

# JAARS SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT

Speaker  
**Freddy Boswell**

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Interviewer  
**Arthur Lightbody**

Primary Topic(s)  
**Wycliffe and SIL International's role in translation projects**

Other Topics  
**The Ethnologue, language extinction, multilingual education, SIL as ISO registrar for languages of the world**

Location Discussed  
**Papua, Indonesia; Papua New Guinea; Santa Cruz and Malaita, Solomon Islands**

People Group (if named)  
**Malaita, Solomon Islands' Pidgin languages**

**Announcer:**

Welcome to *Speeding the Word*, coming to you from the JAARS Center in Waxhaw, North Carolina, where JAARS speeds Bible translation for all people. And now our host Arthur Lightbody.

**Lightbody:**

Today we are talking with Freddy Boswell, the executive director of SIL International. Welcome, Freddy. I know you are here for board meetings here at JAARS. We are glad you can be part of that and give us some guidance and interaction. Tell us what SIL International is.

**Boswell:**

Thank you, Arthur—great to be with you again. SIL is an international, faith-based nongovernmental organization. Our specialty is working in facilitating language-based development. We do that through building capacity in language groups around the world in the areas of translation, research and training. We are also heavily involved in materials development—whether literacy materials, translation materials or community development materials. We are an international organization that really is focused now on building capacity among the language groups of the world where we work.

**Lightbody:**

That is a good lead in—how many languages?

**Boswell:**

The current count of the languages of the world, as of today, is 6,909. Let me explain that figure. Some of our listeners are no doubt familiar with the Ethnologue. The 15th edition of the Ethnologue was published four years ago. In that edition there were 6,912 languages. The 16th edition is at the printer now. It is going to list 6,909 living languages. Now the reason for the difference in three, from 6,912 to 6,909, is basically built on the fact that about 200 languages have been identified as new viable languages. And about 200 languages, exactly, have been identified as no longer viable.

In other words, in the first group you have some that have been identified as “splits” from languages previously thought of as perhaps as one language with three dialects, and as you look at it you realize it is not one language, it is actually two languages with two different dialects. And in the other group, about 200 languages have dropped off the list of living languages through further examination and realizing actually there are no longer any living speakers. There have been language extinctions, including a total of 91 worldwide from the previous edition of the Ethnologue. It just so happens the figure is almost exactly the same, but that does not mean that the number of languages at all was static, or had reached a finite number. We’ve seen a difference in three during that time.

I could give you one in-house reason and I will give you an out-of-house reason, an external reason. But let me also talk about an international standard that has been applied, which we are managing. The in-house reason is that we are much more rigorous in our reporting, because we’ve transitioned databases that lay the foundation for the Ethnologue. Without getting into the technical details of that, let me just say when you transition databases as we have, you are going to see some shifts in some numbers—towards more accuracy, I will quickly add.

Secondly, on the external side, SIL was designated by the International Standards

Organization, ISO, to be the ISO Registrar of the languages of the world. There is an ISO code—it sounds rather like Star Trek—it is 639-3. That is the ISO code for the languages of the world. When we took on the registration of the world's languages, we started matching them up with what we saw in the Ethnologue. We have obviously been doing that applying the rigorous standards of this International Standards Organization. We have seen some things in areas where we've needed to make some changes about how languages are classified, how they are counted, how they are split, how they are joined. One reason that the language data number has grown over the last four years, for example, is because we are seeing increased efforts at language assessment, particularly in Asia. Well over 150 languages have been identified as either language splits that were previously thought perhaps to be part of another language and suddenly they are not. They are not actually a dialect; they are a separate language.

**Lightbody:**

Among these languages, are some of them quite small in the number of people speaking them? What is the scope?

**Boswell:**

It goes from the many millions, to several dozen languages that have 50 speakers or less. For example, in Papua New Guinea, we know there are 239 languages that have less than 500 speakers.

**Lightbody:**

What is the viability of these languages? Are they going to be around for a while?

**Boswell:**

The viability is always a question. Some of these languages with fewer than 500 speakers eventually wilt and pass from the earth due to, for example, bilingualism—encroaching bilingualism of either a national languages or languages that are in nearby borders. Also, because parents are no longer teaching the language to their children, they are no longer speaking it at home. The language is no longer used in cultural-social settings.

On the other hand, we have seen in language development work, in the facilitation of that work, that some of these languages with just a few hundred speakers suddenly find a new revitalization, either through translation of certain materials, through Bible translation, through cultural research, through vernacular education.

I was at a language conference in Bangkok recently focusing on language revitalization. A man was there, a speaker, who was in the Ministry of Education in Papua New Guinea. He did tell the audience, “We intend to see vernacular education in all of our public schools and primary schools through grade three. In other words, we are going to teach our students in their own language through the first few grades.”

Someone asked, “How can you do that if you don't have the languages written down?”

He replied, “There are 450 languages in Papua New Guinea that do not have an alphabet—that have never been written down.”

“Well, how are you going to do that?”

“We are going to depend on SIL to help us.”

That is what he told this international public conference. “We are depending on SIL to help us put these languages into writing.” Now the question you asked about viability—if it is a language with less than 500 speakers, what is the long-term prognosis there? Well, if you have this group of people that speak it, the children speak it. Studies do show that if they learn to read in a language that they control—that they speak—they will transition much easier to English or to another language of wider communication. In other words, they will get their learning elements firmly implanted and embedded in their minds and hearts, rather than trying to learn to read a language they do not speak, which is English, even though that may be the national language of Papua New Guinea.

One thing we are seeing now, Arthur, that in a lot of ways is disturbing and not hidden from the world—you will see a lot of predictions and notices in the news about language death. We know of a researcher in Australia that is contributing to the Ethnologue that has documented, over the past four years, the death of 87 Australian Aboriginal languages. So the language count in Australia will now be reduced by 87 in Ethnologue 16. The death has been noticed and is now documented. Our response in that has been to help the Aboriginal communities that still survive and still remain with language revitalization in their own communities.

There was an amazing event that took place in the Northern Territory of Australia, which was the dedication of the Creole Bible—the first complete Bible into an Australian Aboriginal language. When you think on the one hand of 87 languages going extinct, being declared extinct, and on the other hand a language spoken by 30,000 Aboriginal Australians and presentation by the Bible Society in Australia, it is quite amazing to watch that happen.

**Lightbody:**

And that is the kind of story we are seeing and hearing worldwide, while some languages are dying. Of these viable languages, approximately how many is SIL engaged in with development work?

**Boswell:**

We know almost exactly 2,000 of the world’s languages have some kind of language development ongoing today. SIL people are involved in almost 3/4 of those.

**Lightbody:**

Now, you touched on multilingual education—

**Boswell:**

Multilingual education is, I think, a huge step forward for planet earth. It is a huge step forward for the global communities of the world, in which children are taught to read and write in a language they handle well—or languages they understand well—before transitioning to a language of wider national communication. We have seen promotion of this particularly lately in Asia. There has been a major DVD promotional product produced by SIL in cooperation with UNESCO and with the government of Japan, who funded this particular project. This particular DVD highlights for members and leaders of language communities about how they might get involved in multilingual education.

For example, where do we really start? What are the benefits? What do you need to watch out for? When this takes place in your community, how do you engage a community in making this happen? For a long time people may have thought, Well, we are working in this particular language group, and that’s where we need to focus, and we don’t need to bother with anything external. Multilingual education forces us to think differently—to think outside the single language box and say, “For the good of education, for the good of our children, for the good of our nation, we need to work in a different way.”

**Lightbody:**

Could you give an example of a community somewhere in the world that is faced with one, two or three languages—in what areas of their lives are they faced with different languages?

**Boswell:**

You see this is a number of places in Asia. You see it in the Pacific; you see it in language groups in the Philippines. Very quickly I can speak about our life in the Solomon Islands, which is where I lived before I assumed this particular position as part of our international leadership team, and the jobs I've held there.

Basically you have, for example, a husband and wife who might be from different parts of the country. They've married, and perhaps they've moved to the capital city with good jobs. Well, the wife will bring what is called her "home language," and the husband will bring his home language, traditionally called "mother tongue." And they start having children—the children grow up in the home. Do they speak the mother's language? Do they speak the father's language? Or do they speak the national language of wider communication, which actually isn't an official language—Solomon Islands' Pidgin? I will talk about that in a moment. But [the children] will learn to speak Pidgin. They are probably part of a population of 450,000 in the country—40,000 speakers of Pidgin now as a first language. They will go to school. English has been the mandatory government language of schools. But SIL has been instrumental, at the requests of government ministers of education, to help develop materials and curriculum in Pidgin. So it is more than just English, but in the same time they are learning to read Pidgin. Obviously they can speak it, but they are learning to read it and to write in it. It is an English-based Pidgin, and that language is providing a bridge to the national language, so that when they go to New Zealand or Australia to university, or off to Fiji, they've had a good foundation for a bridge into English, both reading and writing.

At the same time, the husband or wife might decide to move back to their island. So the husband is from Malaita and the wife is from Santa Cruz and the husband just got assigned to move to Malaita. Well, they pack up the children and take them with them, and the child who has been reading and writing and speaking Pidgin in school now goes to north Malaita and might speak Kwara'ae, and the school curriculum and instruction might actually be in Kwara'ae—it may be in Kwaio. They move there, and suddenly the children are put in another educational situation that is multilingual, because it is now their third language of instruction. And the government steps in and says to have a healthy educational system for our children, we need to equip them with resources. We need to see our students succeed, so we have that kind of multilingual approach. It instills confidence in the students. They are learning to write a language they already speak; they are learning to access materials that are already published in the language, and so on.

**Lightbody:**

Freddy, could you tell our listeners how they might find out more about SIL?

**Boswell:**

Probably the easiest way is to go to our Web site, [www.sil.org](http://www.sil.org). And at the Web site you will find all kinds of things on our history, who we are and what we do. You'll find out a lot about publications. You will actually be able to read online a lot of electronic books and papers. You will find a journal of translation. You will also find links to training. So I hope our listeners will visit [sil.org](http://sil.org) for finding out this type of information.

**Lightbody:**

Thank you. I know I visit often. Thank you again.

**Announcer:**

We hope that you have enjoyed *Speeding the Word*. Arthur Lightbody would love to hear from you personally if you are interested in becoming part of the Bible translation movement. He welcomes your call at 1-704-843-6048. You may look us up on the Web at [www.jaars.org](http://www.jaars.org).