

Missionization and Language

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The history of Christian missionization is in many ways a history of Europeans' engagement with diverse languages and their speakers, which have been transformed as missionaries have interpreted and reshaped local speech practices and converted speech to written form.

Already in early Christianity, the Bible was translated into Latin, Syriac, and other languages of influence across the ancient world. But beginning in the sixteenth century, two major movements with European origins altered the nature and geographic scope of Christianity, with huge impacts on language. The first of these was the Protestant Reformation, which swept Europe with a desire for greater immediacy of religious experience. This led to the translation of biblical texts into European vernaculars such as English, Spanish, and German that laypeople could read for themselves. Coinciding with the Reformation was the development of the printing press, which made Bibles in these languages more widely accessible and stimulated the spread of literacy. The second major movement was the missionizing endeavor that proceeded alongside – and indeed enabled – Europe's maritime expansion to conquer and extract profit from foreign peoples and lands. Colonization (see Language, Globalization, and Colonialism) brought Europeans into contact with unfamiliar linguistic codes and sociolinguistic configurations that had to be interpreted and managed if they were to serve the colonizers' administrative aims of civilizing and controlling the local populations and serve the missionaries' aim of saving souls. European colonial expansion also brought non-European peoples everywhere into contact with European languages and language ideologies (see Language Ideology) – beliefs and attitudes about the nature of language – leaving an indelible mark on linguistic ecologies the world over. In many places these encounters introduced linguistic hierarchies in which standardized state-sanctioned languages (see Standard Language(s)) have prevailed and spread at the expense of local languages, while the latter have increasingly become functionally – and above all symbolically – peripheral, leading to their abandonment by their speakers (see Endangered Languages and Language Death).

The first missionaries to extend Christianity's reach beyond Europe were Catholics, who learned local languages in order to facilitate communication with the people who spoke them. The early Catholics provided documentation of linguistic phenomena (see Diversity, Linguistic) previously unknown to Europeans, such as lexical tone in East Asia, polysynthetic word structure in North America, and non-alphabetic writing systems in South and Central America (Gray 2000). Unfortunately, the grammatical texts produced by these early modern missionary-scholars were frequently modeled on Latin, which distorted the languages even as the missionaries attempted to describe them. Until relatively recently, Indigenous languages' divergence from European

expectations was held to be emblematic of the moral deficiency of their speakers. The missionaries' linguistic interpretations thus naturalized social hierarchies that served to justify colonial rule and exploitation.

With the expansion of Protestantism into the mission field, written translation of the Bible into Indigenous languages became another major missionary activity, along with the spread of literacy and the production of wordlists, grammars, and prayer books (see Translation). Beginning in the mid-twentieth century, "translation" of scripture has also come to involve oral translation and distribution of materials in audio form. Bible translation is energized by the Protestant belief that people will find God's word most moving if they experience it in their native language (see Native Speaker, Notion and Theoretical Uses of). The impact of Bible translation on linguistic communities necessarily varies depending on cultural and historical circumstances. It will be discussed further below.

Where the colonial missionary encounter was mediated through an Indigenous elite, the local language of power could be drawn upon to proselytize, promote literacy, and conduct religious services. Such was the case, for example, with Quechua in the Incan Empire, or with Mandarin in China. But where power was less concentrated and many languages were spoken, as was notoriously the case in sub-Saharan Africa, missionaries found it necessary to establish a common "church language." In some areas, such as the French colonies of Africa, European languages were pressed into service for this purpose. But elsewhere, a local language was actively elevated in status as colonial powers codified it and promoted its use as the common language of administration and religious instruction. Linguistic codification by Europeans has virtually always meant expression through Roman-based writing systems (see Orthography). This was true even in Africa, for example, where there was a long local history of familiarity with Arabic script. Standardization dramatically reconfigured local speech forms in a way that has been argued to involve the construction or "socio-genesis" of new languages rather than promotion of preexisting ones (Pennycook and Makoni 2005). The appropriation of Katangan (Shaba) Swahili as a lingua franca (see Lingua Franca) by colonists in the former Belgian Congo is a particularly well-studied case of this historical process in action (Fabian 1986). As colonial subjects began to acquire facility in these common registers, and especially their written forms, new bases for linguistic prestige began to emerge (see Dialect: Social Class). Missionary centers and schooling were thus key sites of access to sociolinguistic identities associated with political power. They contributed to the creation of a class of educated workers that had the skills and motivation to support the stratified status quo (Errington 2001).

One subtle and far-reaching legacy of the mission-cum-colonial enterprise is the identification the world over of territorially bounded linguistic units associated with distinct ethnic groups. This is what languages are, according to the nationalist logic of the Europeans who identified and mapped so many of them in a project of linguistic research and language development that continues into the present, not only in the mission field but in the academic discipline of linguistics. In many parts of the world, speech is distributed according to quite different sociolinguistic principles than those presupposed by Europeans, exhibiting patterns of variation and multilingualism (see Bilingualism and Multilingualism) that do not necessarily resolve into discrete social groups with

each speaking its distinct code. But this is what the colonizers expected and it is therefore what they found. As languages on this model were posited, the ethnicities to which they were presumed to belong were actually brought into being (Irvine 2008).

Christianity has also transmitted throughout the world certain assumptions about how language works, and these have caused friction and ultimately change in communicative culture when missionaries have entered communities where they are not shared. One of the most important such assumptions, which has been tied especially to Protestant Christianity, is that speech should be truthful and sincere, i.e. what one says should align with one's inner beliefs and intentions (Keane 2007). The implication is that in order to be efficacious, prayer must be made by individuals speaking from the heart. Where this idea takes hold, religious speech premised on other semiotic rationales may be devalued. An example is the uttering of a conventional creed, which works by aligning adherents with one another through their shared expression of commitment. Another is the verbatim recitation of a religious text (as in Islam) or the utterance by a ritual specialist of a magical formula (as in "primitive" religion), both of which presuppose that the act of speaking in itself has the power to impinge upon the natural and spiritual world (see *Ritual and Forms of Communication*).

The most dynamic and influential language-focused mission operating today is SIL International, which provides resources and training to Bible translation organizations with the goal of ensuring that a version of the Christian Bible exists in all vernaculars for which there is felt to be a need. Founded in 1934 by American evangelicals, the organization is widely known by its former name, the Summer Institute of Linguistics or "SIL." SIL began as a summer training program that prepared aspiring missionaries to apply knowledge of linguistics to activities like orthography development (see *Orthography*), vernacular literacy promotion (see *Literacy*), and, above all, translation of the Christian Bible into native or "heart" languages the world over (Handman 2007). Today SIL constitutes the practical language development arm of a multiplex institution that includes the overtly missionizing Wycliffe Global Alliance (formerly Wycliffe Bible Translators), which has translated the New Testament into over 500 languages, and Dallas International University (formerly the Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics), an accredited institute of higher education that trains upward of 200 students a year in field linguistics, translation, literacy instruction, and related mission arts. Departing in recent years from the traditional arrangement in which foreign missionary teams take on long-term (in some cases decades-long) assignments in local communities, SIL has begun shifting its work model to partnerships with locally based language development and translation organizations that are run by nationals, like the PNG Bible Translation Association in Papua New Guinea.

One of the reasons for SIL's success is that it serves language development needs in countries that lack the financial and human resources to educate their populations given the multiple languages spoken within their borders (or even to carry out the survey work that would allow them to assess what their language development needs are). Bible translation projects are virtually always accompanied by an effort to promote vernacular literacy, and this in itself can be a significant intervention where there is otherwise a limited culture of reading and writing. Because linguistic variation exists

within all speech communities (see Speech Community), the production of written texts requires decisions to be made about what is the “correct” way to write things down, which results in certain socially meaningful speech patterns being selected over others. With time, those linguistic features that are specifically associated with the translated Bible and religious texts may become understood by the community as “prayerful” or “church” language (see Genre), thus inscribing new social meanings onto certain linguistic forms and those who use them (Fishman 2006). In addition to standardizing language through writing, Christian literacy promotion brings about particular ways of reading, for example, fostering the idea that the reader’s task is to find the truth inherent in texts (Schieffelin 2000). So while at first glance Bible translation may seem to involve only the transformation of a particular written text, in practice it can also bring about wider linguistic and cultural changes in the communities where that text circulates.

Founded on the energy and vision of two highly respected linguistic scholars, Kenneth Pike (see Pike, Kenneth) and Eugene Nida, SIL has had both formal and informal affiliations with US universities and has made itself no less useful to academic linguistics than it has to the governments of developing countries (Dobrin 2009). Besides producing and sharing information on hundreds of languages that would otherwise be unknown to scholarship, SIL has invested heavily in technology that has become a ubiquitous part of linguistic research in the digital era: resources for encoding non-Roman scripts, fonts for phonetic symbols, and data management tools for field linguists. SIL has also taken the lead in establishing and maintaining international standards that ensure the interoperability of linguistic data such as Unicode and the ISO 639 nomenclature for language labeling. *Ethnologue* (Simons and Fennig 2018), the closest thing that exists to an exhaustive catalogue of the world’s languages, is likewise an SIL product. In this regard, SIL’s impact is entirely in line with other efforts to promote Christianity throughout history: it is hardly possible to imagine the production of knowledge about the world’s languages apart from the many ways Christian missionization has contributed to shaping it.

SEE ALSO: Ethnography of Speaking and Communication; Language Planning; Nida, Eugene

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