

# The Ethnolinguistic Reality

## The Complexity of the Task

by Ralph D. Winter

I often talk about the mystery of the universe. The scientists are more and more baffled about where it came from or what it is. Every day, it seems like, it's more complicated than it was before. We live in the era of the befuddled scientists, who are smarter than any scientists who ever lived before, but also more aware of their limitations. The same thing applies to the origin of life and the origin of civilization.

Into this puzzling mass of evil and incredible cruelty and depravity and brilliance and evidence of God's creation and the damage of Satanic fury, the "Reconquest" enters. The Reconquest is the another mystery. Even the Bible refers to it as a mystery. The Jews thought that God was trying to benefit them—only them. That they were supposed to be part of the global Reconquest wasn't supposed to be a mystery—but it was. Paul refers to it as a mystery in Ephesians 3.

The Reconquest is indeed the main subject of the Bible. We really need to see only one book, not 66. It's probably very disconcerting for outsiders (people outside of the church) to understand us when we start to talk about 66 books in the Bible. It would be better to say that we have one book with two parts, a single book that has an inspired introduction—which constitutes Genesis 1-11—that gives the backdrop of the good creation, the evil penetration, the hopeless result. Now, that's a beautiful backdrop for the rest of the redemptive story of the Bible, which essentially is the Reconquest.

### Peoples' Concept

Abraham is the key person in that Reconquest: He is called out to be a

blessing to the peoples of the world. This is where the term *peoples* very centrally enters the story of the Bible. It is not a modern invention of sociologists, anthropologists or missiologists, but really a rediscovery of what the Bible was talking about all along.

The mission mandate, starting with the first pages of the Bible, in the minds of a growing number of Hebrew scholars and Old Testament scholars, actually has been covered up in earlier literature in this century by the phrase "Abrahamic Covenant." However, if we were to go far enough back, we would hear it referred to as the Great Commission again. Somehow, in every era of mission renewal, we rediscover the Bible, write a bunch of books, then forget about them, and then ignore the significance of thing we found and reduce it to phrases like, "the Abrahamic Covenant," when in actuality it was the Great Commission—the mission mandate of the Bible.

But notice the frequency of the phrase *peoples* in the Bible. The English translation gives us terms such as nations, families, peoples—different translations use different words. Even the Hebrew uses different words. Now when we're counting peoples, would we count the *mish pa'hah*? For instance, when the people of Israel went into the land of Canaan there were 60 *mish pa'hah*, that's my list of 60 peoples. But David Barrett insists that there are only 12, but he uses the word *goyim*. You see, the Bible uses both words.

I personally don't recall ever opposing the use of other categories of "peoples," but I have found that many people are very disconcerted if you intimate that the Bible itself, much less

anthropology, conceives of peoples within peoples. They get very uncomfortable. They would rather like it to be French, German, Latin, Spanish. They can't imagine these languages being grouped into phyla and families and so forth. It just really disconcerts many people who want to have it simple. But the Bible itself is not simple, it speaks of of peoples within peoples.

Basically what we're up against is to determine what is a people? You can diagram peoples in different ways. You could diagram them into subgroups that divide into subgroups. The whole history of science is the progressive revealing of much-resented increased complexity. When my father went to school, atoms were seen to marbles. When I went to school, they were little solar systems with things going around on the outside. When my kids went to school, inside the nucleus there were all kinds of particles. Now they've finally discovered the quarks or whatever, and inside these 32 subatomic particles and their symmetry and so forth represent a whole new world—who knows what worlds are even smaller than that—and we're just beyond ourselves. It seems like the more we know, the less we know! It's very embarrassing for scientists, of all people, who would like to be able conquer reality.

In my opinion, we need to take a little dose of humility. We so casually speak of unreal categories. For instance if a friend of yours says that their sister is studying to learn to speak Chinese, you wouldn't bat an eye at that statement. But if she said, "I'm learning to speak European," you'd laugh at her. However, we don't realize that both statements are equally foolish. We normally

don't know enough about the Chinese mega-people to realize that Cantonese and Mandarin are as different as Italian and German.

It's very reassuring for things to be simple, and very discouraging for things to get increasingly complicated. Maybe God has allowed us to gradually uncover the reality bit by bit so that we would be able to learn it along the way, so that this increased complexity doesn't overwhelm us.

### The Mississippi River

Recently I was speaking to a group in England and I was supposed to talk about unreached peoples. I got hold of an atlas of the United States, turned it upside down, and took a piece of paper, and traced off the Mississippi River Valley—all the different rivers, including the Arkansas River, Ohio River, Missouri River, and so forth. Then I threw that on a screen and asked, "Now, what is this? It looks almost like an upside down bush. It all comes down to the top"—which of course is the bottom of the map—of the Mississippi River. I continued: "But now, how many rivers are there? What are their names? Can you give me a list? We're not going to be able to do the work we need to do if we don't have a list. Tell me!"

Well, what is a river? When the Mississippi goes north and then forks off into the Missouri River and then continues illogically with the name Mississippi, which is the shorter part of the river (of course, the people who named the river didn't know that). But what right did they have to name it the "Mississippi" versus the "Missouri"? And they've already let the Ohio River peel off.

So what kind of a business is this? Problem is that we've simply used the wrong framework of description for the reality which we're studying. To make a list of the rivers of that basin is inherently illogical. It does not allow us to see the reality. Or it obscures the

reality, if we're serious about any kind of list of rivers. Furthermore, we might ask, "When is a river a stream, or a brook, or a crick, or a creek?" We have all these words, but they are just inadequate to describe the reality we're studying and want to describe.

### The Morocco List

Recently I was in Morocco and I boned up for the job. I took along with me a list of the peoples of Morocco. I knew in my heart that a list is itself unfaithful to the reality. As soon as one makes a list, the reality is altered. But I took my list, and I showed it to my oldest daughter, who's a real sharp gal, who majored in linguistics, and who had been there for 15 years. She read through this list of peoples. Then suddenly she burst out laughing. I felt a little bit embarrassed and said "Come on, what's so funny about this? This is an impressive list." She said, "Well, Daddy, this one word here refers to the whole group." The word *Shlu* (?) is the whole group; this is the word for all Berbers—not even just the Berbers in Morocco.

But then there are other complexities. In Morocco there are three regions—they often talk about the Berbers in the north, the middle, and the south. Then, in each of these three regions there are different dialects. And no one should hold me accountable for the precise number; which is precisely the whole point of this thing. We don't know—although there is a Wycliffe researcher there who has a far more precise map than any of us. The real point is the structure of ethnography. Those dialects in the three regions break down and subdivide into what is called confederations. These are the words that are commonly used. Then within the confederations there are tribes.

Some of these tribes have very similar languages and cultures, and being so close to each other, like the members of a nuclear family, they kill each

other. (As an aside, that's the most common murder. It happens most frequently within nuclear families, where it's not a matter of misunderstanding what people say; it's the very opposite, where you know exactly what is meant.) So missionaries can't always assume that if you get the Gospel into this or another tribe, that all these others will automatically follow suit.

### Warring Factions

Sometimes it does happen. For instance, in Nagaland there were 14 different groups. The Ao Nagas heard the Word first. They shared it with the next-over tribe, and it went all through Nagaland that way, from tribe to tribe, with the result that 75% of the Nagas today are Christians.

But it isn't always that way. Christian Kaiser, the famous German missionary of the early part of this century, went to Papua New Guinea, as it is now called. He went up into one of the low-land tribal groups at the base of a huge, roaring river coming down from these terrifically high mountains, and won these people to Christ. Then he wanted to go up the river to the next one and do the same. Eventough they spoke a language that was very similar (just like in Nagaland), they didn't like each other (unlike Nagaland). So we can't predict in either case what would happen—a dominoes effect or no dominoes. It's like the Hopi and the Navajos who are very similar in many ways—they understand each other perfectly—but they don't like each other. You have to have Canadians come as missionaries to reach the Hopi because the Navajo can't.

### The Intractable Problem

Wycliffe Bible translators is the largest, most highly-trained, most competent mission agency that has ever existed in Protestant history. They have mastered, through years and years of incredible intellectual endeavor, all kinds

of problems with translation and interpretation and much more. The one absolutely intractable problem which causes them more grief than any other single problem is the question of, "How many people will read this Bible if we produce it?" So they have a whole brand new division that is focused on this challenge. They have translators, they have support personnel, and they have surveyors. Their exclusive task is to bump into this intractable problem and decide, for instance in Morocco, where and when and how to put whom to translate the Bible. That's the reason they're studying this reality. However, they can't tell you in advance what will or won't be a basin of communication for a given tribe or number of tribes. A single translation may bridge three tribes or only one, but they don't know this in advance.

It's just like the scientists, I'm sorry to say. We have to take a little measure of humility. We cannot deny the fact that we can't know in advance all that we would like to know. We need to yield the ground to the reality out there and be content to say, "Look, how many peoples are there in Morocco?... Well, there's Berbers and there's Arabs, and a few French. Ah, yes, and a few American tourists." Well, that's a fairly good way to describe Morocco, especially if we add that the Berbers outnumber all the rest about three to one. But we might ask, "What about the Berbers?... Yes, there's the Northern, and the Middle, and Southern, each with their tribes, dialects and confederations."

It's much like the Mandarin, which has a marvelously creative breakdown of the 100 or 200 Mandarin languages that are mutually unintelligible to each other. They have, creatively called these the Northwest Mandarin and Northeast Mandarin, and Southwest

Mandarin and Southeast Mandarin. Isn't that creative? Of course, that's just a blurry confusion of the complex reality. It really is a blurry confusion of what's out there! The media people are beginning to paste a trade language over the whole of China, and so forth. But that doesn't mean the people themselves speak that language, because only 14% of

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China speaks Mandarin in their homes.

These are complex realities that we have to deal with, and we go on fooling ourselves if we insist that we have to have one list that everyone can agree on. Wycliffe can do its work on the confederation level, as I would predict, in most cases. They would assume that all of these tribes would be able to read this New Testament.

Gospel Recordings on the other hand, targeting the ear gate (which is very much more sophisticated than the printed page, which drops out a great percent of the message coding in language), can't stop at the written level. They have to go to audio level because these people

(especially if they kill each other) recognize the dialect on the cassette—obviously not recognizable on the printed page. So for their purposes, Gospel Recordings always has to do a larger number of translations. Wycliffe is doing what it's doing, for their purposes, with all the intelligence and their competence, while Gospel Recordings is doing what it's doing, according to their purposes. It's not that the Gospel Recordings people are wrong or that Wycliffe is wrong. Each is using a different tool targeting different levels of communication. This type of complexity would also apply to church planting, because that would define a different level of reality with a different dynamic.

#### **Minimal Accomplishment**

The second reality has to do with quantifying the necessary minimal accomplishment in church planting frontier mission efforts. Allow me to use an illustration.

Have you ever heard that anybody had a "mild" case of AIDS, or was "mildly" pregnant? No one would say, "Well, we have to find out

to what extent they're pregnant, or to what extent they have AIDS. What is it? Is it 10% of the white cells that have been invaded, or 5%? When it crosses 2%, we'll call them AIDS patients; otherwise we won't."

The point is when you're dealing with a self-generating movement like the Christian movement, quantities are not important. But qualities are what really are counts. There are people who have had brushes with AIDS, and they didn't really get it. There was a mild invasion and there might have been an embattled reaction, and that dread virus was defeated, or maybe there was some residual pocketing-off of that thing.

But once that thing gets going and is implanted, so far as we know now the person is infected—you've got it. That is despite the Japan conference on AIDS, which they hoped would clarify things, because it only indicated the problem was more complicated to solve than they thought it was. Scientists of all types always are finding out that things are more complicated than it seems. Like them, we too are finding that out.

When the authentic Gospel of Christ penetrates a society and people understand it in their own language, and they have access to the Bible, and they're moving ahead in the Lord (it is a growing concern), there are very few cases in history where that type of movement stopped. Knowing this, the mission question is very precise: How to get that *quality* in there. The *quantity*—whether it is 5% or 2% is really not that important, and we really need not argue about those things. Rather we know what needs to happen in qualitative terms. I'm afraid we can fritter our time away forever getting gnat's-eyelash statistics. It's fun to work with computers. Everyone who knows me knows I like computers. But you know, the question is simpler (as well as more complex). It seems to me, that we may be answering the wrong questions, and there's nothing more absurd than answers to wrong question.

At the very first formative meeting AD 2000 plan for Singapore, for the following year in '89, I spoke about the number of unreached peoples. You know me. I've contrasted my

approach with Patrick Johnstone's; who is a person hoping-for-the-best numbers while mine is a preparing-for-the-worst numbers. So, unless we're going to print two sets of numbers all the time, we probably would need to say, "Look. Let's be very conservative. Let's prepare for the worst." That is precisely the number series I've been using.

Most lists include everybody. The question is, what is the level we need to tangle with especially in frontier missions? We need to be very cautious about statistical monstrosities that are going to tell us all the answers in advance. We'd better get out there and dig in and try to reach these people, and find out when a church-planting movement is going to bump into the barrier, whatever the barrier might be. It isn't a question of linguistics necessarily. It could be cultural barrier, it could be prejudice, it could even be an economic issue. *We have to reach every human being in the world, and we have to penetrate the group in which they would feel at home worshiping our Lord.*

Here is another dimension of the complexity. In Papua New Guinea, those groups up the valley, each having 16 slightly different dialects that were warring and killing each other, would eventually come together in a single Lutheran Synod by 1925. We ask, What's going on now? We're ruining our statistics. We're coalescing groups. But what about the Norwegians and the Swedish? They used to pretend there were two different languages, but in fact, there were dozens of languages

among them. Somehow, with a little bit of the love of Christ, those groups merged. All of this indicates that we're looking at self-generating growing movement. It's a moving target.

## Conclusion

So I'm saying that there are only two basic dimensions of the ethnolinguistic reality which reach beyond the simplicity of our mechanisms of description. I think we need to take that into account. I think if we do, we're not going to feel pressed to argue about which level is the most important. We have to deal with all of the levels. Each level is "a gateway group" as the Southern Baptists nowadays are calling groups like this. If you get into this group here, maybe you can get into this group also, and so forth, and so one group is a gateway for another. Great!

I think that we need to recognize that to complete this task one of the most important factors is to get out there and to dig in, knowing that we will run into the barriers and complexities when we get there. We'll have to cope with them at that point on the ground. It's sort of like invading Haiti—we're not sure what we're going to find until we get there.

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