

Mind the Gap

The Ongoing Need for Language Learning in Missions Training



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'Same same – but Different'

Sitting in my house on Christmas Day, I heard a strange, digital rendition of a Christian hymn coming from outside. I realised after a few seconds that this seasonal music was coming from my neighbour's mobile phone. Perhaps this might be a little strange in post-modern, post-Christian Europe, but it is even stranger in Chiang Mai in Thailand, where I live. What is even more curious is that the phone is owned by an Indian businessman who is a devoted Sikh. This is one more example of globalisation, a guiding motif of the early 21st century.

However, things are a little more complicated than this. When my children took a little present next door, the neighbour's children had no idea why, and my kids had to explain that it is Christmas and the gifts are a tradition reminding us of God's gift of Christ. *Oh yes, Christmas. We've heard of it in school.* Still more complex is the fact that although my children are welcome in our neighbour's house, with its plethora of Sikh symbols and paraphernalia, the Indian children have never set foot in our house, despite repeated invitations, food, and birthday parties.

Here we see a snapshot of the challenge that we face in missions. At one level, globalisation is a reality and is affecting the lives of millions, but at another, more profound and arguably more significant level people's beliefs and worldview remain surprisingly unchanged. I have taken to describing these two opposing trends, one surely a reaction to the other, as globalisation and regionalisation. As small regions of the world struggle for independence and autonomy, and regional accents, customs, and allegiances are promoted, what do these two mutually opposing trends say about communicating the gospel across cultures?

Don't they all Speak English these Days?

In a sense the very choice of words used to communicate the focus of this article represent something of my struggle as I equip, train, and challenge new missionaries and an older mission organisation. The phrase *language learning for missions* was used in the original email to me, and this epitomises my problem. In fact *language learning* is one of my favourite soapboxes.

How important is language learning, in an age of globalisation, MTV, and Internet access? Do we still need to spend many painful hours struggling with strange syntax, weird words, and petrifying pronunciation? After all, all foreigners speak English anyway, don't they? And we do have an urgent task of bringing God's message of redemption to the lost. So why waste years on language learning?

A number of thoughts come to mind. Back to our neighbours. The husband runs a seed business and sells his products into various parts of Indochina. The family has two cars and went home to India for 3 weeks in the Summer. These upper class Indians have connections to the globalised world that most of their fellow countrymen do not. Millions

of people in rural India, China, Indonesia, and Thailand remain disconnected. And this is not a question purely of degree of urbanisation. My former Thai teacher, a delightful university graduate with fairly broken English, does not have a computer, rarely surfs the Internet, and hardly ever reads in English. Globalisation is affecting the world, but not the whole world, and not to the same degree all over. Indeed in many parts of the East Asian region (and presumably many others also) only a small part of the population is genuinely plugged into the power of globalisation, and an even smaller part is willing to be swept along by a foreign, western, and arguably American agenda. Many, many people in areas where missions is going ahead remain either oblivious to, uninterested in, or even antagonistic towards the phenomenon of globalisation.

Where I am typing now is about 100 metres from one of hundreds of Buddhist temples in Chiang Mai. Thailand is an open, relatively modern country, where the gospel is preached freely and where westerners come to play, make a living, and even retire. Yet the nation remains deeply Buddhist. Like many people in East Asia, Thais are familiar with western things and use many English words in their language. They like their ice cream, hamburgers, and jeans, but they remain very Thai. 'Same same – but different' is a slogan on T-shirts here. It is striking even how little western popular music is heard here – Thailand is Thai, through and through. Regional and religious loyalties remain strong.

Taxi Drivers Who Can't Drive

In this day and age churches back home want value for money (mission is expensive!) and want to hear numbers of converts and baptisms. Whenever I hear people say that the task of evangelism is so urgent that they have no time for language learning I share my analogy of the taxi driver. If we dream of being a taxi driver, using our perfect knowledge of the city streets to take passengers speedily to their destination, while at the same time making a decent living, there is a certain prerequisite: the ability to drive. To contemplate being a taxi driver but without the ability to drive is to misunderstand fundamentally and fatally the core elements of taxi driving. And today, increasingly, we are doing something similar in missions. There are many people out there who really want to be cabbies, but simply do not have the time or the interest to learn to drive. Language learning is and should remain central to missions training and initial orientation.

Back to my struggle with the notion of *language learning*. My current job title is longer than I am tall: *Advocate and advisor for language, culture, and worldview acquisition*. Quite a mouthful. Yet I (and many others who do similar jobs in missions) am usually called the *language guy* for short. It is in this very term that I see the need for change.

Quite simply, far from being willing to dispense with or shorten language learning times and programmes, I have come to believe and argue that language *per se* is not enough. For years many mission groups have tried to emphasise the importance of language and develop good language learning and teaching programmes, spending money, producing materials, and training locals willing to help. Many of the best language programmes have adopted and adapted methodologies and ideas from EFL/ESL English language teaching experience and practice. But all too often, very little was done in the area of culture and worldview familiarisation and understanding.

A training agenda which seeks proficiency in language alone is flawed. Language is of course central to communication cross-culturally. But it is also the key to unlock culture and worldview, and a means to engage at a deeper level with what makes people tick.

Our Great Omission in the Great Commission

The importance we attach to culture and worldview in addition to language learning is, I believe, related to our understanding of the task of mission and evangelism. The Great Commission does not tell us to make converts, but disciples. Further, we are told to be Jesus' witness in ever-broader circles centred on Jerusalem, and radiating out unto the ends of the earth. These two more famous statements of Jesus' commission are very instructive. He wants us to help bring people to a state of obedience and submission to Him and His principles and agenda, within the context of their own cultures and worldviews, which show incredible diversity and variety across our planet. The Risen Christ commands us to take His unchanging and now validated and celebrated message of redemption into cultures to which it is strange and unfamiliar.

As soon as we attempt to take a message into an alien culture or environment we need the basic communication tools to actually convey the message, but also a deep understanding of the issues faced by the recipients as they grapple to make sense of what we are telling them. If we have language without culture, we have no way of knowing whether what we say is actually what they hear, not in terms of movements of air molecules in their ears, but in terms of concepts and ideas within their hearts and minds. Consider the simple statement: *The vest is in the boot*. Are we saying that a singlet that is worn under a shirt is in the back of a car, or perhaps in an article of footwear that we wear for heavy work or wading in water? British listeners would be clear about the nature of the clothing, but unsure about the location of the item. Or are we talking about a waistcoat being placed inside an article of footwear, but definitely not in the back of a car? This is what our American friends would understand by the statement. And what would occur in similar transatlantic communications, such as *The trunk is the boot*, *The vest is on the hood*, and *The bonnet is on the hood*. In these cases the linguistic forms are similar, but if cultural knowledge and reference are missing or misunderstood, then we face difficulty.

Now expand and extend that to the more serious business of mission. If I talk about *sin* and *eternal life* then you might assume that I am adopting the Bible as the intellectual and conceptual basis of our conversation. But in some cultures, sin as we understand it is irrelevant because an absolute Creator is not acknowledged; sin is when you get caught! Even in our own culture, these days sin has more to do with rich chocolate cake than falling short of the moral perfection of the Creator. And for the Buddhist *eternal life* has almost the opposite flavour to that which we would like to convey from a Christian perspective. According to Buddhist karmic principles eternal life, life which never ceases, sounds like an infinite cycle of birth and rebirth from which there is no escape into the bliss of nirvana. Come and believe in Jesus and be trapped in a closed cycle of karmic condemnation forever!

Such examples of cultural mismatch are not just anecdotal curiosities that are interesting when missionaries are on furlough. They are the stuff of everyday life as we take the message of Christ across cultures. Consider the parable of the two sons in Matt 21:28-31. The father asked them both to work in the vineyard, and received two different responses. The first said he would not go, but later changed his mind and went. The other son said he would go, but did not. The one who did right was of course the first.

But people in Indonesia thought that the second son behaved better because he did not cause disharmony or loss of face to his father. What about the tribe in Papua New Guinea who thought Judas the hero of the gospel story because he was crafty enough to betray his friend and make a quick 30 pieces of silver. Finally, what about Peter's huge catch of fish in Luke 5. When Peter saw the fish in the boat (v.8), *he fell at Jesus' knees and said, "Go away from me, Lord; I am a sinful man!"* When this story was taught in Thailand the people knew exactly why Peter was so ashamed and so conscious of his sin. Of course, it was because he had killed so many fish and violated a fundamental Buddhist principle about not taking life. The sanctity of life is important here: in a market near our house you can buy caged birds and earn merit by setting them free.

Be sure that the interactions summarised above took place in the languages of the target people. We could not have such conversations without speaking Indonesian, a Papua New Guinea language, or Thai. But what is happening under the surface? What is happening under the bonnet (*hood* if you're from North America)? Without understanding of the beliefs, culture, and worldview of the target people we risk huge misunderstanding and even incorrect teaching.

We need to Update our Thinking and Approach

The world has changed a great deal since the traditional missionary enterprise began, and our thinking must also reflect these developments and enable us to cope with them. Transport is much faster and cheaper than ever before. For a relatively small outlay, Christians from developed nations can travel across the world or region and engage in mission activity. In recent years we have seen a huge increase in short-term missions, particularly of the intra-regional kind, where for example, Singaporeans and Malaysians travel to Thailand for one or two week mission trips. Politically, the world has changed such that we can visit far more countries than ever before, and the tourist infrastructure has improved in many places, including so-called creative access nations, where it is still not permitted to preach the gospel openly.

More people than ever before are able to visit mission fields which were traditionally quite inaccessible or were considered suitable only for real pioneers. These days it is not unusual to have short-term teams from western countries going to China, or Singaporeans spending time in Vietnam. But we need to have great wisdom in how we deal with short-term missions. If a group of non-Thai speaking teenagers spend a week in Chiang Mai somehow trying to communicate the gospel to the local people, is this really a mission trip? Has the ability to reach geographical locations been somehow confused with the ability to reach people? By no means should we discourage short-term visits, because these are excellent ways of bringing missions exposure and planting the importance of missions in people's hearts. But we need to ask how effective such short-term trips are in terms of the precise commands of Jesus in the gospels and the beginning of Acts. And in too many cases the short-term missions mentality is being carried over into the thinking of those who would come for longer periods of service.

In this complex day and age we need complex and eclectic approaches to training in language, culture, and worldview for missions. We need to think very carefully about who our target people are. Even those who accept the concept of missions among UPGs (*unreached people groups*) should be identifying which sector of the society they are trying to reach. If we work with university students in some countries, then maybe we

can be of considerable service to God by using English. That is to say, in some places language may not pose the huge problem that it does in others. But even if we find a group of students in China (for example) who can communicate in very reasonable English, we will fool ourselves and them if we think that we can communicate gospel concepts across a huge barrier of culture, religion, politics, and history. The consequence of understanding this issue can be very liberating. If we identify our target people as English-speaking students, then by all means use English to reach them, and perhaps learn a few phrases of the national language, for the purposes of politeness and ice-breaking. However, to engage in a true mission encounter we would still need to do a great deal of reading and learning about their history and worldview, in order to understand where they are coming from. In some cases we may be able to save time and effort on the language requirement, but we cannot cut corners on the steps we take to understand the heart.

Back to the Future

I am passionate about a return to traditional standards of training in language, culture and worldview for missionaries and Christian professionals. At the same time I want us focus our training and equipping for the job we feel called to do, while making use diverse, effective, and modern methods.

In missions these days we find our listeners more educated than ever before, generally speaking. They are more familiar with western culture and thinking than before, and may have partly justifiable prejudices and misconceptions about links between Christianity and the West. In many parts of the world the Christian message is not new and may even have a bad reputation. There is a desperate need for what we say and how we say it to be credible and effective. Also, the days of western dominance of missions are numbered and we rejoice already in the rainbow coalition of partners and colleagues in missions. As we evangelise in unreached or partially reached areas we need to envisage that those we reach now may one day be colleagues and local or even national leaders. Our task is to train these people and help them work out the gospel in their own context, working ourselves out of a job. Such an agenda requires a deeper and more rounded knowledge of culture and worldview than ever before. It is one thing to visit Burma and throw tracts out of a car window, and quite another to work patiently and over the long term to mentor, train, and empower local folks who have come to love Jesus and want to take their part in His Great Commission.

If anyone remains in any doubt as to the importance of language, culture, and worldview for missions, consider the case of One who was the Word made flesh. Who came to a specific people, in a specific culture, at a specific point in history, and worked among them with a deep knowledge of their culture and religion, in their language, and taught them using illustrations that made sense to them. May we all seek to honour God and what He has done for us by working hard in language, culture, and worldview. And may this whole agenda be genuinely part not only of field-based equipping but also seminary-based training.

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