

# History of the Moro NT

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During the course of grammatical analysis of the Moro language, some problems with the various dialects were discovered. Further investigation seems to be coming to the conclusion that the NT has been written in a dialect which the speakers of other dialects do not understand. And moreover, the speakers of the NT do not understand the speakers of the other dialects.

Since the beginning of October when Angelo brought this problem to my attention, I have been investigating the history of translation in the Moro tribe and finding out precisely why many people find the NT difficult to understand. The information contained in this document was obtained from Angelo, Ibrahim (who is one of the people who revised the NT), Ezekiel, and Mamut, a young man who speaks the dialect of the NT and who moved to Khartoum from the Nuba mountains two years ago.

Missionaries first came to the Moro people in 1936. The first missionaries started to write Moro down using Roman script. However they found that teaching the Roman letters difficult because some people knew Arabic, which doesn't have capital letters. To overcome this, they made an orthography without capital letters. They left, and others continued, and the Moro New Testament was published in the 1960's just before the missionaries had to leave because of the civil war.

When the missionaries came to the area, they worked among speakers of the *lɔŋorɔban* dialect. According to Mamut, the mission center was close to this dialect, but relatively far from speakers of other Moro dialects. Furthermore, this dialect seems to be geographically isolated from the other Moro dialects and is surrounded by speakers of other languages (Katcha, Shatt, Licaber, Utundi).

In the 1980's the Moro decided to revise their New Testament. Two men went to Nairobi to work on the translation under the supervision of the Bible society. They were aware that many people could not read the NT because of differences in dialect. However their consultant (who had learnt to speak Moro), told them that such problems can take 10 years to solve and it would be best if they just did the best they could and that they should not change the dialect.

The two men spent 6 years revising the New Testament. They checked the original translation against the Revised Standard, the Good News and Arabic Bibles and made some corrections. One major change is that they used capital letters. Their consultant kept a list of all the words they used, but no spell checking was done to check that the same word was not spelt in several different ways. There was also no checking to make sure that the two men stuck to one dialect (Ibrahim does not speak the dialect of the NT, but the other man does). The result is that some words are spelt in 5 different ways, and that the same word is sometimes spelt according to one dialect, and sometimes according to another dialect.

The revised version of the New Testament was published in 1993. Unfortunately, not many people use it and the majority actually prefer the old version. I am not quite sure why this is so. It seems that the main reason is that the people don't like the capital letters because they are not familiar with them. I suspect that part of the problem is that the new version contains some words, and possibly phrases from a different dialect. Mamut, who speaks *Lɔŋorɔban* and does not understand any other dialect, says he can only understand the revised version with the help of the old version and as he has been teaching other people about the capital letters, I doubt that that is a big stumbling block for him. I think Angelo and Ezekiel (who speak *Tobɔɛelda*) find the revised version slightly easier to understand. Everyone seems to agree that the layout of the old version is better. Ezekiel says that the revised version will not be used until the old version has gone.

I questioned Mamut and Ezekiel about how well they understand the Moro translation. Mamut said he understood it very well and that the language seemed correct to him. Ezekiel however, understands neither version well and both

seem incorrect to him. Apart from the lexical differences, Ezekiel has problems with the way things are put and some sentences do not make sense to him. He says that he does not know what some of the functors mean. This suggests that there may be significant grammatical differences between the dialects. When I questioned them (and other people) about which dialects they understand, I found that Mamut only understands his own dialect well, whereas speakers of the other dialects understand all dialects except Mamut's. So it seems that the dialect used in the NT is unintelligible to the other dialects.

When Angelo first told me about the problem, we hoped that the problem might be fairly easy to solve, but further investigation has shown that this is not the case, and they may need two translations: one for Ləjorəban, and one for the rest. Ezekiel is against this, and would prefer to see them come to some agreement (which would probably involve Ləjorəban learning another dialect). The churches have been working on the problem and have had several meetings, where they have decided that they would rather use a dialect which most people understand, and the people who speak Ləjorəban agreed to this. However, at that time, the problems were not understood and it seemed likely that the problems could be solved by some minor changes to the orthography, such as not using either f or b. As Angelo's dialect as well as the Ləjorəban dialect have contrast between f and b, this is unlikely to work. I suspect that one reason why they agreed to change the dialect is that, in Khartoum, Ləjorəban is dying out as the children of this dialect learn to speak one of the other dialects. Although it is difficult to find out what the situation is in the Nuba mountains, the fact that Mamut does not understand the other dialects suggests that this is not the case there. Apparently some Ləjorəban speakers have been accusing the language committee of changing the language. Angelo denies that this is the case, but given that there seem to be significant differences in dialect, they may have a point.

During my analysis I have found some problems with the orthography as it is at the moment. We have found contrasts between long and short vowels and consonants, which have not been taken into account before. In addition, there are some lexical tone contrasts. In the NT, when this has been noticed, one word has been spelt with double consonants. Occasionally the group struggles with spelling because to them, two words will sound different, but they will not be able to spell them differently. When this occurs, the problem is mostly tone, but may sometimes be stress. These problems need to be analysed in much more detail than I have managed so far.