Today Tembua is talking about translation and culture with Paul Grant, a doctoral candidate in the History Department at the University of Wisconsin. Mr. Grant can be reached at pgrant@wisc.edu.

PJM: Mr. Grant, can you give us a short summary of your dissertation topic?

PG: I am looking at relationships between Germans and Ghanaians before and after World War One. German missionaries went to Ghana (Africa’s Gold Coast, as it was then known) to convert the natives, but ended up being deeply shaped by West African visions of friendship, loyalty, and community.

The British deported all the Germans from Ghana during WWI, but once at home, these deportees behaved very differently than their compatriots, and some of them paid dearly for their failure to show sufficient loyalty to Germany. They were too few in number to make any immediate difference in the Nazi years, but after 1945, when Germans needed new leaders, a disproportionate number of them were former missionaries--people who knew that there was more to life than nationalism.

PJM:  How has your research intersected with language issues?

PG: Cross-cultural conversation hinges on translation. Translation can change meanings, especially when deep human problems like grief, love, anger and community are involved.

When German missionaries started translating the Bible into the language of Twi, they began to discover all the ways that German religion was not culturally neutral. It was rather the outcome of centuries of "translation" of what was originally a Hebrew-Greek religion into a central European world, with very different concerns.

PJM: Can you expand a bit on the concept that translation can change meaning? At Tembua our job is to move meaning accurately between languages. That is the core of translator training.

PG: Translation is, of course, a term covering a broad field of language activities.

In the context of pre-colonial Ghana, for example, translators usually had well-defined and immediate problems to deal with—things like property disputes and the like. These problems are challenging enough, especially when the language itself was only being reduced to script for the first time.

But things get more complicated when matters of the heart like love, parenthood, faith, healing, and death are involved. When we are talking about healing, for example, translation can involve radically different visions of health and wellness.

In the Gold Coast of the mid-nineteenth century, broken relationships (neighbors who refuse to speak to one another, for example) were sometimes addressed by community leaders with very similar language as those used in dealing with wealth and property. But in western languages (German, in this case) reconciliation and wealth are spoken about in very different ways.

So in order to figure out what people are trying to say, you need to look at their source text and the translated text, and, if possible, the circumstances of the translation. Was the missionary’s informant a youth or a king? Was the interview coming at a time of war or peace? This stuff matters, and it is confusing but also very exciting because translation is a chance to see the world in entirely new ways. By listening to people, especially across linguistic barriers, we can learn a lot more about our own worlds.

PJM: As linguists we say that a text must first be decontextualized and then recontextualized as it’s translated. That is, the text is taken out of its source surroundings, analyzed and put into the target language surroundings. That’s the heart of the cross-cultural communication you mention.

Do you have an example of how German religion as reflected in the language was not culturally neutral?

PG: One way to approach this question is by looking at how some words have changed their meaning over time. *Heathen*, for example. The missionaries were coming from a particular world—early nineteenth-century Germany in this case. In order to set about translating the Bible they began re-reading their Greek Bibles, and struggled over the disparities they found there between the Greek and the German (which in their case meant Martin Luther’s version).

At the risk of oversimplification: in Hebrew there are few words describing those outside the religious community. One of these is *goyim*, usually rendered in English (by way of Latin) as *gentiles*. The Greek Bible used *ethnoi*, which means other people, or nations, or people of other customs than ours, and so on. It is a slightly different idea than *goyim*.

PJM: Choosing just the right term is a large part of the translation process. The social and historical context as well of the *feeling* of a term contribute to that choice. How did you see this handled in your example?

PG: In the 1500s, Luther dealt with the problem by using different words in different settings. In a passage dealing with customs and language, for example, he translated *ethnoi* with *Völker*, but in a passage dealing with religion, he spoke of *Heiden* or heathens. This word choice reflected an understanding of religion as distinct from customs, an understanding that reflected not only language, but also language plus history: The pluripotent word *Volk* has been used in very different things over the centuries, from genocidal exclusion to fairy tales.

But as the missionaries sat down to translate from the Greek to the Twi language of Ghana, they realized that Ghanaian cosmology, as reflected in its vocabulary, was in some respects closer to that of the Hebrews than that of the Greeks, not to mention the Germans. Thus *ethnoi* became *amanaman*, which indicates foreign tribes, albeit with the understanding that every foreign tribe has its own religious practices. So as they set about translating from Greek to Twi, the translators came to read their own German bibles in new ways. It’s really a fascinating story and reminds us that we can never fail to be changed by the people with whom we live.

PJM: Thank you for this interesting discussion, Mr. Grant! We look forward to seeing more of your work in print!