

Biblical Commentary Writing in Ghanaian Languages: Some Principles for Thinking and Writing in the Mother Tongue

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ABSTRACT

In discussing, the above topic titled, “Biblical Commentary Writing in Ghanaian Languages: Some Principles for Thinking and Writing in the Mother Tongue,” one cannot forget to mention the following scholars and their contribution to this important field of study. These are key authors and sources in the field of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics, translation philosophy and the process of inculturation in biblical studies. Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2012), a leading figure in mother tongue biblical hermeneutics, his works explore the translation and exegetical problems in specific mother tongue New Testaments (e.g., Dangme) and the role of mother tongue Bibles as resources for African Biblical Studies. Lamin Sanneh (2009), a foundational scholar who stressed the importance of the mother tongue in the growth of African Christianity and the impact of translation on culture.

INTRODUCTION

In discussing, the above topic titled, “Biblical Commentary Writing in Ghanaian Languages: Some Principles for Thinking and Writing in the Mother Tongue,” one cannot forget to mention the following scholars and their contribution to this important field of study. These are key authors and sources in the field of mother tongue biblical hermeneutics, translation philosophy and the process of inculturation in biblical studies. Kuwornu-Adjaottor (2012), a leading figure in mother tongue biblical hermeneutics, his works explore the translation and exegetical problems in specific mother tongue New Testaments (e.g., Dangme) and the role of mother tongue Bibles as resources for African Biblical Studies. Lamin Sanneh (2009), a foundational scholar who stressed the importance of the mother tongue in the growth of African Christianity and the impact of translation on culture.

Kwame Bediako (2010) argued that the ability to express one's response to the Gospel in one's own language is central to authentic religious encounter. John D. Ekem (2013) known for his works on biblical exegesis in African languages and most especially Ghanaian languages. Justin Ukpong's own contribution to developments in biblical interpretation in Africa, focusing on historical and hermeneutical directions. Gerald O. West has written extensively on biblical hermeneutics in Africa and co-edited works on the Bible in Africa and Abraham Berinyuu, explores the use of African cultural contexts in biblical interpretation.

Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics (MTBH) is a field that emphasizes culturally sensitive interpretation to make the message relevant to local communities. This approach requires a blend of biblical studies, language studies, and an understanding of the local culture. The general usage of the term 'mother tongue' denotes not only the language one learns from one's mother, but also the speaker's dominant and home language, that is not only the first language according to the time of acquisition, but the first with regard to its importance and the speaker's ability to master its linguistic and communicative aspects. Sanneh in explaining this further had this to say: “There is no such thing as a church or a people without a language or without the Scriptures. In spite of barriers of natural and cultural separation among us, God remains a neighbour to us – a safeguard of ethical solidarity. God wooed us in the tones and actions that rocked us on our mothers' knees” (2007:3).

DEFINITION OF THE PHRASE ‘MOTHER TONGUE BIBLE COMMENTARY

"Mother tongue Bible commentary," refers to the interpretation and explanation of biblical texts in a person's first language, known as mother tongue biblical hermeneutics. This approach focuses on providing commentary that is culturally relevant and uses local idioms and symbols, making theological concepts more accessible to the local community. Mother tongue biblical commentary (also referred to as Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics or MTBH) is an approach to biblical studies that focuses on **interpreting and reinterpreting biblical texts using the reader's native language and cultural worldview as a primary lens**. This method aims to make the biblical message profoundly relevant and accessible to local communities, moving beyond interpretations solely based on Western cultural and linguistic frameworks. Writing commentaries in Ghanaian languages involves adhering to general principles of effective commentary while incorporating specific linguistic and cultural rules unique to each language.¹

Organizations like the **Bible Society of Ghana (BSG)** and the **Ghana Institute of Linguistics, Literacy and Bible Translation (GILLBT)** are actively involved in Bible translation and provide a foundation for commentary work. **The Centre for the Study of Biblical Hermeneutics** at the Akrofi Christaller Institute of Theology, Mission and Culture, Akuapem-Akropong and the **Institute of Mother Tongue Biblical Hermeneutics** at the Trinity Theological Seminary, Legon, are major academic hubs for this field of study.

PRINCIPLES FOR THINKING AND WRITING IN THE MOTHER TONGUE

Clarity and Purpose: The purpose is to persuade, inform, critique and at the end of the day, the central message (thesis) of the commentary must be clear from the start.

Audience-Centricity: Write for the target audience in their sitting rooms, not for a mass crowd. This requires using locally relevant contexts, experiences, and cultural nuances.

Strong, Opinionated Stance: Commentaries are typically opinion-based and should present a unique, specific viewpoint, even if it's an extension or critique of existing ideas.

Evidence-Based Reasoning: Support all claims and opinions with relevant evidence, facts, or logical reasoning, even if citations are kept to a minimum in the final published piece.

Logical Structure and Cohesion: Organize ideas thematically, not chronologically or line-by-line. Use connecting phrases and logical transitions (e.g., "because," "consequently") to ensure coherence.

Appropriate Tone and Register: The tone should be engaging, possibly using humor or stories, while the register should be appropriate for the medium and subject matter.

Linguistic Accuracy: Adhere to the specific rules of writing for the chosen Ghanaian language, including its orthography, grammar, syntax, and vocabulary.

3.1 Key Concepts in Mother Tongue Commentary Writing

Definition: MTBH is the discipline devoted to the interpretation and reinterpretation of biblical texts in a person's first, indigenous language. This "mother tongue" is seen as a repository of indigenous wisdom, theology, and philosophy, not merely a communication tool.

Cultural Context: It emphasizes a "dynamic encounter" between the ancient biblical world/text and the contemporary indigenous worldview of the reader. This means recognizing and exploring parallels between biblical stories/practices (e.g., family structures, proverbs, healing) and local cultural traditions.

¹ Scholars such as Kwame Bediako, J.D.K. Ekem, Philip T. Laryea, and J.E.T. Kuwornu-Adjaottor have been some of the proponents for Biblical hermeneutics using the mother-tongue approach in Ghana. This approach enable Biblical scholars contextualize the Bible to fit the religio-cultural setting of the African or Ghanaian to be precise.

Decolonization: It is an approach to decolonize biblical scholarship and theological knowledge by integrating indigenous languages and knowledge systems into academic and practical theological discourse.

Translation as Key: The existence of mother tongue Bible translations is a prerequisite for this field of study. MTBH often critically assesses existing translations to identify and correct potential inaccuracies or problematic renderings that may not fully convey the original meaning or may clash with cultural nuances in an unhelpful way.

3.2 Key Aspects of Mother Tongue Commentary Writing

Interpretation in context: This method involves interpreting biblical texts through the lens of the local language and culture, leading to new theological idioms and a deeper understanding of scripture.

Accessibility: By using the mother tongue, commentaries can bridge the gap between a translated Bible and the readers' lived experiences, making scripture more relevant and understandable.

Cultural relevance: Commentaries can use local imagery and symbols to explain concepts. For example, Christ may be discussed in terms of being an ancestor or healer within the local cultural context (Kwame Bediako, 1990).

Commentary as a necessity: Because different languages require different translation approaches, there is a need for commentaries to exist in the mother tongue to explain the nuances of the translation and ensure the message is communicated accurately.

Growth of local theology: This approach supports the development of local theology and contributes to the growth of Christianity within a specific community by empowering local speakers to interpret scripture for themselves.

3.3 Practical Steps for Mother Tongue Commentary Writing

Identify a Text or Concept: Select a biblical text or theological concept that is particularly challenging or relevant in the specific Ghanaian cultural context.

Analyze the Source Text: Perform an exegesis of the passage in the original biblical languages, considering historical, literary, and theological contexts.

Examine Existing Translations: Compare the text in available mother tongue translations to identify similarities, differences, and potential issues.

Analyze the Local Context: Explore the corresponding concepts, imageries, and linguistic nuances within the specific Ghanaian language and culture.

Propose a Culturally Appropriate Interpretation: Develop and explain a commentary that makes the biblical message clear, meaningful, and applicable to the daily life of the Ghanaian reader.

Document in the Local Language: Write the commentary using local terminologies and linguistic patterns, potentially with explanations or accompanying notes in English for broader academic reach.

CORE PRINCIPLES AND METHODOLOGY IN MOTHER TONGUE COMMENTARY WRITING

Dialogue between Cultures: Commentary writing should foster a two-way dialogue between the ancient biblical world (Judeo-Christian culture) and the contemporary Ghanaian cultural context.

Cultural Relevance and Bridges: The process should identify cultural commonalities (e.g., family systems, belief in a Supreme Being, proverbs, and sacrifices) to bridge the gap between the biblical text and the local reader's worldview.

Exegetical Rigor: The process requires a thorough exegesis of the original Greek/Hebrew texts using standard biblical resources (dictionaries, concordances, etc.).

Mother Tongue Insights: Researchers should interview indigenous speakers and use local terminologies to gain deeper insights into how concepts are understood in the local language.

Addressing Translation Issues: The commentary can identify areas where existing mother tongue Bible (MTB) translations might be problematic or ambiguous in the local context and propose renditions that are more appropriate.

Contextualization, Not Imposition: The goal is to help the reader understand God's message within their own cultural imagery and symbols without imposing African culture on the biblical culture, ensuring the original meaning of the text is not lost.

Mother Tongue Principle: The commentary should be written by a native speaker of the target language to ensure linguistic and cultural integrity, capturing nuances and idioms that a non-native speaker might miss.

Contextual Relevance: The interpretation should facilitate a dynamic encounter between the biblical worldview and the indigenous worldview, allowing the gospel message to "speak" to the local context and address the community's felt needs and existential concerns.

Incarnational Approach: The writing should reflect the belief that the Word of God can be genuinely expressed and understood within any given culture, just as Christ was incarnated in a specific human culture (John 1:14).

Scholarly Rigor: The work should be grounded in sound exegetical methods, including the study of the original biblical languages (Hebrew/Aramaic and Greek), historical-cultural backgrounds, and grammar/syntax analysis.

4.2 Methodology and Steps in Mother Tongue Commentary Writing

The methodology for MTBH is eclectic, drawing from biblical studies, Bible translation studies, and linguistics. A typical process includes:

Identifying a Problem: Identifying a biblical text that seems inadequately translated or problematic in the local cultural context.

Exegetical Study: Conducting a thorough study (exegesis) of the text using original biblical languages (Hebrew, Greek) resources like dictionaries and commentaries, to understand the "original" meaning.

Cultural Analysis: Discussing the usage of the concept within the local language and culture, often by interviewing indigenous speakers for deeper insights.

Comparative Study: Comparing the mother-tongue translation with other translations and scholarly interpretations.

Proposal: Proposing a new, culturally appropriate translation or interpretation that is faithful to the biblical text while resonating with the local worldview.

Identify the Text and Potential Issues: Select a biblical passage and identify concepts or translations that may be problematic or unclear within the local cultural context.

Conduct Exegesis: Perform a thorough study of the text using biblical resources (dictionaries, other commentaries, encyclopedias) to understand the author's intended meaning and the historical circumstances of the original text.

Research Local Concepts: Investigate how the biblical concepts (e.g., salvation, sin, Holy Spirit, Christology) are understood or paralleled in the indigenous language and culture. This might involve interviewing native speakers for deeper insights into local terminologies and worldviews.

Comparative Analysis: Compare existing mother-tongue translations with the original languages and other relevant translations to highlight similarities, differences, and potential areas for re-interpretation.

Develop Culturally Appropriate Rendition: Formulate new theological insights and interpretations that are both faithful to the biblical text and resonate with the local community's understanding and experience.

Writing and Review: Write the commentary using accessible local terminology and idioms, explaining any complex concepts clearly. The work should be reviewed by others with linguistic and theological expertise.

4.3 Methods in Mother Tongue Commentary Writing

Topic Selection and Research: Choose a topic based on personal knowledge, expertise, or current events relevant to the Ghanaian context. Conduct necessary research to ensure depth and address any blind spots.

Develop a Central Thesis: Formulate a clear, concise central message or stance on the chosen topic. This guides the entire commentary.

Outline Supporting Points: Create an outline with two or three main supporting points. Each point should have its own evidence or explanation.

Craft a Strong Introduction: Begin with an engaging hook (e.g., a story, a scenario, a thought-provoking statement) that grabs attention and connects to the thesis.

Write the Body Paragraphs: Develop each supporting point in a dedicated paragraph. Ensure each sentence of commentary explains the reasoning and connection to the main argument, not just summarizing the evidence.

Incorporate Local Linguistic Devices: Use linguistic devices natural to the Ghanaian language, such as idioms, proverbs, figures of speech, rhetorical questions, and culturally specific references to add depth and resonate with the local audience.

Conclude with a Call to Action: End the commentary with a brief summary of the main points and a clear call to action or a final thought that leaves the reader motivated or encourages further discussion.

Review and Refine: Review the draft for clarity, coherence, linguistic accuracy, and impact. Getting feedback from peers or teachers can be helpful.

4.4 Benefits in Mother Tongue Commentary Writing

Deeper Understanding: Enables a more profound and personal understanding of the Scriptures, as people hear God "speak" to them in the language most intertwined with their identity.

Fosters Ownership: Promotes a sense of ownership of the sacred text and the Christian faith within the local community.

Contextual Theology: Facilitates the emergence of relevant, local theological expressions and Christian leadership, leading to the development of "African flavor" in the gospel.

Evangelism Tool: Mother tongue Bibles and interpretations have served as a major catalyst for the growth of Christianity in many regions, making evangelism more effective for both literate and illiterate populations.

Writing biblical commentaries in a mother tongue involves an eclectic methodology that blends standard biblical study methods with an in-depth understanding of the local language and culture to make the text accessible and relevant to the target community.

CHALLENGES IN MOTHER TONGUE COMMENTARY WRITING

Translation Issues: Difficulties arise when there are no direct synonyms for biblical terms in the mother tongue, potentially leading to misinterpretations (e.g., translating "steward" as "doorkeeper" or "ancestors" as "evil spirits").

Translation Difficulties: Finding direct synonyms for complex biblical concepts can be challenging, requiring careful and creative linguistic adaptations.

Financial and Time Constraints: Translation and commentary projects are often slow and money intensive, with some sign language projects estimated to take decades.

Balancing Form and Function: Translators/commentators must navigate between formal equivalence (keeping original grammatical form) and dynamic or functional equivalence (achieving similar audience response and clarity of meaning), which can be difficult.

Orthographic Standards: Inconsistencies or non-systematic patterns in adapting foreign words and names can pose challenges.

Literacy Levels: Not all mother tongue speakers possess reading facilities in their local language, meaning other formats (e.g., oral or video) may be necessary.

Resource Limitations: There can be inadequate training for mother tongue translators in source languages and a lack of existing commentaries and study materials in indigenous languages.

Inadequate Training: A lack of adequate training in both biblical studies and translation/interpretation can hinder the quality of the commentary.

Literacy and Access: Some communities may have low literacy rates in their mother tongue, requiring creative approaches to dissemination beyond written text, such as oral forms.

Cultural Clashes: The commentary might need to navigate sensitive issues where the biblical message challenges or stands in tension with certain indigenous beliefs or practices (e.g., the concept of Christ, as an "ancestor" may be a point of theological debate).

Colonial Legacy and Bias: Overcoming the legacy of colonial era translations and theological biases, where indigenous cultures were often dismissed, remains a challenge.

Globalization: A growing preference for global languages like English among younger generations in urban areas can diminish interest in mother tongue resources.

CONCLUSION

Commentary writing is a form of writing that provides a personal opinion, analysis, or explanation of a specific topic, text, or event. It goes beyond simply summarizing to offer a unique perspective, interpret meaning, evaluate significance, and sometimes speculate on future directions. Commentaries are often shorter and less formal than traditional research articles, focusing on critical analysis and clear communication of the author's viewpoint. By following these principles and steps, mother tongue biblical commentaries can effectively bridge

the gap between the ancient biblical world and contemporary local communities, fostering deeper faith and theological understanding.

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