

Translation of the Bible into Costa Rican Sign Language

Elsa Tamez*

1. Introduction

In this paper I am going to share some particularities and examples of translation from the Costa Rica Sign Language project. All of them come from the DVD that we prepared. In addition, I am going to share the process we adopted, the stages we followed and some recommendations in case you want to start a similar project.

(1) Translation of the Bible into the Costa Rican sign language (henceforth: LESCO) and all other sign language translations require the decoding of the morpho-syntactic discourse before translating the text into sign language. According to our coordinator Christian Ramírez we first have to clearly understand the main ideas from the morpho-syntactic level.

After this we must visualize the content including places and orientations in a step by step order. This is the cognitive level. In this level it is important to sketch the scenes in order to visualize them.

As we all know we have to add implied information. This step is very important for understanding the meaning. In the third level the second level emerges: this is the sign language translation. For instance: to translate this phrase: “All went to their own towns to be registered”(Luk 2:3) into LESCO, the signer has to visualize different communities and different families registering in these communities (see video). In addition it is important to include a negative statement to help them better grasp the corresponding positive; i.e. it is important to say that a person who belongs to a certain place, can not be registered in another place but only in the birth place of his descendents. For this reason, in Luke 2:5 it was necessary to add that Joseph couldn't be registered in Nazareth (see video). This resulted in the LESCO translation being longer than the Spanish audio translation. This created some

* United Bible Societies America Area Translation Consultant

difficulties in matching the audio and the subtitles with the signing. It is not appropriate to do a tight translation even if it is clear because it would not be acceptable to hearing people

In another example when two rulers, like Augustus and Quirinius, appear at the same time, it should be clear that one is over the other, otherwise it is confusing. In Luke 2:2 Caesar Augustus, the emperor, gives an order to prepare a census. Quirinius, the ruler of Syria, was responsible for managing the census in Palestine. In the LESCO translation it was important to add that Augustus was over Quirinius (see video).

(2) Maps and images. Since visual placement is fundamental, maps and images are necessary. It was essential in the translation of the birth of Jesus (Luk 2:1-20) to show maps of the Roman Empire, Syria and Palestine. It was also important to visually display Mary and Joseph's journey from Nazareth to Bethlehem through Jerusalem. It was most important to show the face of Caesar Augustus wearing his laurel wreath, since the sign for Caesar is simply a figure wearing a laurel wreath.

(3) Translation of texts which mention 'ears'. A literal translation of this verse: "Let anyone with ears to hear listen!" (Luk 8:8) is not appropriate for the deaf community, it is difficult to understand and it can easily be misunderstood. Deaf people have "ears to hear" but they can not hear. Our LESCO team translated as follows: "If you want to understand, understand!" (See video)

It was difficult to translate the Isaiah quote in Luke. 8:10: "Looking they may not perceive, and listening they may not understand." It was necessary to change the metaphor. The team translated in this way: "They think they understand but they don't, even if they really try to understand, they can't."

(4) Rhetorical questions. In LESCO, facial gesture and body communication are used together with hand signs. Many manual signs are ultimately defined by facial and body gestures since a sign can represent different meanings. Therefore rhetorical questions were easy to translate because both facial and manual gestures were part of the translation. See, for example, in Luke 18:8 "When the Son of Man comes, will he find faith on earth? The rhetorical aspect of the question is easily understood because of the gestures (see video).

(5) Son of Man. It was impossible to translate the expression “Son of Man.” The son-man sign simply means male child. The LESCO team opted for an interpretation of the term and translated it “Jesus.”

(6) Repetition. It seems that people who communicate in LESCO need to see the signs repeated to confirm their comprehension. This occurs in our video. In the commentaries of the biblical stories, translators felt it necessary to review details of the story before they related its meaning with the deaf community. This fact was confirmed when a draft of the video was presented to deaf representatives from different churches. They reaffirmed the importance of the repetition when it was questioned by a hearing person. I am unsure if repetition is this important in other sign languages.

2. Procedures in the Development of the Translation Project and DVD Production

We believe that we are pioneering biblical sign language translation in Latin America. It was very helpful to learn from projects on sign language translation in Australia and USA. However we discovered that many elements particular to each deaf community must be taken into consideration. For instance, it is recommended that local National Associations of Deaf people be contacted prior to the beginning of all sign language translation projects. Since Costa Rica’s sign language is new and they are trying to bring stability to it, no organization is permitted to create new signs. New signs can only be created by the Deaf Community and regulated by a National Committee. Now I would like to share the procedure we followed, hoping that it will be helpful to those Bible Societies that are interested in sign language translation.

A team of six people, four deaf and two hearing, was formed. The hearing people were not translators. They were the interpreter (LESCO-Spanish) and the translation consultant. These are the steps we followed:

(1) Study of the biblical text. The team studied the text in its historical and literary context. It was analyzed collectively. In this step the team began to perceive

the difficulties of some terminology for the translation into LESCO and the need for some new signs. The translation consultant and the interpreter (LESCO-Spanish-LESCO) participated in the text study.

(2) Deaf Community perspective. After the study of the text, the team reflected on the relevance of the text for the Deaf Community. They chose the most important aspects for the commentary that they had to prepare from the perspective of the Deaf Community. In this step the consultant participated as observer only.

(3) Translation. In this stage, only the deaf members of the team participated in the translation of the text. The coordinator met the translation consultant for exegetical questions. The coordinator prepared the commentaries after having discussed them with the members of the team and with other people of the Deaf Community.

(4) Preparation of the signer models and a “home video.” After the translation of each biblical story, the coordinator prepared a signer model. He used schemas to facilitate the memorization (see picture). The signer learned the translation by heart. If the text was too long he memorized it by paragraphs. After the signer was ready the coordinator filmed the translation and prepared a “home video.”

(5) LESCO translation review. The whole team analyzed the translation on the “home video.” The interpreter re-to-translated from LESCO into Spanish for the translation consultant.

(6) New filming with corrections. Deaf members of the team worked on the corrections and suggestions. The coordinator filmed the translation again and prepared another “home video.”

(7) Second filming review. The translation consultant checked the second filming with the help of the back-translation of the interpreter.

(8) Presentation of the “home video” to the National Committee of LESCO. The coordinator showed a home video draft to the National Committee of LESCO. The

Committee made some corrections of signs and some important suggestions about the presentation and the commentaries from the deaf community perspective.

(9) New filming adding the corrections and suggestions of the National Committee of LESCO. Again, new revision of the translation by the translation consultant.

(10) Presentation of the “home video” to deaf people from different churches. A home video was presented in the Costa Rican Bible Society to deaf representatives from different churches, including representatives of the Christian Committee of the Deaf Association of Costa Rica. The participation was very enthusiastic and everybody made valuable suggestions regarding the form of presentation: clothing and background. Suggestions were incorporated in the professional filming.

(11) Preparation for professional filming. In this stage two colors for the background were prepared –light blue and gray; no images. Several different colored t-shirts were bought for the translator-model signers. The color coordination and the background were prepared ahead of time. The coordinator prepared the daily script with all the details, including clothing and background.

(12) Professional filming. A professional team was hired. They filmed every morning for five days. It was a new situation for the translators: standing under bright lights and in front of several cameras was not easy for them. Due to their nervousness some of the signers forgot the text and had to repeat the scene again and again. The translation consultant was watching the film in a separate room to review the translation, with the help of the back-translation done by the interpreter. Before each recording the whole team was very attentive to the appearance of the model signers. Signer translators should be neat in appearance: no jewelry, hair combed, faces made up, t-shirts well ironed, no shiny buttons, and so on (see pictures).

(13) Translation into Spanish for the audio. The translation of LESCO into Spanish had to be ready and recorded before the final edition of the professional filming. In this stage the participation of the translation consultant was very

important too.

(14) Final editing. The coordinator, the interpreter and the translation consultant participated in this stage. Most important was the participation of the coordinator as he was a deaf person. He told the editor about appropriate lighting, timing of fade-ins on signers, titles and so on. In this stage, the participation of the interpreter is very important because the coordinator communicated with the editor through her. The interpreter also led the editor in matching signs, audio and subtitles. The translation consultant had to look at the translation again, especially because of the incorporation of the audio and subtitles.

(15) DVD cover and information. For the DVD cover (design, color, and information) the opinion of the deaf team, especially the coordinator, was essential.

3. Considerations in Translation Projects into Sign Language

There are some characteristics peculiar to translation into sign language, which should be taken into consideration when starting a project of this kind. For example:

(1) Signer and translation. The selection of signers is a very important task. In addition to the characteristics of all projects of translation in a written tongue (translators whose ‘mother tongue’ is sign language and church, gender and generation representation), other aspects should also be taken into account. For example, appearance: since Bible translation in sign language goes together with the signer as a person, his or her look and personality should be pleasing to the deaf community, so that the translation is well-received. Another related aspect is that signers and translators can be different people. We might expect that translators would be the signer models themselves. However sometimes, for some reason, signers are just signer models, prepared by the translators.

(2) Deaf Associations. If the deaf community itself didn’t ask for a translation project, it is very important to share the project with the association or associations of the deaf community of the country where the project would start, before

beginning any translation project into sign language. At this time of self affirmation of the different deaf communities in Latin America there is much sensitivity to foreign projects coming from the hearing society. This is because they feel used by many religious and secular institutions of the hearing society.

(3) National Committees of Sign Language. Some associations have a committee that regulates signs to stabilize the language. Sign languages are very dynamic and changing because they are new in Latin America. Therefore the official institutions of deaf people are concerned about stabilizing the language. It is important that the National Committee of Sign Language be consulted about new Bible signs. If there is not a regulatory committee for new signs the Deaf Association should be consulted. In this sense the UBS translation project can help in the stabilization of sign language.

(4) Two different translations. If the translation team decides to include audio and subtitles, they must prepare two different translations: one is the direct translation to sign language and the other is the translation of sign language to the language that will be used for audio and subtitles. In our case the team translated from different versions, including Greek, into LESCO (Costa Rican Sign Language), and from LESCO to Spanish adapting it to a version valued by the Deaf Community.

(5) Translation consultant role. As is seen in the stages that were followed to prepare the DVD, the translation consultant's participation does not finish once the translation is checked. Since the signer has to memorize the translation, there is the risk of it being changed whenever it is filmed again. For this reason the consultant must be attentive, reviewing again and again every time the translation is filmed. His or her participation isn't finished until the conclusion of the final edition of the professional recording, including audio and subtitles.

(6) Initial research. Before beginning any project it is important to study the context of the Deaf community and the viability of the language.

4. Final Words

Working on this project has been very meaningful and rewarding on all levels. I am aware that not much has been written about how to start or to work on projects related to sign language Bible translation, therefore I wrote this paper to share some of my experiences in this pilot project. I included what we learned about the deaf community and its relationship with the hearing community; the process we adopted, the stages we followed; the unique elements and difficulties of translating sign language and some recommendations.

<Keyword>

translation, Bible, Costa Rican sign language, DVD, deaf community

<Abstract>

코스타리카 수화(LESCO)를 통한 성서 번역

엘사 타메즈 박사
(세계성서공회연합회 아메리카 지역 번역 컨설턴트)

이 글에서 필자는 성서를 코스타리카 수화로 번역하는 것에 관한 DVD 제작에서 얻어진 경험으로부터 수화 번역의 몇 가지 특징들을 다루고 있다. 동시에, 그 DVD 제작에서 취해진 과정과 단계들을 이야기 하면서 이와 유사한 계획을 수립하고자 하는 사람들을 위한 제언 또한 빠뜨리지 않고 있다.

(안근조 역)