

# **JAARS** SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT

Speaker  
**Dr. Thomas Headland**

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Interviewer  
**Arthur Lightbody**

Primary Topic(s)  
**Scripture use**

Other Topics  
**Translation, cultural changes**

Location Discussed  
**Philippines**

People Group (if named)  
**Agta**

**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**

I am talking with Dr. Thomas Headland today in Dallas, Texas. He is an international anthropology consultant with SIL International, a partner with Wycliffe Bible Translators. He is also an adjunct professor at the University of North Dakota and the University of Texas at Arlington. I've known Dr. Headland for some time. In fact, he even taught me in an anthropology class in the Philippines. It is good to be with you here in Dallas, Tom. How are you?

**Headland:**

I am glad to be with you, Arthur.

**Lightbody:**

You have been with Wycliffe Bible Translators for quite a few years, haven't you? How many years is it?

**Headland:**

Forty-nine years.

**Lightbody:**

The Lord took you to the Philippines. When was that, and where did you live?

**Headland:**

Janet and I joined Wycliffe in 1960 and were married in 1961. Three weeks after we were married, we left for the Philippines. So there we were, newly married, and the story goes on from there—we were both 26 at the time.

**Lightbody:**

Did you go immediately to a village situation?

**Headland:**

One month after we arrived in the Philippines, we went to a place where there were reports and rumors and sighted reports of a people living deep in the rain forest in the northern Philippines. We went and found those people and settled in and lived with them for most of the last 49 years.

**Lightbody:**

What was that group?

**Headland:**

The group was called "Agta." That is what they call themselves and the name they use for their language. Outsiders also call them Agta people. They look different—they don't look like Filipinos. They have a small body size, smaller than Filipinos. They don't look Oriental. They have dark skin and wooly hair.

**Lightbody:**

Tell us, what is their livelihood?

**Headland:**

The Agta people are what anthropologists call hunter-gatherers. Or human foragers. They are a foraging society. They don't make their living by farming or by raising animals. They make their living by collecting wild foods. In the case of these people, they were also trading forest products with Filipino people down in the lowlands—forest-jungle products such as rattan vines, medicinal plants, and especially wild meat like deer and wild pig. They would trade the meat for starch foods, crops, cultivated foods that farmers grew down in the valley.

**Lightbody:**

Because they didn't farm themselves.

**Headland:**

No, they did not farm themselves. They typically did not wear typical Western-type clothes. Men wore a small G-string or loin cloth, and women wore a small wrap-around skirt around their waist. Both men and women were naked from the waist up. The children didn't wear anything at all.

**Lightbody:**

I get your reports, and it is interesting that in one of your reports you remarked at one time they didn't have agriculture, they basically didn't wear clothes, but now many of them have cell phones.

**Headland:**

Now, we are talking about a half-century since we first went there, and now 49 years later they are wearing Western clothes now. I very seldom see a man wearing a loin cloth or G-string anymore. And I seldom see a woman wearing a wrap-around skirt. Half a century later, the Agta are very different. They are no longer nomadic, roaming around in the rain forest collecting wild foods. The forest has been destroyed by thousands of outsiders who have come in—logging industries. Now they wear Western clothes are starting to send their children to school. Lots and lots of changes have gone on.

**Lightbody:**

Let's go back to what I think was the original driver to get you to the Philippines. Was it Scripture translation?

**Headland:**

Well the original driver, I think, was God. I became a Christian in college. Janet was a Christian when she was a teenager in high school. I felt a calling to be a missionary. I didn't know what Bible translation was about at the beginning, but when I met some Wycliffe Bible translators, almost immediately I thought, This is the way I want to do this—because it fit with my goal. I was already majoring in anthropology in college, before I ever heard of Wycliffe.

**Lighbody:**

Now you were there [in the village location], and they are not literate, and you are going to translate the Scripture. How did this work?

**Headland:**

Our goal was—we wanted to see these people know Christ. We felt the best way they could grow as Christians, if they became Christians, was to have the Scriptures of the New Testament, the Bible, in their own language. So that was our goal—to translate the Bible and to introduce literacy into this culture. Literacy as a community value to these people, because no one could read when we went there, and many people had never even seen a book. They didn't know they lived in the Philippines when we got there in 1962. They hadn't been out of the forest.

They didn't know much about the outside world. They had seen a few white men at various times that had passed through. They had never seen a white woman—my wife was the first white woman they ever saw. In August of 1963 our first child was born, and they were all thrilled with that. They still talk about that—we have three children that all grew up with the Agta, living in the village. Our three children are in their 40s today. They still speak Agta fluently, because that's where they grew up. They still make visits back to visit their Agta aunts and uncles.

**Lightbody:**

I think that is amazing that they've had this ongoing contact with the Agta. Now they've seen some of the change. Now that early change—you translated Scripture. Were they able to read it? Were they receptive to it?

**Headland:**

We started translating the Scriptures after we'd been there about a year or so, and it was slow going at first. No one knew English—we didn't even know the language that well after the first year, and we couldn't even go to them and ask them in English, "How do you say 'dog' in your language?" Because no one knew English. We sort of used sign language. We had to just live with them, and if we saw somebody holding a dog we'd say, "What that?" After we learned to say, "What's that?" in their language, they'd say, "This is a dog." We wrote it down, and pretty soon we started learning words like that. They always liked us. They were never hostile to the Christian message.

**Lightbody:**

What was their reaction the first time they heard the Scripture in their own language? Did they care?

**Headland:**

No, they didn't care. They were indifferent—they weren't hostile to it; they were just bored by it.

**Lightbody:**

How did that all finally change? How many years did that take before you actually saw they were taking Scripture and digesting it?

**Headland:**

We finished the New Testament in 1977. It was published in 1979. By that time we'd taught a few people to read. Most people were not interested in learning to read. Literacy was irrelevant to them. When the New Testament was finished, there were maybe six adults that had a mild interest in the Christian message. They certainly weren't serious Christians—didn't understand what that meant yet.

After we finished the New Testament, we distributed it to the few people we taught to read. Two weeks later we asked, "Where's that book we gave you?"

"Oh, I guess I left it in the forest."

They weren't interested in keeping it. We stayed with the Agta until 1986. That was 24 years. Then we moved back to the United States; two of our three children were already in college, and one was a senior in high school. We figured it was time to bring our children home and introduce them to their relatives and our friends in the United States.

**Lightbody:**

You saw the need for some adjustment time.

**Headland:**

Yes. We wanted them to get married; we needed to return to the States, where they can find spouses. They are all happily married now—we have seven grandchildren, by the way.

**Lightbody:**

So they weren't hurt by being overseas.

**Headland:**

No, I don't think they were hurt, and they certainly don't. We happened to live among a group of people, the Agta, where our children were safe. The Agta people treated them just like their own children and nephews and nieces, and they were very safe. They had very close friends. There wasn't any danger.

**Lightbody:**

We want people to know that we in Wycliffe, when we make these choices we sometimes hear people say, "Well, I don't know if I could bring my kids."

**Headland:**

When we lived out there we had no electricity, no running water, and we certainly didn't have any television or radio. I don't think our children were harmed for it. They grew up—they had a tremendous childhood.

**Lightbody:**

We are going to talk a bit more next week about how God reached down and impacted the Agta people. You've told us some things about church meetings that you've been to where things have really changed in the Agta culture, is that right?

**Headland:**

Yes, it is. The program we were doing was not successful during those 24 years we were there, because at the end of the time the people were not using the New Testament. They were not interested in literacy. Only a few people that we'd taught to read.

I'll tell you a story now—Bernie May was the director of Wycliffe Bible Translators when we came home here to the States. Bernie May wrote a letter to me and Janet in 1989. He'd met us and knew our story, and he said, "You know, Tom and Janet, Wycliffe has published a number of books where our translators have worked in a group and the stories have been very successful. We have never, ever written a story of a missionary couple, a Wycliffe couple, who have been unsuccessful. Would you be willing to write that book for us?" We laughed at that, and I actually thought that was a good idea, because I thought our story is not unsuccessful, but it is different. If you measure success the way Westerners do, it was, but not in God's way. We never felt that way. We were willing to do that, but we never did get around to that [writing the book]. Through the '80s and the '90s and up until this last year, 2008, Janet and I made trips back to the Agta every other year and lived there for three months. Now there has been a people movement to Christ. It started in 1997. It just took a while, but all of a sudden it just exploded into a tremendous people movement.

**Lightbody:**

I remember reading a prayer letter where you talked about the church developing. Was that when you were away for a time?

**Headland:**

We'd been away for quite a while. When we moved back to the United States in 1986, there was no church there [among the Agta]. There were no practicing believers. The people didn't disbelieve the Scriptures that we'd read them and told them about, and the story of Jesus. They were just indifferent to it. In 1997, that is 11 years after we moved back to the States, a people movement broke out among the Agta. We weren't even there when this happened. We went back in 1998 and we saw this, but it was so small we didn't really believe what we were seeing. We were only there for three months in 1998. When we returned the next time, in the year 2000, we were absolutely stunned, because it just knocked our socks off. We could hardly believe our ears and our eyes, how all these people—not everyone in the whole language group; the language group is about 600 people, by the way—there were quite a large number of adults and families that had turned to Christ. It took us a while to figure out how this had happened. They said, "Well, you told us about this when you were here—don't you remember, Tom?" If you are going to ask me how the Holy Spirit did this, I don't think I know the answer. Now, I will say that there was another SIL team working in another language group to the north that was also a Negrito people like the Agta, who spoke a different dialect. They had become Christians, so they went down to tell their story of their conversions to their relatives in the area where I lived.

**Lightbody:**

We are going to have to pick up with this next week. We'd like to invite our listeners to tune in for the rest of the story and find out how the Agta became believers, and what is happening in the church, and a little more about anthropology. God bless you and have a great day.

**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).