|---------------------------|-------------------|-------|
| Ecuador  | 13,061,000 | Quichua, Chimborazo Highland | 1,000,000 | 7.3%                     | ?                         | No                | Yes   |
| Peru     | 27,274,000 | Quechua, Ayacucho            | 900,000   | 3.3%                     | 33.3%                     | Yes               | Yes   |
|          |            | Quechua, Cuzco               | 1,500,000 | 5.5%                     | 35.0%                     | Yes               | Yes   |
| Bolivia  | 9,182,000  | Aymara, Central              | 1,790,000 | 19.5%                    | ?                         | Yes               | Yes   |
|          |            | Quechua, South Bolivian      | 2,780,000 | 30.3%                    | ?                         | Yes               | Yes   |
| Paraguay | 5,904,000  | Guaraní, Paraguayan          | 4,650,000 | 78.8%                    | 52.0%                     | Yes               | Yes   |

The real issue here is not how many people speak a given Native language, but how many of them do not speak the national language. One third (300,000) of all Ayacucho Quechua speakers, one third (500,000) of all Cuzco Quechua speakers, and perhaps one half (2,000,000) of all Paraguayan Guaraní speakers living outside the capital, speak little or no Spanish. If these people don't know Spanish, we must use a language they do know. If they can't come to us, we must go to them. We cannot fulfill the gospel commission of Matt 28:18-20 without doing this. Surely such an approach is consistent with the spirit of what God was trying to accomplish at Pentecost. But what about poor literacy rates?

## Discussion

### Illiteracy as a positive opportunity

The lack of literacy skills among Native peoples could actually work to our advantage – in the following way. Where people can't read, but would like to, we could be the ones to fill this need and in doing so we would win their confidence and trust. People would not be able to come in from other countries and spend two weeks teaching Quechua speakers how to read their language, nor would we want them to. The process of conveying such skills involves building long term relationships. Quechua speaking Seventh-day Adventists could use what reading skills they have to help others gain similar skills. This could be the basis for a small group ministry of the most practical kind. Imagine the following conversation:

A: "Let me give you this booklet."

B: "I'm sorry, I can't read it."

A: "Then come to my house next Tuesday evening. There are three others who want to study. We'll learn together."

This type of small group ministry could lead to useful results. (a) It could be a means of initial outreach, as in the conversation above. In this case people are led to Christ by learning to read about Him. Or (b) literacy training could be used to nurture those who have already been baptized, and whose primary need is to grow spiritually.

### Changing social attitudes as opportunities

*Native languages.* Many problems that confronted us before have now been resolved. In many respects the door stands before us. It is widely known that Guaraní has official status in Paraguay,<sup>2</sup> but this in itself does not set that language apart from the dialects of Aymara and Quichua/Quechua mentioned above. All but one dialect mentioned above, in regard to western South America, is an official language within its country. (The exception is Chimborazo Highland Quichua in Ecuador.) Each dialect mentioned has a complete Bible currently in print.

There is more. In 2006 Juan Evo Morales, current president of Bolivia and an Aymara Indian, approached Microsoft Corporation about producing a Quechua version of Windows. In

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<sup>2</sup> According to Joan Rubin, both Guaraní and Spanish have "national" status, with Spanish alone being the "official language" ("The Special Relation of Spanish and Guaraní in Paraguay," in Nessa Wolfson and Joan Manes, ed., *Language of Inequality* [Berlin: Mouton, 1985], p. 118).

view of the fact that he assumed office in January of 2006, this was one of the first things he did as president of Bolivia. As such, we may assume it was something he felt urgently about. A thousand copies of Windows in Quechua were distributed to government offices and schools.<sup>3</sup> Times have changed since the days when Native languages were considered unable to serve as vehicles of serious communication.

*Protestantism.* Attitudes toward Protestantism have changed as well. Benito Juarez, a former president of Mexico and himself a Zapateco Indian, once said, "The happiness and prosperity of my nation depend on the development of Protestantism."<sup>4</sup>

[T]he eminent Mexican educator, Justo Sierra, declares that on one occasion Juárez commented: "I would like for Protestantism to become mexicanized, winning over the Indians. They need a religion which impels them to read and not to spend their savings on candles for the saints."<sup>5</sup>

Why would Juarez speak like this? He did not have spiritual issues in mind, but only the material well being of his people. And he was right. The ability to read is a powerful thing. If our Native converts develop this ability, they will rise within their societies. They might not become wealthy, but they will do better than others around them who didn't learn.

This fact has implications for the church. If our members do well, the entire church does well – and can do more. Placing this means of social and spiritual advancement in people's hands is a forward looking thing to do. It is an investment in the church's future, with many present advantages as well, including spiritual ones.

In his book entitled, *1491*, Charles C. Mann comments about travelling to the central Amazon and stopping off in Santarém. He comments in passing that, "The biggest building always seems to be the Pentecostal or Adventist church."<sup>6</sup> Things have changed since the days of Pedro Kalbermatter, Leo Halliwell, and other pioneers of the work in South America.

*Summary.* The above changes of attitudes in society, both toward Native languages and toward Protestantism, including Adventism, are a wide open invitation for the church to make its unique contribution, taking advantage of the opportunities God has provided.

### Attitudes toward language within the church

So far there has been a unified focus on national languages within our church, and this makes sense. With limited resources one has to focus. And yet I pray that, where appropriate, we will consider producing simple bilingual outreach materials using both a national language and a Native language together. Where is this appropriate? Any place where a well maintained Native language has not only many speakers, but many monolingual speakers. Under such circumstances, where communication cannot take place using the national language alone, we must consider using other methods.

<sup>3</sup> See <http://www.wired.com/techbiz/media/news/2006/08/71664>.

<sup>4</sup> Julian C. Bridges, *Expansión Evangélica en México* [Evangelical Expansion in Mexico] (Mundo Hispano, 1973), p. 11. This book is a published form of the author's masters thesis in sociology (M.A., University of Florida, 1969). See <http://www.thebooklet.org/Documents/Native/JuarezQuotation.pdf>.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> *1491: New Revelations of the Americas Before Columbus* (New York: Vintage, 2006), p. 363.

## Conclusion

All Seventh-day Adventists should be people of the Book, and not only those of us who grew up speaking a European language. Ours is a religion which impels people to read and we should build on this tradition by inviting our Native converts to join with us in reading the Bible in a language they understand. If they are unable to do this, we must teach them.

Along with the greater light of the Bible, we should make available simple excerpts from the lesser light of the Spirit of Prophecy, which leads people to a correct and fuller understanding of Scripture. For South America the Navajo booklet mentioned earlier is merely a proof of concept – the illustration of an idea. However, it could also serve as an actual template, with the English portions being brought over into Spanish and then translated further into Quechua, or Aymara, or Guaraní, with whatever adaptations are required by circumstances.

Jesus didn't come to this earth speaking the language of heaven. If He had, we would not have understood Him. Instead He came speaking the language of the common people around Him. And they heard Him gladly.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> "He unfolded the mysteries of the kingdom of heaven through the use of figures and symbols with which his hearers were familiar, and the common people heard him gladly; for they could comprehend his words" (Ellen White, *Christian Education*, p. 126).