

Heart-Language Worship in Multilingual Contexts

Graham R. Scott and Eleonora L. Scott

Crossway College, Brisbane

Abstract

This paper explores the theological importance of language, and in particular of encouraging heart-language worship. A growing number of churches worldwide exist in multilingual contexts, and these churches have to navigate complex linguistic realities and attitudes towards the various languages surrounding them. Many church services around the globe are conducted in the national language. The use of language in these cases communicates the idea that God is formal and distant, difficult to understand, and prefers the 'great' to the 'small'. Avenues for communicating that the local language is appropriate to use for prayer and worship need to be considered. The inclusion of heart-language worship helps foster a sense of intimacy with an immanent God, who longs for all to seek Him, who loves all people and languages, and desires to be worshipped throughout eternity by people from every language and tribe. This paper draws on the authors' fieldwork in South-East Asia.

Introduction

The global church exists and witnesses to its faith in complex multilingual environments. This is particularly evident in the new urban areas that have grown rapidly over the past fifty years across Asia. Movement of people from rural to urban areas in search of economic opportunity, health care and education has resulted in rapidly growing communities marked by cultural and linguistic diversity. As a result, the dynamics between the national language and the many other languages in use in any given community presents challenges for the church. This paper first examines the sociolinguistic nature of multilingual contexts before considering some theological and practical challenges such multilingual contexts represent for the church. This paper then argues that the encouragement of using 'heart languages' is a fundamental starting point for worship. The concluding section presents an overview of a grassroots approach to heart-language development through prayer and worship songs in such a multilingual context. As there is limited research available in the area of language use in churches in multilingual contexts, examples from the author's personal experience in Indonesia will be used to illustrate the paper's major points.¹

The Reality of Multilingual Contexts

The role of language and how it is used in church in multilingual contexts is likely to reflect the reality of choices and preferences that exist in multilingual contexts more broadly. It is argued that in a multilingual community, the language or languages used in church—or not used—impacts which 'domain' the church is held in by the community. In multilingual contexts, the linguistic environment will typically include the national language, a regional language of wider communication, and a number of more geographically defined local languages. Each of the languages in multilingual contexts will typically be used in different domains according to the situation and those involved in the communicative act. Multilingual speakers thus interact and move between linguistic forms and languages in a fluid manner depending on the context (for example: setting, topic, or other speakers present). Communities then exist, work, play and worship moving between several languages as the context demands. In such contexts, languages exist side-by-side in a community and each language has a defined role. Such a linguistic context is termed *diglossia*, referring to the parallel existence of multiple languages that are assigned to particular roles in a single community. In such cases, one language is the 'high' and prestigious form associated with "formality, religion, literature and political power, whilst the other is characterized as the low form associated with informality and reduced social prestige."² Thus if the 'high' language is used in church, then church is probably regarded as a formal

¹ Note that there is a call for more research into the analysis of language use in the church in multilingual communities and the impact that this has on spirituality. There is a hope that this paper will open dialogue and consideration of such implications.

² Note that the term *diglossia* may refer to a context in which two or more languages exist in parallel, for example, Greek, in which Katharevousa is high form and Dhimotiki is the low form. An example of a three language

activity only.³ This can relegate faith to the formal domain only, while the more informal and personal aspects of faith are neglected.⁴ While there has been research into the effects of such multilingual contexts on government and education, the effects on church, theology, and worship must also be considered, particularly as the growing Southern church is increasingly multilingual.⁵

Throughout Indonesia, multilingual contexts are the norm. For example, school students in Java, Indonesia begin their day using Sunda (local language) in the home with family, before adopting the more hip and contemporary Jakarta Malay (regional language and language of national popular culture) with friends while walking to school, and then using *bahasa Indonesia* (national language) in formal classroom settings. Whilst Sunda might be appropriate as a spoken language in the home, in all likelihood the student may never read or write in Sunda in daily life.⁶ In comparison, Jakarta Malay is accorded some prestige due to its connection to popular culture, and though it lacks a formal orthography students use it for text messaging and will read it in popular magazines. *Bahasa Indonesia*, whilst not considered appropriate for domestic life, and not 'cool' enough for popular culture, is the language that the student must grasp in order to show progress educationally. It is learnt solely through formal education, and is the language used in the majority of print and online publications, and in the general media, politics, government, and high culture. Note that *Bahasa Indonesia* is the national language, but it is NOT a heart language for over 90% of Indonesians.⁷ Yet most Indonesian churches will use *Bahasa Indonesia* for church services unless there has been significant language development work in a vernacular language.⁸

Mastery of the national language can affect the social status of the average church-goer. As children have little or no contact with *bahasa Indonesia* in their early years, it is only at school that they encounter the language in a systematic way. As the student progresses through school and into adult

diglossic situation is Tunisia, where French and Classical Arabic are both high forms, and Colloquial Tunisian Arabic is the low form. D. Crystal, *A Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics*, fifth edition (Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, 2005), 138-139.

³ For more on the relationship between formality and 'high' language, see R. Fasold, *The Sociolinguistics of Society* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1984), 36.

⁴ For a parallel situation to Indonesia, see B.F. Grimes, "Evaluating the Hawaii Creole English Situation", in *Notes on Literature in Use and Language Programs* (39)(updated 1997):44-48.

⁵ For the rise of the Southern church and its increasing urbanization, see P. Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 89-96.

⁶ The Sunda language has a non-Roman script, making it much more unlikely that average Sunda will ever read or write in it.

⁷ See Anton M. Moeliono, "Contact-Induced Language Change in Present-Day Indonesian", in *Language Contact and Change in the Austronesian World*, edited by T. Dutton and D.T. Tyrone (Berlin: Grouton de Gruyter, 1994): 377-378.

⁸ Most of Indonesia's 700+ languages do not yet have Scripture translations. For a list of the world's languages, including Bible translation needs, see *The Ethnologue: the Languages of the World*. <http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp>.

life, their mastery of *bahasa Indonesia* will be the criteria that determines further educational opportunities, and resultantly their socio-economic status and social class. The daily movement of a student between home, street, and school involves unconscious but predictable shifts in language and style. These shifts in language reflect speakers' ethnic and social identity as well as their social roles.⁹ And if the only language used in church is the national language, these language shifts then also mean that a certain social and educational status is required in order to draw closer to God.¹⁰ There may also be an assumption that lower social and education status limits any possibility of learning more about God.

While little research has been done on language use in church and its implications, the field of education and language use offers some insights from which general principles can be drawn. Indeed, the church, is an educational institution of sorts as it seeks to teach biblical truths and guide members in their daily life. Research on minority languages in education shows that student typically struggle with "feelings of confusion and low self-esteem" because there is no acknowledgement that the minority language is a real language.¹¹ The early years of education shape students' expectation of learning and potential outcomes, because as they

enter the education system [they] find that their knowledge, experience and language—rather than serving as a foundation for learning—are treated as a disadvantage. Their language skills do not serve them because their language has no place in the classroom. Instead, textbooks and teaching are in a language they neither speak nor understand. Their learning and problem-solving experiences and their knowledge of 'how things work' in their own culture and social setting do not serve them because the culture of the classroom, the teachers, and the textbooks is that of the dominant society.¹²

The dominance of *bahasa Indonesia* in the educational domain, and failure to acknowledge its complementary role with minority languages, results in a "common attitude among school students that it is something impractical which has to be learnt by heart just to get a certificate."¹³ Such attitudes may impact faith issues too as those who struggle with the national language may feel

⁹ J.N. Sneddon, "Diglossia in Indonesian", *Bijdragen tot de Taal-, Land- en Volkenkunde* 159 (2003)(4): 521-5.

¹⁰ B.D. Grimes, "How *Bad* Indonesian becomes *Good* Kupang Malay: Articulating Regional Autonomy in West Timor", paper presented at Fourth International Symposium of the Journal *Antropologi Indonesia* (Depok: Universitas Indonesia, 12-15 July 2005): 8-9.

¹¹ B.D. Grimes, "How *Bad* Indonesian becomes *Good* Kupang Malay": 8-9.

¹² S. Malone, "Mother tongue-based multilingual education: implications for education policy" (paper presented at the Seminar on Education Policy and the Right to Education: Towards more Equitable Outcomes for South Asia's Children. Kathmandu, 17-20 September 2007), 1.

<http://resources.wycliffe.net/pdf/MT-Based%20MLE%20programs.pdf>.

¹³ Sneddon, 526.

inadequate, and church language and worship practices may be memorised acts with little understanding behind them.¹⁴

Not surprisingly, such attitudes towards the national language often lead to complications in adult literacy. The difficulties inherent in learning to read in another language before learning to read in a heart language lead to many readers being both hesitating and reluctant.¹⁵ Resultantly, motivation to read independently is low.¹⁶ Furthermore, conditioned by their early educational experiences, when people do try to read, there is no inherent expectation that the reader should understand what is read.¹⁷ This failure to gain functional competency in the national language commonly leads to “a significant degree of resentment and rejection” amongst less well-educated people.¹⁸ These complications suggest that motivation to read the Bible independently may be low, especially if the Bible used in the church is in the national language only. Indeed, Dye found a correlation between lack of ability to read the Bible and reversion to animistic practices.¹⁹

The prestige of national languages, like *bahasa Indonesia*, means that they dominate the formal domains of national life, and thus relegate minority languages (including local languages and languages of wider communication) to informal domains and domestic life.²⁰ Despite the privileging of national languages and the devaluation of minority languages, the ‘low’ forms of languages in these multilingual contexts play a vital role in daily life and are typically prized by their speakers as identity markers. Thus the ‘low’ forms of language may be important for critical contextualisation of the Gospel.

The languages of these informal domains are typically those in which people feel freest to express themselves, prefer for familiar socialising, default to in order to mentally assimilate new information

¹⁴ Grimes has perceived this issue of learning foreign language for memorised, foreign rituals elsewhere in Indonesia. B.D. Grimes, “Cloves and Nutmeg, Traders and Wars: Language Contact in the Spice Isles”, in *Language Contact and Change in the Austronesian World*, edited by T. Dutton and D.T. Tyrone (Berlin: Grouton de Gruyter, 1994): 267-269.

¹⁵ On the importance of learning to read in heart language first, see Malone, 4.

¹⁶ Sneddon, 525.

¹⁷ See Grimes and Jacob for the effects on learners of neglect of minority language in education. J. Jacob and B.D. Grimes, “Developing a role for Kupang Malay: the contemporary politics of an eastern Indonesian creole” (paper presented at Tenth International Conference on Austronesian Linguistics, 17-20 January 2006. Puerto Princesa City, Palawan, Philippines). <http://www.sil.org/asia/philippines/ical/papers.html>.

¹⁸ Sneddon, 525.

¹⁹ T. Wayne Dye, *Bible Translation Strategy: An Analysis of Its Spiritual Impact*, revised edition (Dallas: Wycliffe Bible Translators, 1985), 204-205.

²⁰ For an overview of the history of the Indonesian language and its relationship with the 700+ other languages in the Indonesian archipelago, see C.E. Grimes, “Indonesian—the official language of a multilingual nation”, in *Atlas of languages of intercultural communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas*, edited by S.A. Wurm, Peter Mühlhäusler and Darrell Tryon (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 3: 719–727.

and conceptualize abstract ideas, and find easiest to understand.²¹ Such a language may be termed 'heart language'. Heart language forms an understanding of the surrounding world and helps to express emotions, ideas, theology, stories—everything that makes up the fabric of life. The implications of heart language for churches in multilingual contexts are thus critical as the heart language may best support worship and Bible study.

However, disenfranchised heart language speakers tend to compare their own language negatively to the national language, despite the heart language's vital role and intrinsic value in human communication. This leads many in multilingual contexts to a desire for children to gain greater competency in the national language, even to the detriment of the heart language. Thus church may be seen as another opportunity to gain fluency in the national language.

This factor combined with the forces of globalization mean that many minority languages of the world are on the brink of extinction. Though the statistics are complex, and the world language situation far from understood, a conservative estimate would hold that 50% of the world's almost 7000 languages will die in the coming century. This means one language will die every two weeks for the coming one hundred years.²²

As heart language is such a crucial part of cultural identity, potential language loss represents potential cultural loss too. In multilingual settings, cultural identity can become confused, and such language loss may exacerbate social problems.²³ However, if minority languages are perceived to be valuable and are used across the domains of life, the chance of their survival is increased. The church has the unique opportunity to provide a stabilising influence within a culture via the utilisation of heart language in worship.

National Language Use in Church in Multilingual Contexts

Language use in church tends to match the patterns set by society. So it is common in multilingual contexts to observe people chatting and joking in one or more languages outside of a church, and then shifting to the national language upon entering the church. This shift in language is matched also by the adoption of more formal body language and demeanour. Thus church life in many multilingual contexts is typically dominated by the national language, and church is considered a 'formal' activity which demands 'formal' language.

²¹ See Glossary entry. [http://www.wycliffe.org/resources/glossary.aspx?Letter=\[A-V\]](http://www.wycliffe.org/resources/glossary.aspx?Letter=[A-V]).

²² D. Crystal, *Language Death* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 18-19. For a list of the world's languages which are endangered, see *The Ethnologue: the Languages of the World*. <http://www.ethnologue.com/web.asp>.

²³ Crystal, *Language Death*, 37-38.

Even in multilingual settings, there seems to be a preference for monolingual worship.²⁴ In a multilingual setting it is difficult to accommodate every language and culture. So many advocate use of whichever language is assumed to be understood by the greatest number. Most will assume that this will be the national language, due to its prestige and influence. Additionally, as multilingual contexts also tend towards multiculturalism, there may be the idea that language can act as a unifying force, and so the national language is seen as necessary to promote a sense of solidarity and patriotism.²⁵ In the case of Indonesia, a focus on economic development has seen the national language promoted over minority languages, as *bahasa Indonesia* is understood to be the most appropriate language for economic and social progress. National language and educational policies are likely determinative factors in language use in churches, particularly in large denominations.²⁶

Furthermore, the national language may be perceived to be the only appropriate vehicle for worship as it is valued as most prestigious and educated, and by virtue of its formal-feeling structures and vocabulary, deemed worthy of use in interactions with God and thus worship.²⁷ Accordingly, some argue that everyone should be better educated in the national language if they want to understand the Scriptures and church language.²⁸ Others believe that church use of the national language is the will of God and consequently may be reluctant to defy church history.²⁹

The prioritization of the national language can have a negative effect on the production of scriptures in minority languages. Consequently, when there are few Bible translations available in minority languages, the national-language scriptures must be used. In the case of Indonesia, the preferred translation is one that preserves complex grammatical forms and archaic vocabulary.³⁰ This preference persists despite there being more contemporary translations that feature contextualized

²⁴ C.E. Farhadian, "Introduction: Beyond Lambs and Logos: Christianity, cultures, and worldwide worship" in *Christian Worship Worldwide: Expanding Horizons, Deepening Practices*, edited by C.E. Farhadian (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2007), 5, 21-24.

²⁵ Some English speakers argue for English's global role. See Farhadian who argues that social and cultural homogenization is flawed, and has no appropriate role in the future of the church. Farhadian, 6, 10.

²⁶ Indeed in the case of Indonesia, language policy is a key government initiative reflected in the national constitution, *Bahasa negara ialah bahasa Indonesia* ('The national language is Indonesian'). J.N. Sneddon, *The Indonesian Language: Its history and role in modern society* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2003), 113, 208.

²⁷ Grimes summarizes the tension over appropriateness of language for worship. C.E. Grimes, "Languages used in the domain of religion in Indonesia" in *Atlas of languages of intercultural communication in the Pacific, Asia, and the Americas*, edited by S.A. Wurm, Peter Mühlhäusler and Darrell Tryon (Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1996), 13: 633–635.

²⁸ See, for example, Anya Woods, *Medium or Message? Language and Faith in Ethnic Churches* (Church Point, NSW: Footprint Books, 2004), 108.

²⁹ This has been a response in several personal conversations with Indonesian Christians and pastors.

³⁰ The most widely used translation in Indonesia is the *Alkitab Terjemahan Baru* of 1974. See its relationship with the 700+ other languages in the Indonesian archipelago, see C.E. Grimes, "Indonesian—the official language of a multilingual nation", footnote 3, 720.

and readily understandable language. Hymnals and other church literature also tend to follow the formal tone and language of the translated scriptures.

Privileging a formal language represents significant barriers to comprehension for average church goers. Even well educated people struggle with the demands of esoteric terms and formal grammatical structures adopted in the scriptures and hymnals, and many participants are unable to understand much of the content of worship services.³¹ Thus many local believers in our South-East Asian context have commented that they struggle to understand the Scriptures in the national language, and that they have no expectation that God's Word can be readily understood. Nevertheless, locals will faithfully sit in church and listen to scriptures they only minimally understand, hear sermons they struggle to identify with, and sing songs whose meanings are often difficult to grasp.

Many potential issues arise when God's Word is not clearly understood. In our context, one of these has been the attitude towards females. From the pulpit, a national pastor explained that according to Ephesian 5:23 the man is the 'head', and the woman therefore is the 'tail', thus tragically reinforcing existing cultural beliefs that devalue girls and women (in this case through the unfortunate parallel of pig or dog physiology), whilst using the biblical text to justify male dominance and superiority.³² In conducting a multilingual Bible study of Genesis, it was discovered that those present had never before heard that God called women 'good' (Gen 1:31). In time, discovering such misunderstandings was no longer surprising, but rather was seen as the natural outcome of reading scripture in a language other than heart language.

Nevertheless, the idea of using the heart language in the religious domain is often resisted. Many believe that their heart language lacks beauty or appropriate expression for worship. They simply believe that God would not want to hear it. Thus language use patterns and attitudes tend to be deeply entrenched within the church.

Theological Implications of Church Language Use

³¹ This has been observed and confirmed through personal conversations with many Indonesian Christians in a number of different locations across the Indonesian archipelago.

³² For more on the problem of gender inequality worldwide, see T. Schneider, "Born a girl: a worldwide challenge" in *Shaping the Future: Girls and our destiny*, edited by P. Kilbourn (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008), 5-6; and D. Segura-April, "My Story, Their Stories: Girls in Western Contexts" in *Shaping the Future: Girls and our destiny* (Pasadena: William Carey Library, 2008), 97-106. This ironically mirrors the ways that language issues particularly disadvantage girls and women. See UNESCO, *Advocacy kit for promoting multilingual education: Including the excluded* (Bangkok: UNESCO Bangkok, 2007), 8. http://www.ungei.org/resources/files/Advocacy_kit.pdf.

Church history attests to the truth that in multilingual settings, language itself is theologically significant.³³ As the national language is used in formal situations and with those who are relationally distant, so the national language used in the church setting reinforces the idea that God can be encountered only in the formal church setting and that He requires such formality.³⁴ Church conducted in the national language only, and assigned to a formal domain, means that matters of faith do not penetrate to domestic and informal domains of life.

Furthermore, if church literature is only in the national language, a sense of cultural and linguistic hierarchy is perpetuated. If only the formal, national language is considered appropriate to show God adequate respect, then it follows that only those formally ordained, who have adequate religious language, can communicate with God. Thus, people simply will not pray because they do not have enough respectful language with which talk to God. Those who are sufficiently educated in the national language are then considered more 'worthy' of talking to God than are those with less education and formal language.³⁵

This has tremendous implications for the national Church and for future language development and Bible translation work. The implications are that nationals' expectations of being able to understand much about God are extremely low. Even the idea that God desires His Word to be understood may be met with uncertainty. Consequently, what may be generally considered basic Christian beliefs and behaviours will be novel or even meet with resistance. For example, in our context we discovered that many of our friends simply did not understand that discipleship extends to daily life. Nor was there understanding that God wants His people to turn to Him and call on Him for help (for example, Acts 17:27).

In our Asian context, cultural beliefs about politeness and honour exacerbated this situation with a view that God, being an important being, should not be bothered by the prayers of 'little' people. Indeed a sermon given in the national language on the text of Luke 11:5-13 taught that people shouldn't bother God by 'pestering' Him with prayers, a teaching that is the direct opposite of the

³³ The theological creativity of the early church in North Africa can be linked to its cultural appropriation of vernacular Latin. The dramatic growth of the Chinese church in the late seventeenth century was fostered by the Jesuit desire to contextualize the faith and use Chinese for liturgy. Tragically, these inroads were undone by an alienation caused by the 1704 edict that Latin was the only language appropriate for the Christian faith. A.F. Walls, *The Cross-Cultural Process in Christian History* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2002), 87; Jenkins, 31-33.

³⁴ In a post-colonial context such as Indonesia, the understanding of formality not only reflects Indonesian sociolinguistic attitudes but also cultural traits absorbed from the formality of introduced forms of European worship. For the impact of such formality and struggle towards a contextualized worship form in reformed churches in Indonesia, see E. Pudjo Widiasih, "A survey of reformed worship in Indonesia" in *Christian Worship in Reformed Churches past and present*, edited by L. Vischer (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 186-192.

³⁵ On the importance of the specialisation of religious language and the restrictions imposed upon ritual, see C.E. Grimes, "Languages Used in the Domain of Religion in Indonesia": 634.

passage's intent that the Father willingly responds to those who seek Him. Such poor teaching is another example of the barrier that national language can be to communities. Pastors struggle to understand the biblical text in a language which is not their own, and then have to relate that to a congregation made up of even less educated people. The fact that the church grows and that people's lives are transformed in such contexts can only be attributed to the marvellous grace of God.

The linguistic complexity of multilingual contexts thus represents considerable challenges for the local church. It is difficult for the gospel to penetrate into the depths of people's lives as long as it is mediated through another language and culture. The recitation of songs and scriptures in the formal language takes precedence over understanding. Reading and recitation may become ritualised acts to gain favour with God. In contexts where ritualised acts are in use to gain favour with the spirit world, the loss of understanding in worship increases the likelihood of developing a syncretism that turns the devotional act of reading into a mechanistic and magical one designed to manipulate or gain control, rather than an act of relationship building and worship.³⁶

Theological ideas being expressed only in the national language communicates that God remains foreign and distant. In a sense, this is 'anti-Incarnational', the exact opposite of how God has worked on our behalf. Indeed Walls argues that the Christian faith has an "essentially vernacular nature ... which rests on a massive act of translation, the Word made flesh, God translated into a specific segment of social reality as Christ is received there."³⁷ When the gospel fails to be incarnated into vernacular languages and cultures, its essential truth is compromised and the incarnation of Christ is denied. Thus in these contexts, the national language becomes a barrier to the idea that God desires an intimate and personal relationship with people. In contrast, the 'heart language' of a people reinforces the idea that God is immanent, wants to communicate with them, and that He wants to be part of their daily lives (Matt 5:45; 6:25-30; 10:29-30; Acts 17:27-28).

Encouraging Church Inclusion of Heart-Language Worship

In multilingual contexts, the question must be raised as to whether monolingual worship is truly appropriate for church settings.³⁸ This preference for monolingual worship is in part due to the examples of those coming from monolingual or diglossic contexts themselves, who may not see the need for multilingual worship nor question the practicalities of using the national language for worship. It is noteworthy that even the Bible is not a monolingual text (indeed both Testaments include more

³⁶ P. Hiebert, R. Daniel Shaw and T. Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian response to popular beliefs and practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker Books, 1999), 378.

³⁷ Walls, 29.

³⁸ See Farhadian, 5ff, 21-24.

than one language). Thus the Bible reveals the practical implications and outworking of faith in particular times and places in particular languages and cultures.

Therefore it is vital that Christians promote the use of the heart language in multilingual contexts. As Sanneh rightly argues, the gospel “appears to stimulate the vernacular”³⁹ and resists normative idealization and the subsequent divinization of a particular cultural and linguistic stream.⁴⁰ The Incarnation attests to the fact that God translates Himself so that all may know Him. God desires understanding of His Word, and He desires to relate to all in a personal way. Thus it is important for the communication of the Gospel that the heart language be used for worship and Bible translation.

Elevating the Status of the Heart Language

In multilingual contexts, language use and attitudes challenge the notion that the heart language is appropriate for worship. Thus, care and effort must be taken to address the perceived lower status of the heart language.

Such attitudes and reluctance can be addressed through engaging in multilingual Bible studies on the topics of language and diversity. Bible studies and Bible story-telling can be effectively used to emphasize that God is a God who loves, creates and preserves diversity.

For example, the story of Babel (Gen 11:1-9), demonstrates that the source of all languages is God Himself. Studying this passage shows that language is God’s gracious gift to us, and it equalizes all languages as originating from God. In the movement from Babel to Pentecost (Acts 2), it must be stressed that God did not reverse Babel. Rather, God spoke different languages through the apostles so that all could understand His Word. He could have given everyone the understanding of the one language being spoken. But instead, God spoke in multiple languages, showing that God wants people to understand, and He values all languages. This is further reinforced by the throne room scene in Revelation 7:9-10, in which people from every tribe and language worship the Lamb. This suggests that God so loves the diversity of languages that they will be preserved in heaven for eternity. This passage also emphasises that it is God’s eternal plan that people from all different languages and tribes worship Him. The idea that God desires the worship of all nations and peoples is reinforced in many of the Psalms (Ps 48:10; 65:8; 67:3-5; 86:9; 97:1; 117:1). And the importance of understanding and the practical need to shift languages so that others can understand is demonstrated in Ezra’s reading of the covenant while the Levites translate for the returned exiles who had ‘lost’ their language (Nehemiah 8).

³⁹ L. Sanneh, *Translating the Message: the Missionary Impact on Culture* (Maryknoll: Orbis Books, 2008), 52.

⁴⁰ Sanneh, 51-53.

The issue becomes one of communicating God's desire, as Creator of peoples and languages, for worship in all languages from all the peoples and cultures of the world. Studying the above passages with minority language speakers, and discussing them in the heart language can help to improve attitudes towards the heart language. Only then can the local community begin the journey towards worship of God in their own language.

For speakers of minority languages, this is an exciting realization as it reverses the privilege of a large and dominant national language. All of a sudden a language with 300 speakers is as valuable in God's eyes as a language with millions of speakers. These texts speak value into the lives of the speakers of small and marginalized languages, assisting a broader realization about the true value of the individual. Once awakened these realizations are powerful affirmations of self and linguistic-cultural identity. This helps to elevate the status of the heart language and shows that God desires relationship with all cultures, not just particular ones (Acts 10:34-35).

Introducing Heart Language Use in Worship

Once believing members of a community have realized that their heart language is valuable and that God desires worship in it, they may be motivated to seek ways to step into worship in their heart language. We have found that one productive point of departure is to encourage people to try praying in their heart language.

Since prayer has both corporate and private functions, addressing the issue of private prayer is a good starting point. Private prayer, unlike corporate prayer, belongs to the domain of daily life, and so is more likely to be considered an 'informal' activity. Furthermore we have observed that in communities that do not yet worship in their heart language, believers are far less likely to have active prayer lives outside of church. We have been told by several Indonesian Christians, representative of several different languages, that they are afraid of 'offending God' because of their lack of competence in formal and high language. If there has been no previously prescribed manner for private prayer outside of church, believers may be more likely to be open to trying private prayer in their heart language. Private prayer in the heart language builds a sense of closeness to God, and an understanding that God wants to bear our burdens (Isa 55; Matt 11:28-30).

Additionally, Christians can facilitate worship in the heart language by encouraging local musicians to sing a new song to the Lord in their heart language. Often music is also considered an 'informal' activity for which local language can be used. By helping locals to understand that God desires their worship and desires songs to be sung to Him, the heart language becomes a vehicle for proclaiming God's greatness. And when a concrete example is provided, others are likely to recognize the

possibilities and benefits of using their own language for worship. For it is through cultural, linguistic and personal particularity that a relationship with the Creator can be achieved—to worship is not just to observe or affirm, it is to be indwelt.⁴¹

In our context, we used a simple question to try to spark interest. We asked, “Why are there no worship songs in your language?” This question functioned as a prompt, and in time believers came to recognize that God wanted them to sing to Him in their language. Indeed one individual began to write worship songs inspired by her reading of the Psalms. This led to the facilitation of worship workshops to encourage local song writing. These workshops included focused, multilingual Bible study and discussion about the issues of worship and heart language. Given the group’s experience of praying in their own language, they quickly embraced the idea that God would give them songs to worship Him in their heart language.

First Fruits of Heart-Language Worship

By encouraging national believers to worship God in their heart language for the first time, we have witnessed some great theological truths take seed. God has imparted truths to our friends about His interest in their lives, His love for them and their language, and His desire to see them use their own language to worship Him throughout eternity.

In our context when nationals have begun to use their heart language to pray and worship God, the most common response has been that God feels close when they use their heart language. In contrast to the distance reinforced by the use of the national language, the use of the heart language communicates the nearness and personal nature of God. As believers begin to pray in their own language they become excited by the reality of intimate communication with God. Our friends made comments like, “I didn’t know God was so close” and “Now I can share everything in my heart with God.” They could see that God not only heard their heart-language prayers, but He also answered them. Such answers to prayers become a practical reinforcement of the appropriateness of their heart language for prayer.

The worship song writing has proven powerful. The indigenous community is musically gifted and any gathering includes singing, so as a little group began to write worship songs, word of the new songs spread and before long, friends of friends brought their contributions. These songs remain an encouragement to many and a reminder that God desires worship in every language. The immanence of God is being experienced through singing worship songs in the heart language. And God’s purpose

⁴¹ Farhadian, 16–19.

for believers is also being imparted. One friend commented that, "Now I can see that God doesn't just want my respect, He wants all of me."

The themes of the first worship songs have communicated such profound theological truths that were previously missed. For example:

You are the God who sees my heart
You are the God who sees my desires
You are the God who sees my life
You are the God who knows my problems.

The idea that God values them and wants to be intimately involved in their lives is reinforced by such lyrics. Another song declares:

He alone is our God, He alone is our hope
He alone deserves our praise, let us worship and bow down
Come now and bring Him praise
Come now and worship Him
With one voice we declare,
"There is no one like You, Lord"

He is our God, He gives purpose to our lives
He is our God, He frees us from our sin
He is our God, He heals the broken hearted
He is our God who showers us with love

The ideas that God has redeemed people for His purposes, that He loves them, that He brings hope and healing, and that He wants their praise are expressed beautifully here.

Such profound theological realities change the shape of the believer's attitude to faith and worship, and they cause the believer to approach the scriptures in a new way. Despite the challenge of reading in the national language, the realization that God wants to communicate with them spurs believers to spend more time wrestling with the text. Some nationals have begun to paraphrase or re-tell Bible stories into the heart language during group Bible studies, and this has caused great excitement as people begin to see that it is possible for the Bible to be readily understood. This is an important step in preparing for future Bible translation work.

Those involved in multilingual contexts can help encourage minority language speakers to use their heart language for prayer and worship. In Bible studies in which multiple languages may be represented, it can be a great encouragement to local believers to encourage paraphrasing, discussion, and question and answer time in their heart languages. Such activities are likely not only to highlight the need for Bible translation into the various heart languages present, but also can help prepare the multilingual communities for acceptance of heart-language translations and church language use in the future. In multilingual contexts, multilingual worship may be preferable to monolingual worship.

Conclusion

Linguistic issues can be socially complex and may present barriers to the church. However, a grassroots approach can yield fruit as the heart language is recognised as appropriate for worship, private prayer, and Bible study and story-telling. This allows the heart language to cross into the 'religion' domain of language use. This promotes a thirst for hearing and understanding God through the scriptures, and is an important step towards Bible translation. Furthermore, once believers understand God's purposes in their own lives, they will seek to engage in God's mission. Thus heart-language worship paves the way for future partnership in God's work.

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