

# Experiment on Naturalness, Clarity, and Accuracy of Scripture

(written by Tabitha Price)

## Introduction

Scripture translation, the process of taking God's Word and transferring it into another language, is a challenging task. At the beginning of the modern era, marked by Luther's resistance to the institutionalized church, Bible translation became a ministry of the church. Luther risked his life to translate the Scripture into German, his mother tongue. Since then a myriad of Christians have joined Luther in the task of getting God's Word into the modern vernacular of the masses.

The modern missionary movement which is usually considered to have started with William Carey in the late eighteenth century, created a model for Bible translation that has been the standard for more than two hundred years. Typically this model relied on western missionaries' moving to an unchurched region of the world, where they would learn the language and culture of the people, preach the gospel within that cultural context, and plant a church. Then they would work to translate the Bible for those people, inviting new converts to help them in the process. To verify the accuracy of their translations, these missionaries relied on translation consultants, usually biblically trained westerners with some experience in Bible translation. These consultants checked the quality and clarity of the Scripture message once the translator had completed his task. This model typically took between 20 and 30 years to produce a complete New Testament. Often an Old Testament was not completed. Additionally this process routinely cost over a million dollars. Progress was slow for obvious reasons. But many dedicated believers gave their lives to this endeavor and scripture slowly made inroads in various countries of the world.

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The invention of technology and subsequent availability of resources has cut both the time and financial investment by half in the last fifty years. The internet and availability of scriptural resources, as well as the increasing ease of travel have hugely accelerated translation efforts. At the beginning of the 21st century the time frame for a New Testament translation was estimated to be ten years at a cost of less than \$250,000. This acceleration was promising. But the number of languages without scripture throughout the world continued to be daunting.

Although reports of the total number of languages in the world vary considerably and have changed significantly in the past few years, we do know that more languages are without scripture, than those with scripture. According to the most current data, 7120 languages exist in the world today. This is a staggering number! Additionally, many studies indicate that it does not include dialects, especially in rural regions of the world where outsiders do not easily understand the significant differences among the dialects. What is clear from this picture, is that a model for accelerating Bible translation is necessary.

In 2014, at the request of a partner translation organization in southeast Asia, Wycliffe Associates developed the MAST methodology for scripture translation. This method was then tested with those same partners in Asia and proved to be successful. The first language community who adopted MAST in the fall of 2014, completed 48% of the New Testament in one 2-week workshop! None of the translators were trained or educated as translators. None were non-native speakers. None were employed for this project. Their unprecedented accomplishment attracted the attention and scrutiny of the translation world. Western consultants from Bible translation organizations were invited

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to check the translation these native translators had produced. Each check affirmed the quality of the overall work. Within two years the community completed the entire New Testament.

Nearly four years after that first event, more than 70 other language communities, have completed New Testaments, using the MAST methodology. Each language is unique. Each workshop is likewise unique. But the MAST method remains the same. It requires that translators be mother-tongue speakers sent by the Christian community to work on the project. The eight-step process must be followed precisely. Teams work in parallel and learn as they proceed. The Scripture is printed at the end of the workshop and distributed for community use and testing in the real world.

This method diverges greatly from traditional models and many have raised questions. Ultimately the most important question is, *does the MAST method produce accurate, vernacular translations?* Answering this question from field work is difficult because the translations that have been completed are in minority languages. Evidence for their quality exists only among those who are bilingual in their language and the language of their source text (typically English or another national language.) Therefore, an experimental workshop using the MAST methodology and abiding by its field standards was established, where results would be produced in English. These results could then be tested by western scholars and theologians to determine the answer to the above question.

This paper is an explanation of one such experimental workshop. Section one explains the logistics of the workshop and where it varied from a field workshop. It also identifies the participants. Section two explains the process of the workshop. Section

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three identifies the outcomes and section four draws conclusions from those outcomes.

Finally several appendices with charts and a sample of the translated text are included.

### **Section one** **Setting up the workshop**

All efforts were made to follow the same criteria as adhered to in field work.

These are:

1. Translators are Christian bilinguals invited by the Christian community to participate in the workshop.
2. Translators are translating from their second language into their mother tongue.
3. Translators receive compensation for room and board but are not paid for translating.
4. Translators are given training on the first day and are provided tools for the translation.
5. Translators have facilitators who assist them in maintaining the process throughout the workshop.
6. Translators are given responsibility and freedom to use whatever tools or personal resources they have for working on the Scripture translation.

For the experiment the translators were identified as Christians who were bilingual in English and Spanish, with English being their mother-tongue. Translators were invited to participate in the experiment. Room and board as well as travel expenses were covered, but the translators were not paid for their services. Translators were provided with training on the first day. They had facilitators available to support

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and guide the process throughout the workshop. Translators were given responsibility and freedom to use whatever tools and resources they had access too.

### **Variables**

Certain variables could not be controlled as a result of geography and environment. These are noted here with a short explanation as to the methods taken to manage the affects of these variable.

Translators were not commissioned by the local Christian community for this translation, nor did we specifically endeavor to work with local church. In the field, because of our heavy emphasis on ownership, translators are selected by the Christian community and we do seek to partner closely with the local church community. Since these translators were not specifically endorsed through their local churches, they were instead invited based on personal knowledge of their Christian life and interest in Bible translation. They were approved through Wycliffe Associates volunteer program, and also filled out profiles to share their own Christian convictions, training, and calling.

Translators for this workshop were not trained in the electronic tools used in the field, because access to that program is designated for actual translation projects. Instead translators used laptops with a word processor of their choice. All of the translators had adequate computer and typing skills. This is not typical in the field. Translators translated from a Spanish source text, that is commonly used in South America, instead of the ULB (Unlocked Literal Bible)—Spanish—which is typically used for MAST in the field, because the ULB was not complete yet in Spanish. The translation used was chosen by the developer of the experiment. It was chosen for its

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wide acceptance by the Spanish community as a quality translation and its accessibility through online sites.

Since the translators did not use the electronic tools used in the field, they did not have access to the list of keywords for their passages that are available in that tool. Instead, they were provided with lists of key words in Spanish by the developer and another mother-tongue Spanish speaker.

These translators speak English as their mother tongue; therefore, they had access to more aid than is the case in a field translation, since so many resources are only available in English. Additionally, all of them had read Galatians in their own mother tongue at various times before coming to the workshop. However, they did not use any tools during the first four MAST steps and never consulted other English translations, even during the checking steps. The primary tools they chose to use during the checking steps were other Spanish versions of the Bible and some Greek helps.

### **Participants**

The participants in the workshop consisted of four translators, one trainer, one leader, one support facilitator and one outside checker.

All four translators are from from a Christian background. Two have undergraduate degrees in Biblical fields. Two have some undergraduate studies, but have not completed degrees. All study the Bible in their mother tongue regularly, attend a local church where they hear Biblical teaching, and seek to disciple others in the Christian faith. The translators ranged in age from 42 to 57. Two were female and two were male. All were computer literate and brought their own laptops on which to work. All had some familiarity with researching information on the internet. All were literate in both English and Spanish.

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The trainer for the project is a missionary with Wycliffe Associates, who trained as a leader for MAST workshops and has been to numerous workshops around the world. The leader is also a missionary with Wycliffe Associates who has traveled extensively training and supporting MAST translators in the world. The support facilitator is a mother-tongue Spanish speaker who is a believer from a local church. He had no prior experience with Bible translation. His support was in the area of discussing Spanish spiritual terms and keywords.

## Section II The Process

The workshop took place in June, 2017 for one week at the visitor's center for Wycliffe Associates, in Orlando Florida. On Monday all participants gathered for devotions and worship at 8:30 AM. After this, the trainer gave a brief explanation of the eight steps of MAST and had the translators give feedback. Then the translators were broken into two groups of two and given a chapter of Galatians to start translating. The leader was in the room to guide the process and encourage translators as they progressed through the steps. By the end of day one the translators had collectively completed drafts of Galatians 1 and 2 and were working on checking those drafts.

Over the next three days a similar pattern was followed, with devotions and testimony first thing in the morning, then assignment of portions and work on the translation for the rest of the day. The translators worked for about 6.5 hours each day with breaks and lunch interspersed. By Thursday afternoon the translators had completed the entire book of Galatians and had checked it through all of the MAST steps. Their collective hours for this project were roughly 96.

Once the translation was complete, one translator collected everyone's portions and formatted them in one document. She also read through that document and edited it for grammar and mechanics. Then this document was given to the trainer and leader on the project for review.

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The trainer read through the document carefully and compared the keywords in it to the keyword list provided for English projects. Any discrepancies were noted in a chart. (See Appendix A.)

An outside participant also reviewed the document and checked it against modern equivalent versions of the Bible in English (primarily the ESV). He was asked to compare it for clarity, naturalness, accuracy and grammar. Using a provided rubric he reported his findings on each verse of the translation.

Once these checks were done, the experiment was considered complete.

### **Section III** **Outcomes**

Overall the project was very successful. It took four instead of five days to complete. Translators reported gaining confidence after their first day. They also reported a deep level of satisfaction and enjoyment. One translator expressed a strong confidence in the process after having attempted it herself, and said that the value of being a mother-tongue speaker is indispensable. All of the translators felt confident that what they produced was an accurate and vernacular translation. They felt it was in need of some more proofreading and formatting, but the content, they were satisfied was good.

The trainer and leader were also confident that the project was successful. They had observed that the 8 MAST steps were systematically followed. The questions and discussions that had accompanied periods of checking affirmed that the meaning of the passages was being sought out. The translators used tools and resources available to them to find answers to their questions and concerns. The team worked well together in agreeing to and implementing changes.

The checking of the translation after the workshop took several weeks. The trainer spent about fifteen total hours reviewing the text and checking for keywords. Although she found some slight differences in word usage, none were considered at risk for altering, obscuring or omitting



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meaning. For example, in chapter one verse fifteen the term “set apart” was used by the translators instead of “chosen” which is how the ESV renders it. This is a faithful translation of the Greek term in this verse and has been used in other English vernacular translations. For a complete list of these variations, see Appendix B.

A missionary with cross-cultural experience and minimal translation training, also checked through the completed Scriptures. He reported that the checking took him approximately eighteen hours. He was asked to rate each verse with a “yes” or “no” answer to the following questions:

1. Are additional thoughts present?
2. Are all key terms represented?
3. Are there any omissions?
4. Is the intent of the verse upheld?
5. Is the tone of the genre upheld?
6. Is the grammar consistent and communicated clearly?

In response to question number one, out of the 149 verses in Galatians, fifteen slight additions were noted, with ten additions recognized as having some potential for causing confusion. For example in chapter one verse six the term “guys” was added after “you” in an effort to express the plural nature of “you.” However, since this is a gender based term, it could indicate that Paul was only speaking to men.

The score for this question was determined by dividing the number of verses with no potential additions by the numbers of verses in the book (134/149). The result of this scoring is a 90%.

In response to question two, 375 keywords were tested. Seven were noted as missing or varied in the translation. Of those seven, four had minimal potential for causing confusion, and three were noted as having a reasonable potential for causing confusion. The four that were considered of minimal concern are as follows:

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1. In 1:6-7 the term “message” is used two times instead of “gospel.” The context of the section makes it reasonably clear that this message is the gospel, so concern for misunderstanding is low.
2. In 2:8 the term “ministry” is used instead of “apostleship.” Peter’s “apostleship” in this verse is referring to his “ministry.” Slight variance may not emphasize Peter’s identity as well, but it is not likely to interfere with understanding the message of the verse. A modern vernacular English version (CEV) also makes a similar adjustment in language.
3. In 5:11 the term “hounded” is used instead of “persecuted”. The Greek term can mean to pursue as well as persecute, so “hound” seems to carry that essence.

The three that were noted as having some cause for concern are as follows:

1. In 4:06 the term “children” is used instead of “sons” which might lose the significance of being in God’s family. Additionally, in the other instances in verses 5 and 6 the term “sons” is used. For consistency this should be changed.
2. In 4:07 the term “Christ” is used, when the Greek term used is “God”. Even though both are members of the trinity of One God, the specificity of names especially when referring to Jesus as the Messiah should be upheld.
3. In 5:18 the term “lustful” or “sexual” is not included before the word “immoral.” This could lead to a broader understanding of immorality rather than it’s specific definition here as being “sexual.”

The score for this question was determined by dividing the number of correct key terms, 368 by the total number of terms tested, 375 for a score of 98%.

For the question of omissions, only one was noted. In 6:10 the phrase “to everyone” is missing after “do good.” Greek clearly has the phrase “to all” and it should be added here for accuracy and clarity.

The score for this question was determined by dividing the number of verses with no missing information, 148, by the number of total verses, 149, for a total of: 99%

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For questions four and five regarding intent and genre no discrepancies or errors were found for a score of 100%.

For question six concerning grammar, 30 total mistakes or inconsistencies were marked. Eleven were capitalization errors, four were missing verse numbers, two were punctuation, and the remaining 13 were wording issues. These should be cleaned up for naturalness and ease of reading. However, none of them caused concern regarding the true meaning of the passage. The score for this question was determined by dividing the number of verses with no errors, 119, by the number of total verses in the book, 149, for a score of 80%.

## Section IV Conclusions

This experiment allowed for scripture that was translated using the MAST method to be tested and checked by current English speakers in the field. Both a WA missionary and a missionary from a different Bible translation and church planting organization conducted checking tests on the material. These reviews numerically demonstrated that no major alterations, omissions, or additions had been made in the process of translation.

A few errors were found. These errors had only a small likelihood of altering meaning or causing confusion. As a matter of fact, through the checking processes, many questions that were asked regarding accuracy and word usage were researched and the translators' choices were upheld. Furthermore, the errors that were discovered are easy to correct. An overall score of 95% for accuracy and naturalness was given.

A final assessment for the quality and naturalness of Scripture is to disseminate it within the language community and monitor its use. However, this experiment did not incorporate that step because of language limitations. The English language is already saturated with translated scriptures. Assessing how much a new one is used when others are readily available is difficult and will not yield results that could be compared to a language community with no other scripture source.

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The conclusion of this experiment is that when followed, the MAST methodology is capable of producing accurate and vernacular translations in a timeframe that is greatly accelerated from traditional models.

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