HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies
ISSN: (Online) 2072-8050, (Print) 0259-9422

Bible translations for the minorities' languages today: A biblical theological exploration

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Dates:
Received: 11 June 2020
Accepted: 09 Sept. 2020
Published: 28 Jan. 2021

How to cite this article:
Rabali, T.C., 2021, 'Bible translations for the minorities' languages today: A biblical theological exploration', *HTS Teologiese Studies/Theological Studies* 77(4), a6195. https://doi.org/10.4102/hts.v77i4.6195

The contemporary world is a harsh environment for many languages and cultures. Globalisation is one of the powerful forces that are increasing the pressure on some languages to become extinct. The questions that, therefore, arise for Bible translation include: *Does it still make sense to translate the Bible into languages that are being threatened by extinction*? Are there perhaps certain indicators that should be present for the translation of the Bible into endangered languages to make sense and to possibly also contribute towards the revival of languages that are being threatened by extinction? The discussion of these and related questions is not new but has to continue because the issues can be viewed from a variety of angles. This article is offered as a biblical theological exploration of the issues. It is, therefore, also a biblical theological motivation for Bible translation into endangered languages. The article argues that the existence of a growing church that is committed to the use of the Bible in a particular translation should be viewed as one of the critical indicators when assessing the merits of such translation projects.

Contribution: The primary contribution of this article is that it approaches the issues pertaining to language endangerment from a biblical theological angle; and demonstrates that the issues regarding language endangerment are connected to the core of the Bible's message. Language endangerment is one of the results of Adam's fall into sin. God's redemptive work will end language endangerment when God's gracious work of saving creation and fallen humanity is consummated at Christ's return.

Keywords: language endangerment; death; language revitalisation; human diversity; biblical interpretation; biblical theology; Bible translation; the globalisation; mission work.

Introduction[1]

It is a fact that there are languages that are dying or disappearing (Ode 2015:30; Shellnutt 2019:19). Many factors hasten the process of extinction of some languages. The same issues that threaten the existence of some languages often ensure that others flourish. It is for this reason that the situation of minorities' languages is, in some respects, comparable to that of endangered species. Christians can also speak about endangered animals and plants to remind one another of the need for special efforts to preserve what is considered endangered. This is in line with the stewardship mandate reflected in biblical passages like Genesis 2:28; 2:15 (DeWitt 2012:20, 22–24, 46–48). The reality that some languages are being threatened by extinction raises many questions for biblical translation. Some of the issues are: Does it still make sense to translate the Bible into languages that are being threatened by extinction? Are there perhaps certain indicators that should be present for the translation of the Bible into endangered languages to make sense and to possibly contribute towards the revival of languages that are being threatened by extinction?

This article aims to share some insights that could be considered as part of a biblical theological response to such questions. The article is, therefore, also a motivation for the translation of the Bible into minorities' languages today.

The discussion is biblical theological in content and methodology. The details that in biblical books pertain to the issues of language endangerment and death are explored as being related to one another within the total message of the Bible. The methodology involves interpreting the details in the light of the whole message of the Bible whilst also at the same time making sure that the particular contexts in which the details are found in the specific biblical books are respected

1.The term 'minorities' may in this case be misleading because some languages that are endangered may be those that are spoken by a majority that does not have political and economic power in a country. Languages of actual majorities during the colonial era in Africa were neglected to the extent that their users could become ashamed of using them in various situations (Prah 2007:27). The promotion of the Greek language in Alexander the Great's empire meant that the Greek language became a dominant language even in countries that were far away from Greece and accordingly succeeded to take over the place of many languages that were used by majorities before the Hellenisation that ensued (Reicke 1985:39–40).

(Silva 2007:88). An important underlying assumption of the methodology is that the biblical books are read together as part of one canon even though they were written in different contexts and times (Beale 2011:2; Boda 2012:132). Many have accordingly recognised unity in the diverse books of the Bible: a oneness also implying that the earlier books that form the Old Testament anticipate and lay the foundation for its last books, which form the New Testament (Bartholomew 2012:9; Kaiser & Silva 2007:74). There are various ways to account for this widely recognised unity of the Bible. The position taken in this article is that the unity of the Bible is best explained by accepting the self-witness of the individual books and the witness that many of them provide about all of them as one entity, namely that God speaks through them (Dt 1:3; Is 1:1; Zch 1:1–6; 2 Tm 3:15–17; 2 Pt 1:19–21). The persons who wrote the books of the Bible are, therefore, considered to have been prophets and apostles of the Lord (1 Pt 1:10–12; 2 Pt 3:2). The article utilises the biblical theological methodology with the assumptions just referred to in this paragraph in five steps to explore language endangerment issues, which have a bearing on Bible translation. The steps involve (1) placing those issues in the context of the message of the Bible, (2) relating the issues to the reality of the Bible as a linguistic historical entity, which has to be translated into contemporary languages for its message to be heard, (3) using some cardinal biblical values to identify and unpack some of the dimensions that are involved in language endangerment issues, (4) bringing the language endangerment issues into conversation with the general positive attitude of the Bible to languages and (5) drawing attention to how responding to what the Bible says is the mission of Christ's followers compels Christians to take seriously the language endangerment issues by, amongst others, investing in Bible translation to ensure the efficiency and sustainability of their ministries with respect to all nations.

The article, therefore, achieves its objectives by: (1) drawing attention to some passages, which show how the Bible speaks about the reality and issues relating to language endangerment and death, (2) illustrating some of the relevant language endangerment issues by aspects pertaining to the ancient languages that the Bible books were written in, (3) indicating why language extinction should be the cause for mourning, (4) considering the matters in light of the Bible's positive outlook towards human language diversity, (5) placing the matter of language extinction within the context of the mission mandate that Christ gave to the church, and (6) offering some findings and conclusions under the rubric of concluding remarks.

Language extinction a reality after the fall of humans into sin

It actually should not surprise Bible readers to know that languages can die. This is because the death of languages is somehow connected to the sufferings and the death of its users. Pikawi (2015:86) accordingly described endangered languages as those that are 'at risk of falling out of use as its speakers die out or shift to speaking another language'. The Bible speaks about the death of people that speak particular languages and of speakers of certain languages shifting to other languages.

The Bible begins to speak of the death of people from its first book, Genesis; and then concludes what it says about death only in its last book, Revelation. It is noteworthy that the first chapters of Genesis refer to how death started whilst the last chapters of Revelation then talk about how death will end. Genesis 2:17 introduces the Bible's discussion on death by associating it with human disobedience to God (Aalders 1981:93, 110). Revelation 21:4 connects the end of death to the reversal of what emanated from the human disobedience to God introduced in Genesis (Duvall 2016:160). Passages such as Romans 5:12–17 and 1 Corinthians 15:21–22 connect death to Adam's disobedience and link the end of death to the obedience of Jesus Christ (Gaffin 1978:34–36; Murray 1977:181–186).

Between Genesis 2 and Revelation 21, the Bible talks a lot about the death of people. Examples are: Genesis 5 reports the death of many people who lived between Adam and Noah; Genesis 7:17–24 talks of many who perished during the Flood; Genesis 19:24–25 refers to many who perished when Sodom and Gomorrah were destroyed; Joshua 12 reports the destruction of many cities wherein many people died and Revelation 9:18 even refer to a vision in which a third of the population or people were killed. Some of these deaths also involved the death of aspects of the cultures of the people who perished. One of the casualties when particular people die in large numbers is language. Bible records that mention the total or extensive destruction of communities or peoples report events that had some implications for the existence of certain languages. When significant numbers of a people die, their remnants may then become too few to ensure the survival of their language.

There are also many Bible references to individuals and peoples having to shift from the regular use of their languages. This is often associated with a change of location. Popular Bible cases that serve as examples are: Joseph who had to learn a new language when in Egypt (Gn 42:21–23; Lennox 2019:164, 168); Daniel and his friends also had to learn a new language in Babylon (Dn 1:4; Schwab 2006:5, 30) and many in the post-exilic community that no longer knew the language of their ancestors in which their Scriptures were written (Neh 8:7–8; 13:23–24; Brown 1998:132, 244). The pressure for the Jewish exiles in Babylon to survive clearly included the reality of accepting that, if many of them could do with only their own language whilst they were in Jerusalem, their new environment required of them to also accept the dominant languages of their new location under their new rulers. Many of the descendants of Israel who were dispersed amongst the nations through the exile that gained momentum in the Assyrian and Babylonian deportations did not return to Israel when the Persians allowed it (Bruce 1982:182; Ferguson 1990:317). Many of those who returned under the leadership of people such as Zerubbabel needed help to properly understand the reading of their Scriptures as

Nehemiah 8:4–8 indicates. Brown (1998:132), when commenting on Nehemiah 8:4–8, suggests that the Levites that assisted Ezra were involved in translation and interpretation. The exile had made it necessary for the Jewish people to learn other languages. Those that remained in the dispersion were later the reason why it became necessary to translate the Old Testament into Greek that had become their dominant language during the Hellenistic period (Bruce 1982:136; Mojola 2002:204; Russell 1963:15). Russell (1963:13) is therefore correct to suggest that when the Jews were surrounded by Greek culture, 'many had to adopt the Greek language either as their only language or as an alternative to their Aramaic tongue'. Acts 2:5–11 confirm this reality when referring to Jews associated with the dispersion. The passage reports their experience of listening to the Apostles, who were speaking in tongues on Pentecost, as something that amounted to hearing them speak about the mighty works of God in 'our own tongues'. The people whom Luke presents as referring to the many languages that the Apostles were heard using on that memorable day as 'their own' are identified as 'God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven' in Acts 2:5; and also addressed by Peter as 'Fellow Jews' (Ac 2:14), and as 'Fellow Israelites' (Ac 2:22, 29). The fact that they refer to the tongues they heard as 'their own' may suggest that although they had not lost the Aramaic language that many Palestinian Jews used; they considered the languages of the places they had come from as their primary means of communication. Bruce (1980:60–64) and Bock (2007:103, 104) furnish helpful details to confirm that the Jewish dispersion had resulted in there being large Jewish communities in the areas that are mentioned in Acts 2:9–11.

Some insights gleaned from discussions about the ancient biblical languages

The theological training of students intending to enter the ministry of the Gospel usually involves the study of what are often referred to as 'ancient' languages that substantially differ from the languages that could be considered their predecessors and successors (Black 1988:162; Silva 1990:143–145). Some issues that such students often raise can therefore be viewed as confirming that languages can die or become extinct. The primary difference between 'the death' of the biblical languages that theological students are required to study, and most of today's endangered languages is that the biblical languages 'died' at a time when they had already been in use as spoken and written languages. The biblical languages accordingly left a written legacy behind when 'they died'; and the Bible books are a part of that legacy. However, many of today's endangered languages are primarily spoken languages (Shellnutt 2019:19; Siebert 2019:24); and if they die out would not leave behind a substantial written legacy. Such languages will not even leave behind a legacy indicating that the Bible ever existed in their languages if they die out before the Bible is translated into those languages. In spite of this major difference between 'the death' that affected the biblical languages and the death that affects the minority languages of today, the issues that their study by theological students raise illustrate the reality of language extinction. This article picks on three of them.

The first issue comes up in the question: *why not rather do the modern successors of these* 'ancient' *languages*? The question is about whether one who studies the contemporary or Modern Hebrew and Greek will not thereby have sufficient ability to read, translate and interpret the Bible books and their passages that are in Classical Hebrew, Aramaic and Hellenistic Greek? The response to such a question requires that one refer to the uniqueness of each language and that the changes that took place between, for instance, Hellenistic Greek and today's Greek are so great that even the users of Modern Greek have to do some study in order to access ancient documents that are written in Hellenistic Greek (Black 1988:150, 152). The Hellenistic Greek that was used during the 1st century AD when the New Testament books were written is no longer spoken or even used when composing contemporary documents; it is therefore considered an ancient and 'dead' language in that sense. An important matter to remember is not merely the fact that languages often undergo changes over time but also that the general contexts in which they are used also change significantly. The result is that the language of a people at a particular era is also a window to some aspects related to their context and culture during that era.

The second issue can be articulated in the following question: *Is it necessary to study two languages* (*namely, Classical Hebrew and Hellenistic Greek*)? This question is usually supported by the suggestion that it would have been easier to devote all the time to do the required language study to one language. One way of responding to the question requires pointing out that the New Testament authors lived at a time when it would not make sense for them to write in Hebrew or even Aramaic. Although most of the writers of the New Testament books were Jews and, therefore, descendants of Israel, they wrote in Hellenistic Greek (Black 1988:162), because they were communicating with fellow believers who understood Hellenistic Greek and not ancient Hebrew or Aramaic. The Jews started composing their scriptures in Classical Hebrew, then Aramaic and subsequently in Hellenistic Greek long before the birth of Jesus (Schwab 2006:4, 5). It is, therefore, not surprising that when Acts report the establishment of many Christian communities throughout the Roman Empire outside Judea, this necessitated that the leaders of the early Christian churches wrote to them in the language that was predominant in those communities. The superscript which the Roman governor Pilate wrote on the Cross of Jesus was accordingly in Aramaic, Latin and Greek (Jn 19:19–22). Many of the Jewish writers of the New Testament books wrote their books when they were outside Judea and in locations where the Greek Old Testament Bible of the time (the Septuagint) was popular in Jewish synagogues (Russell 1963:62). The Hebrew that at some point in the history of Israel was spoken widely in Jewish communities was by the time of the 1st century no longer spoken widely when the NT books were written. It is apparently for this reason that the three languages used for the superscript on the cross of Jesus included Greek that was still the common or popular

language in many places even during the Roman Empire (Hendriksen 1973:428; Morris 1975:807).

The third matter is apparent when it is asked: *Why do we have to do ancient languages in order to read things that were written long ago*? This question is usually supported by the fact that God is after all not dead but alive. It is a fundamental question because it is about whether God cannot just be expected to do what is essential today so that it would be no longer necessary to go back to what he did and said in the past. In other words, is it not possible to know God and his will without the ancient scriptures? One way of responding to the issue and which also serves to draw attention to the fact that languages do die but their written legacies may continue to be of great value to future generations is that God himself expects people to use the ancient books that are written in languages that are no longer spoken today. The Apostles of Christ, who were writing in Hellenistic Greek, accordingly used the Old Testament books and refer to them as essential in passages like 2 Timothy 3:14–17 and 2 Peter 1:19–21 (Gaffin 2008:60). There are things that God did once for all in history; things which God will not always repeat. This aspect of the Christian faith is significant because it is not only a reminder that God has acted to create, sustain and redeem creation and humanity from the beginning but also something that indicates that what God did and said in the past reveal his character and are connected to what he is doing today and with what he will do in future (Boda 2017:22–24). Although translations of the books can be used, it is essential that many of those who are called to preach the Gospel have the capacity to at least check and follow the translations in terms of what their translators worked from when they made them (Johnson 2007:399; Keller 2015:215). It is also important for aspiring ministers of the Gospel in Africa to be reminded that if they do not want to have access to the sources from which their Bible was translated then they must, even today, remain heavily dependent on the work of those from Europe and North America and could accordingly be excluded from some tasks.

The death of languages as something to mourn for

The complex issues associated with the welfare and possible extinction of the languages of minorities in the contemporary world must also be placed under the category of things that the Bible considers to be in the domain of human responsibility. Language extinction is related to human sin and some of its terrible consequences. Although the Bible clearly indicates that the events that led to the composition of the Scriptures in Classical Hebrew, Aramaic and Hellenistic Greek are part of a history that is in the hands of God, it does not hide the fact that many aspects of the relevant history involved a lot of suffering connected to the reality of human sin. Passages like Deuteronomy 28:49–50, and Jeremiah 5:15–19 suggest that the uprooting of Israel that accompanied the process was the result of God's judgement on Israel for their own sin; and that the divine judgement was meted out by the use of sinful foreign nations inflicting severe devastation in a manner that in turn required God to also judge them in due course (Currid 2018:407; Harman 2007:250; Mayes 1981:356). The Bible, therefore, encourages this approach to the matter in cases where it connects death and the oppression of human beings as sinners to the sinful actions of their fellow sinners in history. It is necessary to approach the matter of the factors that contribute to the possible death of some languages in this way because many of these factors bring one face to face with the evilness of human sin. The literature on things that account for the death of languages mentions human wars, the advancement of colonial interests, the contemporary negative forces associated with globalisation and commercial interests and the pursuit of development without regard for how it impacts on the environment (Pikawi 2015:86). A 2007 commissioned study of the University of Cape Town on endangered languages in South Africa correctly, therefore, stated the matter as follows (Prah 2007):

> [*A*]n endangered language is a language headed for perdition. It is a language with very few, or no monolingual speakers; people who speak only that language. It is a language spoken by a steadily diminishing minority of people, who are relatively disempowered. It is a language with poor societal premium and which in the wider order of things is held in low esteem. Such conditions cause its speakers to avoid using it, are ashamed and sometimes sanctioned for using it, or passing it on to their children. (p. 27)

Many of the descriptions of these factors hide the fact that many of them often go together with atrocities and selfish interests that violates the biblical teaching about loving God and our neighbour (Lv 19:18; Dt 6:5; Mt 22:34–40). A proper mourning for the death of languages accordingly requires that the blame for it not only be put on the sin of the initial human pair (Adam and Eve) but also on the sins of contemporary humanity as such sins contribute to the death and violation of others, especially through policies and actions whereby people, as individuals and institutions, may pursue their own self-interests. It is not only the sins that were committed during the colonial eras that should be acknowledged but also the agendas that are pursued in post-liberation times. The policies formulated and implemented, as well as the manner in which resources are used and deployed may be harmful to minority communities. In many of the factors that account for the acceleration of the possible death of some languages, there may also be what appears to be short-term positives. It is often the case that people may be blinded by such positives to the extent of not also perceiving the long-term impacts that are involved. Many may struggle to realise that the death of languages is at times something connected to the death or oppression of people. There is, therefore, a need to approach the matter of the factors that lead to some languages being endangered in the contemporary world in such a way that the role that human sin often plays in the matter is recognised. Acknowledging such sins may not always indicate direct involvement but could be indirect complicity. The Christian teaching about sins of commission and sins of omission need also to be remembered when considering contemporary humanity's responsibility in the matter. This is important in light of the biblical theological

framework in which God's grace and sovereignty often indicate that the adverse consequences of human sin may often not be immediately visible. The Old Testament Book of Lamentations suggests such mourning even when people perceive the grace of God in the suffering, which affects them or others as a result of human sin (Lm 3:19–39).

Languages are surely something that would have become a reality even if there was no fall of human beings into sin. Silva (1990) correctly makes this point when he reminds us that language was not only a gift of God to Adam and Eve, but that Genesis 1 and 2 presents language primarily as:

> [*A*] powerful attribute that is (1) intrinsic to God's own being and activity, (2) clear evidence of the fact that Adam and Eve were distinctive creatures made in God's image and (3) inseparable from the mandate to Adam and Eve to rule creation. (p. 26)

Poythress (1999:64) echoed these sentiments when he bluntly stated: 'God's speaking is the archetype for human speaking'. It is certainly partly for this reason that the eschatological vision that the Bible encourages is one in which human language may continue to be used, amongst others, in worshipping and praising God (Rv 7:9–10; 19:1–7). Duvall (2016:48) discussed Revelation's teaching on worship and then aptly noted: 'When many other important things have stopped, worship will still be going strong … for eternity'. The picture one gets from what the book of Revelation states about the worship of God suggests that many languages may be part of the restored reality after the return of Christ who now sits on the right hand of the father and is making all things new (Carson 2008:74,75). This restoration includes the fact that speech and languages are being cleansed so that they will once more become what God initially intended language to be (Alexander 2018:164; Silva 1990:39–40). The people that worship God even after God made all things new are nations (Rv 21:24–26; Alexander 2018:153).

The Bible's positive outlook for human language diversity

Mourning for the death of languages and their users, if it is to be useful, has to be accompanied by participating in attempts that aim to ensure the well-being of people, and whatever is good in their culture and languages. This involves cultivating an attitude that cherishes human diversity. It implies looking at human diversity no longer as something that holds humans back from flourishing, but as something capable of enhancing their well-being and greater levels of development. The matter of revitalising endangered languages, therefore, requires allowing the Bible to shape the way one looks at diversity. This is not easy when the diversity that has to be embraced happens to be also wide. Some of the common ways of dealing with difference or diversity are actually part of the reason human beings end up endangering some communities and their languages. Tienou (2000:248) names some of these attitudes to human diversity as homogenisation, colonisation, demonisation, romanticisation and pluralisation. He helpfully advocates for what he terms pluralisation when writing as follows (Tienou 2000):

> [*I*]n homogenization difference is obliterated by pointing to similarity. In colonization difference is explained as inferiority. Consequently the inferior person or group will cease to be different when they are raised to our level. In demonization difference is an evil to be eradicated, while in romanticization the person who is different is viewed as either exotic or superior. Pluralization celebrates difference for difference's sake. (p. 248)

The acceptance of human diversity is, however, something that brings with it certain challenges. Those that appreciate language diversity have also to find ways of ensuring cohesion in society. Carson (2008:74) had in this context correctly observed that sinful human beings 'can corrupt the diversity and turn it into war'. Post-apartheid South Africa affirmed several languages as official, but there are challenges when many of those languages are being allowed to deteriorate. It is not easy to find schools that allow options for children to learn some of the languages even in major centres where all the languages have significant number of children who speak them. There are many who seem to be propagating the idea that it would actually be easy to work with fewer languages. Prah (2007:30–31) correctly indicated that the idea that some South African indigenous languages could be merged is one that was hotly debated even in the pre-apartheid days when it was argued for by Jacob Nhlapo, the editor of the Bantu World. To go in the direction that seeks to marginalise some languages by such a policy of merging languages would be another way of hastening the demise of some languages. It is an approach that prefers fewer languages because it does not want to embrace the value and riches that are associated with language diversity. In the South African context, the question then becomes: *which of the current eleven official languages of South Africa should be allowed to die out if South Africa has to remain with four official languages for instance*? It is in this context that there are some who also blame the Christian church for its missionary enterprise, which ensured that many of the languages we have did not die out (Prah 2007:21–22). There are these tensions and it is accordingly still necessary to provide reasons for appreciating human diversity as it comes into expression even through different languages in a society. Advocating for language diversity in one country such as South Africa is not a plea for something similar to the unjust apartheid project of separate development of the ethnic groups. It is rather a plea for human dignity and respect to be accorded to all languages and the communities. The vast Persian kingdom we read about in the Bible book of Esther, although it was evil in many respects, seems to have made resources available to hire people that could enable it to write to various languages when communicating important information to communities that were part of it (Es 1:21–22; 3:12; 8:7–10; Roach 2016:82, 133, 224).

Diverse languages enable people to say the same thing differently and may, therefore, help those that read the same Bible passage in various languages. New Testament books such as Ephesians indicate that the diversity around us is not ultimately an accident; it is because of a wise God's creation and will. Genesis 11:5–11 seems to be also saying that the

language diversity that was possibly reaffirmed and given great impetus in the event concerning the Tower of Babel had to do with the intervention of the Lord when he wanted the people to fill the whole earth. Alexander (2018:25, 26) accordingly is justified to say that what happened at the Tower of Babel had to do with human arrogance, was the antithesis of what God had indicated as his desire, and also sought to exalt the creature over the creator. Ephesians 3:18–19 seems to point to diversity as something that may help us grow in understanding the extent of God's character and love even better (Hendriksen 1972:173). People need to collaborate and enrich one another not only as individuals but also as communities so that they together grow towards a better understanding of God's revelation. Although this may look like a motive, that is, human-centred, it is not because it is focused on God being glorified (Tienou 2000:148). The fact that the Pentecost event indicated that various languages could be used to declare the wonderful works of God is part of the Bible's positive posture to human language diversity, as is also its requirement that there be an interpretation when the gift of speaking in tongues was exercised in church assemblies (1 Cor 14). Speaking in tongues on Pentecost was not only a foretaste of what would become evident in church history when the Gospel was taken to many nations but may also be taken as a signal of the things to be after the return of Jesus and the resurrection of the dead.

Language extinction within the context of Christ's mission mandate

The cleansing of the nations that is essential in order for them to dwell with God takes place when the Holy Spirit joins them to Christ by giving them faith (Lk 24:45–49; Jn 20:21–23; Alexander 2018:164). The preaching of the Gospel and making the nations disciples is accordingly mandated by Christ as the means through which this cleansing is facilitated (Mt 28:19–20). The reference to baptism in the Great Commission conveys the centrality of cleansing that takes place as the commission is carried out. This commission implied that Christ's disciples were saved and blessed to take the place and role that Abraham and Israel had in the Old Testament (Goheen 2011:32, 48; Wright 2012:202).

Christ's commission in passages like Matthew 28:19–20 implies that his disciples and, therefore, also his church are turned towards 'all nations'. Many scholars have correctly pointed out that the Bible's concept of nations refers to people groups (McIntosh 2003:66; Miller 1999:61). The nations were the unwashed gentiles who were outside the covenant. McIntosh (2003:66) is accordingly justified to note that what the Bible means by nations 'refers to a cohesive unit of people as large as a tribe or as small as a family clan'.

The carrying out of Christ's commission has to do with issues pertaining to language endangerment on several fronts. The preaching and teaching of the Gospel is performed by means of a language; the message comes from Bible books that are written in a language, and the message is taken to various people groups, including those that may not be conversant with the language of the preachers and teachers. A simple question such as whether the missionary coming from a different language group should learn the language of the target group already has implications for the future of the language of the group that the missionary is reaching out to. Mission work also involves reflections on what language(s) the church to be established will use when worshipping God. It has implications for the preparation of catechetical, liturgical, confessional and other materials as these also have to be in a particular language.

It is accordingly not surprising that mission work has been the greatest catalyst for the Bible's translation into various languages (Geyser-Fouche 2017:2; Mojola 2002:203, 204; Siebert 2019:23, 24). The ministry needs of both established churches and those to be planted through their mission work can be expected to continue demanding Bible translation so that it will be an ongoing task till the return of Christ. It is of course true that the format of the Bible may change, but Bible translation will obviously be required in view of the fact that the source text is a historical language entity (Downie 2019:62).

Translating the Bible into any endangered language requires that many people invest a lot of time and resources into the language and those who speak it. Current Bible translation projects such as those into San languages such as Khwedam and !Xun accordingly need significant support to be completed. Some of the many activities associated with Bible translation entail investment into its orthography, its grammar, its vocabulary and the mobilisation and the training of many of its speakers (Shellnutt 2019:19). Such activities create interest in the language and accordingly breathe life into the language (Shellnutt 2019:20). The Bible is also interesting and powerful and if used by users of an endangered language is likely to increase their esteem about their language.

The huge investment that is involved in any Bible translation into an endangered language, therefore, necessitates certain indicators to be in place for it to be sensible. The translation has to be done properly so that speakers of the language who are Christians and have access to the Bible in other languages may have confidence in the new translation and, therefore, start using it. A most important indicator is the need for a church or churches committed to do ministry in the endangered language. Serious attempts have to be made to involve the leaders of such church communities in the translation work. It would go a long way to prevent doing a translation that no one would want to use because of its poor quality or even the ideological stance of the translation. This is also in line with some aspirations in what Siebert (2019:28ff.) describes as the new paradigm in Bible translation, one that is church-centric.

Concluding remarks

The following findings and conclusions are in order:

- Language endangerment and death is indeed a reality.
- The Bible is aware of the phenomenon of language endangerment and death.

The issues pertaining to language endangerment are connected to the core of the Bible's message. Language endangerment is one of the results of Adam's fall into sin. God's redemptive work will end things such as language endangerment when God's gracious work of saving creation and fallen humanity is consummated at Christ's return.

God accepts service and worship in any language today as we await the consummation. Churches may accordingly use various languages today.

Christians contribute towards the revitalisation of language by refusing to participate in acts that make others ashamed of their languages and by lobbying for policies that ensure that national resources are distributed equitably.

A proper understanding of Christ's commission includes support for Bible translation in general and into endangered languages of minorities.

Bible translation into an endangered language today makes sense when there is also a church or churches committed to do ministry through the language.

Acknowledgements

Competing interests

The author declares that he has no financial or personal relationships that may have inappropriately influenced him in writing this article.

Author's contribution

T.C.R. is the sole author of this research article.

Ethical considerations

This article followed all ethical standards for research without direct contact with human or animal subjects.

Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

Data availability

Data sharing is not applicable to this article as no new data were created or analysed in this study.

Disclaimer

The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official policy or position of any affiliated agency of the author.

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