

8 Native Languages Translated So Far—

Wycliffe Completes Native Dictionary

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FAIRBANKS—The Wycliffe Bible Translators, Inc., Summer Institute of Linguists, is committing Alaskan Native languages to paper on a grand scale. Currently eight languages, three Eskimo and five Indian, are being analyzed and written.

"Our goal is to translate the New Testament into all tribal languages that do not have Scriptures," explained Wilfred Zibell, linguist-missionary, who has just finished an Inupiat Eskimo Dictionary with Donald H. Webster. "This often involves linguist analysis, alphabet formation, production of literacy material and teaching people to read and write as well as the translation."

Wycliffe came to Alaska in 1958 and Zibell, a native of Germany, arrived one year later with his wife Donna.

"We were given Kotzebue Sound, Kobuk River area. We picked it in as much as it was a cold climate. Our organization is in 25 different countries and most of these are tropical. We specified a cold climate and that was all."

The family, which now includes four youngsters aged six through 15, lived four years in Ambler and now resides at Noorvik. Zibell knew no Eskimo but spoke fluent English and German when he undertook the assignment. He set about it scientifically giving every sound in the Eskimo language one syllable.

"Work had been done on the North Coast prior to our coming to Alaska. Dr. Ahmagoak published an Inupiate New Testament in the 40s and requested help from our organization. Some of our people worked with him. The language is different but we were able to follow his work."

There were other alphabets around but Zibell found too many inconsistencies in them.

The Eskimos had written a language, too, he notes.

"Many of the older people still use a picture language but it's more of a memory device. It's a lot like Egyptian hieroglyphics."

There is also an Eskimo alphabet established by the University of Alaska but it's in Yupik not Inupiat and there is considerable difference in the two tongues.

"I know of a couple, the wife is Inupiat and the husband Yupik. They dated in English.

Now they can converse with each other in either language but they had to learn it."

The differences between Inupiat and English are even more involved. Zibell and Webster's new dictionary, for example, lists three pages of words that describe snow and ice conditions while some English words are untranslatable.

"Grace for instance. It's an extremely difficult word to translate in Inupiat. In fact it's not really an English word but a loan word from another language. The Eskimo word that's close has too much to do with pity. Most words don't bring out the idea of unmerited favor."

Yet occasionally Eskimo scores ahead of English in Bible translation.

"Luke 5, at the end where Jesus speaks of new wine in old bottles. It's new wine in old skins, really. We've never seen skins used to transport wine. Never seen wine bubble to the point where it will break a bottle.

But Eskimos use skin containers (called puuq) and every-

body knows an old skin is brittle and fermenting wine will break it causing the wine to spill."

In the process of recording the language, Zibell has set down a series of Eskimo fables which work well in literacy classes because they are familiar to the people.

The Summer Institute has also published bible stories, hymns, a primer and even an alphabet coloring book.

The first Inupiat dictionary was published for the Rural Alaska School Project and a second printing has just been financed with the help of the Kotzebue Museum.

A complete Bible translation for the Kotzebue Sound, Kobuk River area is still about eight years off in Zibell's estimation but that's not his only job. He's also teaching literacy classes and working on more teaching material in the Eskimo language.

Is Eskimo hard to learn?

"It certainly is," he conceded.

How long did it take him?

"I'm still at it!" he said.