Assessing the Peoples and Languages of the World

by Ron Rowland

The Peoples Information Network (PIN), along with others, has been seeking to assess the needs for evangelism among the peoples of the world, and the progress towards "culturally indigenous churches that are beginning to send their own missionaries cross-culturally." Our approach can be described under the classic questions: Who? What? Where? When? and Why?

1. Identification: Who?

First came the need to define who the "peoples" were. Many have been the "lists" of peoples, and long have been the discussions, about peoples and languages. The approach of the Peoples Information Network[1] *has not* been that of seeking to generate another list. However, it *has* been to look for reconciliation of the information provided by all involved.

Definition

The meaning of *people* that we use is a modification of the generally accepted 1982 definition.[2] It reads as follows:

> A people or people group is a significantly large ethnic grouping of individuals who perceive themselves to have a common affinity for one another. From the viewpoint of evangelization this is the group within which the gospel can spread as a church-planting movement without encountering barriers of understanding or acceptance.

For the purposes of the Peoples Information Network, social distinctives are not included.[3] We use the word "people" for the narrower definition, leaving the words "people group" to include groups based upon social distinctives.

As I look at this topic there seem to be five "descriptors," that either unite or divide people. These are: Ethnic; Linguistic; Geo-Political; Ideological; Geographic.[4]

Under the Ethnic descriptor we refer to tribes; clans; kinship groups; families: and we know that ethnicity is a very powerful force to unite or divide peoples.

Under the Linguistic descriptor we list such things as language families; language clusters; languages; dialects: all with the potential to unite or divide.

The Geo-political descriptor reflects the fact that sometimes we see different peoples developing, not because of ethnicity or language, but because men have drawn lines on maps, set up borders, and prevented people from moving across those borders freely.

The Ideological descriptor can refer to religion or politics. When a people are so divided by what they believe, it may sometimes be necessary to view them as so separated that they cannot be reached using the same strategy.

Lastly, the Geographic factor is recognized because sometimes people of the same origin are separated by geographic features–rivers, mountains, deserts or jungles.

Let me emphasize that we do not necessarily apply all five descriptors. They are relevant only if they bring about clear divisions, so that a group may not be reachable as a single people.

Classification.

The lists that we have worked with tend to focus primarily upon either *languages* or *peoples*, though both may be present in a specific list. (There are also lists for specific countries. They are not given here, but they are applied to the Registry where possible.)

Language Focus

Ethnologue. 12th Ed. 1992.– Barbara and Joseph Grimes–Updated August 1994.
Atlas of the World's Languages— Moseley and Asher, 1994

Peoples Focus

SBC-FMB–World Evangelization Database; David Barrett–1992.
Operation World Peoples List– Patrick Johnstone–Dec. 1993.
AAPC *The Peoples of the World* 2 Vols. Kaleb Jansen– Apr. 1994.
SBC FMB Peoples List–John Gilbert–Apr. 1994.
Gospel Recordings International– Apr. 1994.
World Vision–Community Development List–John Robb –1993.

The above-mentioned lists have been, or are being, cross-indexed so that we can recognize a single classification for each language or people, while accepting the names existing in the lists. Up-dating continues as newer versions of the lists become available.

Each people or language is then assigned a "ROPAL Code" This is essentially a language code, based upon the Ethnologue 3-letter code, but adding a 2 number extension to distinguish dialects. The basis is linguistic, but we are also seeking to note "habitat" and "people" distinctions in the Register. An example for the Bhili would look something like the following:

BHILI	BHB00
Charani	BHB04
Haburi	BHB06
Kotali	BHB08

It is our hope, that the ROPAL Code will be included in mission databases related to people and/or languages. The Code then becomes a valuable relational tool for the sharing of information.

We have also included recognition of *Language Family Levels* Articles, and even lists, will sometimes use "language" or "people" names that really refer to groups higher than the language. Sometimes this is clearly stated, but at other times it seems confusing. The Registry outlines the language families and gives them a numeric code– so that searches can be done on these "mega-languages." (See Figure 1)
Ethno-Perception

One challenge we face is that of "people" differentiation. For instance, at what level does a group perceive themselves as a "people"? Also at what level are they externally recognized as a people? Although we want to remain within our broad definitions, the answers can only be obtained through local knowledge. Let me illustrate with two examples:
Informal Observation.

We need to reflect some of the complexity of classification–especially in the more densely populated conurbations. This was well illustrated in a paper by Rev. Chan Fong, "People Groups of Singapore."[5] He writes of a proposal to use the "ethnicity-linguistic" approach.

"This approach has the advantage of including certain groups of people who belong neither to the ethnic or language group. For example, the Baba group which I listed in this classification is a combination of the Malays and Hokkiens. Similarly, the Hongkongese is another group that should be a category by itself. There are Hongkong Teochew, Hongkong Hokkien, Hongkong Cantonese, etc. among them, but they do not fall into the Singapore ethnic groups. The Hongkongese are a community by themselves and it is more appropriate to group them under the category Hongkongese."

The report also contains an observation that an estimated 19,700 Hongkong believers will be moving to Singapore within the next 5-8 years. However we understand this, it is clearly a major concern at the local level, and must be accommodated in our handling of "peoples" and/or "people groups."
Formal Recognition

We need to recognize, understand, and map intermediate ethnic levels, as defined within specific countries. This is well illustrated by the situation in India. The Anthropological Survey of India has identified 2198 "Communities" in India.[6] Within the 2198 "Communities", they list 4635 "communities" or "language communities."[7] These language communities are apparently groups of people who speak the same language(s) and reside in the same state. They are not villages, Districts or States. They are identified with the Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, and "Other Communities." [8]

It is apparent that sometimes "peoples" (or "languages") and "communities" are listed together. The lack of differentiation leads to confusion, and to wide discrepancies in the numbers.

Of 75 "unclassified" languages of India in the Registry: 42 community

---

FIGURE 1

FAMILY	LANG.	DIALECT	ROPAL	WEDB	AAPC	GRI
Indo-European						
Indo-Aryan						
Central Zone						
Bhit						
	BARELI		BGD00	Barel	Barel	
	BAURIA		BGE00	Bauria	Bauri	
	BHILALA		BHI00	Bhilala	Bhilala	
	BHILI		BHB00	Central Bhil	Bhil Bhil	Bhil: Akrani
		CHARANI	BHB04		Charani	
		HABURI	BHB06		Haburi	
		KOTALI	BHB08		Kotal	
		KOTVALI	BHB09		Kotvali	
		TADAVI	BHB19			Bhil: Tadavi
		VALVI	BHB22	Southern Bhil		Bhil: Valvi
	BHILORI		BQI00		Bhil, Central	Bhilori

names are identical, 23 names are similar; and only 10 have no obvious similarity. The understanding of the Community System, and how it relates to Christian ministries, must be determined by Indian leaders at the national and local levels.[9]

Diversification.

Another of the challenges we face is that of "geo-political" differentiation. In essence, do we count separately peoples of the same ethnicity and language who are living in different countries?.The answer is that we only want to record them as different if they are isolated for some reason, and cannot be reached evangelistically as a single group. But, how can we know? Again, this is information that can only be provided by people who know the local situation.

Assimilation

In the paper already quoted from Singapore, we see another "ethno-linguistic" challenge that needs to be accommodated—that of language assimilation. Of the 98 "dialect-speaking" congregations in the Chinese community, 52 also use Mandarin, 9 also use English, and 4 also use Cantonese. Two thirds of the Indian community in Singapore is "Tamil"—but only 15.9% of these are literate only in Tamil.
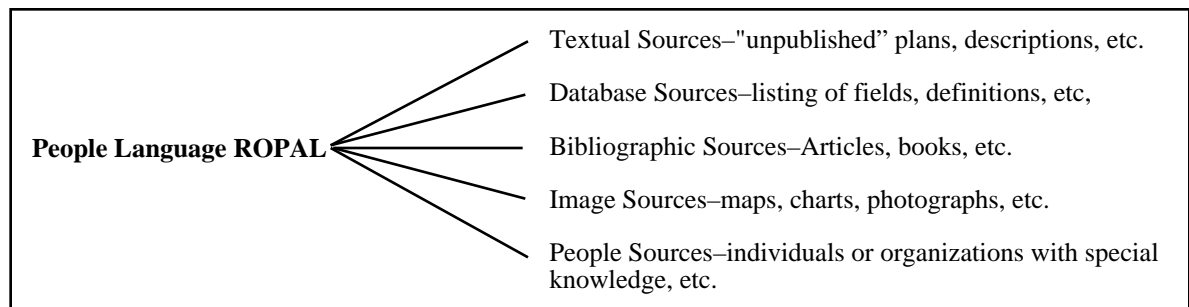
> "All the Indians born in Singapore speak English well. Currently, Indians who retain and communicate in their mother tongue are a small minority, mainly the older ones. This small minority may vanish within the next 30 years." [10]

Clearly, such factors, as perceived at the local level, must be a part of the system, and reflected in a Registry of Peoples and Languages.

Development of ROPAL, as described above, continues–and we hope it will soon reach a "maintenance" mode, in which it can be a satisfactory tool for Missions to apply in their own databases. This we are now calling "ROPAL 1".

2. Information: What?

Although the Registry of Peoples and Languages is not intended to be a broad database of "information" about peoples and languages, we have agreed to gather certain specific information about the "status" of peoples and languages.

Summation.

Currently the third iteration of a survey is being conducted to gather this kind of information. Many organizations are cooperating in this, and we hope to gather the main body of updated information by February-March, 1995.[11]

Indication.

The process has begun for developing "ROPAL 2", which will seek to use the Registry as a "pointing system." The idea is not to compile all information we can, on every People and Language, rather, it is to be able to "point" to sources of information.[12]

Description.

A 1993 survey of mission leaders indicated a keen interest in "Peoples Profiles" The Adopt-A-People Clearinghouse has taken a lead in the preparation of these. Additionally, the opportunity is now available to make the profiles available on Internet, along with a "guide"

to other information available. [13]

3. Location: Where?

Latitude and longitude, and ATLAS.GIS mapping codes, are assigned for specific peoples and languages. The Language Mapping Project [14] has completed the point maps for the World, though some are still in the validation process. Polygons take a little longer. Currently some 56 countries have language polygons, and the target date for completion is late 1995.

Habitats

We cannot work for long with peoples and languages without becoming very aware that people live in "habitats"–

cities, towns, villages, etc. The significance of this is repeatedly underlined as we gather information. Peoples are becoming increasingly dispersed and intertwined—by choice or by force.

Dots or polygons on a map, although valuable, are not always representative of the real situation. I have become increasingly convinced that we need to collect and record people and language information at the habitat level.

Linked to this conviction is the realization that we need more accurate recording and mapping of habitats. This is an enormous undertaking, and will require open cooperation between agencies if it is to be accomplished. It is, however, necessary if we are to use habitat maps as part of our strategies.

SHARE Fellowship has recently begun to form a Habitats Special Interest Group to address some of the same issues that PIN has faced. There

People Language ROPAL

- Textual Sources–"unpublished" plans, descriptions, etc.
- Database Sources–listing of fields, definitions, etc,
- Bibliographic Sources–Articles, books, etc.
- Image Sources–maps, charts, photographs, etc.
- People Sources–individuals or organizations with special knowledge, etc.

is the same need for an agreed coding system, the need to share lists, and for other information as well. The "Habitats Project" operating out of Dallas, is seeking to add latitude and longitude coordinates to all habitats. This has been done for habitats with a population above 50,000. Current efforts seek to bring this to the 25,000 population level.

Currently, a small group of missions is beginning to explore the use of satellite imagery as a basis for more accurate mapping. Our goal is to develop this on behalf of all mission agencies, and to share the technology.

With satellite imagery, the location and size of each habitat is apparent on the raster image map.[15] When a vector image is superimposed, labeling of habitats can be done and database information can be shown. Information gathered at the habitat level can then be combined in a variety of ways to show information at higher levels.

4. Destination: When?

What is our time-table for all of this? Does the work of PIN have significant milestones? Does it have a finishing date?
Global Consultation

As a task force for AD 2000 Movement and Beyond, we hope to complete certain tasks in time for GCOWE '95. For each country we hope to provide the following:
1. A Language Map. We will seek to provide a polygon map wherever possible. Otherwise, a point map should be available.
2. A Language Family Diagram. We are currently developing such diagrams for every country.
3. Statusing information. A survey is currently in progress, and we would hope to provide up-to-date information.
AD 2000.

We will continue to up-date and refine information to assist AD 2000

Movement and Beyond in attaining its goal of "A Church for Every People, and the Gospel for Every Person by the Year 2000."
The Return of Christ.

We hope the work will continue as long as it is needed. PIN is a special interest group of SHARE Fellowship. We do not think that our mandate ends in AD 2001. We seek to serve the Lord until He returns.

5. Transformation: Why?

Clearly one of our goals is to support the work of evangelization around the world, providing information that helps to make the remaining task clear.

Spiritual Formation.

The Registry of Peoples and Languages, however, not only is an "unreached peoples" list. We seek to list all peoples and languages, and desire to see the on-going formation of the Body of Christ as included in our mandate.

End Notes

1. The Peoples Information Network (PIN) came into being in October, 1992. The Steering Committee is drawn from AD 2000 Movement & Beyond, AAPC, Dataserve, SBC FMB, and SIL. The Network now has Partners and Participants from more than 80 Mission Organizations.
2. Lausanne Committee on World Evangelization, Meeting of mission agencies and researchers, Chicago, March, 1982.
3. We have not retained the term "sociological", as used in the Chicago, 1982 definition.
4. Rowland, Ron. Presented at Second Adopt-A-People Consultation, Colorado Springs. April, 1993.
5. Rev. Chan Fong. "People Groups of Singapore". Singapore National Missions Consultation.

6. "The term community is used here in an anthropological sense. Apart from the traditional parameters such as endogamy, social and political organization and language, the self perception of a community as well as its perception by others has been taken into account" People of India. Vol. IX, *Languages and Scripts*, Oxford, 1993.
7. The word "communities" seems to be used at both levels.
8. The "Chinese Nationalities" system bears a superficial similarity, but appears to have been politically imposed.
9. It is my understanding that the Church Growth Association of India has begun an extensive survey of Indian communities.
10. Ibid.
11. Survey forms are being distributed through AAPC, SBC-FMB and SIL. Groups like YWAM are cooperating extensively.
12. This is a team project, with Billy Graham Library (Wheaton), SHARE Fellowship, GMI, et al.
13. Abilene Christian University and Daystar are interested in developing a Special Interest Group.
14. A combined project of Global Mapping International and the Summer Institute of Linguistics—Strategic Information Office
15. We are currently exploring the use of 20-meter or 8-meter resolution.

Ron Rowland is the International Coordinator of Strategic Information for WBT/SIL, and the Coordinator of the People Information Network. He and his wife Muriel reside in Dallas Texas, USA