Mission
To facilitate Bible translation, sustainable literacy and language development programmes among small language groups in Kenya and beyond, partnering with the Church and others to fulfill the Great Commission.
A society that is functionally literate, is well empowered to make informed decisions and actively participate in the development process both locally and nationally. The use of indigenous languages in the development of functional literacy materials ensures inclusion in the learning process and taps into the indigenous knowledge to address social, economic and spiritual issues. It is for this reason that Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL), continues to work towards developing partnerships with the national government, county governments, religious leaders, local communities and development agencies to ensure that there are available materials to promote functional literacy among adults.

In 2016, BTL partnering with Church World Services (CWS) and Partners in Literacy Ministries (PALM) conducted a literacy assessment to establish the status of adult literacy in West Pokot County. The assessment indicated that the ongoing literacy program in the County was facing several challenges among them lack of adequate learning and teaching materials.

In response to the findings of this assessment, the governor of West Pokot, His Excellency Prof. John Lonyangapuo has made remarkable efforts to improve the literacy levels in the County. He has also made great strides in complementing the national government’s efforts of implementing adult literacy programs by creating a County Directorate of Adult and Continuing Education, establishing 300 adult classes and employing adult trainers.

These efforts have not gone unnoticed and in the year 2019, the Ministry of Education, selected West Pokot County to host the International Literacy Day Celebrations.

Despite the milestones achieved so far, the issue of inadequate teaching and learning materials still stands. In an effort to support the governor’s ongoing efforts and as a way of marking the International Literacy Day Celebration, BTL donated 30 Black Boards to aid in some of the adult classes.

The year 2019 was very special to BTL; it was declared by UNESCO the Year of Indigenous Languages. We look forward to forging more partnerships to promote literacy throughout the country and ensure that every citizen is empowered to fully participate in the development process. This is the only way to achieve the sustainable Development goals.
Beja and his three friends, Nadzuwa, Zainab and Mwaka are learners at Miyani Primary School and currently are grade two pupils. Last year when they enrolled in grade one, neither could they read the alphabets nor mention words of any language. They were also fearful to express their views in class. *Nancy, their grade one teacher, was quite worried that the young learners were experiencing learning challenges.

Having participated in the Mother Tongue Education (MTE) trainings, Nancy had been enlightened on the significance of introducing learning from the known to unknown to her pupils. She took it upon herself to salvage the situation of Beja’s team and that of her class. She took her time to observe how the young learners behaved in class. After a series of observations, she concluded that the children receiving instructions mainly in the English language were faced with the challenge of understanding and comprehension. She therefore decided to take a different approach of learning. She introduced learning in a familiar language of the children; the Chiduruma language.

In their new class, the children found things very different; their teacher communicated to them in the Chiduruma language and interacted with reading materials in Chiduruma supplied by Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL) as opposed to learning in their previous grade, where learning was strictly done in English. The class-learning environment suddenly changed, it became friendlier to the pupils who began to enjoy their learning and participated fully in the classroom. It only took them a matter of a few weeks to learn how to read the alphabet in this familiar language. The Chiduruma language has allowed them not only to freely express themselves in class but also to read materials in other languages like Kiswahili and English.
Kuria was resistant to embrace the Mother Tongue Education (MTE) program at his school. He believed that if his students were taught in their Pokomo mother tongue, they would fail academically. He went ahead to inform the MTE volunteer that she was being misguided and confused to have rallied for MTE program in pre-primary schools. During one of the school term’s, one of his teachers’ was invited by the Ministry of Education for a material development workshop. He was still adamant and stood by his word; mother tongue was not a language he was going to engage his students with. As a matter of fact, he only released the teacher on condition that it would be the first and the last time he would ever involve his teachers to attend the MTE workshops. Shadrack Falama and his team never gave up on *Kuria’s school. They kept going into that school until something unusual happened. “In one of our visits to the school, we were surprised by the warm and cordial hospitality he accorded to us. He spoke positively about the project and how he looked forward for the mother tongue books to be distributed in his school so that his teachers could start using them in their teaching.”

*Kuria who was originally against the programme developed a change of heart stating that he had noted that the children were now fluent in the Pokomo language and especially when narrating Pokomo stories, singing and performing coordinated Pokomo traditional dances. Mother tongue education began being taught in his school from then on to this day.
During our recent graduation ceremony at Kadzandani Literacy Centre, Mzee Guyo Kolosho joyfully shared how his son, Bajila Guyo Kolosho, secured a job as an enumerator in the concluded Kenyan 2019 Census exercise. “When the Kenya National Bureau of Statistics (KNBS) advertised 2019 Kenya Population census jobs. One of the qualifications for this job was fluency in speaking the local language.” I encouraged my son Bajila to apply for this entry since he had acquired his Level Two Waata literacy certificate in 2017 while in form 3. He had enrolled in the literacy classes so that he would be able to read the Waata Scriptures but we never imagined that God would use his proficiency in our language to get him a job,” Mzee Kolosho said. Bajila was lucky enough and he was called upon for the interview. During the interview, Bajila presented all his certificates including the Waata literacy certificate. One question among many others that he was asked was whether he could speak his local language articulately; Bajila in response pointed out to his Waata literacy certificate that was amongst his certificates to the interviewers, who were very impressed giving Bajila the job.

Word spread through the village that the Waata literacy certificate was very valuable in getting jobs. This led to people flocking into the Literacy Centre seeking how they could acquire such a certificate. They were encouraged to enroll for the literacy classes. There was great applause as Mzee Kolosho finished sharing his testimony, we are assured that the next literacy classes will be full; the community now knows that the skill of knowing how to read and write in mother tongue is a key that can open doors; not just a door to read and write in the Waata Language but other doors of service to their community.

by Gideon Badiwa

Empowerment through Literacy
Tharaka baobab tree is bearing fruits

by Onesmus Kamwara

“If you plant a baobab tree you do not expect to eat its fruit yourself. If you are lucky your children may eat its fruits but the most expected is that your grandchildren are the ones to enjoy the fruits.” This is a belief that was held by Tharaka people about the big slow growing baobab tree. It was believed to take long before its fruits could be enjoyed.

It seemed like the Baobab tree would be likened to the Mother Tongue Education (MTE) program Tharaka. As BTL staff and other partners traversed Tharaka lands advocating for use of Mother language in primary schools in 2003, it looked like the MTE program would not take off all, and if it did, its impact could not be felt in this generation.

However, what seemed too difficult to achieve was finally achieved. Different stakeholders in the education sector eventually bought into the idea of using Mother Tongue as the language of instruction in grade one to three. Mother Tongue was also being taught as a subject in the same three lower primary classes. Even after BTL handed over the program entirely to the local education office, MTE continued being implemented at varying degrees in different schools.

A few years after MTE program was implemented, the impact of the program is undeniably evident among the Tharaka people; the use of Kiitharaka language in the social media platforms has grown tremendously. Some of the learners who went through MTE program are now employed and working in the community while others are in colleges and universities. They are among the most active users in the social media.

Tharaka people love their language and their desire is to have a Tharaka dictionary someday.

I appreciate all the partners who planted the MTE baobab tree in Tharaka. The tree has matured unexpectedly fast and its fruits are sweet. Those enjoying the fruits are very grateful.
Developing a language

Faith Shume is a linguist at Bible Translation and Literacy (BTL). She has passionately served in this role for the past 7 years facilitating BTL’s projects develop their orthographies (writing system). She helps us understand the crucial aspects of language development and its importance.

**Why does a community need their writing system developed?**

To help them develop literature in and for their language. The developed literature helps them write materials for their social, intellectual, spiritual and economic needs both for personal and community’s gains.

**Can a non-speaker of the language develop a language for a community?**

Yes. This is possible with the help of a language assistant from the target community. The language assistant helps the linguist in collecting the required 2,000 and above native words. After the collection is completed, the linguist analyses the words to get the actual sounds.

If the linguist is from the community, he/she confirms the collected words with the community members and writes down the findings.

**How do you consolidate your findings?**

The linguists’ assistant picks a representation of male, female, youth and the elderly from the community for an orthography workshop. There are 3 stages of orthography development; tentative, working and established.

**Tentative** orthography is arrived at after the initial study of a community’s phonology. It is followed by discussions and testing within the community. It mentions any relevant dialect differences and compares the proposed orthography with the trade and neighboring languages as the case may be.

**Working** orthography is a detailed study of the phonology, which includes morphophonemcis, segmentation, consonant clusters, tone and stress. It tests the tentative orthography and the reactions of the stakeholders.
Established Orthography involves writing a paper documenting the community’s acceptance of the orthography. At this point the orthography is considered “finished.”

In this workshop, the community with the help of a linguist decides how to represent the sounds for their ownership. It is also at this point that the linguist indicates his/her findings.

If the community members confirm that the collected word sounds exist in their language, they are adopted. If they differ in certain collected words, the linguist and the linguist assistant proceed to collect more words synonymous or related to the disputed words to establish if the sounds do exist or are borrowed sounds. These are then shared for verification in subsequent meetings.

What are some of challenges you face as you develop a language into a written form?

The challenges vary for communities. A challenge in community A may be a strength in community B. Sometime back while collecting words sounds for a bantu community, I realized that they had borrowed words sounds from their Cushitic neighbors. I brought up this issue while presenting my findings in an orthography workshop. This turned out to be a big issue, community members being adamant that the ‘borrowed’ sounds existed in their language. This took quite some of our time and days trying to amicably find solutions.
How do you test a written language in a community that has never seen their language written before?

We use the alphabet chart and written stories, which are developed during the orthography workshop. The testing does not end at the orthography workshops. Other materials developed beyond the workshop act as testing tools for the language, for instance Scripture portions.

What kind of responses do you get from communities when you present them their alphabet with their languages written for the first time?

My first interactions with most communities that I have worked with to develop their languages, are usually inquisitive of my capability to develop such difficult languages as theirs. This narrative changes as soon as I present word sounds during the Orthography workshop. It gets better as we work together in developing their alphabet charts. In the year 2015, while working with the Taveta community, a 90-year-old man wrote an article for their storybook collection using the alphabets we had developed. He could not imagine that his language could be in a written form; him being at the forefront.

What current projects are you working on?

Sengwer and Kabarasi projects. The two communities are at the tentative stages of orthography development and their alphabet charts are presently on print to be distributed in the community for testing.

Does development of a language come to end?

Yes and No. This is an on-going process and only comes to an end if the initial need for it has been met. As a linguist, I do further researches in order to write papers on the grammar of the language.
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INTERNATIONAL LITERACY DAY
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