

Why Would a Cross-Cultural Worker Make a Dictionary?



Ian Dicks shares about the major project he is leading in Malawi and answers some frequently asked questions.

For the last 12 years I have been involved in a project to construct a bilingual dictionary in English and Ciyawo, the heart language of the Yawo people. For most of these years I lived in Malawi with my family, however, for the last four years I have travelled back and forth from Melbourne to see the project to completion. When I mention to people that I am continuing to travel back to Malawi, as well as what I am doing there, it can elicit a number of different responses. First, **shock** that the Yawo don't have a dictionary like that already! Second, **amazement** thinking that I am doing the work on my own.

Third, **wonder** at why a cross-cultural worker for a mission organisation would be involved in this sort of activity. In case you find yourself wondering the same things, let me share how I answer each of these questions.

Yes, it is shocking to think that there are children and communities in the world today that don't have access to necessary educational materials. The Yawo who number more than three million people and live in Malawi, Mozambique and Tanzania are one of the least educated groups in the region. One of the reasons for their low level of education in Malawi is

because they are disadvantaged when first entering school. The vast majority of Yawo children do not speak, read or write either of the two languages in which education is taught - Chichewa and English. This means Yawo children must learn these languages before they can progress in their schooling. The English-Ciyawo learner's dictionary has the most important and frequently used words in English and will help Yawo students overcome this obstacle. It will help bridge the gap for Yawo children, empowering the next generation through education and greater future opportunities.

Second, yes it would be amazing if I had the ability to construct a bilingual dictionary on my own, but it would also be dangerous, and the finished result would not be representative of the Yawo.



Above: Ian and the Malawian Minister for Education, Science and Technology, Bright Msaka, at the official launch of the English-Ciyawo dictionary. Right: The published dictionary. Above Right: A gathering of Yawo chiefs to review the dictionary.



We celebrate that this long-term project is nearing completion.
To learn more, visit: www.globalinteraction.org.au/Projects/Dictionary



The Yawo have many proverbs and stories that express the need for working with others on important tasks. One of their proverbs is, ‘Alone, alone, one does not make history’, which means that to achieve anything significant people must work together. We have followed Yawo wisdom when making the English-Ciyawo dictionary. This dictionary is the result of a dedicated team of eight Yawo lexicographers who have worked together to achieve our goal. Others in the Yawo community, including students, teachers and senior Yawo chiefs, have also reviewed the dictionary and provided us with valuable feedback and encouragement. Their endorsement then enabled the Malawian Minister of Education, Science and Technology to officially launch the dictionary, allowing it to become a public document.

Third, you might wonder why Global Interaction and cross-cultural workers like Wendy and I would spend so much time undertaking a project like this. We believe that God is interested in every aspect of the Yawo’s life. Jesus, when He talked about His ministry on earth, talked about it in holistic terms. We read in

Luke 4:18-19 that Jesus saw His ministry to people in **word, sign and deed** and through Jesus, God is reconciling, renewing and transforming all things to himself. At Global Interaction, we believe that God calls us to join Him in His mission to the world and that we should also work holistically in the same manner as Jesus.

Obviously, a dictionary on its own is not enough to reconcile, renew or even transform the Yawo. In fact, fully meeting the education, health and economic needs of the Yawo would still not be enough for them to experience true shalom. For this to take place the Yawo also need to encounter Jesus who is reconciling, transforming and renewing all things. For such encounters to take place it usually requires people who can communicate with the Yawo meaningfully in their own language, which is why we are constructing the second side of this dictionary. The Ciyawo into English side will help explain the most important and frequently used Ciyawo words to cross-cultural workers who are working with them.

The first side of our dictionary, the English into Ciyawo side is complete, has been circulated, and is being used. We could not

have achieved this without the vital financial contributions, encouragement and prayers of Australian Baptists. At the public launch of the dictionary, Global Interaction donated 500 copies on your behalf to the Malawian Ministry of Education. The Australian government donated a further 200 copies through the embassy in Zimbabwe. The second side of the dictionary, the Ciyawo into English side, is nearing completion. Through this effort cross-cultural workers will have access to a tool that will help them learn more of the Yawo language so that they are better able to understand and speak to the Yawo meaningfully.

Yawo wisdom tells us that we cannot complete this project alone, or even the larger work of seeing people reconciled and transformed. It requires all of us working together.

— Ian Dicks

Ian continues to work part-time as a cross-cultural worker in Malawi with the Yawo and is a lecturer in Intercultural Studies at Whitley College, Melbourne.