

# **JAARS** SPEEDING THE WORD TRANSCRIPT

Speaker  
**Steve Quakenbush**

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Interviewer  
**Arthur Lightbody**

Primary Topic(s)  
**Agutaynen of the Philippines**

Other Topics  
**Language learning and translation, impact of Scripture in the mother tongue**

Location Discussed  
**Philippines**

People Group (if named)  
**Agutaynen**

**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're talking with Steve Quakenbush today. Welcome to *Speeding the Word*, Steve. We're glad you and Janice can be in the Waxhaw area for a while with one of your sons.

**Quakenbush:**

That's right. Daniel, who is just about to turn 10 years old.

**Lightbody:**

You're here for a time, and we're delighted to have the time with you. I know that you went to live and work among the Agutaynen in the Philippines.

**Quakenbush:**

Yes. You said that just right. The Agutaynen live in the Palawan province in the Philippines. There are about 15,000 of them. They are largely farmers and fishermen, although there are a good number of them who are professional types too. A really common profession among the Agutaynen is teaching school, so there are a number of school teachers and also policemen and some men who work professionally on fishing boats.

**Lightbody:**

Now, you are Bible translators with Wycliffe Bible Translators, and you studied linguistics. You've gone as far as a Ph.D. in linguistics, and Janice has had other graduate studies. As a linguist you understand languages. Can you tell us what the language is like among the Agutaynen? Do they speak one language, or are there many languages?

**Quakenbush:**

Yes. Agutaynen, typically, though they speak about four languages to some extent or another. There is the Agutaynen language, which is their home language, which they use for important personal things and with each other. There is a regional trade language called "Cuyonon," which many of them speak. There is the national language called "Filipino," based on Tagalog, which more of them speak these days. And then many Agutaynens would speak some degree of English.

**Lightbody:**

What language do they speak best?

**Quakenbush:**

Agutaynen.

**Lightbody:**

Is that the first language that they would speak?

**Quakenbush:**

It depends on who they are talking to. If they are talking to each other, Agutaynen is the natural choice. If they're talking to foreigners, then they might try one of their other languages.

**Lightbody:**

A lot of our friends have the idea that people speak one language, and we translate the Bible for them in that one language. Now you have given us a different picture. These people speak four languages. What's the need for translation in a situation like that? How does that work?

**Quakenbush:**

That's a really good question. That actually was what motivated my dissertation research for my Ph.D. I was looking at the patterns of language used in the community—how they used different languages that they used—and tried to get an idea how well they spoke the different languages. So I interviewed over 200 people and asked them these sorts of questions.

One day a man asked me why I was doing this. And I told him I was doing this project for my research, and depending on the outcome, maybe we'll come back and help you translate the New Testament into your language. Would that be a good idea?

"Oh, that would be a very good idea."

"Why is that?"

"We hear about Jesus from the time we're born until the day we die, but we never understand it well."

I went home and told Janet I thought I knew why this was worth our while.

**Lightbody:**

So how do you start?

**Quakenbush:**

Well, of course you can't study the language ahead of time. You can study neighboring languages ahead of time. We did do some national language study before we went to the village.

**Lightbody:**

Why can't you study the language ahead of time?

**Quakenbush:**

I would challenge you to find a book written on Agutaynen grammar or language lessons on many of these unwritten languages of the world. But that's what we do in linguistics—we prepare people to go do that sort of thing. So we moved in with a rice-farming family in the rural Philippines and began speaking with them as much as we could. I would record them. I would ask, "Tell me something that happened to you yesterday." Then I would play it back again and again, and I would write down everything I could. Then I would work with people until I understood every bit of that. That is the way I began to analyze that language.

**Lightbody:**

When did you go to live with them, and how soon were you able to start to translate the Scripture?

**Quakenbush:**

We first went in 1984 and lived with them for about a year. After about six months I could speak enough to do the interviews that I was doing for my research. But it

was another couple of years before we could really start translating.

**Lightbody:**

Where did you start?

**Quakenbush:**

We started with the Book of Luke. We chose that because the Agutaynen celebrated Christmas and Easter in a big way, so we wanted to have the Christmas story, and Luke chapter two is the best choice for the Christmas story, so that's where we started.

**Lightbody:**

How did this process work? You said you translated Luke first. Were you alone in this process? How did you work with the people in this project?

**Quakenbush:**

Well of course, it's the Agutaynen people who put God's Word into their language, and we were there to help them do that, really. Janice and I were the first foreign team who went to work with them. We would work together—I especially worked with one man to get a rough draft. It's fairly easy to get a rough draft of Scripture, but it's very difficult to make sure that it says what you want it to say. We spent much more time checking this draft with other people to see what they understood from, to make sure that we are communicating an accurate message. There are many, many different kinds of checks that we do on [the translation]. Then other colleagues of ours check it for us. We translate it back into English, and they check it over again. Then we take it through a multiple-community check. It's a long process to make sure it's a good product.

**Lightbody:**

What was the goal you had in mind as you worked on this? Was it a certain amount of Scripture?

**Quakenbush:**

We were actually aiming for the New Testament as a complete book. That was finished in 2004, when we celebrated the dedication of that New Testament.

**Lightbody:**

Can you tell us about the celebration?

**Quakenbush:**

We had several celebrations, because Agutaynens are spread out. There is the 6 1/2 square-mile home island Agutaya, which we call the "ethnocenter" of the original Agutaynen area. Then they have also settled in different communities on what we call the "mainland" of Palawan, which is also an island, but a much larger island. We had celebrations in several different communities. We had one on the home island—we had parades; we fed 1,000 people or so; we had a cultural show; we had special worship services. It was a great, big day event.

**Lightbody:**

Can you tell us about the program itself?

**Quakenbush:**

One of the most meaningful parts for me was when the bishop of northern Palawan, who came especially for the event, held up the New Testament in front of all the Agutaynen people, and he said, "This Book is evidence of God's love for you."

As I sat there on the other the side of the stage, I said, “Yes, God, that is exactly the message I want them to hear!” That bishop later sent a message to people in the United States who helped support us and helped send us.

He said tell them, “Thank you. You have brought God closer to the heart every Agutaynen, where He will be more clearly known, more nearly followed, more dearly loved and worshipped.”

**Lightbody:**

You had a special friend come from the U.S. to visit you at the dedication. Is that right?

**Quakenbush:**

At another dedication, we had one of our pastors from a supporting church in the U.S. came. This is another one of the meaningful times for me through the whole celebration season.

This pastor came from Washington, D.C., and he was there speaking to the Agutaynen people. He’d never seen them close up. They’d only seen me as a representative—as the one sent from that church. These two worlds had never come together, and he wanted to communicate something to these people. He wanted to say, “Hold on to this Word of God. Follow in this teaching of Christ.” And he was going to choose something from the Scriptures to share with them. I was excited because I knew whatever he chose, as long as it was from the New Testament, we had it. We were ready. When he spoke that day, I was his interpreter. It was a great joy to me to help bring those two worlds together and to share from the Word of God as the interpreter.

**Lightbody:**

Let’s back up a little. Before that dedication—or that series of dedications and celebrations—with the New Testament, had you seen Scripture being used by the people? Were they taking it to heart and making it a part of their lives?

**Quakenbush:**

Before we came to do Bible translation, people weren’t that aware of the Scriptures, and they didn’t have much of a sense that what went on in church was something they were supposed to understand anyway, because religion was something for the few professionals. So it was really exciting to see them come to understand that the Scriptures are meaningful, for one thing, and that they have a message for them.

One of the women who became a co-translator for us said to me one day, “I could read the Tagalog or the English Scriptures, but I don’t because they’re hard. But this—when you think about it, it has meaning.”

After the dedication I got a message from another young college graduate. He told me, “I am crying from the beauty of reading the Scriptures in my own language. I pray that God will give me a radio program, so that I can teach from it and use the Agutaynen Scriptures on the radio.”

**Lightbody:**

Tell us about what is happening now. What are the plans for further Scripture or for the use of Scripture by the churches among the Agutaynen?

**Quakenbush:**

There are two things that encourage me about Scripture use there in the Agutaynen community. One is that another mission agency has come in. Just as we

left, New Tribes sent in a team, and they are committed to teaching the Scriptures through a chronological approach. Now, I told you a while ago that we were focused on the New Testament. Our missionary friends came in and said, “Where is the Old Testament? We want to start at the beginning.” And you know, that really makes a lot of sense. Before they came on, though, we were losing motivation. We thought, “Maybe nobody is going to use this. Maybe it’s not worth it.” But when they came and asked, we thought, “Well, maybe we should work on this a bit [the Old Testament].” So we have provided them with some rough drafts of all the portions they need to use to teach chronologically through the Old Testament. We pray for God’s blessing on them.

Another thing that encourages me is the formation of a new organization among the Agutaynen. It is led by a group of young professionals—and they asked me to be a member of the board, too, even though I am a little older and I am the only non-Agutaynen. They have this goal—the vision—of a prosperous Agutaynen community united by a sense of identity, values and spiritual well-being. So this group of young movers and shakers is making plans for how to work toward that prosperous Agutaynen community, and it includes using the Agutaynen Scriptures.

**Lightbody:**

I want to ask why it is a person like you studies linguistics and goes as far as getting a Ph.D., which is further than most of us go. What is the value of real strong academics in the work of Bible translation?

**Quakenbush:**

The Bible translation process is really profoundly academic, in the sense that we need to understand as much as we can about the original languages of the Scripture and the original culture of the peoples where those Scriptures were written. We need to understand how languages work and how we can move a message from one language into another, how we express it clearly and accurately and naturally and acceptably. There’s a whole lot of room for using the mind in understanding those processes. Not everybody has to have a Ph.D. to be a Bible translator. It was just something along the road for me. I thought it would come in handy, and it has, not only in helping me to understand language and language situations better, but it has also opened the door for me to be a teacher and a trainer in different training programs. I’ve been able to teach in Singapore and Manila. There’s a new applied linguistics program in Manila where you can get a master’s degree. Most of the students who are going through that program are Filipinos, and a good number of those Filipinos are continuing translation work in their own languages. I’m really happy to have the credential that allows me to be a part of their training.

**Lightbody:**

When I was an ordinary working linguist, I appreciated people like you to help us, consult with us and help us through workshops and training. Now you’re moving into a new role in the academic area—as coordinator, I understand. What is this time now, a little bit of furlough time and family time?

**Quakenbush:**

That’s right. We’ve been overseas for six years, so we have some time now to reconnect with financial and prayer partners and to retool a bit and also to rest along the way. Then I’ll be taking a new assignment in Dallas at our international headquarters as the international academic coordinator.

**Lightbody:**

Do you have any special prayer requests as we close, Steve?

**Quakenbush:**

Well, it's always on my heart that God will transform other Agutaynen communities through the use of His Word. Pray that the Agutaynens who now have the Scriptures will read them and take them to heart. Then you could pray, too, that we will be able from our international headquarters to provide the sort of assistance that Bible translators all around the world need. I look at it this way—we're a team to provide the some of the brain power to fuel the Bible translation movement around the world.

**Lightbody:**

Maybe one of our listeners will join with us.

**Quakenbush:**

Oh, I hope so—many of them.

**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).