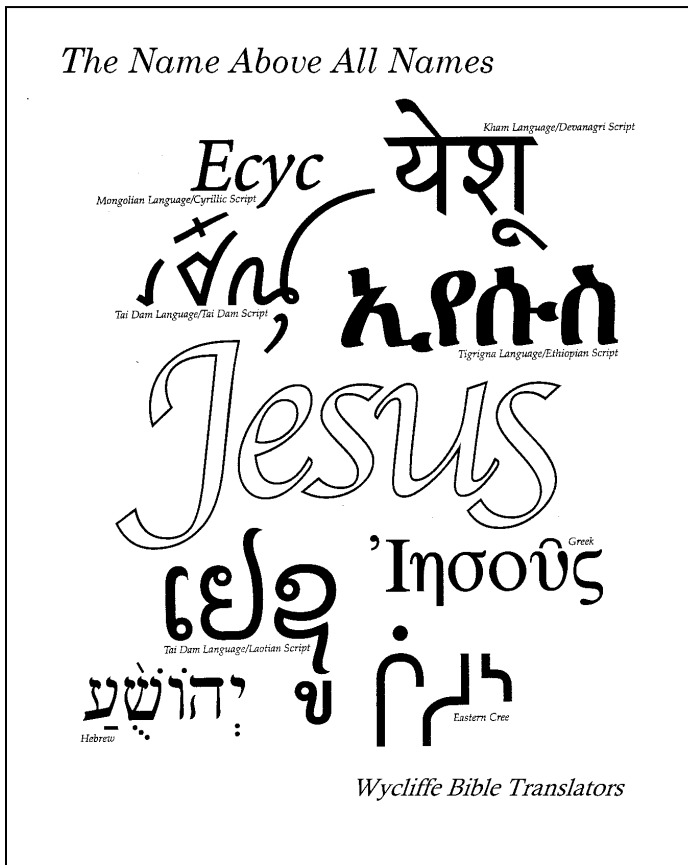# Writing Systems in Papua New Guinea

People often ask: *"Well what do you really do, Brian?",* which is always difficult to answer. If I was a "classic" church planting missionary then I could tell about the new indigenous churches that started up and all the problems thereof. People can somehow relate to this better. If I were doing evangelism in remote villages enduring physical hardships proclaiming the Gospel of Christ, then this too, most people would somehow relate to.

The Name Above All Names

Ecyc — Mongolian Language/Cyrillic Script

येशू — Kham Language/Devanagri Script

Tai Dam Language/Tai Dam Script

ኢየሱስ — Tigrigna Language/Ethiopian Script

Jesus

ເຢຊູ — Tai Dam Language/Laotian Script

Ἰησοῦς — Greek

Eastern Cree

יְהוֹשֻׁעַ — Hebrew

Wycliffe Bible Translators

But the task of Bible Translation is very different. It is Spiritual to be sure, but if nothing else it is extremely technical in nature. For just one translation project, a team has to live and work in the language and culture of a remote people group for 10 to 20 years! It's definitely a long-term vision. It is also filled with precise and scientific studies on the order of pure research. In fact many of our missionaries publish their findings in leading linguistic and anthropologic journals.

"All right, so what are you specifically doing, Brian?" Well, I was recently asked to look into the Unicode problem for all of PNG languages. If you've been around computers for any length of time, you have probably heard about something called 7 bit ASCII. That's where all the early computers used the same character mapping for the first 128 numbers found in something called binary $(2^7 = 128)$. Remember base number systems back in high school? What? You never heard of 'em? !!

Well anyway, in the history of computers along came the IBM Personal Computer in 1981, and with it something called extended ASCII. That gave us 256 (2^8) character positions. IBM and other companies basically mapped a lot of European language characters into these positions. These were characters like the French Ç or the Spanish Ñ. This was fine for the European languages, but what about other "major" languages that use ideographs like Korean, Chinese and Japanese? What about Arabic, and Burmese and Thai and Laotian? Soon computer scientists were thinking about a new scheme called Unicode that used 2^{16} or approximate 64,000 character positions in a standard that all computers and their software could use for hopefully ALL the major languages of the world. Pretty ambitious? You bet!

What You See Computer Sees

A	065
B	066
†	134
Ã	195
Ç	199
Ñ	209
å	229

But guess what, Wycliffe Bible Translators is not working in the "major" languages of the world so much as in the "minority" languages of the world. Let's face it, there are no financial incentives for the world to worry about these languages and their writing needs. But we missionaries care a lot about these forgotten tongues, because we are doing translation work. It's tough to write a literacy primer or the New Testament with characters that do not exist anywhere on our computers just yet, in any kind of a standard way.

Kuate nu kilke mbol mbal ŋakmba tuku wamdus suŋgo ŋak minmba nuŋe Kiŋo nuŋe ndindo niŋgina. Ima nu Kiŋo nuŋe kumuŋ ŋga son ŋgate ta nu ŋgisi ndaka abo ŋak minmba minamŋgat

John 3:16, Siroi Language, Rai Coast

Velar Nasal: ŋ

So one of my recent projects is to try to categorize and specify (in one place) all the orthographic characters that would be necessary for all the 850 plus languages we will encounter here in Papua New Guinea. With such a study, then researchers back in the USA will be able to ensure that perhaps some of our languages will not be forgotten by the world-wide Unicode consortium.

Tentîc sicpisíci ákapuúci awǒkupíc udewáci yíwintínkác wóno.

You must go on watching over and taking care of my lambs. (John 21:15)

Gadsup Language, Eastern Highland Province

Is this technical or what? Is it a ministry? Absolutely! Is it difficult to describe to others what you are doing for the Lord? You bet! Getting the Bible into the hands of minority people groups around the world is a most difficult and technical task, but it is the very foundation for a thriving and strong church around the world. That was the original vision of Cameron Townsend (founder of the Wycliffe Bible Translators) and that vision lives on today.

"So what are you working on, Brian?" "Oh….. just mapping all the characters of the country, to make sure Unicode doesn't miss any." Basically, a fundamental building block for any kind of computer assisted literacy and translation work. It's all exciting work for an ex-engineer (who used to work for IBM way back when…..)

May God give you joy as you overcome your technical hurdles in the land where you reside. Amen! Our Lord is the Lord over all technical matters. Colossians 1:16

In Him,