

JAARS **SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT**

Speaker
John Nystrom

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Interviewer
Arthur Lightbody

Primary Topic(s)
Translation for the Arop-Sissano

Other Topics
2008 Computer Technical Conference, "cluster" translation projects, a tsunami in 1998

Location Discussed
Aitape and Ukarumpa, Papua New Guinea

People Group (if named)
Arop-Sissano

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:

We are talking today with John Nystrom, a Wycliffe translator who works in Papua New Guinea. You are here for the Computer Technical Conference—we are glad to have you people enriching our lives on the center. We are learning from you, and we appreciate that. We'll talk about the conference in a bit. When did you and your wife, Bonnie, go as Bible translators?

Nystrom:

We went to PNG in August of 1987. We were 26 years old at the time.

Lightbody:

We often say people "gave up" a lot to be a Bible translator—what was your career before? What did you give up?

Nystrom:

I gave up my '67 Ford pickup in '87 and took off for PNG. I really didn't have a career before this—I trained to do translation, and this is what I am doing. This is my career.

Lightbody:

What is the name of the language group that God prepared you and Bonnie to work with?

Nystrom:

Arop-Sissano is the language. It is spoken on the Sissano Lagoon on the north coast of PNG.

Lightbody:

So this is a coastal place. A lowland place by the sea.

Nystrom:

Right. As low as it gets.

Lightbody:

How many people were living there when you started? Did some of them speak a trade language?

Nystrom:

About 2,400 persons. Some people speak a trade language—some speak Pidgin, the trade language in that part of PNG, but not everyone.

Lightbody:

So they needed Scripture translation?

Nystrom:

Definitely.

Lightbody:

At age 26 you went to Sissano for 2,400 people. A lot of people would think maybe there is something more significant. But those people, how did you feel about them and God's Word?

Nystrom:

I really think everybody needs God's Word in their language. You can't really do church planting or make disciples effectively unless people have the Word of God in the language that they really understand best. In their case, there is no question that that is their mother tongue. So that's why we were there.

Lightbody:

You started in what year? And not long after that there was a disaster.

Nystrom:

Yes, it was 10 years later. We started in April of 1988, and the tsunami happened in 1998.

Lightbody:

So you had made progress in translation. How much had you finished?

Nystrom:

We were working on the New Testament. We'd done the Book of Mark together, and that had been published in 1993. We were working on Acts, and actually, just prior to the tsunami my wife and I had been regional directors, overseeing the work of 25 other teams in the region and had not been involved in the Arop language as we'd like to be, but we were just ready to get involved with it full-time again when the tsunami happened.

Lightbody:

Tell us about the tsunami. What created it, and how did it affect the people?

Nystrom:

Apparently it—if I understand correctly; this is one of the most-studied tsunami ever—apparently there was an underwater earthquake that triggered an underwater landslide of silt from the rivers nearby that had built up over time. That's what made the tsunami come in. We had three waves come in, all over 30 feet high. That is what completely erased every building on that shore where the people were living at that time. All the buildings were gone, and it killed half the people who lived there.

Lightbody:

How many remained then? And where were you?

Nystrom:

Approximately 1,200 survived. I was at Ukarumpa, our translation center in Papua New Guinea, preparing to come to the U.S. for another one of these computer meetings that I've been involved in.

Lightbody:

So God chose that calendar item to spare your lives, to continue.

Nystrom:

I really think so. I don't think we would have survived. We would have been inside our house at that time of the evening, and it would have collapsed on top of us.

Lightbody:

I've read accounts of that tsunami and people did survive, pulled under water or pushed higher up. Were some people able to run or get away and see it?

Nystrom:

There's really nowhere to run, because we're talking about a sand spit that was about 100 yards wide and three miles long. And once people realized what was coming, there was really nowhere to run, except to try to cross the lagoon. So a lot of people were killed trying to flee.

Lightbody:

How long afterwards before you got out to visit?

Nystrom:

That happened Friday night, and we learned about it Saturday at noon. One of our JAARS pilots was able to fly us out there. At 6 o'clock the next morning we were taking off. We were able to land at the airstrip in the town of Aitape. We chose to go to the hospital to see people there. Helicopter flights were going out and picking up injured people. We chose not to do that, because we would have taken the place of an injured person coming back in. We visited a lot of friends there in the hospital.

We could tell who had been involved in the tsunami and who had been in town, just by the way they reacted. People who had been involved in the tsunami were absolutely numb and weren't really able to say much. It was the people from town, who were from that area, that were hysterical over what was going on, but the people who lived through it were just numb.

Lightbody:

How did they recover? How did they rebuild? Did they create a village again in that area?

Nystrom:

Eventually they moved about two miles inland. That's where they built their schools and churches. There is a road now that goes to their inland village. There did not used to be a road to the coastal village—you'd get there by boat. So they moved two miles inland, and a year later they were rebuilding, and so did we. We built inland as well.

Lightbody:

I understand your approach to Bible translation for the Arop-Sissano changed after that. Was that fairly immediate? There were new developments.

Nystrom:

That night, after the first visit at the hospital, Bonnie and I started talking. We said, "Well, we're going to be starting over from scratch when we get this translation project going again, and we don't have to do anything the way we used to do it. We can start thinking about this in a completely new way." As we and the three translators who survived—one of the four was killed in the tsunami—started discussing beginning the translation again, and when we did start a year later we started asking ourselves, "What are the reasons why we were not helping the related languages on the coast?" We had good reasons why we should finish in Arop-Sissano first before we did Sera, Sissano, Malol languages that are so close by, eight miles away to the east and eight miles away to the west.

Those reasons were good, but after the tsunami they just sounded like excuses to us. We really felt like the Lord wanted us to find a way to include them in the translation. So we put out the word that we were interested in including those language groups in the translation project and finding a way to work together. We didn't know how to do that—but what happened next was people we didn't intend to hear that message heard it. People who lived nearby and speak other languages that are completely different languages from these coastal languages heard about the project, and they started coming and asking, "Can we get a translation in our language, too?" The translators we'd been working with are also pastors—they said, "People's eyes are really open right now. People are more open to the gospel now than they have been before the tsunami, so we really need to do this."

I told them they needed to count the cost, because we were probably six to seven years away from finishing the Arop-Sissano New Testament—because your training is to the point where we are ready to finish. They replied, "This is more important."

We need to help these other people.” So that is what we’ve done.

We’ve ended up expanding into what turned out to be a total of 11 languages in three language families. What they have in common is they are all within walking distance of where our little translation center is that we built in the new village a couple of miles inland.

The translators work very hard at what they do. They really enjoy it. They come together for three weeks or so, four or five times a year, for translation workshops. They absolutely love working together. That is one of the things we’ve seen in this process—having people, even from different languages, even from different kinds of languages, working together in the same place, same time, working on the same translation problems together, are coming up with good solutions and really having a good time doing it together.

Lightbody:

I want to interject a question here. I’m curious as to how these men survive—these men that are translators. Are they paid? Are they still fishing or finding ways of making a living?

Nystrom:

All of them are subsistence farmers. None have paying jobs the way we think of them. The translators do get a stipend—it is not a lot of money, but it is intended to help their families while they are gone, because they are gone for three weeks at a time. One of the things they need to give up when they are away that much is cash-cropping. They still have other responsibilities they need to do in their villages to remain part of the local culture, but cash-cropping is an optional thing. You have to do that if you are going to pay your school fees and get clothes for your kids and certain kinds of food people buy, though most of it they grow. That is the model we are following now, and so far it seems to be acceptable to them and sustainable for the project.

Lightbody:

Where is that funding coming from?

Nystrom:

Right now, Wycliffe USA is our funding partner. Of course, Bonnie and I and our partners, Ben and Mandy Pearson and Beth Fuller, are all supported in the way all Wycliffe members are supported. But the project itself, all these translation workshops—that is all sponsored by Wycliffe USA.

Lightbody:

I wanted to interject that, because we had Bob Creson interviewed just a couple of weeks ago, and he was talking about the Last Languages Campaign. Maybe this will help the understanding of our listeners as to why there is this interest in helping our national partners. Before, it was people like the Nystroms that went out and did the work one-on-one in a village. But you can work in 11 languages now, and Nystroms could have raised their money and worked in one village with one group of people. But through funding and people caring about whole clusters of many language groups, we can get the job done in a much different way. Thank you for sharing about that, John.

I know this experience has led you to understand certain issues about computer technology, and you’ve brought some awareness of that to our meetings here. Can you tell us about that—these computer technical meetings that have been taking place?

Nystrom:

Yes. I gave two presentations. One was about cluster challenges from a specific perspective. One of the things I talked about is how when we work together in a translation project like this, it is the working together that is really the genius. It is the thing that is helping us get good-quality translation, and the interaction between the translators and the consultants that are working with them. One of the challenges we've had for the last seven years as we've been translating is that the software we've been using is designed for one person to use it on one computer in one language. But we have 20-plus translators with 13 laptops and three to five consultants working with them, and we need to make sure everyone has the latest version of each of the translations we are working on. All of the notes we are writing—the notes need to get to the right people. One of the things I've been talking about at the conference, and that we've seen start to happen in our software is, the software is actually helping us begin to work in a collaborative way. It wasn't a priority for us 10 years ago in our software, but it is now. And our programmers are working on it. I really enjoy working with them, discussing about how we could do this better in our software.

Lightbody:

We are going to switch this, John, and ask if you have any special prayer requests as we start to wrap up here for your family. Are you headed back to Papua New Guinea soon?

Nystrom:

Actually, Bonnie and I are on home assignment right now. We have two kids in college. Right now it is the right time for us to be in the States for a little bit. We plan on returning to PNG perhaps a year from now. I am working on checking the Book of Acts. I am also working on helping to improve some of our software for doing translation. Both Bonnie and I plan on being back in PNG in March. Bonnie is very much involved in our strategy committee, and we are developing a strategy for the next five to 10 years for our group in PNG. I plan to test some of this new software and to see how it really works.

Lightbody:

So our listeners are now more aware of new technologies and new ways of doing things. God bless you, John; thanks for being with us.

Announcer:

We hope 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.