

# Bible stories

*The International Decade of Indigenous Languages starts in 2020. Jost Zetsche describes a tool that analyses and compares translations of the Bible*



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Last year, 2019, was designated by the United Nations as the International Year of Indigenous Languages. In retrospect, it's hard to say whether the year was effective but I'm thankful for an unprecedented number of articles, radio features, and television programmes about indigenous languages, their relevance, and why it's important to support efforts to ensure their survival.

For me personally it was very rewarding to take part in the International Federation of Translators (FIT) symposium on 'Translation and Interpreting for Indigenous Languages' last November in Montreal. During that one-day conference I felt that I learned more than at any other conference before. Even more importantly, actual, tangible steps were taken to further indigenous translation and interpreting by bringing together academia and indigenous practitioners. And as 2019 drew to a close, the UN General Assembly declared that the 10 years from 2022 to 2032 are to be the International *Decade of Indigenous Languages*.

## Changing the conversation

At the FIT conference I also had the chance to present a tool I've been working on for some time, and I'd like to introduce it here as well. But let's start at the beginning.

As translators, we're fascinated by languages, so it's not hard to convince ourselves that the survival of indigenous languages is important. I also don't have to repeat the dire statistics concerning the rapid loss of languages that we are experiencing. We know about this, and we care –

even though we sometimes feel helpless in responding to the problem. How, though, do we communicate that urgency to others, or how do we at least awaken some interest in the rest of the world?

For about three years I have been working on a tool which I think has the potential to make that possible. It can change the conversation about why everyone should care about indigenous languages and their plight from 'because it's the right thing to do' to 'if you don't, you personally will lose out'.

Translation Insights and Perspectives (TIPs) is a tool that

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collects data under the following presupposition: all languages are equally *competent* at expressing any concept, and at the same time uniquely *qualified* to express additional facets of any concept. If that is so, we (and everyone else) should have an interest in discovering those facets and in doing whatever we can to make sure language diversity remains at its highest possible level.

TIPs is sponsored by the United Bible Societies (the umbrella organisation for hundreds of national and territorial Bible societies). The text it explores via translation is the

Christian Bible. Since no text has been translated nearly as often as the Bible (portions of the Bible or the entire text have been translated into more than 3,000 languages), it has enormous potential to illuminate.

You can access the tool at <https://tips.translation.bible>, where you'll find a simple interface with myriad 'stories' (explanations and examples of how other languages approach words, concepts, or even grammatical constructs through translation). You'll also find instructions for how to use the tool and submit new stories.

## Concepts and perspectives

The spartan look belies the very respectable amount of data that has been assembled so far. (Though the tool is still very young, these early stages will not lead to a specific end goal, since the data collection is designed to continue ad infinitum.) There are currently approximately 2,200 stories, relating to more than 15,000 passages in the Bible from 500 or so languages. As I said, these are early days, and the database is growing every day.

You can access the data by looking at an alphabetical list of terms, languages, or sources, or by the structure provided by the Bible's system of verses, chapters and books (all under 'Find Stories' in the top menu). Many of the often very short stories illuminate different cultural concepts – such as this one ([tips.translation.bible/story/heal-from-infertility](https://tips.translation.bible/story/heal-from-infertility)), which reveals through translation that at least one culture, refreshingly, does not consider infertility to be a sickness.

Others look at many languages at the same time and how they approach complex concepts, such as 'forgiveness' ([tips.translation.bible/story/forgiveness](https://tips.translation.bible/story/forgiveness)). To make complex stories like the forgiveness entry more easily digestible, a simplified graphic offers a comparative view (click on the link in the first line of that story).

Still others look at different grammatical concepts and how languages wrestle with their own grammar to express something that the source text may not adequately convey (see [tips.translation.bible/tip\\_verse/mark-95](https://tips.translation.bible/tip_verse/mark-95)). The story that first sparked my curiosity concerned the Chinese gender of God. Clicking on




tips.translation.bible/story/divine-gender-pronoun-for-god brings up a Chinese translation of the story because the TIPs committee felt it was an example of a uniquely empowering story for Chinese speakers (as the only language we know of that is able to express this concept) that therefore should be

accessible directly in Chinese.

Every language in a story is hyperlinked to that language's *Wikipedia* page (many languages are otherwise hard to pinpoint geographically and linguistically) as well as to an online version of the Bible in that language, if applicable.

Empowering indigenous (or

majority) language speakers (by saying *your* language is the only one among the 7,000 worldwide that can express these words in exactly this manner), and empowering everyone using indigenous and other languages (by saying *your* world has changed because you have been able to look at it through the lens of another, otherwise inaccessible, language), are only two of this project's goals. Another, clearly, is to provide people who are interested in the Bible with a tremendous study tool. And yet another is to point out the power of translation, as something that is not only enlightening for the readers of the target language, but potentially for everyone else as well.

Please use this tool as much as you find beneficial, contribute to it as you see fit (we're interested in any language), follow its Twitter account at [twitter.com/transl8insights](https://twitter.com/transl8insights), and help us promote it as a great way to celebrate languages and translation for everyone. 

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