

TRANSLATION ON STEROIDS: HOW LOOKING AT THOUSANDS OF TRANSLATIONS ENHANCES UNDERSTANDING

Presenter: Jost Zetsche



Jost Zetsche is a professional translator who lives on the Oregon coast. Originally from Hamburg, Germany, he earned a Ph.D. for a dissertation on the history of Chinese Bible translation at the University of Hamburg in 1996. 1999 Jost co-founded International Writers' Group, LLC, on the Oregon coast. Since 2016 he has been contracting with United Bible Societies to help create and maintain the Translation Insights and Perspectives (TIPs) tool.

Jost Zetsche's presentation introduced us to his fascinating project, TIPS: Translation Insights and Perspectives. A work in progress, it is housed online at <https://tips.translation.bible/>.

Jost describes the project as an ongoing collection of “stories”—words, phrases, or verses from the Christian Bible translated into hundreds of the world's languages. In this searchable database, one can browse, look for a specific term or verse, or make one's own contribution to the site.

The project is supported by United Bible Societies, an umbrella for national biblical societies, and Jost works with biblical translation consultants and a skilled programmer. At the time of Jost's talk, the website had some 3181 “stories”—narratives regarding how a phrase, etc., is being translated into one of some 534 languages.

To understand why Jost calls the contributions “stories,” read this one about how, in the Aekyom language, our abstract English notion of “years” is transformed into the very concrete counting of “turtles”:

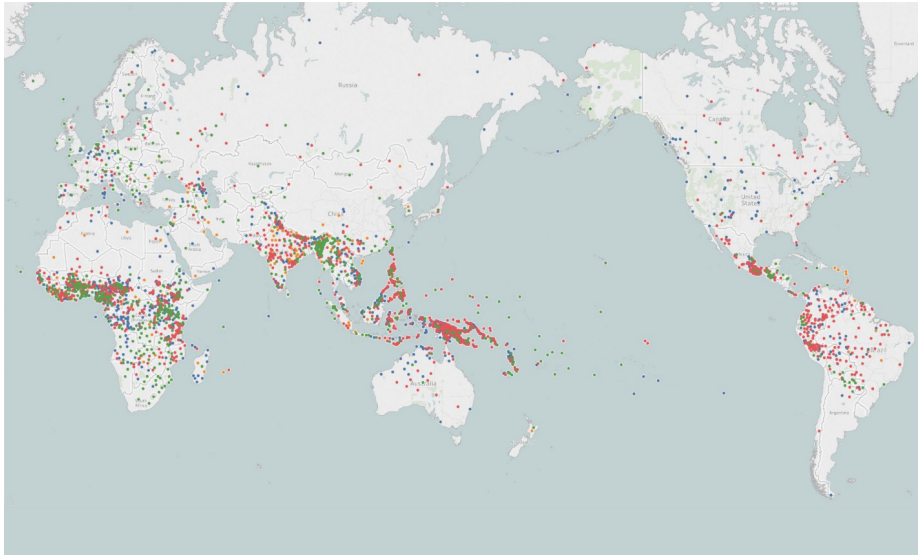
In Aekyom, years are counted as “turtles.”

Norm Mundhenk tells this story:

“Recently I was checking some New Testament material in the Aekyom language of western Papua New Guinea. It seemed relatively clear until suddenly we came to a passage that started, ‘When Jesus had 12 turtles,...’ Surely I had misunderstood what they said.

‘Did you say that Jesus had 12 turtles?’

‘Let us explain! Around here there is a certain time every year when river turtles come up on the banks and lay their eggs. Because this is so regular, it can be used as a way of counting years. Someone's age is said to be how many turtles that person has.



This map shows the state of Bible translation worldwide. It is copyrighted (©) 2018 by SIL International with data from progress.bible. The green dots refer to the complete Bible translated in individual languages, the red dots to translations of either the Old or New Testament, the blue dots to Bible selections, and the yellow dots to biblical stories. See <https://tips.translation.bible/> for a larger image.

So when we say that Jesus had 12 turtles, we mean that Jesus was 12 years old.
It was of course the familiar story of Jesus' trip with his parents to Jerusalem. And certainly, as we all know, Jesus did indeed have 12 turtles at that time!"

Though not as detailed, the following stories, providing back-translations of the word *forgiveness*, are just as concrete:

- Miskito (indigenous language of Nicaragua & Honduras): “take a man’s fault out of your heart”
- Western Parbate Kham (Sino-Tibetan Magaric language of Nepal): “unstring someone” (“hold a grudge” is to “have someone strung up in your heart”)
- Koonzime (Bantu language of Cameroon): “removing the bad deed-counters” (“The Koonzime lay out the deeds symbolically—usually strips of banana leaf—and rehearse their grievances with the person addressed.”)
- Similarly, in Lamogai (Austronesian language, island of New Britain, Papua New Guinea) there is no noun for love, so God’s love is translated as “His insides go to his people.”

Jost also talked about some of the structural differences among languages that his website makes visible:

- The pronoun “we” may or may not include “you.”
- In the Fijian language, a “trial” (3-person) pronoun makes clear what Paul said, that he *and two others* wrote the letters in the Bible.
- To cut something may require a verb specifying cut with *what*.
- The Chinese have a special pronoun for God that transcends gender.

After exploring more examples of semantic, societal, and cultural differences among languages made evident at his TIPS website, Jost noted that 2019 was the UN’s International Year of Indigenous Languages, focusing on the importance of languages in our lives and on the endangered status of many indigenous languages.

Source in fact will be featuring indigenous languages in its next issue, and we hope to feature an article by Jost on the topic.

—Reviewed by Michele Aynesworth