

The VITAL update from Dannii

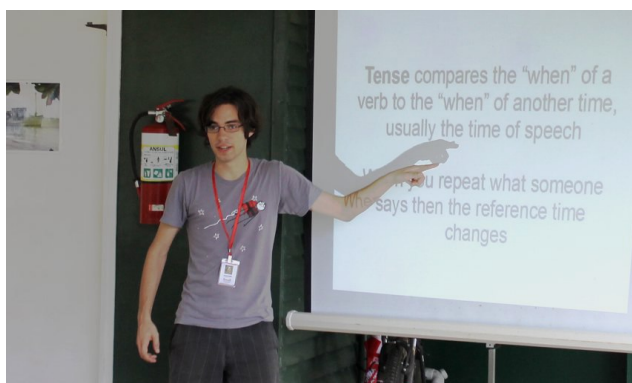
October 2011



Hello again!

This month I started working at VITAL, the Vernacular Initiative for Translation and Literacy. It was the 20th module so far, and eleven languages made it here.

Last month I wrote that I was expecting to mentor the Wedau and Topura teams, but as I don't know those languages there was really little I could do with them. Instead my main role was helping with the daily Language Discovery (LD) sessions. Although we all know and can use our own language, our conscious understanding of how it works might be very limited.



Teaching a lesson on tense

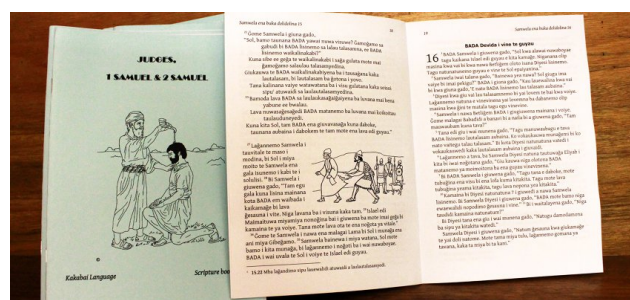
For example, although you can easily replace *told* with *recounted* in “He told the story to me,” you can’t with the very similar sentence “He told me the story”, but most fluent English speakers couldn’t explain why that is. Unfortunately, languages rarely behave exactly as we expect them to, and careful study is sometimes needed to produce natural translations.

This month we focused on Tense and Aspect, two dimensions of verbal meaning. Tense is very important in English, and anyone who has been educated in English will know that. But studies have suggested that Tense is only important in about half of the world’s languages. In many languages Aspect is more important. (Aspect is about the “shape” of verbs, such as whether an event took place in an instant, or over a

period of time.) For many of VITAL’s languages this is the case, but because people here learn English, many think that tense is important in their language because they assume it’s similar to English. LD is about helping the VITAL participants study their own languages and test their assumptions. After giving an introduction to each topic in non-technical terms, everyone would consider their languages, and rather than relying on intuitions, which are so very often wrong, we would test our theories by checking the natural language data: stories that had been collected previously.

LD isn’t a very big part of VITAL time-wise, but I often saw participants working on their homework, and many told me the sessions were very interesting and helpful, which encouraged me! The rest of my time was spent driving participants to the guest house they were staying at, negotiating the local market, and running a VITAL tradition: Friday night movies!

But while I was preparing for the next day’s LD session, the translation teams worked on twenty verses each day, covering portions from Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel. The literacy team produced books for their schools and Sunday schools, and ended up printing over 15,000 A3 pages!



A draft printing of portions from Judges and 1 & 2 Samuel

In November I’ll be spending two weeks with the Wedau to get an introduction to working in a village. I’ll also be planning for February’s LD sessions, which will be on Modality. We’ll be looking at words like *could*, *should* and *must*, and how best to translate them. That’s a challenge I’m looking forward to!

-Dannii