

Bible Translation Conference 2009
Graduate Institute of Applied Linguistics and
SIL, International
Dallas, Texas

Beekman Lecture

Orality, Bible Translation, and Scripture Engagement

Grant Lovejoy

I am grateful to the program planners for inviting me to speak to this important meeting. I speak to you not as a Bible translator, but as a representative of more than 5500 IMB missionaries whose work is heavily influenced by Bible translation. We appreciate your sacrificial labor on behalf of Bibleless people groups and others who have ongoing needs for Scripture resources. In my role at IMB, I relate to Bible translation organizations as one of my assignments. I am happy that is so, and I thank you for your kind welcome.

The year 2009 marks two decades of heightened attention to the question of how best to foster Scripture engagement in oral cultures. By “oral cultures” I mean those communities who rely on spoken, rather than written communication. Some rely on speech out of necessity: their language is not written or they cannot read and write. Other cultures have written languages and literacy but are oral by tradition and preference. (Deaf communities, by the way, have much in common with oral cultures. Their heart language—that is, sign language—is unwritten. They

overwhelmingly prefer non-print communication. Much of what I will say about oral cultures applies to the Deaf¹ as well.)

Professor and UBS consultant Viggo Søgaaard has written recently that “The challenges confronting Bible agencies are greater than ever.”² Among these challenges are the hundreds of millions who never go to school. In addition, he points out that half the children who do attend school “are likely to stop the learning process before actual skills for reading a daily newspaper have been achieved. There are likely more than one billion people who are classified as readers, but who are functionally non-literate.”³ These realities have implications for Scripture distribution and engagement strategies, obviously, but they also have implications for Bible translation. It is encouraging to me that this is increasingly being realized and affecting how we go about making adequate Scripture available to all peoples in formats and media that serve them well.

In this presentation I want to talk about the interrelationship of orality, Bible translation, and Scripture engagement. I’ll describe it as I see it from the perspective of an organization committed to making Christ known among all people groups and planting healthy churches among them. I plan to review the notable progress that has been made and to suggest areas where we still have a lot to do.

Twenty years ago, in 1989, the International Mission Board, SBC (then called the Foreign Mission Board) began teaching a method called Chronological Bible Storying (CBS) to

¹ The capitalized reference to “Deaf” refers to the cultural group united by sign language, shared values and customs, and identity apart from the hearing community. The lowercased use of “deaf” refers to persons who are unable to hear.

² Viggo Søgaaard, “Advancing Bible Translation for Non-Reading Audiences,” *Lausanne World Pulse* (September 2009): <http://www.lausanneworldpulse.com/themedarticles.php/1196>.

³ Ibid.

its missionaries and others. CBS had been developed in the Philippines in the 1980s. But in 1989 IMB took it outside the Philippines, holding CBS workshops in East Africa, West Africa, and Central America. This was a significant step for two reasons.

First, exponents of CBS, most notably James B. Slack, Jr., advocated the use of CBS because of the prevalence of orality around the world, and in particular among unevangelized and Bibleless people groups. Slack insisted that it was essential to engage oral communities with oral communications approaches. He considered this sound communications theory and sound missiology.

Secondly, this institutional endorsement of CBS by IMB gave the orality emphasis reach and penetration. Certainly there had been individuals who had previously sought to develop effective means of communication in oral cultures. H. R. Weber, to take just one example, had addressed these issues in the 1950s in Indonesia. He had published a book about his work, *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates*.⁴ Slack and his colleague J. O. Terry had read Weber's book and drawn from it. But IMB institutional support for their efforts to teach CBS around the world was critical in drawing the attention of the missions community to orality. Slack, Terry, and others stressed the need to communicate the gospel in mother tongues in the same ways those communities used their language, which was primarily or exclusively oral.

Ten years later, in 1999, SIL, Campus Crusade, and IMB agreed to hold a Non-Print Media Consultation outside Nairobi in the following year. The previous decade had seen the increased use of CBS, the Jesus Film, audio cassettes, radio programs, and other strategies. The

⁴ H. R. Weber, *The Communication of the Gospel to Illiterates* (London: S. C. M. Press, 1957).

planners invited representatives from their agencies, Bible societies, and other organizations to consider issues related to the use of non-print media.

The Consultation planners invited Viggo Søggaard to give the keynote presentations. He expressed very well the needs and the changes that he saw were needed. The planners also asked me to make a presentation about Chronological Bible Storying and I happily agreed. My initial plan was simply to describe CBS and explain its merits. Later I decided to sharpen my remarks to offer a challenge, express several commitments IMB was making, and issue a sort of “Macedonian call” asking Bible translation organizations to “come over and help us.”

By way of challenge, I said,

“We offer the gospel to people irrespective of the availability of print materials in their language. In the past we have sometimes supposed that Bible translation must precede evangelism, church planting, leadership training, and the like. We will gladly partner with Bible translators because we believe in the value of their work, but we will not let the pace of Bible translation or the pace of literacy training determine with whom we will seek to sow the good seed of the gospel.”

A key commitment that we made was to:

“ . . . select the most appropriate communicational approach available. If our favorite methods of communication are foreign to those we seek to reach, as Christians we bear the burden of changing in order to facilitate communication with them. We cannot justify asking them to adopt our communication preferences. This is doubly so when doing it would make them unable to communicate to their own people what we have taught them. Stories are how oral communicators learn and share, so stories are our primary vehicle. If a group chants or drums its stories instead of telling them, we will seek to chant or drum the biblical stories, too.”

When I pointed out that “This process means that every people group should be evangelized with a set of biblical stories chosen expressly for their worldview,” I even got some “amens”!

That said, I issued my “Macedonian call” to the translation organizations. I expressed our desire for help in three areas:

- (1) “We would welcome collaboration with Bible translators who will use their specialized skills to help us develop reliable worldview documents.” (We needed to get beyond generic Scripture presentations and develop worldview-sensitive ones.)
- (2) “We also look to translators for faithful oral translations of an initial set of perhaps 150 stories from the biblical chronology for use in storying while other translation work is done.”⁵
- (3) “We welcome collaboration with media specialists who will work with us in preparing culturally appropriate, locally reproducible supplements to the telling of biblical stories. These supplements could include putting biblical stories to music, dance, drama, and the like. They could include preparing radio broadcasts based on storying and audiocassettes that reinforce the storytelling. They could include culturally appropriate and cost-effective teaching pictures or witnessing booklets composed of appropriate Bible pictures at a time when the people are able to decode them.”

My plea came at a time when many other individuals and organizations had already been experimenting with ways to address these needs. I simply added my voice to theirs. I am grateful that in a variety of ways Bible agencies have responded to these needs with increasing attention and innovation. Let me name several advances that I think are significant.

1. Vision 2025, adopted the previous year (in 1999) at the SIL triennial meeting, called for and led to an increased urgency to get the Christian scriptures to Bibleless peoples. It

⁵ This request produced some confusion. When Bible translators later asked me which 150 stories I wanted translated, I realized that I should have made it clearer that I was not asking them to translate a specific set of passages. I wanted hundreds of culture-specific panoramas consisting of approximately 150 stories. By virtue of being culture-specific, each panorama would differ somewhat from the others. A panorama that is relevant to Hindus, for example, would differ from a panorama developed for Muslims or Buddhists. I used the number 150 simply to suggest a large quantity of biblical stories.

acknowledged that new approaches would be needed, that just working harder in the usual ways would not reach the goal. This created a climate for experimentation and innovation. Without it many of the other advances would have been difficult to conceive, let alone achieve. In that climate of urgency and innovation, oral strategies have received additional consideration.

2. Bible translators and others recognized the value of beginning translation with a carefully-selected panorama of biblical stories spanning the Old and New Testaments. They saw that beginning with key narrative passages from the Old Testament laid a better foundation for understanding the New Testament. The concreteness of narrative texts made it easier for mother tongue workers to understand these passages and led to better selection of key terms. This panorama process enabled translation teams to develop theological vocabulary in a natural, progressive sequence. A well-designed panorama is attuned to the host culture, which enhances its relevance to the culture and increases the likelihood that people will find it meaningful and want to know more. A panorama also enables translators to bypass vexing passages initially and provide usable Scripture portions to church planters sooner.

Increasingly we are seeing translation programs specify this as their first Scripture resource. One large SIL branch has decided that all of its new translation programs will begin with a storying panorama. Those of us involved in evangelism and church planting consider this a hugely important step, tremendously positive. Such panoramas can be developed comparatively quickly. They provide church planters with strategic portions that support storying strategies and enable us to whet the recipients' appetites for more Scripture. If we succeed in our evangelism and church planting, we can provide a larger

pool of Christian mother tongue speakers to participate in the translation process. We thereby increase the likelihood that translations will be accepted by the community and used.

3. Sociolinguists, cultural anthropologists, and folklorists, among others, have helped us to view orality positively. We have accepted the unfamiliar and awkward term “orality” as a way of referring to the often-profound, sophisticated, and beautiful ways oral cultures use language. We try to minimize references to oral communicators in terms of what they are not--“non-literate,” “illiterate,” “pre-literate,” “non-readers”—as if such terms adequately described resourceful, complex, intelligent people. There has been a perceptible shift toward acceptance of the fact that many adults around the world will choose to engage Scripture in non-print forms, even if we offer printed Scriptures and adult literacy classes. Specialists in Scripture engagement have helped translators and others move beyond the idea that “if we translate it, they will read.” That will certainly be true of some people, but, unfortunately, not of all. In some communities only a minority of the population will engage the Scriptures via print. Where that is the case, we need to pursue Scripture impact via oral means also. There is a growing acceptance of this attitude toward orality and oral cultures.
4. People directly involved in Bible translation are increasingly realizing the advantages of relating to mother tongue translators as oral communicators. Bible translators have been discussing oral approaches to translation for decades, at least for the last thirty years,⁶ so it is not as though this is a new idea. But it seems more widely accepted today. For

⁶ Euan Fry, “An Oral Approach to Translation,” *The Bible Translator* 30 No. 2 (April 1979) : 214-17.

example,⁷ a team of mother tongue translators were introduced to CBS while working on a written translation of OT portions. After crafting a thirty-story biblical panorama using a storying methodology, they reported that the storying process revealed additional biblical insights to them. They said that the act of retelling the biblical stories orally led to a style that was closer to the way their people used their language. They chose to use the storying approach as a key element of their ongoing translation work.

Likewise, IMB has developed a process for equipping Deaf people to put biblical stories into sign languages. In the pilot projects we have consistently found Deaf storytellers who have excellent understanding of sign languages but who struggle to read their national language or other spoken languages. By working with them as non-print communicators we have been able to free them to use their skills. The meticulous process has produced stories that have been well received; Deaf people who have been Christians for years have wept as the stories in sign have for the first time enabled them to understand the Scripture. Non-believers find the stories compelling. The key has been relating to the Deaf storycrafters in their own heart language (in sign) and not making them work through a written language. On each team we have also had Deaf people able to read the national language and they have made a valuable contribution as well.

5. People within the “orality movement” are gradually developing a better understanding of what orality is. Papers presented to the research task force of the International Orality Network by scholars associated with GIAL, SIL, and the United Bible Societies have helped many of us by offering an evaluation of Walter Ong’s descriptions of orality.

Those of us who relied heavily on Ong have come to understand that at times he

⁷ The account that follows has been described by Stan Wafler in an unpublished paper titled, “The Interrelationship of Orality and Bible Translation,” (June 2006) and in private conversation with me.

attributed to literacy certain habits of thought and speech that are produced by a western educational approach rather than literacy itself. We have been reminded of the dangers of simplistic either/or distinctions between oral learners and literate learners. We have also learned to steer away from universalizing claims about orality and oral cultures. “All oral cultures . . .” is a dangerous way to begin a sentence. At the same time, the researchers have also affirmed that in other respects Ong has been correct. Church planters still often have a long way to go in understanding orality, but we are making progress.

6. Studies of orality in the biblical era have proliferated and the Bible translation community has been interacting with those works. Essays like those edited by Holly Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*⁸ have reminded us that the Bible emerged in an oral culture. Scholars estimate that somewhere between 3 and 20 percent of the population of Judea could read during the New Testament era. Any effort to understand the Bible in its historical context must take to heart the fact that what we have in Scripture was in many cases communicated orally before it was written. Some of it was transmitted orally for many years before it was written. Even Paul’s epistles were often dictated orally. Normally when Scripture was read it was read aloud by one person to many listeners. Far more people encountered Scripture by hearing it read than ever read it themselves.

In an intriguing essay,⁹ Richard Swanson compares a printed Bible to a printed musical score. He argues that the written musical notation is a means to the recovery of

⁸ Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, eds., *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media* (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009).

⁹ Richard W. Swanson, “Taking Place/Taking up Space,” in *The Bible in Ancient and Modern Media*, ed. Holly E. Hearon and Philip Ruge-Jones, (Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2009): 129-141.

the performed music. We do not sit in front of a piece of sheet music and silently enjoy the music that the notes recall. The written notation is a means to recover the original acoustic event. Those of us accustomed to writing in silence and reading silently need that reminder. Simply as an expression of faithfulness to what the Bible is, we need to think long about the implications of translating Scripture with a view to the oral performance of it and the aural encounter with it.

7. In the contemporary missions, Bible translation, and Scripture engagement movements there is a growing recognition that many people in newly-evangelized locations may have both literate aspirations and strong oral preferences. We can affirm both realities. Orality and literacy are not a zero-sum game. One is not inevitably at the expense of the other. Each can benefit the other. Just as multi-lingual people may use one language for certain functions or domains and another language for a different domain, so it may be possible that they want literacy for certain functions in their lives and oral forms of communication for others. We are beginning to see this possibility given more credence; we can look forward to the development of strategies appropriate to it. Instead of viewing calls for oral strategies as a rejection of literacy campaigns and printed Scriptures, we can affirm oral strategies as part of a both/and approach. Instead of viewing calls for written translations and literacy campaigns as rejection of orality, we can affirm that printed Scripture and the ability to read it strengthen faith communities. We all need to work together to help these happen.

We all can serve our audiences by being sensitive to the means that they prefer to use and seeking to accommodate them. It is certainly my expectation that when people in oral cultures engage Scripture orally, it will stimulate a desire to learn to read, to

participate in Bible translation efforts, and to advocate for the use of printed Scriptures in appropriate ways in their churches and communities. That would be a wonderful outcome of a both/and approach among oral communities. Every Christian denomination or church body will need a corps of educated leaders who can access the whole of Scripture and related resources and contribute that learning to the strengthening of their church or denomination.

8. Recent research has documented the combined impact of the use of local language, having at least one team member fluent in the local language, and appropriate oral or literate strategies. Research reported in *From Seed to Fruit*,¹⁰ edited by J. Dudley Woodberry, found a strong correlation between the use of these communication strategies and effectiveness in starting new churches in Muslim settings. Use of local language rather than regional language was itself strongly correlated with effectiveness in church planting. But the impact of using local language along with the other two factors showed an even more striking correlation. Where all three factors were absent, the probability of planting no churches was 93% and the probability of planting one church was 6%. Where all three factors were present, the probability of planting no churches was 16%, the probability of planting one church was 41% and the probability of planting multiple churches was also 41%. Thus, when teams used all three communication factors, there was an 82% likelihood of planting at least one church. The significance of using oral strategies when appropriate was noted as well: “The impact of incorporating the learning preferences of the people group (oral vs. literate) into team strategy results in an increase in the expected number of churches by a factor of 4.4 (340%).”

¹⁰ J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008). See especially the technical report on the supplemental CD included with the book.

9. Advances in audio and video technology make production and delivery of audio and video products easier, faster, and cheaper. A recent article¹¹ in *The Economist* about the rapid spread and utilization of mobile phones, even in struggling economies in sub-Saharan Africa, makes it clear that we cannot overlook the possibilities for putting biblical content in audio or video forms on mobile phones and similar devices. I received an email earlier this month from North Africa about the chief of a nomadic tribe who has given his wife a smart phone. Never having been to school but wanting to use her new phone, she asked a Christian worker to teach her to read and to give her some video content to put on her smart phone. The Christian worker transferred videos of biblical stories onto the woman's phone and made arrangements to visit her to begin literacy instruction. This is another example of how Scripture engagement is likely to be both oral/audio on the one hand and literate/print on the other. Those whom we serve often request both; we need to try to do both. Advances in technology can help us.
10. There has been very encouraging progress in finding alternative ways to produce high-quality panoramas of biblical stories in oral form that are effective in leading people to faith in Christ and the formation of multiplying fellowship groups or house churches. The OneStory Partnership has developed the model I know best. Let me describe a recent pilot project using essentially that model.

Over a twelve month period in 2008-2009, mother tongue speakers from eight language groups received training in how to do cross-language storycrafting using oral methods. They learned to make high-quality audio recordings of the stories and learned how to use the stories to introduce people to faith in Christ and start new groups. They learned to document the storycrafting and checking process.

¹¹ "The Mother of Invention: A Special Report on Telecoms in Emerging Markets," *The Economist*, Sept. 26, 2009.

In a year's time all eight teams were able to complete their projects. They produced cohesive, worldview-sensitive biblical panoramas of 25-35 biblical stories. The stories were carefully checked and approved by an SIL-trained storycrafting consultant. As part of the OneStory model, the project facilitators test the stories in the community. In each case the stories generated interest in knowing more. In all eight languages the testing process and other uses of the stories in the community led to new followers of Jesus and a new fellowship group. In some cases as many as five new fellowship groups resulted from the practice of sharing the stories with others and seeking to lead them to faith in Jesus. When the cluster project began, three of the eight groups were high priorities for church planting because they were considered "unengaged."

Mother tongue speakers in three of the eight projects have now transitioned into translation of the Gospel of Luke. The leader of the Luke translation project said that these participants are as well prepared as those who had had formal translation training.

The mother tongue facilitators of these eight projects were coached by a woman who has never had formal linguistic or translation training. She developed her expertise by doing a OneStory project herself as an expatriate worker and then being coached as she facilitated these teams. The OneStory training, mentoring, and consulting equipped her to lead this eight-language cluster to a successful outcome. Vision 2025 called for finding ways to engage more languages in a shorter period of time, to produce appropriate Scripture resources for Bibleless groups, and to do so by drawing new people into the process instead of loading more tasks on the existing translators and consultants. The OneStory experiment seems to be a significant breakthrough.

Given these advances, it is not surprising that The Mission Exchange, a fellowship of over a hundred evangelical mission sending agencies supporting approximately 20,000 workers, gave its Innovation in Mission award to the orality movement in September 2009.

With all this progress, several challenges still remain.

1. There is a huge need for involving more people in the whole task of Bible translation, Scripture engagement, and the planting and nurture of church planting movements. Time does not allow for spelling these out in any detail. As we involve people from the emerging churches of Asia, Africa, and Central and South America, we need to keep looking for the most effective training and utilization of those people, many of whom come from strongly oral cultures. How can we tap their intuitive familiarity with orality to help all of us work more effectively among the oral communities where the greatest remaining need lies?
2. A great many missionary practitioners of Bible storying are creating biblical stories without sufficient awareness of the tricky cross-language issues involved. They seldom do any formal checking of the stories, so they are likely to tell stories that contain inaccuracies, don't communicate well, or are unnatural. The Bible storying movement needs considerable assistance from within the translation community on this issue. At least three possible ways of addressing the situation come to mind.

One option is for Bible agencies to assist church planting organizations to develop a basic checking process that can be made a standard part of Bible storying strategies. This process would need to be relatively simple and non-technical, so that church planters could conduct checking themselves. No doubt it would not catch all mistakes, but my hope is that it would at least catch the worst errors. It could help Bible storying

practitioners to see the value of more robust third-party checking processes. This has been one of the most valuable lessons IMB has learned through its participation in the OneStory partnership. We are looking for ways to make checking of biblical resources part of our standard practice.

A second option for addressing the checking gap would be to enlist people within the translation community to check the stories being used. With a limited amount of coaching regarding the unique aspects of checking oral stories, experienced translators could be equipped to do this task, if they were willing. This option seems especially viable where a conventional translation project is already under way in the same language or a closely-related language. This is already happening on a limited basis.

A third option for closing the checking gap is for translation organizations to produce a high quality biblical story panorama as their first Scripture resource and continue enlarging it with additional biblical stories over time. This is happening with greater frequency, but it is not a complete solution. In all likelihood the need will be addressed by a combination of these three options and others not yet identified.

3. We need to improve in developing audio resources that are also truly oral in style or genre. As we understand more about how oral cultures use their language, we need to reflect that in our audio resources. Just recognizing that audio is not synonymous with oral is a beginning. We need Bible translation teams to give more concerted attention to producing Scripture resources that reflect the oral use of language within the community.

Julian Sundersingh's doctoral research in Tamil Nadu, published in his book *Audio-Based Translation*,¹² showed that more than 80% of uneducated villagers preferred

¹² Julian Sundersingh, *Audio-Based Translation: Communicating Biblical Scriptures to Non-Literate People* (Bangalore: SAIACS Press and New York: United Bible Societies, 2001), 158-61.

the Scripture translated for the ear as opposed to the Scripture translated for print.¹³ These two source texts were then tested in three audio formats: straight reading without voice modulation, reading with voice modulation typical of storytelling, and dramatic reading with different voices for different characters. A recording in storytelling style was overwhelmingly more popular than a recording of straight reading, whether it was the literary text or the aural text that was the basis. Respondents preferred storytelling format 93% to 7% with the print-based text and 97% to 3% when the aural text was used. When respondents were asked whether they liked straight reading, storytelling, or dramatic multi-voice presentation better, they preferred the dramatic presentation 86% to 14% when the Scripture basis was the print-based text. (None preferred straight reading.) This finding brings to mind Faith Comes By Hearing's dramatized recordings of the New Testament. When the source was the aural text, the preference for the dramatic presentation was still evident, but by a much smaller margin (61 to 39%). Thus the drama was preferred over storytelling by a 3 to 2 ratio. Where resources are few and security risks are great, using a single storyteller may be a viable option. We cannot assume that these findings apply to every situation, of course, but they are enough to cause us to keep giving careful consideration to these issues in deciding on translation genre, style, format, and distribution strategy.

4. Translation teams need to have in mind from the beginning the most likely distribution and Scripture engagement methods that will be used. Each medium of distribution has its own strengths and weaknesses; translation teams need to be aware of these and develop Scripture products that maximize the strengths and compensate for the weaknesses. I am aware that this makes the translation task more complicated. But that is the situation we

¹³ Ibid.

face. Bible translation is essentially a communication task, as Søggaard points out in the article I referenced earlier. Instead of producing a text for print and then leaving it to the media specialists to figure out how to make audio resources from it, we need translation teams to do their task with these likely audio distribution channels in mind from inception.

In naming these challenges and suggesting how I hope Bible translators can assist evangelists and church planters with them, I am operating from the standpoint of having seen the tremendous progress that we have made in the last two decades. The progress made in just the last five years is remarkable. Given that track record and our common desire to honor God by making him known among those who do not know him, I thank you for your cooperation in the gospel up to this date, and look forward to continuing to work together with you. May God bless your every effort, may we find ways to work together, and may we be a blessing to all who still need to hear.