

Missionaries and Languages

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I. World language facts

A. *Languages in the world – 6,909 (about 7,000)*

1. “What language do they speak in that country?” is not a valid question. To function in most developing countries a missionary will need to know eventually two languages, an official language or LWC (language of wider circulation) and a local language for the people group with which he or she will work.
2. Countries and languages – PNG (830), India (438), Chad (131), Spain (14), U. S. (176, mostly immigrant languages, Hawaiian and Spanish are official languages in Hawaii and New Mexico)

B. *Language vs. dialect*

1. The difference between a language and a dialect is a matter of debate among linguists, but generally a dialect is a specific part of a language group that speaks in a certain way. American English is a dialect of English, as is British English. There is a southern dialect, a New England dialect, a mid-west dialect, etc.
2. The term “dialect” is often used in common language to refer to a language in a country that is not the official language, or a language that is not written down. This is a pejorative or negative use of this word, and it should be avoided. These “dialects” are really legitimate languages.

C. *Language hierarchies*

Language hierarchies differ somewhat in their composition from one area to another, but there is nevertheless a general worldwide pattern, at least parts of which will apply almost everywhere, and which is often highly relevant to translation decisions. These rankings of language as “higher” or “lower” have nothing to do with intrinsic language quality, but arise out of differences in the collective power of their speakers.

At the top is English, the nearest thing to a world language which exists. Below it are several international languages, most of them important in areas where they once were, or still are, colonial languages: English, which operates on this level as well as on the world level, Russian, Spanish, French, Mandarin and Arabic. Only one of them is usually significant in any given area, except that English in its role of world language may be significant along with another international language of the area. In addition to these major international languages there are a few other more regional

multinational languages like Swahili in East Africa, Urdu, Hindi, Bengali and Tamil in South Asia, and German in Europe, for example. The same multinational language may even have different names in different countries, like Malay and Indonesian.

Then below the international and multinational languages are often national languages, which include most of the international languages in their “home” countries, plus languages of other countries like Indonesian, Thai, Filipino, or Persian. Under these are sometimes regional languages within the country, like Javanese (Indonesia), Lao (Thailand) or Cebuano (Philippines). And finally, there are the languages of the towns and villages, the languages which nobody from outside usually learns unless there is more than one level of village languages, or unless the language also functions on a higher level in the hierarchy of languages.

Smalley WA 1991. *Translation as Mission*. (Series: *The Modern Mission Era, 1792-1992: An Appraisal*. ed. Wilbert R. Shenk) Macon, Georgia, Mercer University Press, pp. 141-142.

D. Sources for language and people group information

1. Ethnologue – www.ethnologue.com
2. Joshua Project – www.joshuaproject.net

II. Language acquisition methods

A. Classical-grammatical approach

This is the traditional approach for learning ancient languages such as Latin, Greek, and Hebrew. It involves rote memorization for the most part, studying of grammar and verb and noun form lists, and little if any oral or aural practice. In many parts of the world even modern languages are taught in this way.

B. Direct approach

The primary feature of the direct approach is that the student has all instruction in the target language with no opportunity to respond or ask questions in the native language. But also the direct approach withholds written materials until the student has grasped the language enough to converse in it. The idea of the method is to imitate the way in which a child learns a language.

C. Audio-lingual approach

This approach was developed during World War II as a rapid way to train people in foreign languages, built upon the idea that learning language was a matter of acquiring habits. It is characterized by many drills, replacement exercises, as well as dialogues. The theory behind it was that students would learn if their correct behaviors were rewarded.

D. Immersion approach

This approach involves complete use of the foreign language in teaching, but provides a more academic approach to learning. It is similar to the direct approach in that all instruction is in the foreign language.

E. Many others – see Wikipedia

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Methods_of_teaching_foreign_languages

III. Language acquisition programs**A. Pimsleur**

Built upon 30-minute lessons for each day, with minimal grammar and minimal exposure to the written language. The website lists 28 different languages available. All the lessons are audio only, and some languages have four levels of skill through which to advance. Paul Pimsleur built his approach upon four principles:

1. **Anticipation**
2. **Graduated-interval recall**
3. **Core vocabulary**
4. **Organic learning**

B. Rosetta Stone

This is a computer-based learning system, probably the most thorough and successful of such on the market. The website lists 33 different languages available, though American and British English are two separate programs. The program involves audio and visual practice.

C. PILAT – Mission Training International

MTI has a language acquisition course they call PILAT, which stands for Program In Language Acquisition Techniques. It is a two-week training program to prepare people for learning a language, and is best taken before going to language school or to language learning on the field.

<http://www.mti.org/pilat.htm>

D. BJU missionary linguistics

Bob Jones University has a missionary linguistics program every other summer for missionaries interested in better preparing themselves for language learning. The program involves several courses, involving eight weeks if all the courses are taken.

<http://www.bju.edu/academics/arts-and-science/missionary-linguistics/>

E. SIL-UND summer program

The Summer Institute of Linguistics program at the University of North Dakota is a full-fledged linguistics program designed to terminate in a master's degree in linguistics. The entire program is intensive and demanding, but is first-rate in its materials and content. Two

summers are required to complete the master's degree, but specific courses can be taken and an individual program set up.

<http://www.und.edu/dept/linguistics/>

F. *Baptist Bible Translators Institute*

This organization works to prepare missionaries for language acquisition and basics of translation, as well as other missionary skills including deputation planning, particularly suited to missionaries sent out by their own local church and who endorse the KJV as the only translation in English.

<http://www.baptisttranslators.com/>

G. *Public library resources, local programs*

Many public libraries have language tapes and CDs and other resources including online databases that can aid in language learning, and in many places local universities and colleges will also have language learning programs that are outside the normal daytime schedule of classes.

IV. Sociocultural issues in language

A. *Language acquisition and church planting*

Recent research in particular of missionaries working in Muslim areas shows a dramatic relationship between language learning and success in mission work:

Excerpt from "Orality, Bible Translation, and Scripture Engagement"

Presented by: Dr. Grant Lovejoy, past Director of Orality Strategies for the International Mission Board – BT2009 Conference, October 2009

Recent research has documented the combined impact of the use of local language, having at least one team member fluent in the local language, and appropriate oral or literate strategies. Research reported in *From Seed to Fruit*,¹ edited by J. Dudley Woodberry, found a strong correlation between the use of these communication strategies and effectiveness in starting new churches in Muslim settings. Use of local language rather than regional language was itself strongly correlated with effectiveness in church planting. But the impact of using local language along with the other two factors showed an even more striking correlation. Where all three factors were absent, the probability of planting no churches was 93% and the probability of planting one church was 6%. Where all three factors were present, the probability of planting no churches was 16%, the probability of planting one church was 41% and the probability of planting multiple churches was also 41%. Thus, when teams used all three communication factors, there was an 82% likelihood of planting at least one church. The significance of using oral strategies when appropriate was noted as well: "The impact of incorporating the learning preferences of the people group (oral vs. literate) into team strategy results in an increase in the expected number of churches by a factor of 4.4 (340%)."

¹

J. Dudley Woodberry, ed., *From Seed to Fruit: Global Trends, Fruitful Practices, and Emerging Issues among Muslims* (Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 2008). See especially the technical report on the supplemental CD included with the book.

Summary: If you don't use the local language, you have a 50-50 chance of planting one church. If you use the local language, you have a 76% chance of planting one church. If you use all three strategies, you have an 82% chance of planting one church. If you use none of these strategies, you have a 90% chance of planting no church at all.

B. Team consistency, family, and language skills

1. Other missionaries on the field to where you are going may have lessons already for one of the languages you may need to learn. Find out, get copies, and read ahead of time if possible. Do something as you travel those miles of deputation.
2. A missionary on the field who cannot acquire the language is a lonely person, and pressure and frustrations will inevitably build.
3. When one spouse acquires the language and the other does not, family conflict is more likely to result, and the spouse without the language will be isolated from the ministry of the other.

C. Colonial vs. indigenous language

Arguments for English, colonial, or dominant indigenous language	Arguments for heart language, local language rather than regional
plenty of resources in English	teaching colonial language is failed program of last 200 years
English is a near-universal language	heart-language principle
easier for missionary	defeats image of "foreign" god/religion puts the missionary more on a par with the national
English puts national better in touch with rest of world	ethnocentricity of the outlook, lack of respect for national language
national leaders often feel too many languages will fragment work	true spirit of Pentecost
too great a break with past wisdom	reinforces colonial imagery
best use of limited resources and time	doing a translation in their language is actually cheaper, less time-consuming and requires less resources
teaching English may be only way of entry into some countries	teaching English or LWC makes missions synonymous with education
teaching English is a great drawing card for evangelism and discipleship	suggests something else other than repentance and belief is necessary for salvation
betters the national	finds the nationals where they are
	teaching LWC or dominant language may reinforce local prejudice
	separates the trained national even more from his

	people
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D. Objections

1. Why do I need to learn another language?
2. I don't do well with languages.
3. I am too old to learn a language.
4. I can't make the sounds of that language.
5. My mission says I won't need it, I can use English.
6. English is a world language, can't I get by with just English?
7. Wouldn't it be better for the nationals to learn English?
8. Isn't teaching English a great way to get into a country and get contacts?
9. My husband/wife does better with languages, and there are other people on our team who do better with languages—why don't I depend on them for those things where the language is needed?
10. I can start learning the language when I get there.
11. I am going to language school.

Recommended Reading

Brewster, E. Thomas and Elizabeth S. Brewster. *Language Acquisition Made Practical*. Colorado Springs, CO: Lingua House, 1976.

Heny, Jeannine. "Learning and Using a Second Language," pp. 160-189. Clark, Virginia P, Paul Eschholz, Alfred Rosa (eds.). *Language: Introductory Readings*. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1985. (This article available on the SGI website: missionsmandate.org/sgi)

Larson Donald N., William A. Smalley. *Becoming Bilingual*. South Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library, 1972.

Glenn, chief translation consultant for Bibles International, part of Baptist Mid-Missions, has worked for 16 years with translation projects involving over 30 people groups, working in francophone West Africa, South America, and Southeast Asia. Glenn also serves as an adjunct professor of linguistics at several universities. He and his wife Becky reside in Grand Rapids, Michigan. They have three married children (two sons and a daughter), and six grand-children.