

Preliminary Questions to Consider When Looking at an Oral Translation Approach

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Abstract

Over the past forty years there has been an increasing interest in oral approaches for sharing the gospel. This interest has paralleled the increasing capacity that technology has given to produce and distribute the gospel message. It has also paralleled a growing awareness that written media wasn't always as effective as hoped; at times, what was being communicated was that to be Christian, a person or community had to be literate. This paper takes an initial look at the place of oral approaches to Bible translation. It gives readers questions to ask, along with some information to consider, as they look to determine what, if any, role oral approaches might have in their context. This paper is not trying to assert the superiority of an oral process over a written process, or vice versa. Written translation done well produces good translations. Oral translation done poorly produces poor translations. Likewise, each can capture and express "oral" and "written" features of a language. The goal of this paper is to give the team organizing a translation project a starting point from which to decide which environment(s) will best facilitate the translation process.

1. What product is desired by the community?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: These will be the kinds of things addressed in program planning and/or the translation brief. Tied into this first question will be questions along the lines of:

- a. What kind of product is primarily desired by the community (e.g. printed Bible (portions), audio-Bible (portions), both print and audio, other)?
- b. What is/are the main function(s)/*skopos* (*skopoi*) of the translation product?
- c. Who is the main audience?
- d. What are the primary contexts in which the translation product will be used?
- e. To what extent is there current capacity to use the product?

The key is to not look at orality and literacy as an either/or dichotomy, but to look at them as a continuum of ways of engaging Scripture. Two good questions to ask are: How can orality serve/complement a literate engagement of Scripture? How can literacy serve/complement an oral engagement of Scripture? For example, is the written text to serve as a prompt for the oral presentation of Scripture (as was often the case before the printing press), or is it primarily for

¹ I appreciate the input on earlier drafts from Steve Quakenbush, Dick Kroneman, Paul O'Rear, and others.

the individual to sit and read privately? With the first option, footnotes are less relevant, thus affecting how the text is translated. Therefore, even a written text might be geared more for a primarily oral community.²

2. Is there something in your context that requires an oral approach? If so, what?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: An example of this could be that there is no orthography and an oral approach allows a translation project to move forward while an orthography is in development. However, just because a community is primarily oral does not necessitate a completely oral translation approach.

3. Are you looking at oral drafting, oral storying, or oral translation?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: Oral drafting, oral storying, and oral translation are three distinct processes, each with its own methodological and missiological considerations.

For the purpose of this paper each is defined as following:

Oral drafting is the process of developing an initial draft of a section of Scripture in the receptor language (RL) via a completely oral process. As best as possible, the source is internalized³ by the MTT(s). Then, as best as possible, the section of Scripture is expressed as an entire unit in the RL. This draft is the starting point for oral storying and oral translation; it can be transcribed and used in written translation as well.

Oral storying is the process of developing portions of Scripture in the RL as oral stories. The finished stories are a Scripture-based product—an abridged form of Scripture.⁴

Oral translation refers to translation of Scripture into the RL, where the translation process is carried out orally as much as possible and the oral text, recorded in audio-form, is usually seen as the primary output. The focus so far has been on making the drafting, community testing, consultant checking, and revision processes oral. It is the interface between the mother-tongue speakers and the “text,” as well as with those facilitating the work (e.g. exegetical facilitator and translation consultant), that has primarily been in view. At this time some written documentation is still seen as necessary.

² For the purposes of this paper, communities that are ‘primarily oral’ are those where the majority of the population accesses new information by oral means, either out of preference or necessity. Often the technologies of literacy are only minimally present. In the literature this is often fleshed out in terms of primary orality, secondary orality, and traditional orality (e.g. [Lausanne](#), [Brown](#), [Green](#), [Lovejoy](#)). For more information on Orality, please also see the SIL Storying & Orality Unit FAQ on [Orality](#).

³ This paper distinguishes between internalization and memorization (especially as memorization does not always mean they’ve understood what they’ve heard). For the purposes of this paper, internalization is (preferably, when context allows) a group process that involves the use of multiple audio versions of the source-text, visual resources (e.g. Jesus Film), and concrete-relational activities (e.g. dramatization, storyboarding, use of objects to tell a story, etc.), as well as group discussion. In oral drafting, the goal is to collectively exegete and understand a section of Scripture. Ideally, participants will be able to picture it in their mind’s eye, have a sense of the relevance of the section of Scripture in their own lives and that of the community’s, and express it accurately and naturally in their own words.

⁴ For more information on Storying, please see the SIL Storying & Orality Unit FAQ on [Storying](#).

An oral process is not mutually exclusive of a written process, and vice versa. They can be highly complementary. A team can incorporate oral components into a translation project without it being an exclusively oral translation project. Projects seeking to include a more oral approach can do that via oral drafting, oral community testing, oral checking, oral revision, oral storying or one of the other arts (e.g. song, poetry, drama), and other audio-visual material.

For example, oral drafting is not done only in situations where the community or MTTs are primarily oral—that is, where there are no readers or potential readers. Any group can do oral drafting. Oral drafting is done because it can produce a high-quality draft of an entire pericope that is both accurate and natural (e.g. discourse features). Literate people do oral drafting. They do it because it is enjoyable and profitable. Based on observations made from its broad use over the past ten years, both oral and literate people appreciate working orally. Oral drafting is done because of the possible advantages gained by:

1. Exegeting the pericope as a group (e.g. a discovery Bible study format; however, just as with written translation there is no one single prescribed practice) and internalizing the pericope in this fashion. A group study format, when done well, engages multiple learning modalities (through concrete-relational activities such as dramatizing the passage) and thus can develop a comprehensive understanding of the pericope.
2. The process of internalizing a pericope fosters a discourse level approach to the text. It is postulated that it is easier to make a natural text more accurate than an accurate text more natural. A discourse level approach provides a good environment for producing a natural translation of a pericope.
3. It can help the translators approach the translation process as an act of communication. When delivered orally to a group of listeners, the person speaking will naturally seek to maximize the understanding of those listening.
4. It can tap into the multifaceted talents of a group of people, bringing more natural gifts to bear. It helps address the desire/need of finding one or two people who have all the skills needed to do good translation. It also can tap into the more formal talents of storytellers, poets, songwriters, etc., as they bring those talents to the appropriate Biblical texts.

Oral drafting is appropriate when there is a group chemistry/synergy felt by those who participate in an oral drafting process.

It is necessary that one or more persons on the translation team have the capacity to engage with translation helps, commentaries, the original texts, etc. These persons must spend the appropriate amount of time discerning the meaning of the text for themselves before starting the drafting process. They will then need to be able to lead others in discerning the meaning of the text.

4. Have you tried oral drafting and/or oral storying first to see how well they work in your context?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: Oral translation seeks to produce Scripture. Thus, it sets the highest bar. Oral drafting and/or oral storying only seek to produce a draft/Scripture-based product and are thus more accessible processes than a completely oral translation process. They are a good testing ground for seeing whether an oral approach will work well.

An oral Bible translation (OBT) project is essentially an oral storying project on steroids. A storying project could be done as a pre-OBT project so it integrates well into the OBT project and, especially, gets the same focus and commitment from the local translation entity and impact partner(s), along with an appropriate budget (to fund full-time MTTs). An oral storying project can be a good precursor/experiment because:

1. A storying project will make many of the same demands that an OBT project will make, but in a more accessible, smaller bite-size piece.
2. A storying project is geared to train up new team facilitators (aka exegetical facilitators). The facilitators developed via a storying project will be natural candidates for facilitating an OBT project. Similarly, local translation consultants can get cross-trained via storying and come well equipped for the OBT project.
3. A storying project fits well within a time frame of 2-3 years (i.e. SC/Common Framework ready).
4. A storying project that produces a panorama of the Old and New Testament provides the ideal framework/foundation for future translation work. A good understanding of the big picture of the Bible is important for good translation work. Plus, a storying project will flesh out felt needs in the community and what would be the appropriate book to start with in the translation project.
5. Teams will have a chance to really get their heads around the complexity of key terms and other translation issues, before they tackle whole books/multiple books.
6. The oral drafting and testing skills learned in a storying project can be fully utilized in any future translation work, whether oral or a more traditional written translation.

5. What problems does an oral approach solve and what problems does it create?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: Oral storying began because of the missiological assessment⁵ that a significant majority of remaining unreached and Bibleless communities were primarily oral. Oral translation continues in that same vein. The growth in available audio resources has occurred because of the recognition that the traditional media, print, was not as accessible as originally hoped.

From the point of view of the translation process, in addition to the benefits derived from oral drafting, an oral translation process can help:

1. the translation team to maximize the potential of community involvement. It can tap into the natural talents of storytellers, poets, songwriters, etc., as they bring those talents to the appropriate Biblical texts. It can allow for the more direct involvement of influential members of the community who, because they were illiterate, were potentially sidelined from the translation work.
2. a translation project to move forward even when orthography development hasn't been done and/or isn't viable (for example, for political, cultural, or human resource reasons).

⁵ See [Lausanne Occasional Paper No. 54 Making Disciples of Oral Learners](#).

3. the translation work to proceed where education levels are low and oral sources and oral interaction are helpful.

Oral Bible Translation is ideal where (*or* OBT might not be the best fit unless):

1. the people naturally work in groups and oral internalization and discussion would fit well.
2. recruiting translators/helpers is difficult and an oral process would allow for a wider pool of possible recruits.
3. a group/collective process would promote community ownership.
4. a group/collective process would help remove cultural barriers of individuals feeling shamed if they draft/check and someone else feels it should be improved.

An oral translation approach will create new difficulties. While it can improve accessibility, it has the potential of reducing the translation's acceptability. If "the Bible" is viewed as a book, how will an oral document be received?

An oral translation approach will also introduce complications due to it being an audio product.⁶ With the introduction of an aural component, it becomes "Form-Heavy Communication" in that it heavily depends on manipulating (stylized) form(s) for a significant/heavy part of encoding the meaning.⁷ For example, much of the meaning of the text will be carried by the prosody of the speaker as well as the words themselves. Several new elements will be introduced, such as volume, cadence, intonation, tone, stress, and rhythm; the emotional state of the speaker; the form of the utterance (statement, question, or command); and the presence of irony, sarcasm, emphasis, contrast, and focus; even something as simple as a pause; and, knowing the appropriate ways to use those forms of communication in the culture. Please see the document [Transcription of State Farm Commercials](#) for examples.

Sociolinguistic factors will also be prominent in an oral translation approach. Differences in dialects and accents will have a strong effect on the acceptability of an oral text. In some communities there will be strong cultural rules as to who can and who cannot "tell" religious material.

Another complication is that an oral translation does not allow for footnotes. While options are being explored, as a general rule a translation team cannot expect to provide much implicit/background/cultural information via additional notes outside the text.

⁶ It seems appropriate to reference Aristotle at this point: "Of the modes of persuasion furnished by the spoken word there are three kinds. The first kind depends on the personal character of the speaker; the second on putting the audience into a certain frame of mind; the third on the proof, or apparent proof, provided by the words of the speech itself" (quotation taken from *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*, p. 192).

⁷ I'd like to acknowledge Brad Keating of the Center for Excellence in World Arts (CEWA) for conceptualizing it in this way.

6. Why are you looking at an oral translation approach?

What are the primary factors in considering an oral approach?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: The first five questions have highlighted a number of things to consider. How do those considerations play out in your context? What other factors are a part of the calculus in looking at an oral approach?

7. What workflow management options are you considering?

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: There are two workflow management tools for oral translation projects that this paper will highlight:

- a. [*Render*](#) - Render seeks to facilitate a completely oral translation process. Render is a unified workflow tool; it directs the process from start to finish and manages all the audio files. At this time, it is not designed for doing only portions of the translation process via the software. Please see their website for a full explanation and demonstration of the software.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: Render will require many of the same/similar procedures and make many of the same demands as a written translation process. Core to a team will be an exegetical facilitator who can engage with the source texts, exegetical material, and translation helps, and then lead the team of mother-tongue translators in the oral exegeting and internalization of the section of Scripture. Some additional demands have been mentioned in the sections above on oral drafting, oral storying, and oral translation. Render is both a cloud-based and LAN-based software, so it can operate locally for a period of time without good bandwidth; but at times one of the team's computers must be in an area with good bandwidth for uploading and downloading of files.

At this time, Render has some strengths and limitations in relation to Paratext. For example, a completely oral product does not require correct spelling, punctuation, etc. On the flip side, being an oral product, it does require additional understanding and testing of oral features of a text that don't present themselves in written text. It also introduces issues of voice/telling quality and recording quality for the final product. In addition, Render is not an information management tool. It is strictly a workflow management tool. As such, it does not manage Key Terms, nor do Find/Replace nor other cross-checking features like Paratext. Revising a section of Scripture requires re-recording that section. The use of Render will require an additional information management tool (e.g. Word, Excel, Paratext). Depending on the breadth and complexity of the translation project, it still might require the development of an official orthography so that the language can be consistently represented and the translation work can be cross-checked.

- b. [*SayMore-Paratext-HearThis*](#) - The use of these three programs allows for a team to tailor the manner in which a translation project is "oral" as well as "written." SayMore seeks to facilitate easy versification, transcription, and exportation of an audio recording into Paratext (and other programs such as OneStory Editor (OSE) and FLEEx). HearThis seeks to facilitate the easy creation of an audio recording from a text in Paratext. Paratext remains the primary translation software, with SayMore and HearThis providing supporting roles.

For example, if a team orally drafts a section of Scripture and wants to transcribe and enter that audio recording into Paratext, SayMore can facilitate that process. If, later in the translation process, a team seeks to orally check a section of Scripture, HearThis can facilitate the recording of that text which can then be used on an audio device.

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: The use of SayMore-Paratext-HearThis will have all the same demands as the use of Paratext, in addition to the demands made by doing steps of the translation process orally (e.g. oral drafting, oral community checking, oral consultant checking, oral revision).

**8. How will the mother-tongue translators (MTTs) be trained?
Will the project engage MTTs part-time or full-time?
How comprehensive a role will the MTTs have in the project?**

SOME CONSIDERATIONS: These questions are interdependent and so they are being looked at together.

In an oral translation project, it is not required that the translators be literate. However, the translators still need to be trained. In an oral context (more specifically, where they are oral learners), all training needs to be done through mentoring and working through exegetical and translational issues in real-life, real-time situations. They cannot be asked to read training materials or work through translation principles in a more traditional academic setting. This requires a well-qualified trainer/mentor (e.g. [Translation Advisor](#)), onsite and actively engaged with the translation team(s) at all times.

If the translation project will be using the Peer Review step (i.e. two independent translation teams reviewing each other's work in the drafting stage), that will mean there are at least four translators (minimum of two translators per team, but preferably 3-4 people per team). Two translation teams will often require the presence of two Translation Advisors.

If the translators will be engaged part-time, this will require more coordination and training on the part of the Translation Advisor(s).

The last question above can be asked another way – Who will be responsible for seeing the forest and the individual trees at the same time? Who will be keeping the big picture in view while working through the details of a particular passage? For example, will the translators be expected to have an understanding of the place of Luke ch. 5 in relation to chapters 1-4? In relation to the other gospels? Will they be expected to speak to the cultural significance of translation choices? If they are part-time, how comprehensive a role will they have?

Conclusion

This paper has taken an initial look at the place of oral approaches in Bible translation. Hopefully it has been a helpful starting point for those looking to determine what, if any, role oral approaches might have in their context. With time, the questions will change and things to take into consideration will be different, as methodology improves and technology provides new options. What is exciting is that there are numerous and varied ways to make a contribution to

Bible translation through an oral approach. There is much work to be done, and the whole body of Christ can be involved.

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