

Introduction

Frank Hardy

It's possible to get a good start learning a different language with nothing more than a New Testament. If the alphabet is strange, you'll need an alphabet list (or syllabary) as well, but even without one you can still learn a lot just from plain, unadorned text.

Let me illustrate how to do this with examples from the gospel of John. This of course assumes that you can locate the book. What if the names of the books and even the numbers are in a script you don't recognize? Well, you can generally tell where chapters begin, so just count them. A New Testament book with 21 chapters immediately following a book with 24 chapters stands a very strong chance (100% or better) of being the gospel of John.

Chapter 1 of John offers an ideal language learning environment because so many words are used more than once. Different languages have different ideas as to what should be isolated as separate words, but there are many bits of meaning that one can be fairly sure will be represented as separate forms in the text.

Once we accept this hypothesis there is a straightforward way to test it. For example, the term 'Word' occurs three times in vs. 1 in English and in the Greek original, while the word 'God' occurs only two times. So it becomes a simple matter of pattern recognition and counting.

I've pulled together a table of what we could call the occurrence profiles of certain terms drawn primarily from John 1:1-18. This is a good place to start, because so many terms are repeated. We could extend the illustration, but this much will get us started. The resulting list will work for just about any language that has a New Testament, which means it will work for just about any language you are likely to know about.

There are many good textual resources online. Below are two of the ones I have used. Try the following links for a selection of foreign language New Testaments if you would like to test your newly acquired language learning skills against some actual data:

BibleGateway.com

EthnicHarvest.org

The exercise I've described above could be approached in much the same way as a crossword puzzle. One similarity is that it's fun and not very hard to do. One difference is that the words are supplied for you in the text. You won't come away knowing a new language when you finish, but you will know at least something about the language. And what subject matter to use as a study tool!