

JAARS **SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT**

Speaker
Ron Moe

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Interviewer
Arthur Lightbody

Primary Topic(s)
Dictionary development

Other Topics
Word meanings

Location Discussed
Philippines, Uganda and Kenya

People Group (if named)
N/A

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 with Ron Moe today. We remember talking a few years ago on *Speeding the Word*. We know you from our Philippine days and from when we were students studying linguistics. We are going to talk about linguistics today, and why we are involved in that area of study. Where are some of the places you and your wife, Beth, have worked?

Moe:

We started our career as Bible translators in the Philippines in a very large group in the southern Philippines. After a term, we left there and went to Uganda to help open SIL's work in Uganda. After a couple of years there, I was asked to take on a consulting role in Kenya. So we moved to Kenya—we've worked in three countries in our career.

Lightbody:

Our listeners may know that SIL is a partner with JAARS that we work closely with. Many of us are seconded over to that organization when we do our language work. How would you describe the purpose of SIL, Ron?

Moe:

Our purpose is to foster the use of minority languages in writing and in literacy. And we also help produce various kinds of literature. For example, I've helped design a number of alphabets for a number of languages, though my primary work right now is to help Bible translators produce dictionaries. We do linguistic work of various types—grammars, alphabets, dictionaries—to support the work of Bible translation.

Lightbody:

Let's talk about words today—we were talking earlier about our Bible translators and linguists working with the local people in doing these translations. Sometimes we get locked into meanings of words and the way we structure our sentences. Can you explain a bit more about why it is important to study linguistics?

Moe:

Well, we've got lots of words in all of our languages. An average language would have, say, 25,000 words. We've got a lot more in English, so one of the things we need to do is study words and what they mean and how they are used. For example, there is a word in Greek, *proskuneo*, and it is translated in a lot of our English translations with the word "worship," but it doesn't really mean that. The problem with this word is it describes what you would do when you come into the presence of a king. Well, we don't have kings, so we are kind of missing this whole concept. What you did in the ancient Middle East would be—you would enter the presence of the king; you would get down on your knees and put your forehead on the ground. That action is *proskuneo*. What you are doing is, you are actually telling the king that for one thing, you are in his presence, but you are also submitting to his authority. You are saying, "You are my king, and I am acknowledging you as my king." It is what we would call a "protocol word"—the protocol you would have to go through to enter the presence of the king.

We need to understand the culture and how this word actually functions. So who would you do this to? In the New Testament you would do it to the king, and you would also do it to God. Why? Well, because God is the King of Kings and Lord of Lords. So when you use that word *proskuneo* in the New Testament in the relationship of a person to God, what it's actually meaning is, "I am acknowledging God as my King."

So Jesus says to the woman at the well, "What the Father is really looking for is a people who will *proskuneo*—who will bow to Him—in their spirit and in truth." Now this woman had been worshipping. She had been going to the temple, but she didn't really mean it. She was actually in rebellion against God's laws, so what Jesus was saying to her was what the Father was really interested in is people who will acknowledge Him as King and really mean it. So it is not just an outward form, but it is something that is really going on in their heart. That's what He was saying the Father was really interested in. Well, that is a rather complex concept.

Until we get into the culture and the way words work, we are not really sure how to translate words like that. There are a lot of languages around the world that do not have kings, and they don't bow—so how are you going to translate that word? That is the kind of thing that we've run into all the time in translation.

Lightbody:

Ron, can you tell me how you would translate that word?

Moe:

In English I would translate it with a phrase: "to bow in submission." In the context, you could shorten that to "bow." Jesus uses this word *proskuneo* quite a few times talking with the Samaritan woman, so at least the first time I would have to translate it "bow in submission." So the woman says, "You Jews think you should *proskuneo* in Jerusalem. That's because that is where God is in their culture. But we Samaritans believe we should go to this mountain in Samaria, because that is where God is." As He goes on and talks about this word, you can shorten the way you translate it. But initially you've got to give the physical form—"bow"—plus the meaning, "submit."

Lightbody:

If we had retained the real meaning of [the word] "*proskuneo*," when we said the word "worship" it wouldn't be a problem.

Moe:

Right. But we don't use "worship" today with that meaning. If we were going to do an accurate translation today into English, we would really need to translate that word differently than "worship," because that doesn't communicate anymore.

Lightbody:

Can you think of another example or two of words?

Moe:

One of my favorite examples of a word that is difficult today in English is the word "grace." We all know what it means in English—at least, the preachers define it as "God's unmerited favor." But when you look at how it is actually used in Greek, it doesn't mean that at all. Now, it is a nice theological concept, and we love the concept of God's grace—that we don't merit what God does for us, but He loves us enough to do it anyway.

Well, that is not the way the word is used in Greek. In fact, God the Father has grace to Jesus, and you think, “Well, did Jesus not deserve it?” Sure He did. What the word actually means normally is that somebody did something good—like in Philippians 2. Jesus became obedient, even unto death, so the Father graced Him with the name that is above every name. Well, Jesus deserves the name which is above every name. And that is the basic meaning of that word [grace].

However, Paul takes that word and he stretches the meaning to fit when God gives us something, even though we don’t deserve it. Normally, human beings will only give nice things in appreciation for good people, but God will give us things even when we don’t deserve it. So here is a complex word that creates translation problems for us. We’ve got to really understand what the basic meaning is and the different situations in which that word is used in the New Testament and then figure out—how are we going to translate that? So we need lots of translation options to fit all the different contexts in which a particular word is used.

Lightbody:

So you were in Uganda and Kenya, helping Bible translators—some were Ugandans, some were Kenyans. I understand when I visited you in Nairobi, you had developed an understanding of how language structure worked, the basic linguistics and the way the grammar was formed, and you’d become quite knowledgeable. Then you saw a need and you developed something. Tell us about that, Ron.

Moe:

I was asked to write up something to help translators produce dictionaries. I was sitting at my desk thinking, *There are a lot of good ideas, but which ones would be really important for me to focus on?* There was a great idea out there that no one was using. That is: we could use word families, like parts of the bodies, parts of the house or color terms, kinship terms—these word families or groups of words that are all somehow related—we could use these words to collect the words of a language. I wondered if it would work.

I began working on the idea and came up with a new method for collecting the words of a language. Until then, our translators would collect maybe 2 1/2 words per day, about 650 per year. I thought, *We can do better than that.* When I figured out that maybe we could use this idea, I thought, *Well, what would it take?* It would take a list of word families—the technical term for this in linguistics is “semantic domains.” So I made a list—1,800 of these. I tested it, and in the first test we collected 14,000 words in two weeks. That was a world record. The world’s record currently, using this new method, is 26,000 words in two weeks.

If Guinness was keeping track of it, this translator about two months ago would now hold the world record.

Lightbody:

I have to ask you, are some of those words related? Like in a family of words, different forms of a word, not like stems. So now we have quite an arsenal of words.

Moe:

Yes. And the interesting thing about this method is you got an instant thesaurus. Now, when I am writing sometimes I can’t remember a word, and I think, *Well, I can think of a related word, but I can’t think of an exact word.* So I pull my thesaurus off the shelf and look up the word I can remember, and it gives me a list of other related words. Well, that is exactly the tool a Bible translator needs. He has a concept, maybe a Greek concept, and he wants to know: “How do I express that in this target language?” So he needs to pull his thesaurus off the shelf. Unfortunately,

there is no thesaurus in most of these languages, but now with this new method of collecting words, in two weeks we get a giant thesaurus. This kind of a dictionary is the translator's most important tool. There are professional translators who wear out their dictionaries, thesaurus, because they use them all the time. Now for the first time, a Bible translator can produce a giant thesaurus before he even starts translating. Before this, nobody had a good one—it took too long to produce one. But now we have hundreds of translators all over the world who have used this method, and now have this tremendous tool to help them in the translation process.

Lightbody:

What do you call this—do you have a name?

Moe:

I call it the “dictionary development process.”

Lightbody:

Do you have an example of somebody who has said, “Hey, this really worked”?

Moe:

Yes. There is a gentleman in the South Pacific. He held a workshop, collected thousands of words. The next day they were translating, and they needed a word for wilderness. They had a word, but they were not happy with it, so the translator said, “Let's go look in our brand-new thesaurus.” And sure enough, there was a better word sitting in the dictionary-thesaurus that they could use, that fit the context better. These things are being used all over the world.

Lightbody:

So you are helping to train, doing seminars, etc.?

Moe:

Yes. I've been to India three times; I've been to the Philippines and other places, teaching translators how to produce a dictionary like this.

Lightbody:

It is exciting work. I am sure there are people who would be interested in helping on the technical side, because this involved a software program of some kind?

Moe:

Yes, that's right. We have some people in our office in Dallas that are writing a new software package. It is called “Field Works”—a program that helps translators and linguists to do linguistic research, including producing a dictionary. I've been helping them as a user to tell them what I, as a lexicographer, would like the program to be able to do. Then they go ahead and program in the functionality.

Lightbody:

So you people out there who are programmers—this is how you can use your skills, maybe in this program or a related program. Similar things are done here at JAARS in connection with the office in Dallas. Just look at www.jaars.org.

Moe:

We need a lot of programmers to help us. In fact, I was just talking with a couple of fellows today—I've got a dream of setting up a Web site, and I needed some help because I don't know how to set up a site. There are lots of software development needs that we could use a lot of help with.

Lightbody:

You've returned to the States, where you can more easily facilitate this project. Your children are all grown?

Moe:

I have four adult children. The youngest is still in college, so we are living in the U.S. right now while I do this research. I have good Internet connectivity here, so there are some reasons why we are here right now.

Lightbody:

Thanks for your time with us and the way you've helped explain some tough concepts for us.

Announcer:

We hope that you've 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.