

Illumination

BY DWAYNE JANKE

in a Dining Room

On the home stretch of their project, the Dogrib New Testament team tackles some final translation problems.

After several days of cold, overcast weather, a low-angled sun is out and unobstructed over Yellowknife, N.W.T.

Brilliant sunbeams reflect off a snowy ground on this winter day outside of Jaap and Morina Feenstra's split-level, suburban home on Nuttall Court. Sunshine streams into the dining room through a set of French patio doors. The room is drenched with wide shafts of light and warmth, hopefully a good sign of things to come this afternoon (opposite page).

Jaap, an SIL translation consultant, and two Dogrib translators, Mary Siemens and Marie Louise Bouvier-White, definitely need a little more illumination.

Sticky Problems

They must tackle a final half-dozen sticky problems in the translation of the New Testament they have worked on for more than 10 years. Another woman, Alice Sangris, has been invited to attend the meeting to test how well their translated verses might be comprehended by a typical Dogrib speaker.

As the group first arrives and enjoys coffee in the living room, Jaap inspires them by showing what has come in the mail recently. It's a first-draft print-out

of the typeset New Testament text in Dogrib, done by the Canadian Bible Society (CBS).

"Wow!" says Mary, smiling as she leafs through the plastic, spiral-bound booklet. "Is that print-out for us?"

She says she would like to read from it at the small Protestant church group she attends in the Dogrib community of Rae-Edzo, northwest of Yellowknife. Tli Cho Christian Fellowship, which has about 70 people, is led by David Shed, a Native Gospel Outreach missionary.

Jaap disappoints her by explaining it is his only version. "It's a matter of weeks and we will get more copies."

Next, Alice thumbs through the booklet. "Oh man, this is good!" she exclaims. "This is the *real* treaty. This one will never change."

There is a clear sense of anticipation in the air as the Dogrib people look ahead to the coming printing and distribution of their Scriptures. Yes, God's printed Word is coming soon—but it is not here quite yet.

Questioning the Truth

Jaap's more immediate concern is the lingering doubts he has about some translated words and phrases in the four Gospels, Romans and Revelation. The team gathers around the pine dining room table, now a working space covered with a few computers.

After an opening prayer asking God for wisdom, the four start the checking session. They turn their attention to two pages of the problematic Scripture verses in Dogrib that Jaap has printed from his computer. The text also appears on the computer screens in front of them.

One challenging passage is John 18: 37-38, where Christ tells Pontius Pilate that everyone on the side of truth listens to Him. In response, Pilate asks, "What is truth?" and walks away.

Jaap turns to Alice after reading the verses. "Why, Alice, would he say, 'Nàowo ehkw'i ayii awèidi?' 'What do you mean with truth?'"

Alice seems unsure. But after Marie Louise reads the verses again, Alice says, that to her, Pilate is asking a genuine question.

"It's supposed to be a rhetorical question," Jaap replies. "Pilate is saying, 'We don't even know what truth is.'"

Marie Louise catches onto the concept: "Pilate went out [of the room] because 'truth' doesn't mean anything to him."

Mary offers an optional wording that makes the Dogrib translation of Pilate's question more sarcastic in tone. The group discusses and tweaks the phrasing, until in Dogrib it says: "What may the truth be anyway?"



Biting Remarks

Later, plenty of laughs follow when Jaap challenges the women to find an improved expression in Dogrib for the phrase “gnashes his teeth.” In Mark 9:18 it is part of a description of a boy with an evil spirit whom Christ heals after his disciples are unsuccessful.

In this verse, the translators used the Dogrib expression for “biting,” but Jaap wonders if there is something more appropriate. Someone suggests “filing his teeth” and everyone bursts into laughter. As various new words are suggested, they come complete with physical demonstrations, resulting in more fun and teasing. After “filing his teeth,” they consider Dogrib for a biting/nibbling action, but then revert back to biting. It seems the best way to describe a kid that is gnashing his teeth in anger.

“That’s good, then,” concedes Jaap. “Great.”

A Little More Illumination

After making Pontius Pilate sound more rhetorical in John 18; adjusting wording in the Romans 4 chapter heading; indicating through a Revelation 9: 5 verb that the accompanying object is plural; and clarifying who Jesus was talking to in Matthew 9:5—the session is over. Well, sort of.

Mary, unrelenting in her quest for perfection, is still looking for a little more illumination on the phrase, “gnashing his teeth.” Back in Rae-Edzo, she talks to her mother, Elizabeth Mackenzie—kind of a walking dictionary among the people. The Dogrib elder has a keen interest in her language as well as the Bible translation project. (See “Strong Like Two People,” page 4.) Probing her mother’s knowledge and experience, Mary discovers a Dogrib phrase for “grinding teeth.” In the end, it is the best fit for Mark 9:18.

Now, God’s Word will speak a little more clearly. 🍀



More on the Web

Basic principles and procedures that guide SIL and Wycliffe in Bible translation can be read at <www.wycliffe.net>.