Confusing Asiku: how mission and development intervention in international languages works to bypass the minds of beneficiaries

Gary Cowman, SIL International

Jim Harries, Alliance for Vulnerable Mission

This paper looks at the challenges faced by external holistic ministry and development workers who do not speak the local language. The implications of using the international, rather than local, language are explored as they impact the people in the local community and external workers. A conversational approach is used to bring understanding to difficult questions related to topics such as whether linguistic diversity leads to conflict, the cost/benefit of learning the local language, managing donor expectations in light of what is in the best interest of the local community, the importance of contextually relevant communications material in terms of both language and culture, and the pertinence of globalisation to the local communities we come alongside of to serve.

1. Asiku's dilemma

Asiku is delighted the health workers have come to her village. The sickness that has come over many of her family and friends has already taken several lives, and the outsiders say that the illness can be driven away. Only a few people in her community speak English well. This means that whenever the outsiders talk about what can be done for the sickness, Asiku waits for one of the English-speaking locals to listen and then translate the meaning. The medical words used are sometimes very difficult to translate because the comparable meanings are not clear in Asiku's language, so the translator will often just use the English word which Asiku still doesn't understand. Most of Asiku's family and friends are confused after the outsiders talk because they don't know what they are supposed to do differently, but they don't want them to leave or be offended. Everyone from the local community smiles encouragingly and nods to affirm that what the outsiders are doing is important. Asiku is sure that the outsider is bringing some very important and useful information that is not being understood, but how can she access it?

2. Introduction

This article attempts to address the common dilemma above. Using the language that people speak and taking time to understand their culture are both essential for effective mission and development work. Jesus speaks most powerfully to each of us in the language we understand best. "The book of God in the Koonzime language sounds good in our ears. When we read it, our ears really open up and we hear clearly as if we are hearing a single sound without any competing noises," said a Cameroonian literacy teacher.[1] So the good news of an abundant life with God and the good news of any development initiatives leading to peace and justice must be built on a secure foundation of understanding. Such can only happen when the local language and culture are embraced.

3. Addressing language questions concerning holistic mission

Language issues can be more than just inter-culturally confusing. Use of the wrong languages can lead to injustice instead of justice, and conflict where there should have been shalom. Here is an attempt to respond via dialogue to some difficult questions frequently asked by people who think that it is not a problem to carry out mission and development using an international language:

- **Aren't there about 7,000 languages[2] in the world? How is it possible to relate to people in all the different dialects that exist?**

Adam – There are indeed many languages in the world. The thing to do is to start learning the one spoken by the community you're in.

Maria – Agreed. It's most important to relate to people in the language of people's emotion, which is normally the local language. We need to remember also that many geographically proximate language communities are linguistically and culturally related. Engaging in one language can enable work in related languages. Bringing transformation to one community can prompt neighbouring communities to embrace similar changes needed so they too can experience community transformation.

Adam – That's right, Maria. People are increasingly being exposed to multiple languages, and are able to speak such languages with varying levels

of proficiency. It will often be crucial for people to be able to speak at least some words in more than the local language to transact business with neighbouring communities, but a high level of fluency in more than one language isn't the reality for many people.

Maria – That makes sense. So it's really key for the sake of justice and shalom that the development and mission work we do connects to people in the language they understand best.

- **Aren't all these local languages dying off?**

Maria – Language is dynamic and people's use of any particular language increases or decreases based on their need to use it. While some languages are diminishing in use or even dying off, this is currently true for a minority of languages.

Adam – But in light of globalisation and the potential benefits of economic opportunity in broader society, the question is whether it isn't in the best interest of people to encourage them to abandon their local language and speak English, Chinese, French or other such languages?

Maria – Similar to when God asked Moses "What is that in your hand?" people need to start with what they have rather than where they might like to be.[3] Paulin Djité tells us that multilingualism is the new lingua-franca, and this should be warmly embraced.[4] People need to begin with the language they speak and then build from that rather than abandon it. This is like saying that education must build from the known to unknown.

- **Doesn't local language use reinforce ethnic pride and therefore hatred of others?**

Adam – Many people believe that national unity can best be built through linguistic uniformity.

Maria –Yes, that is a common misperception. History shows that denying people the right to maintain their language and culture can cause resentment.[5] If the cultural and linguistic identity of a community is not under threat they will not feel the need to fight to maintain it. Hence boosting someone's indigenous identity through the use of local languages can be to opt for peace.

Adam – Come to think of it, most of the conflict between ethnic groups within a country results from ideological differences and access to resources such as land, water and economic development rather than being specifically about language or culture.[6] Think of Rwanda – Rwandans were using the same language, yet their genocide in 1994 was horrific!

Maria – In fact, peace, unity and joy can best be built by recognising and validating diversity, whether that diversity is ethnic or linguistic.

- **Is the good of the local community really at the heart of our development efforts? If so, how does that influence the language we use and the way we go about engaging with them.**

Maria – I think the obvious answer is "yes", as development workers are interested in bettering the lives of those in the local community.

Adam – That is the obvious answer, but is it true? Wouldn't the community's interest being at the heart mean that all the ideas about a preferred future or what could be different would arise from within the community? Then that the community's language would be used in leading any creation of interventions?

Maria – Aha. Therefore this can't be done if the language primarily used is the one spoken by the outsiders and less proficiently by those from the local community. Using the outsiders' language in development and mission work gives prestige to the outsider and further marginalises those in the community.[7]

Adam – Agreed. Often outsiders are concerned about having a successful project and meeting donors' expectations.

Maria – Because development workers need to demonstrate results and preferably quickly, then outsiders see it as expedient to have local people use the language with which outsiders are already familiar. This applies even if as a result those in the local community do not have a very clear understanding of what the development workers are trying to do! Obviously this seriously hinders the local community from owning the development process and undermines the possibility of sustainable impact and deep shalom.

- **So does indeed the choice of language (local, international, official/national) have any impact on sustainability of impact?**

Maria – As we know, local ownership isn't just a catch phrase. It is foundational for establishing the preferred future, determining relevant interventions and also seeing the local community motivated to participate in the interventions long term.[8]

Adam – I get it. Using the local language will allow people from the local community to be included, and it will make sense to them in a way that the international language can't.

Maria – Which means there is a much higher likelihood of any development initiative lasting. If the local people are to use 'our' language to do 'their' development, then that is like saying 'here is a cow for you to milk, but I am the only one who is authorised to feed the cow'. Is that justice?

Adam – Also, if an outsider uses the language of the local people, that means that he continues to be exposed to opportunities to learn new things from them as they talk.

- **Do all languages have the capacity to communicate the important truths of the Gospel?**

Adam – This was a question raised even back in the 1300s by those who opposed the translation of the Bible into English.

Maria – What was their concern?

Adam – The upper echelons of church and society saw English as a crude, simple and rudimentary language. As far as they were concerned it could not possibly communicate the depth and truth of the Holy Scriptures.

Maria – I'm sure glad that didn't stop John Wycliffe from translating the Scriptures into English[9]. God wants us to engage Him in whatever language we speak, and each language is adequate to communicate what He wants us to know about Him and the world.[10]

Adam – So you mean that there is a parallel between fourteenth century English, and 'minority' languages today? That is to say – that people who choose to ignore or even discourage (e.g. by insisting that education be in foreign languages) local languages are like the fourteenth century authorities

who declared John Wycliffe a heretic because he thought that English people should be able to read the Bible in English?

Maria – The Church hierarchy preferred the Bible only be available in Latin, which kept the common person reliant on the more educated who could then read and interpret the Bible for them. That's sobering! We should learn from the past.

- **When donors expect prompt results, isn't learning the language and culture a luxury we can't afford?**

Maria – This is a very common situation, and actually very often the mission or development worker creates their own pressure as they want to see immediate results.

Adam – Unfortunately this limits mutual learning and undermines the importance of learning the local culture and language, which can be seen as time consuming. This comes at a *huge cost*, though, as not only does the outsider lose the opportunity to connect to people at a deep level, but this also limits cultural understanding and the ability to see the nuances of life within a community that often are the difference between success and failure. Outsider interventions can be bringing division and conflict instead of peace and joy, without the outsiders even knowing!

- **Isn't a legitimate strategy to hire local people in these communities to translate our material?**

Adam – This is being done by many at the moment, and this is better than merely giving material to the local community in a language they don't understand.

Maria – Yes, I can see that. But, like Asiku's situation at the beginning of this paper, I doubt that these local translators are necessarily trained in the technical terminology they are translating. It is one of those strange things. Sometimes mother-tongue speakers of international languages like French or English think that their lives are very simple and transparent[11], but that other people have 'cultures'. I guess this is connected to the thought that English and French are rooted in secularism. Secularism, to some people, means that all of one's thinking and hence language is rooted in simple scientific objectivity that is universally comprehensible. Hence when something is

translated into English, we think that the cultural frills will be omitted, but the essential content will be included. But is this true?

Adam – I doubt it!

Maria – Right! Actually, all languages, including English, are rooted in extensive cultural complexities, so can only be fully understood in the light of a pre-knowledge of the culture.

Adam – For example, if a health NGO in Cameroon has a local translator, does that translator necessarily get the nuances of the medical terms either in the source language or in the local language?

Maria – One solution could be to identify key medical terms (for example) which could be discussed with a broad group, and then agreement could be reached on how these terms would be translated into the local language.

Adam – That approach assumes that the people concerned understand medicine in bio-scientific terms. If they understand ill-health as arising from witchcraft or curses, as is the case for many people around the world, then – since culture is a primary driver of language – it will be a struggle to find equivalent words in their own language for bio-medical terms.

- **We've been doing this kind of work with local communities for years – why should we consider changing now?**

Maria – Are our programmes making the level of impact hoped for? Really? Are they connecting? (It can be very hard to obtain candid feedback from the local community, especially if programmes come with foreign money which the local people need!)

Adam – Maybe an evaluation should be done to determine the factors that are contributing to or hindering shalom brought by a programme. In which language should this evaluation be carried out? Are we to evaluate a programme as locals see it, or as outsiders see it?

Maria – Often we see some form of technology as being pivotal in mission and development work, but the most fundamental tool is language.[12] Most of our programmes hinge on good communication. Quite likely the message we intend to be communicated and acted upon isn't being understood as expected.

Adam – This would make it pretty unlikely we are making the desired impact. If funding consistently comes, but the programme concerned does not work effectively in the interests of the people, we could as Christians be giving people the message that Jesus is more concerned that they receive money than that they make progress towards shalom in the way the project envisages!

- **But aren't most people bilingual or at least fluent enough in an international language to understand?**

Maria – Seems to me that is a political question! Perhaps we don't always realise how political it is. For example, to ask someone in East Africa whether they know English is like asking whether they are enlightened or whether they are primitive.

Adam – Absolutely. That can make it very hard to get a straight answer. To deny that one has a sufficient knowledge of English can be to feel like one is admitting to being uncivilised!

Maria – The above makes it especially hard to be clear on just what it is to 'understand'. Some kinds of understanding are relatively easy to impart, for example the day and time you will arrive at the bus station and need picking up. But how do you know if someone 'understands' what it means to say 'Jesus has forgiven my sin'? That seems basic, but *sin* is a very difficult word to translate in many languages. You might be unexpectedly communicating something very different than you intend.

- **Isn't it against globalisation and the people's best interests to encourage the use of these local languages, as they'll lose job and financial opportunities which are more plentiful for those who speak international languages?**

Adam – Counter-intuitively, children who learn first in their local language are more likely to have a higher fluency rate in the international language that they then study as a subject for several years.[13] Children who learn in a language they do not understand well will not have equal opportunity for cognitive development, which will also limit their employability as adults.[14] However, using the local languages as a platform to assist students to learn an international language can open up job opportunities.

Maria – It is a bit rotten when the best job opportunities are often available to people who have moved away from their own languages.

Adam – This is sad. Perhaps folks from the West do not realise the above. Some American people are just thankful for the *coincidence* that their English happens to be an international language. Hence they encourage financial backing for their language; e.g. almost all projects proposed to the majority world are designed and administered from a foundation of English.

Maria – What we are saying here, it seems, is that indeed knowledge of international languages can improve someone's job prospects. That is indeed the cruel irony and injustice in the current global situation. It keeps many countries in the world 'down' and dependent on the West.[15] The West benefits from this since people who are dependent on them pose less of a threat. Should that be our approach as Christians, to keep other people and countries suppressed? Or should we empower them to encounter Jesus and be able to do things for themselves in their own way?

- **Surely you can't be implying that pastors should be taught theological concepts in local languages… There's not theological material in these languages so how would they be able to refer to exegetical helps later on?**

Adam – I wish things were so simple, that pastors around the world would be grappling with the same issues. But what about if pastors in the majority world are struggling with *different* issues?

Maria – Right Adam. As a result of the above, much Western theological material may not be directly relevant to them.

Adam – Can you explain this in more detail?

Maria – Don't you see Adam, that theological materials produced in the West arise from particular contexts. Often they are responding to culturally relevant challenges such as modernism, secularism, humanism, textual criticism, feminism, and Marxism. Even lexicons of biblical languages written in English are by people who are trying to make a point to their own people. People who have had a different history will innately ask very different questions of the Bible. To be able to hear those questions at depth, and then to be able to be a part of answering them, requires sharing in those people's languages and culture.

- **For those of you with a particular interest in language you make it sound like that will solve all problems in development and Christian work. Aren't there more reasons than just language for development and integral mission work promoting shalom to be effective?**

Maria – Everything has to be communicated in a language. Everything, we could also say, is learned using a language. There is no development or integral mission apart from language that we then 'put into' language in order to implement.

Adam – Of course you are right – we need language in order to function. That language then provides the categories that we use, which in turn determine how we go about things.

Maria – Someone who lives all their life in one community that uses one language does not need to think very much about the terms they use, because they are provided for them by default. Carrying on that way when engaging people of vastly different cultural backgrounds is the problem. This is what has been happening. Minority language speakers have accepted it, because of the foreign subsidy that makes mission and development 'work' in their communities. If the foreign subsidy, which easily generates unhealthy dependency, were to be taken away, then the mission or development worker would have **no choice** but to use the language of the people they are engaging. This is essential since any aid needs to be understood from the perspective of the recipients. A shortcut provided by foreign subsidy is a mirage; when you get too close, the oasis you thought you saw in the desert is no longer there.

Adam – So there are other reasons apart from language for development and mission to be effective. Yet without the right language there will be no significant or sustainable impact.

4. Conclusion

Asiku is being given health information in a foreign language, but is confused through being unfamiliar with all the words and concepts being shared. She is unlikely to concede that she is confused; because to do so would be to admit to being ignorant and maybe even to risk not getting a job.

This article addresses a list of common objections to the use of local languages by development workers and missionaries. Foreign workers feeling overwhelmed by the wealth of different languages should be encouraged to begin by learning and then using one local language for those people they will be relating to closely. Sometimes the real reasons an outsider does not invest in learning a local language is pressure from donors to make things happen quickly and fear of the work involved in language acquisition.

The co-existence and usage of multiple languages need not be associated with injustice, tensions or conflict between ethnic groups. It is important to understand the impact and nuance of language in our work. Use of a local language in the design and implementation of a project is essential to its sustainability and its actualising of true peace and joy in a community. Choice of language can make the difference between success and failure or progress and getting stuck. All too often, failure to adopt and use the right language prevents initiatives towards shalom from being sustainable once foreign funding is withdrawn. This article advocates that workers involved in integral mission or development should engage using languages local to the people they work with.

---

[1] OneBook. "Why is giving the Bible to people in their own language so urgent, so desperately important?" http://www.onebook.ca/2011/09/30/why-is-giving-the-bible-to-people-in-their-own-language-so-urgent-so-desperately-important/. (2011).

[2] Lewis, M. Paul (ed). *Ethnologue: Languages of the World, 17th Edition.* (Dallas: SIL International, 2013).

[3] Johnson, Jean. "What is that in your hand? Mobilising local resources." *Missio Dei: a journal of missional theory and practice*, 4, no.1 (February 2013).

[4] Djité, P.G., *The Sociolinguistics of Development in Africa*. (Clevedon: Multilingual Matters Ltd., 2008). p.xiv.

[5] McAll, C. *Class, Ethnicity and Social Inequality*. (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1990). p.192.

[6] Rummel, R.J. *Understanding Conflict and War. Volume 4: War, Power, Peace*. (Beverly Hills, California: Sage Publications, 1979). p.241.

[7] Rubagumya, Casmir. "A Three-Tiered Citizenship: Can the State in Tanzania Guarantee Linguistic Human Rights?" *EdQual Working Paper*, no. 5. (2007). p.4.

[8] Chambers, R. "The World Development Report: Concepts, Content and Chapter 12", *Journal of International Development*. (2002). p.299-306.

[9] Bobrick, B. *Wide as the Waters: The Story of the English Bible and the Revolution It Inspired*. (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2002). p.48-51.

[10] Marshall, David. *Communicating the Word: Revelation, Translation, and Interpretation in Christianity and Islam*. (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2011). p.75-76.

[11] Djité. (2008). p.109.

[12] Cameron, R and Williams, J. "Sentence to Ten Cents: A Case Study of Relevance and Communicative Success in Nonnative-Native Speaker Interactions in a Medical Setting". *Applied Linguistics,* 18, no.4. (1997). p.419.

[13] Wisbey, Matt, ed. "Multilingual Education for All in Asia and the Pacific: Policies, Practices and Processes: 4th International Conference on Language and Education". Bangkok, Thailand. (2013).

[14] Benson, Carol. "The importance of mother tongue-based schooling for educational quality". *Background paper prepared for the Education for All Global Monitoring Report 2005, the Quality Imperative.* UNESCO, Paris. (2004).

[15] Harries, Jim. "The Contribution of the Use of English in Africa to Dependency in Mission and Development." *Exchange, Journal of Missiological and Ecumenical Research,* 41, no.3. (2012). p.279-294.