

Video in a translation program: to use or not to use

Hargrave, David J

David J. Hargrave has a B.A. in Bible from Biola University as well as an M.A. in New Testament Studies and an M.Div. in Theology from Trinity Evangelical Divinity School. He joined SIL in 1966. He and his wife, Susanne, serve in Australia where David has been a translator, translation consultant, and is currently SIL's Australia Aborigines and Islanders Branch Director.

1 Development of video in the AAIB

The use of video in the Australia Aborigines and Islanders Branch (AAIB) has been developing over the last eight years. Much of the impetus has come from the Media Department of the Australian Division at Kangaroo Ground. Roy Gwyther-Jones has had a great influence on the AAIB, as well as on SIL in general, in getting us started using video. Some of the first contacts with video were materials that were filmed at International Conferences by him.

Some of AAIB's first videos were in the area of publicity. A number of our field teams have developed video programs for use in their personal deputation. Gwyther-Jones assisted several teams in making these videos. In addition to that, videos have been prepared during the dedication of two of our New Testaments. One of these was done in conjunction with the Australian Division, and one was done by a member. These publicity videos have been used with considerable effect in small group meetings and in other P.R. work.

One of the main uses of video in the AAIB has been in the area of literacy. The translators working in the Kriol language have developed a series of video programs based on Sesame Street; it has had good reception in many schools and communities. Programs have also been developed in other languages to show aspects of the culture as well as helping people to learn to read.

2 Video and translation

As the use of video has developed in the AAIB, its application to the translation area has not been neglected. The Murrinh-patha language team was able to borrow equipment from the local school and put portions of the book of James on video. The audio was direct from the translated material with the video material depicting the spoken text. Local people were used as the actors in this video, which was well received by the people of the community.

Several other teams began to experiment with putting translated materials on video. The Kriol team has put Ruth, Philemon, and James on video. Translators with the Pitjantjatjara have done the Good Samaritan and other passages, and the Burarra team have done the Stoning of Stephen and other portions. Some other attempts have been made in using local people to make videos that are simply placing the translated Word in a visual setting.

A number of years ago AAIB received a set of fifteen reels of film which depicted the book of Luke. This venture was produced by the Genesis Project, entitled The New Media Bible. The films were well received in a number of communities, despite the fact that they were in English. Though we had hoped to develop an audio tract in the various languages, we were never able to get the project started. We later heard that these films were produced on video at a very reasonable price. Because of this, several of our teams became enthusiastic about the possibility of putting their translation of Luke on these videos, since these

visual effects more closely depicted the actual setting in the Middle East. However, the ownership of the copyright has changed hands, and we have as yet to receive permission to proceed with this project.

One area that has been used by at least two teams is the development of drama. In both of these Torres Strait Islander groups, the Kala Lagaw Ya and the Meriam Mir, drama plays a significant cultural role. Therefore, these teams have worked out some dramatized portions of Scripture allowing the local people to use their own initiative in the development of the script and the acting out of the various roles. These videos have been popular both in the local area in which they have been produced as well as in other areas where people of these language groups live. A further aspect that relates to this is the filming of Christian corroborees for use on video. These are ceremonies that the Aboriginal people themselves have developed to depict various biblical happenings.

A further area for using the video is also being explored. This has to do with the visualizing of Scripture truths. This area needs to be handled very sensitively so that we are not seen to be moving heavily into the area of the teaching of Scripture. The general thought is to put various Scripture portions on the same topic together along with a visual portrayal of what those Scriptures are saying to the people. One topic that is being explored is the area of drinking. This has become a major problem in many communities, and the thought is to develop a video that lets the Scriptures themselves speak to the issue of drunkenness with the added emphasis that the visual effects can give.

3 Problems with the use of video

3.1 Visualising material that is the same as the text

One of the difficulties that has to be faced in the production of video material is faithfulness to the text. The material being portrayed must accurately depict the text that accompanies the visual display. This is extremely important when the translated text of a passage is merely being used to accompany the visual depiction. If the text says one thing and the screen shows something that is at variance with it, it is most probable that the visual material will be accepted as the true "picture."

An example of this type of problem comes from the print media. An illustration was drawn to accompany the story of David and Goliath. This picture showed Goliath lying on the ground with David preparing to cut off his head. The difficulty arose when the translator checked the picture against the text. A discrepancy was noted in that the text said Goliath had fallen on his face, and the picture showed him on his back. It made a better picture, but it also made the translated text appear to be wrong. Since the passage being illustrated was being done in Bible story form, the problem was handled by the translator simply stating Goliath fell on the ground.

This example illustrates the magnitude of the possible problems that could arise in visualising passages of straight translated material. The difficulty could be alleviated if the material being used is just an adaptation of the text. Then the portrayal and text can be made to fit together. If this approach is taken, then it must be clearly indicated that the presented material is an adaptation of the text rather than a straight portrayal of the translated passage.

A related difficulty comes when trying to be faithful to a translated portion that is difficult to portray on the screen. The text may say one thing, but actually visualising the material may be difficult or impossible to achieve. One way of handling this difficulty is to have someone portrayed who is reading that portion of the passage.

3.2 Using already prepared materials

In using a prepared video, such as The New Media Bible, the translation of a passage may not coincide with the portrayal of the passage on the screen. The translators who have used the visual presentation of the book of Luke have found that it was very well done. However, in the process of doing idiomatic translation of a passage, the translated portion may be at variance with the presentation on the screen.

To make a passage understandable to the readers, it may be necessary for the text to be amplified so that the proper meaning can be understood. These amplifications may be necessitated by grammatical considerations in the language or for better understanding within the local cultural scene. But these additions may not be acceptable in light of the material on the screen. Added to this is the fact that the amount of time necessary to present the amplifications may not be allowed by the forward movement of the action on the screen.

Since the film presentation is already finalised, using the translation with it may necessitate changing the text to fit the pictures. This approach of changing the text is not an acceptable principle of idiomatic translation. If anything governs the use of visual presentation of the Scriptures, it should be the principle of the screen portrayal being faithful to the text rather than vice versa.

3.3 Using background music

Most of the videos that have been prepared have an excellent array of background music, but the picking of proper background music can be an area of difficulty as well. Some of the tunes used do not fit the situation well, either from a biblical point of view or a local point of view. It would appear that sufficient study has not been done to see what music will fit the local cultural situation. Much of the music seems to fit the situation based upon a Western perception of the material being presented. Perhaps it would be better to have no background music in some of these cases.

3.4 Observing cultural taboos

A very definite problem in the Aboriginal setting is the death of one of the actors. In many Aboriginal communities, it is taboo to speak the name or show a photo of a recently deceased person. This has even created problems when the deceased individual's name appears on a publication or their photo appears in a publication. Even with audio cassettes this has caused serious difficulty when the individual who recorded the passage dies. There are portions of the recorded Scripture in the Warlpiri language that can no longer be used because the speaker died.

This matter is further exacerbated when a video presentation of the Scriptures has been produced because of the combination of the visual image of the actor as well as his voice. Just this year one of the actors in the Pitjantjatjara version of The Good Samaritan video died. The translators in this project estimate that the video will not be able to be used for ten years.

3.5 Using the videos in the long term

The long term use of videos is questionable. The expense and effort that goes into making them does not seem to be justified, based on the shortness of life for the videos. They get used a lot at the start, but the use tapers off quite quickly. Even the most popular of videos, for example, showing children riding their BMX bikes, falls out of use very rapidly. For these reasons, the Murrinh-patha translator is no longer making videos.

Another observation has to do with their usefulness for developing personal reading of the Scriptures and Bible study. Videos are definitely useful in creating interest in the Scriptures, but their long term use in these areas seems to be limited. Again the matter of expense and effort must be weighed against the positive influences that videos may have in getting the Scriptures into use.

The taboo placed on videos that have deceased persons in them has already been mentioned. This, too, can contribute to the videos having a short life span.

3.6 Distinguishing between the Scriptures and adaptations

One of the persisting problems is distinguishing between the use of actual straight translation and Scripture portions that have been adapted for use in video. In the print media there have been problems with readers trying to distinguish between straight translation, Bible summaries, panoramas, and Bible stories. An effort has been made to help the reader by identifying the material in an introduction or preface to the publication. If the reader avails himself of this preliminary material, it will help him to discern between what is actually the Bible and other material.

When it comes to visualising the Scriptures, how can the viewer know whether what he is seeing is a part of the Scriptures or only an adaptation of what the Scriptures say? Some statement may be made at the start of the video as a disclaimer, but can we expect the viewer to note this?

3.7 Understanding the medium

Cinema, television, and video are very powerful forms of media. Some leaders in Third-World countries have been very concerned about the effect these forms of media will have upon their people. In the AAIB we have been concerned about the effect of satellite television upon the Aboriginal and Islander peoples who live in more remote areas of Australia. Not only are we concerned about the effects upon the culture but the very real effects that this medium will have on language use.

Cinema and video are found throughout the remote areas of Australia. Movies featuring violence and sexual behaviour are available to everyone. The video has become a prime form of entertainment in some places. What is portrayed on the screen may either be accepted without critical appraisal or disregarded because it is only used as entertainment. It would appear that videos are very effective in catching the attention of an audience, but how effective are they at keeping up long term interest?

This raises several questions in regard to the use of video. Does the video medium contribute to the understanding that Scripture on video is just another form of entertainment? Does a video representation of the Scripture evoke a passive response from the viewer? What "message" is being communicated by using the video medium? The use of video has great potential, but these questions must be considered before videos are accepted as the answer to taking God's Word to postliterate societies.

3.8 Understanding the problem of silent language

Using video also brings in the problem of hidden messages or silent language. A video or film can communicate many messages to the receiver. Much of the message may be quite clear to the perception of Westerners. However, some of the matters that are taken to be clear to us may be communicating quite another message to the audience for whom we have prepared a translation. These messages may be hidden to us but are readily available to the audience.

There are seven aspects of silent language behavior that need to be considered in cross-cultural communication (Hesselgrave, 283-84).

3.8.1 Physical characteristics. The appearance of the actors in a video may have a direct influence on the understanding of the audience. Such things as general appearance, physique, skin colour, and other factors may be saying things to the audience which the translator is not aware of. If a prepared video has a blond-haired, blue-eyed Jesus, this can give an impression that Jesus is for foreigners, but not for them. If local actors are used, the people need to understand this is merely a portrayal of a historical event and not be given the impression the characters of the story were from a local setting.

3.8.2 Body motion (body language or kinesics). This is particularly a problem when a prepared video is used. The translated text may be added to the visual production so that faithfulness to the text is retained. However, the actions of the actors--gestures, movements of the eyes, position of the feet, facial expressions, and other physical phenomena--may be undermining the oral message. There are acceptable forms of body language in each culture, and a video made outside of the culture may be unacceptable

because of the unconscious actions of the actors. Hence, this is a strong argument for the production being done by the local people for whom the translation has been done.

3.8.3 Touching behavior. These types of behavioral actions are particularly relevant when actions between the sexes are portrayed in the video. It also can be very important in the normal social structure of the culture. Should bodily contact occur in greetings, farewells, in scenes portraying fights, etc? The local cultural equivalents need to be taken into consideration if the filming is to communicate the proper message.

3.8.4 Spatial relationships (proxemics). A correct acquaintance with the culture will indicate that there is a proper distance for conversation, that seating arrangements need to be based on local observance, and that territoriality must be observed. If these are incorrectly portrayed in the video, it can be a cause for an improper understanding of the message.

3.8.5 Temporal relationships. Time means different things in different cultural settings. A problem that has to be faced in making a video is the matter of flashbacks and flashforwards in the story. Another technique in film-making is moving quickly from one scene to another. This can cause much misunderstanding on the part of an observer who is not acquainted with these techniques. However, this is often a problem that has to be faced in the formal translation process as well. Perhaps an unskewing of the complex line of events is a way of handling this problem.

3.8.6 Paralanguage. This includes such matters as intonation, rate of speaking, pauses, voice inflection, and articulation. There may be differing forms of paralanguage for public address as opposed to private conversations or special forms of speech that are appropriate for different occasions. Silences may also communicate meaning. The meaning of what is said is important to the translator, but the way the message is said will also convey meaning. This needs to be observed by the actors or by those who are adding the audio portion of a prepared video.

3.8.7 Artifacts and environmental factors. If authenticity to the biblical setting is desired, then these factors are important. Anachronistic additions to the video can give the wrong understanding of the passage to the observer. The dress of the actors or the setting must not communicate the wrong meaning. The possessions of the actors need to be in line with the status of the individuals they are portraying. Even colours may be communicating hidden messages to the audience.

4 Conclusion

Video is an important medium which can be used with great effect in many areas. All of these foregoing issues may not become problems in the use of video. However, those who prepare videos as an alternative to written portions of the Scriptures or as an aid to getting written Scripture into use need to take these matters into careful consideration.

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