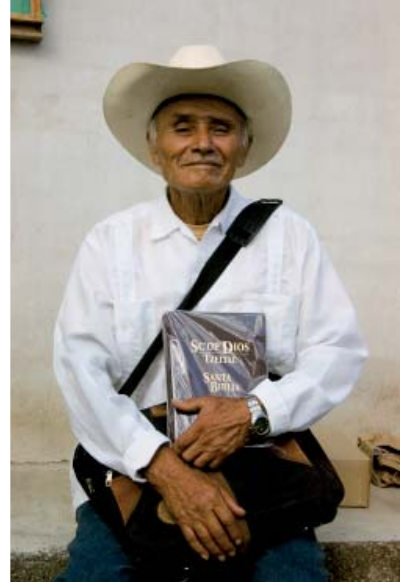


# Scripture Language Report 2007

UNITED  
**BIBLE**  
SOCIETIES  
*A World Fellowship of Bible Societies*



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## 2,454 languages now have Scripture

### *United Bible Societies' Scripture Language Report 2007*

"To have the New Testament in your own language is to be evangelised...it is to possess God's Word and thus to be visited by Jesus Christ." These were the words of Rev Thomas Nyiwe, President of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in Cameroon, at the launch of the Vute New Testament in December (see Latest News # 471).

This new Scripture was welcomed in a "feast of colour and sound" by hundreds of people, many of whom had made enormous efforts to attend the event. One chief and his entourage made the 130km (80 mile) journey on foot, while hundreds of others travelled from different parts of the country by car on roads that were so pot-holed and bumpy that they "looked like an elephant track", according to Thomas Ndindjock of the Bible Society of Cameroon.



One Vute-speaking leader, the Rev Pierre Songsare, said at the launch, "If I die today I will not be able to say that God did not love me. Of almost 270 tribes in our country, the Vute people are particularly blessed. God will ask much of us because we have received much from him."



Similar sentiments were echoed across the world by other language groups who also received Scripture in their languages for the first time last year. Nine new Bibles and 34 New Testaments were registered for the first time in the United Bible Societies' (UBS) *2007 Scripture Language Report (SLR)*. The report, which is updated annually, records new or revised translations of the whole Bible or parts of the Bible which are received at one of three Bible Society deposit libraries during the year (see *Guidelines on the data* below). By December 31, 2007, the cumulative total had reached 2,454.

Making the Bible's message accessible and understood has been at the heart of Bible Society work since the foundation of the first Bible Society more than 200 years ago. And translating the Bible into the languages of the world's many diverse people groups remains one of the key means of achieving that goal.

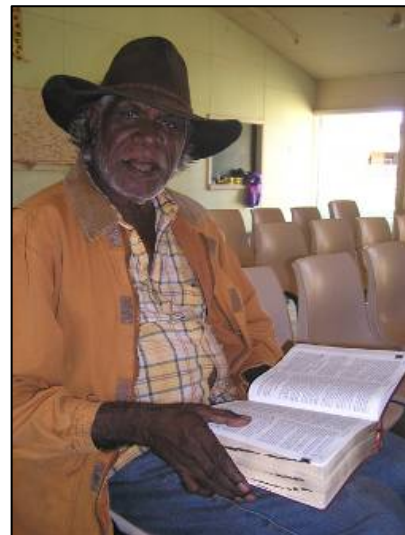
In theory, due to the globalisation of certain languages like English, French and Spanish, 95 per cent of humanity now has access to the Bible in a language they can understand. But many of these people are having to read the Bible in a language that is not their own. With overwhelming evidence that Scripture speaks most powerfully to people when it is presented in their mother tongue, Bible Societies are working ceaselessly towards the goal of giving everybody this kind of access to the Scriptures.

One of the Bibles launched last year, for instance, was the Chuj (San Mateo) Bible in Guatemala (see Latest News # 438). The Chuj (San Mateo) people only number about 31,000 – a relatively small group in a country of nearly 13 million people. Yet the arrival of their Bible was an emotional and significant event, attracting more than 1,000 people, some of whom had travelled for days to be there, braving wind, rain and thick mud on the steep and winding roads.



They cheerfully sat through several showers of rain during the ceremony and then queued in torrential rain to get copies of the Bible in their mother tongue. “They didn’t mind at all – the hunger and thirst of the *mateanos* (local people) for God’s Word was much greater,” commented Celeste de Anleu of the Bible Society of Guatemala (BSG). The BSG has published six other Bibles in indigenous minority languages, and it has two more projects in the pipeline.

Another indigenous, minority language Scripture that was launched last year was the Kriol Bible in Australia (see Latest News # 413). Kriol is the first language of 10,000 people and the second language of another 20,000. The Bible is the *first* formal written text in Kriol. More than 2,000 people gathered to celebrate its publication last May with an enthusiasm that will be replicated across countless Kriol communities, according to Gwen Tremlett, a member of the translation team.



“People are really keen to know what God is saying to them,” she explained. “One of the highlights of my work has been seeing people’s faces as they hear God’s Word read in their own language for the first time.”

But it is not only members of *small* minority groups who received the Scriptures in their languages in 2007: Christians among Senegal’s nearly 1.2 million Sérère speakers recently welcomed their Bible in an elaborate ceremony in which a copy of the new Bible was placed in a gourd covered with a white cloth to symbolise purity (see Latest News # 476).



It is the first of the six national languages of this Muslim-majority country to get a full Bible and was hailed by a Muslim imam who attended the launch as “something of which the whole of Senegal can be proud”. The project has taken more than three decades to complete.

In fact, each and every New Testament or Bible that is published is the culmination of years, sometimes decades, of work, including academic research, building relationships with the Churches and carrying out the painstaking task of Bible translation, sometimes in very difficult conditions. The publication of Scripture Portions (one or more books of the Bible) is often a significant milestone in this lengthy process. Last year, for instance, *SLR* registered the publication of Portions, such as the Gospels of Mark and Luke, in 11 new languages.

In addition to the publications that are reported in *SLR 2007*, last year the Bible Society fellowship also completed work on several other Scripture translations, which will be published soon. These include three Bibles and four New Testaments in new languages.

“Once again the *SLR* gives a fascinating panorama of the huge variety of Bible translation work throughout the world,” comments Dr Simon Crisp, UBS Director of Translation Services. “Behind each of the new publications stands a story of dedication and effort sustained over many years, so that people can receive the message of the Scriptures in their own language. The Bible Societies continue to be at the very heart of this vital ministry.”

While it is always good news when a New Testament or Bible is published, the fact remains that only 438 of the world’s estimated 6,900 languages have the complete Bible and only 1,168 have the New Testament. The Bible Society fellowship is currently engaged in 564 translation projects all over the world, funded exclusively through voluntary gifts from churches and individuals.

*Photographs (top to bottom):*

*CAM07DJ-18: Bible Society of Cameroon vehicles on their way to the launch of the Vute New Testament in December 2007. Central Province, Cameroon. (Photo: Bible Society of Cameroon/Thomas Ndindjock)*

*CAM07DJ-20: Members of the clergy arriving at the launch of the Vute New Testament on December 2, 2007. Yoko, Central Province, Cameroon. (Photo: Bible Society of Cameroon/Thomas Ndindjock)*

*GUA07DJ-16: Women attending the dedication of the Chuj San Mateo Bible in San Mateo Ixtatan, Guatemala, in July 2007. (Photo: Bible Society of Guatemala)*

*AUS07DJ-42: Pastor Jerry Jangala of Marrara Christian School in Darwin with a Kriol Bible. The school has ordered 100 Kriol Bibles for its indigenous students. Northern Territory, Australia. (Photo: Bible Society in Australia/Phil Zamagias)*

*SEN08DJ-2: The Sérère Bible arriving in a gourd at the launch ceremony on January 6, 2008, in Fatick, Senegal. (Photo: UBS Sahel Project/Robert Cabou)*

## **Guidelines on the data**

While the figures in the annual *Scripture Language Report* are accurate – as they represent Scriptures acquired, catalogued and classified by the deposit libraries of the American Bible Society, the British and Foreign Bible Society or the Bible Society of Brazil in the past calendar year – they do not represent the whole story. The report is compiled by UBS, but the Scriptures it takes into account are published and deposited by many different agencies. *SLR* does not record translations that have been completed but have yet to be published or deposited.

UBS manages many translation projects in partnership with other agencies and may not be the final publisher.

## FAQs about UBS translation

- What are the successive stages in the publication of a new translation of the Bible?  
The publication of a new Bible translation starts with the publication of a 'Portion' of Scripture. A Portion can be a single passage, a group of passages or a whole book of the Bible, printed in booklet form. Depending on the extent of the Portion, it is normally followed by the publication of a whole book, or a collection of books from the New Testament, and then by the complete New Testament. The normal sequence is for the complete New Testament to be published before work begins on the Old Testament.
- How long does it take to translate a whole Bible?  
The mean average is 12 years. In some parts of the world, such as Europe, it tends to take less time, and in others, Africa, for example, it can take longer.
- Why revise an existing Bible translation when there are languages that haven't got a Bible?  
Revising and improving an existing translation may not seem as 'glamorous' as bringing a completely new translation to the printed page for the first time, but it is just as important a part of the total effort to make the whole Word of God available to all people in the living, vital languages that they speak and understand. Instances where the language of a Bible translation now seems old fashioned and hard for a new generation to understand provide a parallel situation to languages that have no translation at all.
  - Revisions help to deal with negative associations with a colonial past and involve contemporary indigenous churches. This means the Bible is likely to be used more effectively by the churches.
  - Languages change over time. What may be understood by previous generations has less or no meaning in the modern context. Revisions to a translation can be called for on the grounds of changes in language alone after as little as 30 years. A revision provides opportunity for making the Bible better understood.
  - Shortcomings in a translation which were overlooked prior to its publication can become clear as the Bible gains wide use and churches can then start demanding a revised version.
  - SLR 2007 lists 30 revisions of Scripture, ranging from the entire Bible with Deuterocanon in the Amharic language of Ethiopia to the Zapoteco:Rincon New Testament and Psalms in Mexico.

In view of these considerations, the publication of a new translation can be seen not as the end of a process but as the first stage in a continuous effort to keep Scripture abreast of changes in language.

- Why are UBS translations distinctive from those done by other Bible agencies?

There is no one thing that makes the UBS approach distinctive. But taken together a number of factors make UBS unique in the world:

- Working with and through all the churches (Protestant, Catholic, Orthodox)

- An emphasis on quality and accuracy that requires doctoral level qualifications for Translation Consultants (we refer to this as our intellectual equity)
- An unparalleled track record

## **Planning and managing translation projects**

These factors are taken into account when deciding whether a translation project should proceed:

- The Church's view of the need for a new translation project
- Socio-linguistic research: it is important to understand the comparative status of the language under consideration: a different local language may be regarded more highly
- The number of speakers: this is taken into account, but is not the key determinant.
- Translation can be done more quickly and more cheaply, but the UBS position is that there is no shortcut to achieving a high-quality translation that the Churches will accept. This is one reason why the UBS has an unparalleled network of doctorate level translators

Once a translation project has begun, translation teams are managed at Area level by Translation Co-ordinators through Translation Consultants.

The backgrounds of the translators in the field vary widely. Today most are members of the indigenous community which is going to benefit from their work. Some may be farmers with little or no formal education; others come to the task as seminary-educated priests. However, most have no formal training in the disciplines such as biblical studies, theology and anthropology, that the task of translating the Bible requires, and UBS Area Translation Consultants organise training for them all to equip them for the task ahead.

This introduces them to helpful theological reference works. Training also gives them practice in translating potentially difficult theological concepts into their respective languages and cultures. It also helps them to question and review attitudes acquired from their culture which could become obstacles in the way of a successful Bible translation.

With the translation project under way, the Translation Consultants pay regular visits to the translators in the field and review their work with them.

And once a book has been translated into a 'new' language, exegetical checkers test it amongst the community for whom it is intended. For example, they may assemble a small group and ask the members each to read a section aloud; any hesitation or stumble is then investigated. They may also test the readers' understanding of the text to assure themselves of its clarity.

## Statistical summary by UBS area

A summary, by UBS Area and type of publication, of the number of different languages and dialects in which publication of at least one book of the Bible had been registered as of December 31, 2007<sup>1</sup>:

<b>Continent or region</b>	<b>Portions</b>	<b>Testaments</b>	<b>Bibles</b>	<b>Bibles + DC<sup>2</sup></b>	<b>Total</b>
Africa	218	322	163	(29)	703
Asia-Pacific	363	495	171	(37)	1029
Europe-Middle East	112	39	61	(47)	212
Americas	153	312	42	(10)	507
Constructed Languages	2	0	1	(0)	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>848</b>	<b>1,168</b>	<b>438</b>	<b>(123)</b>	<b>2,454</b>

<sup>1</sup>The following three languages were added to the ABS language list based on information received during 2007: Mele-Fila spoken in Vanuatu (NT 1993), Nishga spoken in Canada (Portion 1926), and Samba Leko spoken in Cameroon (NT 2001), which had been considered identical to Samba Daka spoken in Nigeria (Portion 1933).

<sup>2</sup>This column is a sub-section of the Bibles column – for example, there is a translation of the Deuterocanon for 47 of the 61 languages of Europe in which the Bible has been translated.