
Goal: Vernacular Scriptures in use¹

A case study from the Paez of Columbia

by Marianna Slocum

Originally published in 1987

Republication © FOBAI 2009

In many areas of Latin America, the arrival-on-the-scene of a vernacular New Testament comes after prolonged use of the Scriptures in the national language, Spanish or Portuguese, imperfectly or inadequately understood by the native language speakers. Since the national language, with a long history of use, both oral and written, is naturally the prestige language, the introduction of a translation in the vernacular needs special promotion to convince the speakers of a non-prestige language of the value of the Scriptures in their own language. The following case history of the Paez, a minority language group in the Andean highlands of Colombia, South America, shows the way the use of the vernacular Scriptures is being promoted among them.

Background

The Gospel first entered the Paez tribe over 50 years ago, through The Christian and Missionary Alliance (C&MA) missionaries who evangelized in Spanish, with interpretation into Paez by the first Paez believer, Porfirio Ocana. The first generation of Paez Christians used the Spanish Bible, which most, who were monolingual, could not benefit from, but which they esteemed as the Word of God. The translation team came on the scene 35 years later, at the request of The Alliance, which realized that the Paez believers needed the Word of God in their own language in order to become a strong, enduring indigenous church. From 1969 on, the translation team published portions in limited editions: Life of Christ, Sermon on the Mount, Parables, Mark, Epistles of John, Revelation, and so forth. In 1980, the Paez New Testament (NT) came off the press—the first time the Paez believers had access to the complete NT in their mother tongue. The question was: Would they continue to use the only partially understood Scriptures in the prestige language? Or would they accept the idiomatic translation in their own non-prestige language as being also the Word of God?

First of all, the older Paez leaders who had used the Spanish Bible in their preaching for many years had to be convinced that fuller comprehension of God's Word could be gained by using the Paez translation. Some had been trained in Bible school in the Spanish Scriptures and found

¹ This article is a revision of: Slocum, Marianna. 1987. 'Goal: Vernacular Scriptures in use.' *Notes on Scripture in Use* 15:7–11.

it difficult to transfer spiritual terminology from Spanish into their own language. Paez, a Chibchan language, expresses truths differently from Spanish, sometimes requiring drastic restructuring to convey spiritual terms. Abstract nouns such as “salvation,” “grace,” “forgiveness,” “peace,” become verbs in Paez. “Faith” is often rendered by the verb “say” or “think” plus a direct quote—a far cry from the two-letter word *fe* in Spanish which they had been using up until then. As a result, the leaders had to be retrained to find and use equivalent expressions in Paez.

Secondly, the younger second- and third-generation Paez Christians were dubious about “reverting” to their own Indian “dialecto.” They aspire to learn Spanish, so as to be able to function in the Spanish-speaking community around them—an aspiration with which we are in full accord, as long as they retain their own mother tongue as well. Some purposely had not been allowed to speak Paez by their elders, in a misguided attempt to force them to be on a par with non-Paez speakers. We had to convince them of the credibility of Paez as a viable means of communication in written form.

In addition, there was zero literacy rate in Paez, a newly written language with no prestige associated with it; low literacy rate in Spanish, due to a dearth of schools in the Paez area, either government- or church-sponsored; and no infrastructure existing for a tribe-wide literacy effort. Compounding the problem was the difficulty of maneuvering throughout two ranges of rugged Andes mountains where subversive activity was rife, among 68,000-plus widely scattered and economically depressed people. Literacy has low priority compared to survival! Such was the scenario in which the Paez translation was produced (1964–1980).

For the Paez Scriptures to be accepted and used by the Paez Christians, we had to do more than just provide the translation. We needed:

1. to convince them that their mother tongue was a worthy vehicle of expression
2. to prove to them the credibility of the translation into their own language, and
3. to enable them to make the transition from low or zero comprehension in Spanish to in-depth comprehension in Paez

I. The credibility factor

To ensure that the translation would have the backing of the Paez church leaders, we enlisted their help in producing the translation. Porfirio Ocana, the first and most highly esteemed Christian in the whole region, was our main language helper and co-translator, giving credibility to what was produced as well as being retrained himself in the process of developing spiritual terminology in Paez. Rogerio Yonda, a younger Paez leader who had studied five years in a Bible school in Spanish, became our main translation helper for the whole New Testament, thinking through all the concepts of the NT and rephrasing and restructuring them in natural Paez style. The 11 years he collaborated at the translation table, interspersed with his teaching in the C&MA Bible Institute, afforded him an in-depth understanding of the Scriptures that he affirmed far surpassed a Bible school education. Julian Yonda, a bilingual Paez pastor, added his

insights to the translation with a special gift for converting any unnatural or ambiguous rendering into vigorous, highly communicative Paez. Isauro Yotengo, a dynamic young teacher who heads up the Paez literacy program, had vital input by reason of his expertise in the dialectical variations of Paez and his sensitivity to the younger generation's language attitudes. The combined efforts of these church leaders with diverse gifts but acknowledged competence, resulted in the New Testament: God's message in Paez. We found that the caliber of those who helped produce the translation is a crucial factor in giving it credibility among their own people.

2. The comprehension factor

Another factor that is as important as the credibility factor is the comprehension factor. Do the Scriptures in the vernacular stand the crucial test of providing increased comprehension of God's Word as compared to the Scriptures in the national language? For the Paez to be motivated to read and study the Paez Scriptures, they had to be convinced that they could understand what God had said better in their own language than in Spanish.

2.1. Courses

In addition to those Paez church leaders who participated in the translation process, there were the leaders of the 50-plus Paez congregations who needed instruction in how to use the Paez New Testament. To meet this need, we have held two- to three-week courses each year for selected Paez pastors and teachers, using the facilities of the C&MA Bible Institute. The curriculum consists of classes in:

- Reading Proficiency in Paez, so that they could confidently and accurately read the Paez Scriptures in front of a congregation
- Paez Grammar, which proved to be extremely interesting to them
- Translation Principles underlying the translation of the Paez NT
- NT Terminology, using as text a newly compiled glossary of key terms in Spanish with their equivalents in Paez
- Creative Writing in Paez, producing Old Testament stories such as Daniel and Ruth in simplified, condensed form

The Paez participants in the course, on their own initiative, added another feature to the curriculum: Program Planning for promotion of literacy and bilingual education, formulating a four-year graded study program to produce their own certified Paez specialists in literacy and bilingual education. The same participants attend each year, in order to upgrade their abilities, and are then assigned to take part in the Paez literacy program, teaching others of their own people. At the end of each course, each participant receives an impressive certificate with gold seal—an added incentive to be one of those chosen by the Paez church to attend.

2.2. Glossary

To facilitate the transition from terminology in Spanish to terminology in Paez, we prepared a diglot glossary of key terms in the NT. It is entitled "Key words in the New Testament: Spanish-Paez." The booklet is the same size as the Paez NT and is to be used in conjunction with it. The

Bible Society offers a translator the option of including a glossary in the vernacular NT, as is done in the Spanish Version Popular; we found it more feasible to publish the glossary separately, and to make it diglot, in order to serve as transitional material between Spanish and Paez NT terminology. We purposely restricted the glossary to the most-used terms, and limited it in scope so as not to overwhelm the reader or be too costly.

The glossary consists of one hundred and 55 terms, in the following format:

1. The term in Spanish
2. Definition of the term, as given in reliable Spanish Bible dictionaries
3. Equivalent terminology in Paez
4. References from the Paez NT, as in a concordance

It also contains two full-page illustrations: birds and animals of Judea, and birds and animals of Galilee, from *The New Bible Dictionary*, IVP, 1962.

The preface of the glossary states: “The purpose of this vocabulary is to enable the reader of the NT to make the transition from Spanish to Paez of many of the most-used terms in the New Testament. Some concepts are expressed in Paez by a descriptive phrase. Other terms have figurative as well as literal meanings. Certain words have multiple senses, which are listed. Sometimes it is necessary to make explicit the implicit meaning of a term in order to convey the meaning accurately.”

In teaching the course in NT terminology to 18 Paez pastors and teachers in July–August 1985, in the language area, I used the glossary as a text and had a chance to observe its effectiveness. It was well received by the Paez leaders who had been struggling to understand the Spanish Bible before they had the NT in their own language. It proved especially advantageous to them in the following ways:

1. Specialized NT terminology for which they lacked background was clarified by the idiomatic renderings in Paez.
2. Comparison of intelligibility between Paez and Spanish (in such passages as Mark 1:4, resulting in a clear win for the Paez rendering) convinced them of the validity of the Paez translation.
3. By contrasting heretofore misunderstood passages in Spanish with easily understood Paez renderings, their own language gained prestige in their eyes.
4. From in-depth understanding of the text in their own language, they gained increased competency in understanding the Spanish text and in interpreting from Spanish into Paez.

Formerly, when the Paez pastors had preached from the NT, they had usually been limited to retelling narratives from the Gospels and Acts, because that was the extent of their knowledge of Spanish. Now, with the Paez NT in hand and increased comprehension of NT terminology, they were able to preach confidently from Romans, Ephesians, Revelation—a transition from purely narrative genre to expository and hortatory genre, with resultant spiritual deepening in the lives of the believers. Increased comprehension of the truths of the Word gave them increased confidence in using the Word.

3. The prestige factor

Another factor affecting the acceptance of the Paez translation was the attitude of the Paez themselves to their own language. They had a deeply ingrained feeling that their language was “inferior” since non-Paez speakers considered it so, and that they themselves were inferior as well—“guilty by association” with a minority language. Naturally, a formerly unwritten language lacks the prestige of a long established language. Can the gap be bridged? Is it possible to give much-needed assurance to the speakers of a minority language that their mother tongue is worthwhile?

Fortunately, the answer is yes. Any language gains in prestige by passing from an oral to a written form of communication. Paez is no exception. But changing the attitude of native speakers of the language requires a great deal more than giving them the New Testament. In order to upgrade the status of Paez from a “dialecto” to a “real language,” we found it necessary to provide high-quality linguistic materials in addition to primers and scriptural materials, namely:

- a Paez-Spanish Spanish-Paez dictionary, that the Paez received enthusiastically as an aid to learning Spanish
- a pedagogical grammar, in Spanish and Paez, which monolingual Paez speakers found helpful in learning to speak Spanish even though it was designed to help Spanish speakers learn Paez
- a discourse grammar, resulting from a Longacre workshop and published in both a Spanish and an English translation, and
- a practical grammar of Paez, written in textbook-style Spanish, which enables the Paez to defend their language in the terms and in the context of a language of wider communication—Spanish

The prestige of Paez took a quantum leap upward when government officials of the state of Cauca and schoolteachers working in the Paez area began to buy copies of the Paez materials we had published. These publications not only fulfill our contractual obligations to the Colombian government; they also contribute immeasurably to increasing the prestige of a minority language like Paez. The non-scriptural materials are valuable adjuncts to the Scripture because of their effect on the language attitudes of both non-vernacular speakers and vernacular speakers. We do a great service to those of the minority language group by affording prestige to their native language and so, by extension, to them.

4. The bottom line

Today, seven years after the Paez New Testament came off the press, the use of it among the Paez is increasing. We have found that these three factors—the credibility factor, the comprehension factor, and the prestige factor—are all-important components in promoting the use of a newly introduced vernacular translation in a newly written language. Our commitment does not end with providing the Scriptures in the vernacular. We are also committed to ensuring that the Scriptures are used, so that the Holy Spirit can produce life-changing results for the glory of God.

Marianna Slocum served in Colombia from 1964–1985 and translated the Paez New Testament.