

## Fascinated by Languages



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John Benjamins Publishing Company  
Amsterdam/Philadelphia



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#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Nida, Eugene Albert, 1914-

Fascinated by languages / Eugene A. Nida.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and indexes.

1. Bible--Translating. 2. Nida, Eugene Albert, 1914- I. Title.

BS449. N52 2003

418'02-dc21

2003051907

ISBN 90 272 2601 6 (Eur.) / 1 58811 408 2 (US) (Hb; alk. paper)

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John Benjamins Publishing Co. · P.O. Box 36224 · 1020 ME Amsterdam · The Netherlands  
John Benjamins North America · P.O. Box 27519 · Philadelphia PA 19118-0519 · USA

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## Fascinated by languages

As a small boy I was thrilled to have my grandmother Nida speak to me in German. And I wished so much that I could grow up speaking four languages as our closest neighbors did. In that family, the father, mother, maid, and daughter all spoke German, French, Dutch, and English. How I wished I could be a part of a family like that!

Our family attended a Methodist church, where, as a small boy, I had one of the most meaningful experiences of my life. One Sunday a visiting preacher used the thirteenth chapter of the book of Revelation to prove conclusively that Mussolini was the Anti-Christ, but a week later another visiting preacher used the same passage to prove that Mussolini could not be the Anti-Christ. At first, I did not understand just how the Bible could be used in such a contradictory manner. But my father helped me understand by saying, "In life it is even more important to be able to doubt than to believe, because too many people love the unbelievable."

Bugs and bees were so much more interesting to me than baseball, and as a result my younger brother was convinced that I was mentally deficient, because I preferred making collections of flowers, leaves, wood, sea shells, always labelled with their technical names. I was especially interested in the behavior of animals, and particularly of whales, because we saw so many of them each summer when we vacationed in Newport, Oregon. The fact that whales were actually mammals that had become aquatic millions of years ago seemed astounding, and the realization that dinosaurs once dominated the earth and left fossils of their bones and eggs seemed almost incredible, but obviously true. Even more amazing was the existence of millions of galaxies hundreds of light-years across.

The *Scientific American* (my favorite magazine) and the accounts in Genesis 1 and 2 made sense only as two quite different ways of understanding texts: literally and figuratively. But in Genesis 6 the Bible also says that God himself was sorry for having created people. This I could readily believe because truly good people seem to be so scarce.

Latin and German were the only languages taught in the high school, but at the University of California at Los Angeles, I added French and majored in

Classical Greek. I also had the exciting advantage of studying the books of leading linguists: Bloomfield, Sapir, and Malinowski. And I was especially interested in the distribution of languages and relations between languages and between dialects. All my other courses, however, were in science: physics, botany, biology, and geology.

At the time of graduation in 1936 a friend urged me to consider attending the Summer Institute of Linguistics, held in a farmhouse near Siloam Springs, Arkansas. The students were all keenly interested in doing Bible translating in one or more of the Indian languages of Mexico.

I went to the Tarahumara area of northern Mexico, but had scarcely analysed a dozen texts, when I had serious health problems. Nevertheless, I taught each summer in the program of the SIL until 1952.

At the University of Southern California I also finished a master's degree in patristics, the writings of the early church Fathers. This proved immensely useful to me in later contacts with Orthodox and Roman Catholic scholars. It was especially significant to recognize the manner in which Platonists and Stoics had influenced so significantly the language of the creeds and had interpreted the sayings of Jesus as exalted philosophy rather than Good News. Note, for example, the name of the cathedral in Constantinople named *Santa Sophia*, "Holy Wisdom," a tribute to the influence of the Platonists and the Stoics in early Christianity.

## The American Bible Society

Problems of correctly understanding biblical texts are particularly numerous in translations made by people who have not mastered either the corresponding Greek or Hebrew texts nor the lexical and grammatical structures of the local languages. But similar complaints about poor translations had come from speakers of Japanese, Chinese, Hindi, Arabic, and Russian. Accordingly, in 1943 Dr. Eric M. North, president of the American Bible Society, decided that perhaps a linguist could explain why so many copies of the Scriptures were simply not read or understood, and I was asked to help find some of the answers to a crucial set of problems.

My first task was to evaluate a recently submitted manuscript of the Gospel of Mark from Gabon, West Africa. It was evidently a Bantu language in view of its complex gender prefixes occurring on nouns, adjectives, and pro-

nouns, both free and affixed to verbs. The translator had carefully filled out the forms listing the principal occurrences of key words and parallel passages, so as to highlight the consistency with which the translator had rendered the text of Mark. But I was immediately suspicious because it is rare that key Greek words can or should always be translated in the same way. In fact, key words are very likely to have quite different meanings in diverse contexts. Furthermore, the translated text seemed to follow too closely the wording of the literal American Standard Version in English, although at other points it appeared to depend too much on the Louis Segond French Version, a translation used by most theologically conservative missionaries in French-speaking areas of West Africa.

Because I thought that perhaps Columbia University library might have a grammar or text of a Bantu language spoken in the Gabon, I arranged for an interlibrary loan of a grammar that turned out to be rather closely related to the language of the biblical manuscript. It did not take more than a few hours to recognize the tendency of the translator to be quite literal in some passages and quite free in others. And so I wrote up an eight-page report in which I pointed out a number of problems, especially in those passages in which the translator assumed that he had to be carefully consistent. The real issue is that translators can be consistently wrong as well as consistently right. What one needs to look for are the consistent inconsistencies.

In my report I indicated that the translator obviously had a good grasp of the language because he had used some highly intelligent expressions, especially in those passages that had not been listed as requiring consistency in rendering. It would not be fair, however, to rate the efforts of the translator without sitting down with him and going carefully over major portions of the text. This would mean going to Minneapolis, where the translator was living at that time during World War II.

The translator had been seriously misled by being told that he should follow the American Standard Version of 1901, a text that was an important advance in terms of Greek textual evidence and exegesis, but terribly literal in wording. In fact, in many ways it was more literal and old-fashioned than even the King James Version of 1611.

As soon as the translator understood that it was not the specific words but the meaning of the Greek text that was important, he proceeded to revise the translation so that it would speak meaningfully in the local Yipounou language. But this was only the first of many such experiences in helping transla-

tors see through and beyond the words to the meaning of the text.

In my work for the American Bible Society I was particularly encouraged by James Oscar Boyd, my predecessor in the translations program, who introduced me to *New Testament Studies*, *The Journal of Biblical Literature*, *Interpretation*, and the Hebrew language, as well as to a number of commentaries, as a way of helping me make up for my lack of formal seminary training. But even more important than these academic matters was the kind advice he gave me as we often had lunch together. I particularly appreciated his insistence that judgment is even more important than knowledge and that God never asks people to believe what they know is not true.

I was also very fortunate to be able to work closely with Margaret T. Hills, librarian of the society. She was an expert in the history of printed Bibles in America and an excellent administrator. Later, the administrative work of the department was handled by Eleanore Dohle, and then Leila Wright, a well-trained administrative assistant educated in Jamaica, guided the administrative aspects of the Translations Department for more than thirty years. In the preparation of the Greek-English Lexicon Karen Munson was my indispensable colleague for several years. My first wife, Althea Lucille Sprague, who earned advanced degrees in both theology and commercial science, was a loyal companion in work and travel for almost fifty years, and in this book most references to *we*, *us*, *our* represent her help and encouragement.

## The United Bible Societies

Shortly after hostilities ceased in Western Europe, Herman C. Rutgers of the Netherlands Bible Society visited the United States for discussions concerning plans for the establishment of the United Bible Societies. Because of a long history of sending out linguists to do translating of the Scriptures into a number of major languages in Indonesia, the Netherlands Bible Society was especially concerned about arrangements for future Bible translating.

Since many Indonesians had excellent theological training and were competent in both Greek and Hebrew, it seemed unwise to think in terms of sending out Dutch linguists to do the actual translating, because the time required to master the languages and the distinctive cultures would be entirely too long if the needs of the churches were to be met. Rutgers wisely believed that the Bible Societies should pay more attention to linguistics and cultural

anthropology, and he proposed that the Netherlands Bible Society sponsor an international conference of Bible translators in 1947, following the establishment of the United Bible Societies, scheduled for a founding meeting in England in 1946.

For the meeting of translators and linguists in 1947 it would be important to have a document, perhaps even a book, that would outline the various problems and provide a series of recommendations about future possibilities. In order to respond to this need, I wrote a book called simply *Bible Translating*, published in 1947 by the American Bible Society. All my other books, however, have been published commercially because this usually meant a wider distribution, and the income from royalties could go directly to the American Bible Society.

The founding meeting of the United Bible Societies was held in May 1946 in Haywards Heath, England, and was attended by sixty-one participants from thirteen countries. Several of us from the American Bible Society flew together to London, but we were completely unprepared for what we saw: whole blocks of houses blown to bits and vast areas of nothing but rubble. We had read about the bombing and had seen pictures of the devastation, but the shock of what we witnessed formed a striking backdrop for the necessity of combining all of our resources in money and people to meet the severe needs of a shocked world. What unnerved me most, however, was the chilling scream of a small child during a theatrical performance in which toy bombs were exploded.

The representative of the Norwegian Bible Society described how the Nazi police entered the Bible depot in Oslo and demanded that he turn over all books written by Jews. But he replied, "All the books here were written by Jews." The police, however, did not know what to do because their orders were to take only certain books, and so they left without taking any.

This brave Bible Society director and former chaplain in the Norwegian army, had received each day detailed information about German troop movements, military flights, and the sailing of vessels, which he reported each night by telephone through Sweden to the Allied headquarters in London. All this was done without writing down a single word so that others could not be implicated.

Bishop Eivind Berggrav of Norway, who had been under house arrest by the Gestapo for months, was a firm and congenial host with his long-stemmed

pipe which he used for rapping on the table from time to time. He explained his need for the long stem as being the result of his mother's admonition to stay as far away as possible from tobacco.

The arrival of Bishop Hanns Lilje from Germany was the emotional high point of the meeting. He had been delayed because of visa difficulties, but when he finally showed up at the door, Bishop Berggrave, his good friend and colleague for many years, rushed to meet him. And there in the middle of the room the two men met with tears running down their cheeks.

Most of the discussions were led by Eric North, who had prepared a document on principles and procedures for a new epoch of cooperation, and Gilbert Darlington, treasurer of the American Bible Society, showed how the program could be financially underwritten. They also had the full support of their British opposite numbers, Arthur Wilkinson and John Temple, as well as the enthusiastic approval of all the other delegates.

A key person in the formation of the United Bible Societies was Olivier Béguin, a trilingual Swiss, who had accomplished the impossible in printing and distributing Scriptures to prisoners of war on both sides of the conflict. The rules of the societies prevented the Bible Societies from printing less than a complete book of the Bible, but Gilbert Darlington felt that this was a serious mistake, especially during the crucial period of the war, and so he personally paid for hundreds of thousands of copies of the Sermon on the Mount to be published in a number of languages and distributed widely. The profound appreciation for this farsighted act prepared the way for millions of Scripture selections to be distributed in scores of languages all over the world.

As a coordinating organizer for the work of the United Bible Societies and as a creative guide for various aspects of the Bible Societies, Béguin was a genius. Even as an interpreter between German, French, and English speakers, he had the unique ability to interpret severe arguments in such a way that everyone involved was convinced of Béguin's sympathetic integrity. We soon became close colleagues and friends.

The meeting in Haywards Heath was only the beginning, but it laid the foundation for an organization, that now consists of more than one hundred national Bible societies that benefit from joint budgets and from shared plans for meaningful translations into large and small languages. This was a very opportune time because during the following fifty years at least some books of the Holy Scriptures were published by the Bible Societies and other organiza-

tions into more new languages than during the entire preceding centuries of Christianity.

In October 16 to 22, 1948, the Netherlands Bible Society hosted the first international conference of Bible translators in Woudschoten, Holland. The focus of the discussions was not on Greek or Hebrew texts or on new exegetical insights, but on the application of linguistics and anthropology to the problems of communicating the message of the Scriptures in both new and old languages. Participants discussed the various techniques for determining dialect distinctions between geographical and socio-economic dialects, and how best to evaluate dialect differences in view of the religious and linguistic needs of the churches.

One of the major themes was a new approach to helping translators. Instead of depending on correspondence about issues that society-based secretaries would never be able to deal with adequately, the shift was toward field surveys by technically-trained people and translation consultants who would live and work in different parts of the world. In this way they could give almost immediate help on hundreds of major and minor matters. This would also mean constant field visits by translation secretaries as a way of determining how best to serve the entire constituency and especially the numerous “new” languages in what were previously colonies.

Trips, however, would not be enough. A journal published by the United Bible Societies for translators was crucial for keeping these new concepts alive and showing people how they work. Some persons, however, were so skeptical about such a journal that they voted for it only because they were sure that it could not be continued for more than six months. But that is when I became a prolific ghost-writer.

In checking manuscripts with translators, I frequently encountered fascinating solutions to widespread problems, but the local translators often did not have the time or thought that they did not have the experience to write about such matters. Accordingly, I asked them to tell me as much as they could about what they or we had discovered, and then I would write an article if they would permit the use of their names as authors.

The following sections dealing with travel and the study of typical problems in languages throughout the world represent the highlights of more than two hundred trips that I made during some forty years to different parts of the world in order to learn about problems of linguistic and cultural differences

that prove to be so crucial for proper interlingual understanding. In fact, I was normally traveling between seven and eight months a year and once we traveled for a year and a half without returning home. Additional types of problems are also discussed in later sections that focus on typical problems faced by translation consultants.

## **Part I: In more than ninety countries**



## Travel surprises

By traveling and working in more than ninety countries, I have also had some fascinating and completely unexpected surprises. On one occasion I was riding a slow train that went once a week from Chihuahua City to Creel in northern Mexico. In fact it was so slow that a man on horseback, who had missed the train at the last stop, caught up with the train on horseback and swung onto the last coach.

The train was so desperately slow and the day so warm that I fell asleep, and about an hour or so later I woke up and looked out to see what appeared to be Kansas. The farm houses were neat dwellings with fences, grass, and huge barns, something I had never seen in Mexico. The fields of corn were being harvested just as in mid America. I thought I must be dreaming, and like so many other people in similar circumstances I pinched myself to see whether I was awake or sleeping. But then the train limped slowly into a little town where all the signs were in German. I was convinced that I must be losing my mind. And there at the door to the coach were people talking in German. I immediately broke in and said, "Wo bin ich? Where am I," and they immediately told me that I was in a Mennonite colony of German-speaking people who wanted nothing to do with war and had come to Mexico to live out the implications of their faith.

On another occasion our flight from Juba in the Sudan to Nairobi in Kenya was canceled, and we had to go by boat and train, but what a marvelous trip: elephants trumpeting in tropical grasslands, hippos gathered along swampy river banks, vast herds of gazelles and zebras, crouching lions moving in for a kill, and flocks of birds that darkened the sky.

But as the sun was setting, a man rushed into our railroad coach shouting, "Dr. Nida! Dr. Nida!" I was startled, but the man immediately urged me to get off the train and to accompany him to his home high in a nearby mountain. He insisted that he must have help in correcting the proofs of a New Testament text that he had just received from the American Bible Society. How he knew I was on the train, I never learned, but I rushed out with him and rode with him up a narrow mountain road along which eight persons had been murdered the night before.