Spiritual Capital: How the Kingdom Spreads through Communities

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Abstract

Just as a speech community can best understand its language use practices in terms of *social capital* investment, so the community's progress towards holistic transformation can be understood, analogously, in terms of its *spiritual capital*. Using the same set of research tools provides a unified conceptual framework and promotes synergy between translation and church growth.

Speakers can scope what their "heart language(s)" are by identifying those speech communities in whose *social capital* they are investing. This process includes ongoing study, ideally led by communities themselves, of their

a) social networks;

b) norms and reciprocal obligations; and,

c) shared narratives.

They can assess their *spiritual capital* in a similar way, if that concept is reoriented to make God both the agent and goal of its growth. This assessment requires study of

a) the various spiritual identities of the individuals and groups with which people network; and, the extent to which

b) core norms and obligations are Church-based and

c) shared narratives are biblically concordant.

The integrated study of social and spiritual capital helps communities to hold linguistic identity issues and Scripture engagement needs in tandem, so that their churches can be established, equipped, and expanding. To identify practical ways forward, this article considers two language communities in West Asia.

Key Words: Bible translation, heart language, holistic transformation, identity, Scripture engagement, social networks

Introduction

Human beings collaborating in complex processes need to know how their individual tasks contribute to the whole. Vision statements are vitally important, such as the SIL 2019 Vision Statement: "We long to see people flourishing in community using the languages they value most." Alongside these are more explicitly spiritual statements, such as that "God uses the translated Word as a foundational means for holistic transformation. At their core, Bible translation programs facilitate the process of the "indwelling" of God's Word in the lives of the speakers of a language community" (Wycliffe Global Alliance 2019).

These high-level statements need breaking down into meaningful parts. What exactly is the goal of such "holistic transformation"? What connections are there between linguistic and sociolinguistic work on the one hand, and Scripture engagement and Bible translation on the other, as they all seek to contribute holistically to transformation?

This article argues that, just as a speech community can best understand its language use practices in terms of *social capital* investment (Paul 2019), so the community's progress towards holistic transformation can be understood, analogously, in terms of its *spiritual capital*. These parallel concepts of social and spiritual capital:

- are easy to conceptualize;

- handle the multifarious activities involved in Bible translation and language development;

- account for multilingual communities; and,

- are quantifiable.

Social Capital as a Measure of a Community's Sociolinguistic Situation

The concept of social capital entered mainstream thinking with the book *Bowling Alone* by Robert Putnam (2000). Putnam had initially defined social capital as "features of social life—networks, norms and trust—that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives" (Putnam 1996:56).

Social capital is key in motivating a community to cohere in groups larger than their own kinship systems, which is crucial if the gospel is to spread across extended family boundaries. It has three core dimensions, as arranged in the table below entitled "Components of Social Capital":

1. the structural dimension of social *networks*: when we explore how dense and how multiplex the links are between individuals, we can understand how communities are socially structured and predict which languages they will use and when.

2. the relational dimension of *norms* in society: how should people in a community behave? What obligations do they have? Whom should they trust? With whom do they identify?

3. the cognitive dimension of *narratives* and systems of meaning: what stories do people tell each other, or assume implicitly, and how do these drive community motivations and aspirations?

Networks	Structural Dimension Social network ties Social network configuration
Norms	Relational Dimension Trust Norms and Obligations Identity
Narratives	Cognitive Dimension Language Cultural heritage Knowledge bases

Components of Social Capital

As depicted in Figure 1 below, a community with strong, *bonding* social capital is likely to be close-knit and may well maintain its vernacular language to maintain community solidarity.

A community with strong, *bridging* social capital may have social networks which reflect a more outward-looking orientation and is more likely to value a language of wider communication, whether alongside their own vernacular or not.
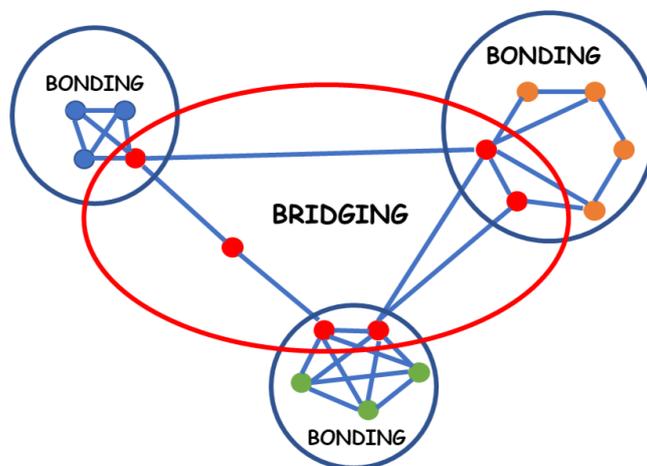

Figure 1: Bridging and Bonding Social Capital

Further below, the article will also consider *linking* capital: access to institutional power.

The crucial insight here for understanding the sociolinguistic situation of a community is that its heart language(s) can be identified as those speech varieties in which community members are investing their social capital. This investment can be measured by looking at whether their social networks are intra- or inter-group; what groups they emulate to establish their norms in all spheres; and, from where they find their defining narratives.

Spiritual Capital

Establishing where a community's social capital is invested identifies which speech varieties will communicate to them best – their so-called "heart languages." This identification answers the part of the vision statement cited above concerning "the languages [people in any given community] value most." But what does it mean to "see people flourishing in community" or "experiencing transformation"?

Christians can agree with sociologists that social capital is both a useful concept and a valuable resource for communities to accumulate. If this is so, why could there not be a spiritual equivalent: a set of networks which inform communities' spiritual norms and provide the narratives which drive them towards or away from the divine? Bishop Stephen Neill wrote in the mid-twentieth century: "It is on Europe that the glance of the observer falls with gravest anxiety. We seem to be watching a steady diminution of the *spiritual capital* of Europe, the disappearance of the old European synthesis of religion and culture, and a desiccation of the human spirit" (Neill 1964:564-5 – my emphasis).

The term "spiritual capital" was first coined by Adam Müller (1809), an economist who meant to Romanticism what Adam Smith meant to classical economics (Noghiu 2015:50). Müller rejected Smith's idea that self-interest should be the guiding principle of economic life, arguing that social contracts covered more than just the relationships of stipulated parties; they included obligations to mankind at large and relationships of man to God (Waetford 2007:9). Alongside the classical notions of land, labour, and physical capital, Müller therefore included spiritual capital as the central element around which the other three revolved and from which they should derive their meaning. Müller's formulation enabled a holistic perspective ahead of its time, preferring community over individual and engaging

with crucial economic questions such as agency and value far in advance of modern scholars (Noghiu 2015:50).

Recent applications of spiritual capital in secular literature have focused on "what religion can do for you"; for example, Berger and Redding define spiritual capital in functional terms, as a "set of resources stemming from religion and available for use in economic and political development" (Berger and Redding 2010:2). However, this article asserts that the concept is ripe for reorientation in terms of the *missio Dei*. God must be given his rightful place as both the growth agent, by his Holy Spirit, and the goal of spiritual capital. An analysis of a community's spiritual networks, norms, and narratives can then effectively triangulate what spiritual capital it has. Furthermore, as spiritual capital is calculated in terms analogous to how social capital is analysed, multilingualism is simultaneously accounted for. As Figure 2 indicates, the community's networks show how united and widespread the local church is; its norms, how much it loves God and neighbour; and, its narratives, how deeply the gospel drives its ambitions, hopes and dreams.
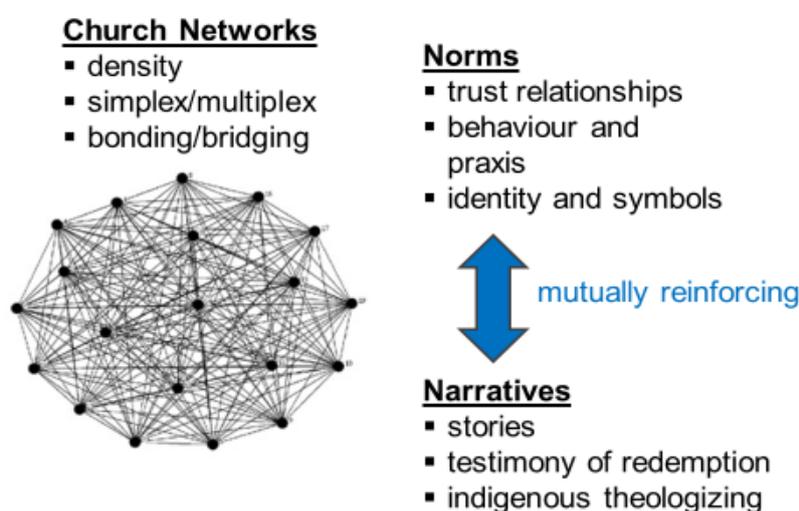

Figure 2: Components of Spiritual Capital

Networks

Definition: The phrase 'social network' refers to the entirety of the inter-personal relationships formed by an individual or group, viewed in structural terms. Milroy established that "dense, close-knit network structures function as important mechanisms of vernacular maintenance, with a powerful capacity to resist the social pressures associated with the standard language" (Milroy 1987:169). Networks are 'dense' when a high proportion of any given individual's network contacts are also contacts of each other; networks are 'multiplex' when many of the links between contacts consist of more than one kind of relationship.

The spiritual capital of a community will be higher as the social networks strengthen within and between local churches. Specifically, such heightened spiritual capital occurs when:

- the proportion of Jesus-following contacts in a typical community member's network increases (though retaining relationships with community members who do not follow Jesus is also vital);

- the density of contact between Jesus-following community members increases; and

- the links between Jesus-following community members are multiplex, signalling that they are deepening their relationships with each other beyond, say, meeting for a single weekly religious event.

How to Analyse: Social networks can be analysed using demographic inventories and social network questionnaires. These were used to good effect in, for example, Tajikistan by Abbess et al. (2010), who developed earlier work by Schooling (1990). A simple method was used at a recent mini-workshop: each of the three local participants wrote on a flipchart one non-believing friend in each of the age-brackets 20s, 30s, 40s, 50s, 60s, and 70-plus, and the group prayed for each of these (3x6 = 18) people together. The following day each participant returned to the six friends they had listed, and wrote on the flipchart how many people are currently influenced by each of those friends. They were amazed and inspired to discover that between them they had identified 517 people. Like the day before, the group prayed for these influenced people together.

Implications for Practice: How do the insights gleaned from social network analysis inform translation and Scripture engagement work? Some suggestions are listed here, categorised by four key social network dimensions (Abbess et al. 2010):

- Geographical location: Showing a film can draw a crowd in a village; likewise, event-based engagement methodologies such as storying work well in contexts where homogeneous groups often gather. Platt (2019:4) argues for applying the label "unreached" to places as much as to people. It is harder to achieve strong networks in cities when speech community members may be isolated in a sea of people from other communities – but all the more important to do so if their language and culture are to survive. Creating urban social contexts where community members can gather and speak their language together is an act of love in itself and can create wonderful opportunities for engagement.

- Occupation: In their study of Tajikistan, Murakimi and Yamada (2020) noted the significance of Tajiks working in Russia. In 2018, 41% of households in Tajikistan contained at least one migrant worker, while their remittances to family members in Tajikistan have constituted as much as 43% to the country's GDP in recent years. This societal theme has implications for both product and distribution strategies. Fruitful Scripture-based products should include audio dramas based around migrant workers as well as take account of the distress such lifestyles can cause to separated families. As for distribution, appropriate materials in the mother tongue may be particularly appreciated by workers in a foreign country, far from home.

- Kinship: Children's Bibles can encourage older family members to use the home language with children, and many testimonies exist of adults who have made a faith decision in response to such material. Meanwhile, proverbs promoting healthy marriage and wise upbringing of children strengthen family bonds. Scriptural proverbs can be produced in calendar, booklet, or Scripture app form, with or without parallel examples from the community's own store of vernacular proverbs.

- Friendship: These kinds of networks can be leveraged and enhanced by producing digital materials which are shareable on social media. Also, a beautifully presented book with culturally appropriate style and decoration can make a special gift between friends.

Norms

Definition: "Norms" is shorthand for the relational dimension of a community. The key facets of this dimension include trust and trustworthiness, norms and sanctions, obligations and expectations, and identity and identification (Nahapiet and Ghoshal 1998:244). Regarding identity and identification, Myers notes: "I … articulate the twin goals of transformational development as changed people and just and peaceful relationships. By 'changed people' I mean people who have discovered their true identity as children of God and who have recovered their true vocation as faithful and productive stewards of gifts from God for the well-being of all" (Myers 2011:17).

Wright (1992) identifies praxis and symbol as two core components of any community's worldview. Both connect to the relational dimension, whilst also feeding into the stories a community tells (see next section). A Christian community's praxis will include how it conducts its missionary activity, its sacraments, and its worship. That praxis will also aim to develop a strong, clear ethical code which is based on Scripture. As for symbols, Wright (1992:366ff) observes that Cross, Church and creed were three key cultural symbols of the early New Testament Church.

How to Analyse: The challenges of discovering a community's praxis and symbols illustrate the important role of anthropological research and reflection. At an early stage in the life of a community's church, such praxis and symbols should be studied. Consideration should also be given to the bridges and barriers (Hill and Hill 2008) created by the similarities and differences between local and biblically sanctioned practices.

Implications for Practice: With regard to bridges, Escobar observes that "Protestants have emphasised true doctrine as a mark of the church, but at the expense of understanding the value of ritual and symbol" (Escobar 2000:38). Pikkert notes the importance for Muslim-background Jesus followers of simple spiritual disciplines such as *lectio divina*, chanting, and fasting as they adjust from a "clear and direct religion" to a "more spiritually-oriented faith system" (Pikkert 2008:207). Both of these observations argue for project work which intentionally catalyses the development of culturally appropriate, Christian praxis, and symbols in the community. Whether the church grows in large numbers or not, it is certainly called to be a witness for Christ to the community that surrounds it (Matthew 5:14-16).

Narratives

Definition: "Narratives" allude to a community's cognitive dimension. From a Christian perspective, they may include the community's story of redemption, as well as the extent to which they engage in indigenous theologizing in their local language. DeLoach argues for Bible translation always to be considered part of a larger process of experiencing God through the creation of local theologies (DeLoach 2016:225ff). Wright notes that human life "can be seen as grounded in and constituted by the implicit or explicit stories which humans tell themselves and one another" (Wright 1992:38). He goes on to note that stories also provide a means by which views of the world may be challenged.

Freire highlights the importance of culture; of remembering community history (hence the value of trauma healing and its effect on perception); and, of generative themes, which connect to worldviews and shared narratives (Freire 1970:95ff). When Paul told the Roman, Gentile Christians that they had been grafted into the Jewish olive tree (Romans 11:17ff), he was including an invitation to participate in the story of Israel. A parallel process of joining a new narrative occurs whenever members of any community find themselves being incorporated into the worldwide Church.

How to Analyse: Franklin (2012) observes:

When engaging with contemporary culture the important factor, according to Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk (2006:181) is, 'learning to communicate the biblical stories that connect with the underlying cultural narratives that dominate' most people's lives. This provides a discovery in 'how to indwell the Scriptures… with the narrative presence of God, who invites us into a story that reads and shapes us' (2006:34).

Again, anthropological research is crucial: What are the stories parents tell their children? Who are the community's heroes, and what did they do? In multilingual communities, it will be important to differentiate the various core narratives in each of the cultures that the multiple languages spoken represent, particularly for the sake of identifying which narratives have emotive power and truly define identity and motivate behaviour. Earlier, the importance of identifying cultural bridges that can facilitate comprehension and acceptance of the gospel was mentioned. Richardson's (1974) story of the *Peace Child* concept amongst the Sawi people is a classic example.

Implications for Practice: Padilla has observed that "Latin America is a continent of people who have been baptized but not evangelized" (Padilla 1985:118). It is no good having the norms without the narrative!

Jore (2018) points out that a complete Bible does not meet the complete product need of the church in any given speech community (what he terms "the lingual church"). If their spiritual needs are to be fully met by resources in that speech variety, a Bible dictionary, commentaries, and other study tools will eventually be required to reinforce the gospel narrative that Scripture provides.

As for the style of the narrative, Pikkert cites Meral (2005:213) to note that

the Middle Eastern mind is not exclusively linear like the Western or cyclical like the Indian.… Knowledge is not processed at the practical level but at the ideological or heart level. Thus a Middle Eastern theology … will use poetry, heart-felt stories and spiritual reflections. Instead of being systematic, it will be a romantic theology written in the tradition of the Confessions of St. Augustine (Pikkert 2008:207).

Bridging and Bonding

For a long time, the Bible translation movement posited a one-to-one relationship between a language community and its vernacular. It assumed that the network ties in a community without effective access to the whole counsel of God were bonding ties by default. Now the movement is realising that factors such as multilingualism, urbanisation, and migration mean that many communities have multiple identities and speech varieties. Much of their social capital investment may be of the bridging kind.

Padilla points out that

The New Testament contains no example of a local church with a membership that had been taken by the apostles from a single homogeneous unit, unless the term homogeneous unit means no more than a group of people with a common language. By contrast, it provides plenty of examples of how the barriers had been abolished in the new humanity (Padilla 1985:147).

He goes on:

Eradicating boundaries between races, and between slaves and free men, enables the Church to be not a quotation mark that simply reflects society, but an embodied

question-mark that challenges the values of the world. This will build up the kind of church which is the firstfruits of a new humanity made up of persons from every tribe, tongue, people and nation who will sing in unison a new song to the Lamb (Padilla 1985:150).

Although the gospel must be preached to every nation, and perhaps even to every clan (Piper 1993:208), this does not imply that there must be a church consisting exclusively of members of each nation/clan/language. Some stable multilingual churches will be happy using different languages in different domains, even for different parts of a church meeting.

Watters (2000) makes a case for Scriptures in diglot or triglot form, which would certainly help in such multilingual situations. The non-vernacular language(s) might even include a modern language of wider communication and/or an interlinearized biblical language text.

On the question of whether portions can automatically be assumed sufficient, Jore demurs: "It is rare for lingual church leaders to decide for themselves that they do not need a translation of the whole Bible in their language and in multiple formats. They consider it extremely important that their people group also be among the ones who understand the 'whole counsel of God' (Acts 20:27)" (Jore 2018:11)

Linking

Social "linking capital" (an innovation of Woolcock 2001) describes those social networks with access to institutional power. To posit a spiritual analogy: in the divine economy linking capital constitutes access to God's power, one facet of which is the support local congregations can receive from the worldwide Church (see especially Jore 2018:26f). Such support must have two characteristics. One is *humility*, helped wherever mission agencies embrace a servant posture. Campbell (2006) points out that humility is at the heart of redemption, and cross-cultural workers must be broken if they are to see a release of divine blessing. Similarly, Freire (1970) contains dire warnings for those external to the community who seek to help "the oppressed".

Escobar perceived how Stott shifted attention in 1966 from the Great Commission to the

… almost forgotten text of John 20:21. Here we have not only a mandate for mission, but also a model of mission style: in obedience to the loving design of the Father, patterned by the example of Jesus Christ, and driven by the power of the Holy Spirit. In the cross, Jesus Christ died for our salvation and also left a pattern for our missionary life.… Mission requires orthopraxis as well as orthodoxy (Escobar 2000:44).

The second necessary characteristic of support from the worldwide church is that it be *localized*, consisting of "prayerful, physically present people." Padilla goes on to state, "Any attempt to communicate the gospel without an initial profound identification of the communicator with the receiving culture is sub-Christian. Consider the anthropomorphic language of the Bible: God walks in the garden in the cool of the day. The Logos pitched his tent in a definite spot in time and space" (Padilla 1985:87).

Likewise, Jesus sent out his message by means of disciples, the leaders in Acts 15 sent believers to accompany their letter, and Paul sent messengers. Dayton and Fraser observe:

More and more we are inserting technology between us and those we seek to evangelize. Our contacts are increasingly more impersonal and fleeting. Yet all our studies indicate that the nature and length of contact is the single most important

element in evangelism. … There is something contradictory about trying to create an indigenous church by using nonindigenous methods (Dayton and Fraser 1980:259-60).

These observations should inform any attempt by Christians in the northern hemisphere to serve the Church in other parts of the world.

Application to Two Communities in West Asia

This section sketches out some brief examples of how these spiritual capital principles apply to two languages in West Asia: a national language and a local language, referred to here as Davlati and Mahali respectively.

Davlati has a young church with dense, multiplex Christian *social networks* which are mostly urban. The church is growing only very slowly in most rural contexts. "Social capital" networks include a number which use Russian through family, education, or work connections, again especially in the cities, where the church happens to be strongest. This prevalence of Russian speakers is reflected in a primarily Russian-speaking, urban church. But in rural areas Russian is fading, so whole-Bible access for the country as a whole must be in Davlati. As noted above, the high number of work migrants in Russia has significant Scripture engagement implications for both product choice and distribution mechanisms.

The Mahali church is very small, and most Christian networks are in the diaspora community outside the heartland. There is therefore an urgent need for believers to reach across their networks with the good news. They need portions of Scripture in an accessible format which are easily shareable.

The Mahali church exhibits heavy bridging social capital investment in Russian but high bonding social capital in the vernacular. Bilingual proficiency is high, but the emotions are engaged mainly by the local language, which also helps define community identity. (One speaker exhibited no interest in vernacular Scripture products until that person heard a psalm in the vernacular, sung in the local style. Suddenly, as the emotions were engaged, the formerly disinterested attitude radically changed.) A key sociolinguistic implication is the value of language development, to guard against language shift by stabilising and even increasing the number of domains in which the vernacular is widely used. As for Scripture engagement, it would seem wise to do Bible translation with an emphasis on the kinds of materials that can establish what Ralph Winter termed "an indigenous beachhead" (Winter 1984:136), while also complementing for believers what they already have in Russian, e.g. giving them the option to sing and to preach in either language. Some of the ideas for Scripture engagement delineated above on kinship and geographical location are also relevant here.

As for *norms*, one example springs from the Muslim background of both groups and the questions such a background raised about the appropriate place to worship. Pikkert points out that the house church movement has not really taken off in the Middle East, where people are more comfortable worshipping in a place designated for worship than in a home: "This is partly because the state tends to view secret religious meetings with suspicion, and partly because, traditionally, the mosque … as opposed to the home, is the place of worship as well as for communal activities on behalf of the larger body of believers" (Pikkert 2008:205). Materials to facilitate corporate prayer, as well as songbooks, recordings, and Scripture-based songs, will all help to support worship together.

Regarding *narratives*, these communities' shared cultural knowledge suggests that lives of the prophets anthologies and stories connected with migration and return (see above), or which relate to farming or mountain cultures, would all be helpful. The Mahali are Ismaili, and they have signalled that symbolic literature (e.g. the Gospel of John with its seven signs) is of particular interest. Meanwhile, the history of literature in the region has created a dichotomy between Scripture, which should be written and in a high register, and Scripture-based stories, which can be audio-visual. Alongside the fashion for storying and the repackaging of Scripture, the many testimonies of the impact of written biblical books in their own right, such as the Gospels and the books of Genesis and Exodus should not be overlooked. Abridgements may help catch an audience's attention initially, because they are shorter; however, sooner or later, interested audiences will need more.

Conclusions

Bandy (2019) highlights the critical importance of language program planning, to establish the *skopos* of any translation work and achieve community buy-in to Scripture and Scripture engagement activities.

Such planning must be collaborative, owned and led as much as possible by the community, perhaps through participatory methods. Language surveyors, Scripture engagement specialists, and generalist language team members can together facilitate this work to research and monitor spiritual capital dimensions alongside social capital ones.

Research questions, alongside analysis of the "Eight Conditions for Scripture Engagement" (Dye 2009), will include:

- What is the nature of the community's (bonding and bridging) social and spiritual networks?
- How can these be leveraged to spread the Good News?
- What are the community's core religious practices and symbols?
- What are the community's stories?
- How can Scripture best intersect with and reshape these practices, symbols and stories?

For the Church to reach maturity requires a richly networked community, infused with a shared narrative (DNA is a metaphor, the gospel is the story) and existing in relationships of love with God, each other, and the world.

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