



RESEARCH

Accelerated Bible Translation: Reflections on 21st Century Challenges and Opportunities

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Calls to “accelerate” Bible translation have grown in recent decades, fueled by expanding global participation in the Bible translation movement and increasing impatience over the slow engagement of Bibleless communities. Yet acceleration is often pursued through strategies—expanded teams, oral internalization, simplified training, or the proliferation of written and digital resources—that fail to address the primary barrier to faster and faithful translation: the critical-thinking gap shaped by the educational experiences of many new translators. Drawing on field observations across multiple world regions, this paper argues that neither additional resources nor compressed methodologies reliably produce accurate, natural, and comprehensible translations when translators have limited experience with analytical problem-solving. Instead, enduring acceleration arises from relational, skill-oriented approaches—especially intentional mentoring, coached internalization, and the disciplined scaling of proven fruitful practices across the global enterprise. The paper further highlights underutilized technological tools, including related-language adaptation, front and back translations, and emerging AI applications, as strategic aids when deployed responsibly. Ultimately, sustainable acceleration requires aligning tools, training, and expectations with the actual needs and learning styles of the global workforce. The paper calls for a shift from celebrating the production of resources to investing in equipping people, ensuring that accelerated translation never comes at the cost of faithfulness.

Introduction—Acceleration Is Not a Four-letter Word

When I first transitioned from an assignment with SIL International to Seed Company, the cutline (i.e., the slogan) for Seed Company’s logo was *Accelerated Bible Translation*. I felt somewhat ambivalent about the cutline at the time because of the comparison implied in the phrase. It appeared we were claiming that the Bible translation work we supported was “faster” than some other unnamed groups involved in the wider Bible translation movement. I think many of my colleagues in the Bible translation movement also took exception to this implicit comparison. While the cutline has since changed (to *Bible Translation, Life Transformation*), acceleration still appears in Seed Company’s Board-mandated mission statement: *To accelerate Scripture translation and impact for people without God’s Word through Great Commission partnerships* (emphasis mine).

No one would openly advocate for a faster translation pace at the expense of translation faithfulness (accuracy, comprehensibility, and naturalness). The notion of acceleration in Seed Company's mission statement captures our desire that everyone get a faithful translation of the Bible in the language that serves them best as soon as possible. That is an aspiration that most Bible translation agencies would embrace. It drives many today to explore innovations to reduce the time it takes to achieve that goal. This paper reflects my observations on the effectiveness of various efforts to accelerate the Bible translation process.

Bible Translation Status in the 21st Century

The landscape of Bible translation ministry has changed profoundly in the 21st century. Besides the efforts of the Bible agencies, we have also seen a rush of new actors in the Bible translation space in the last fifteen years. Both evangelistic church-planting missions and church denominations increasingly embrace the need for heart language Scripture for Bibleless people groups around the world. This wild growth in the size and diversity of the Bible translation workforce presents both opportunities and challenges for historic Bible agencies.

An attitude shared by many of those who have recently joined the Bible translation movement is *impatient dissatisfaction*. They are dissatisfied with how slowly the remaining Bibleless people groups are being engaged. They are also impatient with how long the agencies take to complete a Bible translation project. The push to accelerate engagement and process in Bible translation springs in large part from the desires and convictions of our new partners in this cause.

These zealous (albeit partially trained) Christian workers are launching Bible translation projects around the world. They are not waiting on the Bible translation specialists to address the need. Because they are unencumbered by the legacy of historic Bible translation practice, they are exploring many creative alternative methodologies which they think will make the process faster.

Bibleless people groups are, for the most part, the world's smaller language communities. Fully half the remaining people groups with no Scripture at all have less than 10,000 speakers. The vast majority of these languages are only used in the oral-aural medium. Learning takes place primarily through face-to-face communication. By the same token, where churches exist in these communities, they most often want a translation of the full Bible in written form for their use. To the extent formal education is available to speakers of these languages, it is founded on a rote-learning pedagogy with scant attention to the development of critical thinking skills.

For beginning translators from these people groups, the default approach to translation is to be rigidly literal. This is probably true of any beginning translator; it is especially true when translating sacred text. Because of its numinous quality, sacred text is often assumed to be mysterious, with hidden meanings. If a translator finds the meaning of a Bible verse in the translation in the language of wider communication to be opaque, he can assume that there is a hidden meaning which the Spirit will reveal to the reader as He chooses. There can also be the fear of divine retribution for mistranslating God's word. The beginning translator can think that the safest thing to do is just painstakingly translate the words, even if the translation does not make sense.

Inadequate Solutions to Acceleration

Several years ago, I was helping a translation team in Indonesia check their translation of Psalms. The five-member team included the leading translator of their New Testament, who was a schoolteacher. The team also included a computer-savvy university graduate. The Indonesian Bible society had recently uploaded digital versions of their adaptations of the UBS translator handbooks to Paratext, including the handbook on Psalms. The translation team had this handbook as part of their suite of resources available to help them translate the Psalms faithfully. A couple of years into the project, I was arrested by the sudden realization that, as I checked the translation, I almost never saw evidence in it that the translators' use of the handbook had shaped the translation in any material way. The only exceptions I noticed were a few times when the handbook would list alternate renderings.

This observation led me to ask, "Why is a well-prepared handbook in Indonesian not being used by such a competent, experienced translation team?" I realized that, even when a written exegetical resource like the handbook is read and understood, digesting that information and using it to inform the translation task is a huge intellectual stretch that requires significant problem-solving and critical-thinking skills. The formal educational experience of the translation team was shaped by a rote-learning pedagogy. As a result, the academic problem-solving skills presupposed in the handbook were underdeveloped in the translation team. My next realization was that this critical-thinking gap was not confined to one translation team in Indonesia.

When I joined the Bible translation cause in 1976, there was already a concerted effort to produce English exegetical resources oriented to the unique needs of Bible translators; that effort has continued. SIL and the United Bible Societies were in the vanguard of those efforts. Many of these resources have proven useful to the highly trained linguists who have formed SIL's foundational workforce for Bible translation ministry over the years. They have also helped highly educated translators working in the world's

largest languages. Recently, unfoldingWord has sought to produce or obtain exegetical materials unencumbered by copyright restrictions so as to make them freely available in digital formats.

An ancillary effort is to produce these kinds of resources in various languages of wider communication, sometimes referred to as “gateway languages,” to make them available to those translators who cannot use English-language resources. In the 1990s, I myself was an early champion for the translation and adaptation of the UBS translator handbooks into Bahasa Indonesia. I assumed that if we could get the English exegetical resource materials that I found helpful into Indonesian, it would equip Indonesian translators to render Scripture in their languages with accuracy, clarity, and naturalness.

All this work, both producing more exegetical resources in various media and translating them into other languages, presupposes that the growing global workforce of Bible translators who are speakers of the Bibleless languages will be able to digest the information in these resources and use it to shape their translation efforts.

It is often assumed that translators who are speakers of the world’s lesser-known languages, if they had the right resources in a language they could understand, could translate Scripture in a way that is natural, accurate, and comprehensible. This assumption overlooks the fact that, due to a narrow formal educational experience, most of these translators have never developed the sophisticated problem-solving skills that are necessary to digest the information in a written translation resource and produce accurate, comprehensible, and natural translations of Scripture in their languages.

Further, we tend to underestimate the considerable academic problem-solving skills required to translate the biblical message in a vastly different language with accuracy, comprehensibility, and naturalness. I have found that accurately rendering a complex biblical text, such as an epistle, in an unrelated language, within the constraints of that language’s unique lexicon and grammar, is an intellectual lift of Olympic proportions. It requires an awareness of the interplay between meaning and language structures and the ability to discern how the same message can be conveyed using a significantly different inventory of grammatical and lexical tools. “How to say the same thing with different words” is a complex intellectual task.

These tasks are an intrinsic part of producing faithful translations of the Bible; they require creative problem-solving skills that many translator colleagues around the world simply have not had the opportunity to develop. Those colleagues can be intellectually brilliant, but their formal educational experience has not given them the critical-thinking skills needed to effectively apply written resource materials to the translation task in order to creatively craft translations of complex genres of literature that are accurate, natural, and comprehensible.

Since many of today's translators speak languages that are primarily oral, coming from communities with limited histories of literacy, some have proposed using an oral-based process of internalization to help translators understand a portion of Scripture well enough to render it naturally and accurately in their language in an oral form. These efforts appear to have considerable merit in helping translators produce faithful translations of Scripture. However, the process seems somewhat painstaking, and it requires considerable face-to-face interaction. For the most part, I have not seen these approaches address the global church's sense of urgency to get translations of the Bible into the world's lesser-known languages as soon as possible. They lay an excellent foundation of understanding for translation and also contribute to the development of the church's capacity to steward Bible translation for the long haul. But the process to produce a faithful translation of a New Testament or a full Bible, for the most part, seems to take as long (or occasionally longer) than translation projects using the classic literacy-based approach.

In an effort to take oral-based translation efforts to scale, some have proposed circulating exegetical information in oral form through web-based video recordings. I suggest that the critical thinking skills needed to digest and apply information delivered in a video recording may not be much different from what is required to learn from a written exegetical resource. Both approaches seem to me to be insufficient in themselves to equip translators to achieve a useful level of faithfulness (accuracy, naturalness, and comprehension) in their translations.

Another proposed strategy for accelerating translation has been to expand the number of translators on translation teams and have them work simultaneously on different passages. Exercised within reason, this approach makes sense. I am aware of several translation projects comprised of two or three translation teams, simultaneously working on different books of the Bible. They exchange their drafts and give each other comments. This approach can materially accelerate the achievement of major translation goals, such as a New Testament or a full Bible. However, the most aggressive forms of the strategy have involved dozens of speakers of a language (sometimes over a hundred) working in parallel to draft massive amounts of translated Scripture in a very short period. This includes a compressed training phase that assumes translators can quickly digest and apply complex information provided in a one-way communication stream (oral or written). When many minimally trained translators are working simultaneously on different passages of the same book, the result can be stylistically uneven. That unevenness tends to be ironed out by sticking to an unhelpful level of literalness in translation. Again, we see that, because of the limitations of critical thinking skills in these translators, this approach "accelerates" the completion of a translation goal, but it frequently sacrifices usability in the process.

Efforts to train people with a rote-learning educational background to execute tasks requiring critical-thinking skills are often fraught with frustration. A number of years ago, colleagues at a workshop in the Philippines spent a considerable amount of time helping their Filipino translators learn how to use exegetical resources to identify challenges in the Old Testament text and evaluate the merits of various interpretations. At one point, one of the translators raised his hand and said, “Can’t you just tell us what the text means and we’ll translate it?” This highlights the fact that colleagues who have an educational background weak in critical-thinking training will require an intentionally different approach to training than the reading and lecture formats common in Western training regimens.

In summary, I submit that, because critical thinking skills are underdeveloped in the global workforce, the continued production of informational resources, without an intentional program to train translators to use them, is not sufficient to equip a broadened Bible translation workforce or to accelerate the Bible translation process. I believe this is true regardless of the media used (written or oral, video recording or live lecture, in hard copy or on the web) and regardless of the languages of wider communication into which the materials are translated. These resources can make a valuable contribution to a full-orbed plan for equipping the saints for works of service in Bible translation. However, too often it has seemed to me that disproportionate focus, effort, and funding have been invested—and victory proclaimed—for having simply produced tools, without any intentional and scalable plan for equipping people to use them.

Strategies that Reliably Accelerate Bible Translation

Effective Training

Obviously, the most direct approach to addressing the critical-thinking gap to which I referred above is to train adult translators to develop their skills in complex intellectual problem solving. As I mentioned above, the coached internalization process used in many oral Bible translation projects is effective in helping translation teams understand texts well enough to translate them accurately and naturally in their languages.

I personally have found that intentional mentoring has been effective in equipping translators, translation project facilitators, and consultant trainees. Mentoring involves relationships between a wise, experienced mentor and one or more protégés. For the vast majority of translators, project facilitators, and consultant trainees in the new global workforce, their cultural heritage predisposes them to relational learning. It matches the learning styles with which they grew up.

Intentional mentoring of this kind can be done in the context of working together without excessive additional time and effort on the part of the mentor. I have found a mentoring loop to be particularly effective. The loop

can be summarized as observation, debrief, observed practice, debrief, repeat, with gradually increased levels of complexity and responsibility. In my case, a beginning consultant trainee watches me conduct a consultant check on a relatively straightforward text, such as a synoptic gospel. We debrief the experience at coffee breaks, over lunch, and at the end of each day. After observing me conduct a check on most of the gospel, I give the protégé the opportunity to lead the conversation to check a few simple pericopes, such as the resurrection narratives. I observe the protégé's work, give input to the team along the way if something has been missed, and debrief with her after her experience. We schedule another check of the same text with a different team, and I assign the trainee to prepare a few of the easier chapters for checking. She observes me checking, I observe her checking, and we debrief several times each day. After this, if all is going well, we schedule another check of the same text by a different translation team, where the trainee will do the bulk of the check under my observation, and I reserve only the hardest chapters for personal checking. We continue the discipline of intentional debriefs each day. This is combined with periodic guided reading and discussion.

Human learning takes time, so this approach does not immediately accelerate the translation process. However, it does make for better translators, facilitators, and consultants. Over time it equips them to utilize the resources made available to them more effectively, leading to an accelerated process in the longer term.

Short of this admittedly painstaking approach, there are some other methods that I have seen readily accelerate the process of faithful Bible translation for many translation projects around the world.

Taking fruitful practices to scale

The global Bible translation enterprise is a diffuse, decentralized endeavor. For a variety of reasons, Bible translation practices have tended to develop differently in different parts of the world. For example, the consultant checking process can differ significantly from one area to another. When I became SIL's Asia Area Director in 1998, I noted with interest that many translations done in the Philippines were routinely checked by correspondence, something that, at the time, was discouraged in Indonesia. When I later assumed a global responsibility with Seed Company's Field domain, I observed that many translations in Africa were checked by consultants interacting with translators but without the involvement of Unconditioned Native Speakers (UNSS) to verify comprehensibility. Most consultant checking in Asia includes the involvement of Unconditioned Native Speakers.

Variations in translation processes as practiced in different regions tend to be zealously embraced by their practitioners as essential to guarding the fidelity of translations, even though there is significant variation in those practices around the world. There is also considerable deference to individual local preference in translation approaches. All this impedes the application of fruitful practices and innovations across the Bible translation enterprise. “That’s fine for projects in that part of the world, but it can’t work here!” is a frequent refrain.

A related factor that inhibits the application of fruitful practices is the pioneering heritage of the modern Bible translation movement. The 20th-century missionary translation movement was launched at a time when little linguistic research had been done on the world’s lesser-known languages. Missionary linguist-translators had to be equipped to analyze on their own the grammar and sound system of the language of the people group they intended to serve. Of necessity, there was a “starting from scratch” approach to training people to serve language communities where no other research had ever been done. This pioneering approach still informs many training programs, even though today much research has been done on the world’s languages. When training has equipped linguists to work in a pioneering context, they tend to look askance at work done in related languages, information on areal features, or innovative approaches developed elsewhere to accelerate faithful Bible translation. Many also assume that the whole training program given to missionary linguist-translators in the 20th century is required to equip today’s global Bible translation workforce; this ignores the fact that the bulk of that workforce has insider knowledge of their own language and culture.

All this to say, at the most general level, a common commitment to apply practices shown to accelerate the Bible translation process as broadly as possible, as quickly as possible, would change the landscape of the global translation enterprise. It would rapidly accelerate the process of Bible translation such that many more people groups would get access to faithful translations of God’s Word far sooner than would otherwise be possible.

Leveraging Good Work Already Done

Machine-assisted adaptation technology such as Adapt It has existed for over twenty years. There are other programs today that leverage the good work already done in a translation in one language to help teams get a running start drafting the biblical text in related languages. Scripture Forge has been successfully used in this regard, as has the Paratext interlinearizer. Regardless of the program, I do not think this technology is applied nearly enough. While it cannot apply everywhere, I submit that we in the Bible translation community need to be far more intentional to use related language

adaptation technology everywhere that it makes sense to do so. It can cut years off the achievement of major translation goals such as New Testaments or full Bibles.

Front translations, back translations, and alternative renderings are also helpful. One of the few parts of printed exegetical resources and exegetical lectures that I have observed to be most useful is a list of alternative renderings of difficult passages. Basically, these renderings preprocess the original text in order to provide the translator with approved ways to say the same thing with different words. The translator feels immense reassurance knowing that a biblical scholar or translation consultant has said that a particular creative rendering of a verse is indeed a faithful reflection of the original meaning. A related more programmatic approach is to do a “front translation” of the biblical text. This casts the biblical text in a language of wider communication with special attention to reflecting areal features common to languages in that region. Likewise, having access to written back translations of consultant-approved work done in related languages enables translators to consider how to translate the same passages in their own language. All these approaches give translators an opportunity to follow their default inclination for literal translation while still ending up with target-language translations that are both accurate in meaning and reasonably natural.

No discussion of accelerating technologies in Bible translation today is complete without at least making a nod to artificial intelligence. In my opinion, the jury is still out on whether the AI engines currently available will be able to learn the world’s lesser-known languages in a timely way and produce drafts of translated Scripture that are reasonably faithful, without some dependence on good translation work already done in a related language. The most promising possibility I have seen to date is the application of AI to extrapolate drafts of translated Scripture based on a corpus of Scripture already well translated in the target language. For example, Seed Company is collaborating with SIL to see if the Scripture Forge program can be used to rapidly draft Old Testament texts based on extant published New Testaments in a group of South Asian languages. The early results look very promising.

Conclusion

The purpose of these remarks is not to disparage the various efforts of my colleagues who labor faithfully to equip God’s people around the world to participate in the Bible translation task. May their tribe increase and may God establish the work of their hands! However, I do suggest that we need to understand more clearly who it is that we are trying to equip and to tailor our efforts more intentionally for maximum effectiveness.



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