



**“You Pour Car Grease on My Head”:  
*Translating Ideas and Training Effectively Among Oral Culture People*  
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Working cross-culturally can be very challenging, particularly if we are lettered culture people working among oral culture people. We tend to focus only on the language translation that must occur. We may occasionally understand that we need to adapt our thinking to the cultural norms and practices of the communities. But what almost always escapes us is the totally different ways that oral learners receive, process, remember and act on information. We think that we are communicating well and that our translator is translating well, but in reality we may be completely confusing the people we are trying to help and possibly even causing great harm.

To illustrate, consider the difference between an English version of the 23rd Psalm from the Bible and a literal back-translation to English recorded in the language of the Khmus tribe of Laos.

Psalm 23 (from NIV version of the Bible):

“The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not be in want.  
He makes me lie down in green pastures,  
He leads me beside quiet waters,  
He restores my soul.  
He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name’s sake.  
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,  
I will fear no evil, for you are with me;  
Your rod and your staff, they comfort me.  
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.  
You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows.  
Surely goodness and love will follow me all the days of my life,  
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.”

Back-translation to English from the language of the Khmus tribe of Laos:

“The Great Boss is the one who takes care of my sheep  
I don’t want to own anything.  
The Great Boss wants me to like down in the field.  
He wants me to go to the lake.  
He makes my good spirit come back.  
Even though I walk through something the missionary calls the valley of the shadow of death,  
I do not care. You are with me.  
You use a stick and a club to make me comfortable.  
You manufacture a piece of furniture right in front of my eyes while my enemies watch.  
You pour car grease on my head.  
My cup has too much water in it and therefore overflows.  
Goodness and kindness will walk single file behind me all my life.  
And I will live in the hut of the Great Boss until I die and am forgotten by the tribe.” \*

What was thought to be translated and what was heard and understood are completely different. The meaning of what is understood often is the exact opposite of what is intended. When working with oral culture people, three kinds of *translation* are needed: (1) language translation into the mother tongue (not just the national language); (2) cultural translation; and (3) translation from lettered cultural ways to oral culture ways.

T4 Global has been doing these three kinds of *translation* among oral culture people for over five years in places like Afghanistan, India, Kenya, Nepal, Nigeria, and Sudan. Visit our website at [www.T4Global.org](http://www.T4Global.org) to learn more and download evaluations of some of our work.

\* Provided by Dr. Darrell Whiteman from an interview with Dr. William Smalley, *Wichita Eagle*, January 7, 1960.