

BSL Bible Translation Project/Doctor of Practical Theology, University of Manchester

Project Title

Study and evaluation of a process of Biblical translation and its impact on community identity: a case-study in contextual hermeneutics.

Outline of Proposed Project

The BSL Bible Translation Project

British Sign Language (BSL) is the preferred language of 50,000–70,000 Deaf people, for whom English may be a second or third language. At least 250,000 hearing people who have a proficiency in the language also use it. BSL is a visual/spatial language, which is governed by its own grammatical rules, using hand shapes, hand movements and facial expressions to convey meaning. More people (Deaf and hearing) use BSL than speak Welsh or Gaelic. On 18 March 2003, BSL was recognised by Parliament as a national minority language of the United Kingdom. Deaf people in the UK exist within the majority culture, but are also part of their own community, with its own language and culture. This Deaf community varies in its ability to access the written English of wider society. Deaf people often refer to the period from the late 1960s onward as a 'renaissance' of Deaf culture, as they have become more involved in challenging wider societal discourses. This has found expression in linguistic and, more recently, cultural research into Deaf people's language and community and helped to improve access to services and provision in sign language.

Deaf Christians in the UK have never had access to the Bible in their own language. They rely on interpretations from English, largely done 'on the spot' in Christian gatherings. Deaf people are becoming more involved in mainstream Church life and as their confidence in their language and skills increase, so does their need to be equipped to reflect theologically on their own sacred texts. At present this has to take place entirely in what could be considered their 'second' language, and so the BSL Bible Translation Project will give the UK Deaf community a Bible in their own language, for the first time. The Project aims to produce a translation acceptable to all major Christian denominations. The Deaf community will lead and be stakeholders in the process to ensure a translation that is linguistically accurate and culturally aware. Translation will be done by teams of experienced Deaf and hearing translators who are bilingual in both English and BSL, advised by experts in Biblical hermeneutics.

BSL is a naturally evolving language of the Deaf community with no written form. This means that the Bible in BSL will be produced in digital video form and delivered through a range of media, which is likely to include Internet, DVD, personal computer and mobile technologies.

This Project has developed a business plan which sets out workable stages: the initial objective of the project will be to translate the Gospel of Mark into BSL by the year 2011 (to coincide with the 400th anniversary of the translation of the King James Bible). In addition to this, a book from the Hebrew Bible will be translated, and work on these first two books will establish the formal process of the bulk of the project work beyond 2011. The cycle of translation and consultation is implemented on a 10-12 week cycle, including all the steps of community consultation within the translation process.

The research project

The proposal is for a collaborative research studentship to study and evaluate a process of Biblical translation and its impact on community identity as a case-study in contextual hermeneutics.

The research project has strong correspondence with aims and themes of the Religion and Society programme and it offers the following: a unique case study of the impact of a sacred text on a minority community, and that community's impact on the interpretation of the text; an investigation of a methodology for the analysis and visual representation of sacred texts; a development of user-led research; a development of interdisciplinary themes and approaches in the fields of linguistics, cultural studies, translation theory, theological and Biblical studies and technological applications and in the emerging field of Deaf Studies; a contribution to public awareness in wide consultation using existing networks and new ones, and in the dissemination of the Project's product.

The research project lies within the research theme 'Texts, Spaces, Rituals and Objects' (with some crossover in aspects of Identity and Community, Religion and Media, and Education and Socialisation). It offers the opportunity to review and critique the methodologies of biblical translation and end-user involvement within the BSL Bible Translation Project, as a case study in the relationship between sacred texts and cultural identity. The intellectual issues to be addressed include the hermeneutical approaches that are used in translating from a written and spoken language into a visual-spatial language; the relationship of a somatic, embodied text and the 'performative' theologies of Deaf Christians; and impact on cultural identity when individuals and groups receive texts for the first time in their own language. The study may also include a comparison between the particular reading strategies of Deaf Christians and other liberationist and practical theologies which stress the theological significance of context and experience.

As a participant and observer in a number of regional translation teams, and as a member of the panel reviewing the reception of the work, the

researcher will have an overview of the translation and reception of the whole of the first book (the Gospel of Mark) in the Project, and of the pilot stages of a book of the Hebrew Bible throughout September 2007-August 2010. The ongoing dissemination to a network of BSL users (using a dedicated web-site and an e-mail discussion group) of the researcher's critique, in consultation with other academics and practitioners in the Project, will be part of the evolution of the Bible Translation Project.

The researcher will be enrolled on the Doctor of Practical Theology (DPT) programme at the University of Manchester. This is a ground-breaking initiative in doctoral study, being one of a new breed of 'professional doctorates' rapidly gaining currency in the arts, humanities and social sciences. It is a practice-based research degree aimed at candidates from a range of professional and voluntary contexts. It is therefore ideally suited to meet the expectations of the collaborative arrangement, since it emphasises the importance of building advanced skills and capacities in 'action-research' of the very kind proposed within this bid. Since the DPT is assessed by means of a portfolio of work (including a literature review, research proposal, publishable articles and extended dissertation), it provides a phased and managed route through the research process as well as offering a structured programme of research training via four residential seminars per year. The doctoral candidate will therefore benefit from participation in a cutting-edge research initiative, tailor-made to the practice-based nature of the research project. The emphasis within the project on reflective practice - via journaling, the use of qualitative and collaborative research methods, and the stress on producing publishable material - represent tangible opportunities for evaluating the 'added value' of the research project not only for the researcher, but in his/her wider professional context, for participants from Deaf communities, as well as the various academic disciplines represented.

The DPT at Manchester has already received recognition as a 'flagship' PGR programme: Professor Graham (Programme Director of the DPT and Lead Supervisor for this project) is in receipt of £20k over three years from the Centre of Excellence in Enquiry-Based Learning (one of the HEFCE CETLs) to develop enquiry-based learning through developing practice-based research at PGR level.

The Lead Supervisor from the BSL Bible Translation Project has considerable professional experience in project management and in academic supervision. There is crossover in the membership of academics on the advisory board for the research project (see 6 above) and membership of the regional translation teams and the management group. The involvement of the British and Foreign Bible Society supports the expertise in translation studies.

What new and original contribution to research in this area will this project make?

- This research is unique in its analysis of the correlation between a visual-spatial language and its embodied and performative representation in the context of corporate ritual.
- It also provides a case-study in the linguistic and hermeneutical issues presented by the transition from written script to visual-spatial medium.
- The project will shed new light on strategies used in Black, feminist and other liberationist hermeneutics whereby a marginalized community looks for itself in its sacred scriptures, and the consequent emergence of a vernacular, contextual theology by and for Deaf people.

January 2007