

On Bible Translation and Choosing a Bible

From a sign near a children's play area at a mall in Kuala Lumpur:

1. The playground is fit for 3 to 13 years children to play. Parents should lead them to play if their children's age is under 4. Take off the shoes before entering the naughty palace, hand in your shoes to the administrator.
2. Forbid to carry sharp things when playing. Such as knife.
3. Forbid to quarrel and do some practical jokes when playing.
4. When playing in the ball pool, the head should protrude from the spherical surface. The tourist can't throw with the balls.
5. Obey the naughty palace's safe navigation.
6. Forbid slip from the tube with the head downward.
[...]
9. If the tourist has heart disease, infection disease, psychosis disease, stupid disease. Any disease is forbid to play in it.¹

Let me stipulate that I have personally said things every bit as ridiculous as this (and worse) while learning languages. The example above is not cited in order to have some fun at the expense of a struggling language learner, but because the factors that contributed to this unfortunate result are fairly easy to reconstruct, making it a good illustration of some basic and important issues in translation theory.

When a recent gathering of pastors and other called workers² was exposed to this translation, they had no trouble listing several probable reasons for its weaknesses. Their observations went beyond the translator's shaky grasp of some very basic elements of the structure of the target language (or TL—English, in this case). They noticed a certain tone-deafness toward connotative meaning (“naughty,” “stupid”)—a full sensitivity to which, to be fair, is one of the last things a new language speaker learns. They sensed a lack of awareness on the translator's part of the level at which his/her language is pitched (“protrude from the spherical surface”). They also agreed that a quantum improvement in the translation would have been as simple as finding a native English speaker and asking him or her, “Read this and tell me what you think it means.” Why this wasn't done we can only speculate.

More importantly, they agreed that the translation very likely mirrors its source text (ST) closely, whether ST existed as a written document or only in the translator's mind. The translator was less conscious, however, of the structure of the TL and the needs of the target reader (TR). It was this in particular that resulted in a translation that communicates so little as to be almost useless. Not only does current translation theory address the problem demonstrated by this text; thoughtful translators have been aware of it for centuries—perhaps none more so than Martin Luther.

1. The priority of TL and TR in translating

Prepared as a working document for the English Version Evaluation Steering Committee of the WELS.

¹ www.english.com, 10/18/2010.

² Shepherd of the Hills Lutheran Church, Fredericksburg, TX, November 1, 2010.

In an important, early discussion of translating in the literature of the West, St. Jerome defends himself against the charge that he has been either incompetent or unethical in translating a text other than strictly literally. He writes:

For I myself not only admit but freely proclaim that in translating from the Greek (except in the case of the holy scriptures where even the order of the words is a mystery) I render sense for sense and not word for word.

It is sufficient for the present to name Hilary the confessor who has turned some homilies on Job and several treatises on the Psalms from Greek into Latin; yet has not bound himself to the drowsiness of the letter or fettered himself by the stale literalism of inadequate culture. Like a conqueror he has led away captive into his own tongue the meaning of his originals.³

When Jerome framed the translator's decision as a choice between "word-for-word" and "sense-for-sense," he set translation theory on a course from which it would not depart for nearly 1600 years. Luther agreed with Jerome's preference for "sense-for-sense" and considered it appropriate for translating Scripture as well. He drew the practical conclusion that the structure of the SL is a lesser consideration than the structure of TL and the needs of TR.

In all these phrases, this is the German usage, even though it is not the Latin or Greek usage... We do not have to inquire of the literal Latin, how we are to speak German, as these asses do. Rather, we must inquire about this of the mother in the home, the children on the street, the common man in the marketplace. We must be guided by their language, the way they speak, and do our translating accordingly. That way they will understand it and recognize that we are speaking German to them.⁴

Luther could also adhere quite closely to SL when he deemed it necessary—for instance, because of a theologically pregnant word choice in the original.

I have not gone ahead anyway and disregarded altogether the exact wording of the original. Rather with my helpers I have been careful to see that where everything turns on a single passage, I have kept to the original quite literally and have not lightly departed from it. For example, in John 6[:27] Christ says, "Him has God the Father sealed [*versiegelt*]." It would have been better German to say, "Him has God the Father signified [*gezeichnet*]," or "He it is whom God the Father means [*meinet*]." But I have preferred to do violence to the German language rather than to depart from the word.⁵

³ Jerome, *Letter 57: To Pammachius on the Best Method of Translating*, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3001057.htm>, 11/8/10.

⁴ Martin Luther, "An Open Letter on Translating," in E. T. Bachmann and H. Lehmann, eds., *Luther's Works*, vol. 35 (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1960), p. 189.

⁵ *Ibid*, p. 194.

By and large, however, Luther did his work with TL and TR firmly in mind:

When the angel greets Mary, he says, "Hail Mary, full of grace, the Lord is with you!" Up to now that has simply been translated according to the literal Latin (*ave Maria gratia plena*). Tell me whether that is also good German! When does a German speak like that, "You are full of grace"? He would have to think of a keg "full of" beer or a purse "full of" money. Therefore I have translated it, "Thou gracious one" (*du holdselig*), so that a German can at least think his way through to what the angel meant by this greeting ... though I have still not hit upon the best German for it. Suppose I had taken the best German and translated the salutation thus: "Hello there, Mary" (*Gott grusse dich, du liebe Maria*)--for that is what the angel wanted to say, and what he would have said, if he had wanted to greet her in German ... [In that case, former Roman Catholics] would have hanged themselves out of (their) tremendous fanaticism for the Virgin Mary, because I had thus destroyed the salutation.⁶

The priority that Luther assigned to the structure of German and the needs of the German reader has earned him the title, "Father of Confessional, Functional-Equivalence Bible Translating."⁷ What is known as "functional equivalence" as a theory of translating is not without its problems, so that most authorities in the field have modified it substantially (or have moved on entirely). What is undeniable is that Luther as translator was several centuries ahead of his time, and this is one of the main reasons for the profound impact of Luther's Bible. It is thus something of a paradox to see an approach to translating that Luther explicitly rejected today finding some vocal champions in evangelical circles, including among some Lutherans.⁸

2. Functional equivalence

In the 20th century, Eugene Nida attempted to put Luther's philosophy on an objective footing with his dichotomy between "formal correspondence" and "dynamic (functional) equivalence." A "formal correspondence" approach aims at a target text (TT) that represents the structure of SL as much as possible,⁹ usually in the belief that this is most consistent with the goal of "faithfulness." "Formal correspondence" translators attempt to calibrate the source author's semantic choices against the range of similar choices available in the target language, *i.e.*, consistently translating the same Hebrew, Aramaic, or Greek word with the same target-language word. Some of them even seek to preserve, where possible, the word order, sentence structure, and idioms of ST.

Because of inevitable structural differences between SL and TL, however, formal correspondence can produce a TT with very different content from ST. To take an obvious example, a strict "formal correspondence" rendering of Spanish *Él no dice nada* would be "He

⁶ Luther, *op.cit.*, p.190.

⁷ Wendland, E. R., "Martin Luther, the Father of Confessional, Functional-Equivalence Bible Translation, Part 1," *Notes on Translation* 9:1, pp 16-36, and "Part 2," 9:2, pp 47-60.

⁸ For an example among evangelicals, see Leland Ryken, *Choosing a Bible: Understanding Bible Translation Differences* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2005). For a Lutheran example, see <http://cyberbrethren.com/2010/12/10/god-inspired-metaphors-another-problem-with-the-new-international-version/>, accessed December 20, 2010.

⁹ Everett Fox's *The Five Books of Moses* (New York: Schocken, 1983) would be a clear example.

does not say nothing,” which would change the meaning of ST completely. Even when more of the original information content remains intact, strict “formal correspondence” renderings often distort the literary and pragmatic effects of the original—for instance, introducing a clumsiness that was not there when ST was read by SR. Many proponents of, *e.g.*, the Authorized Version (AV) have come to associate this very clumsiness with dignity and literary beauty. To say the least, it is arguable that some positive evaluations of the AV owe more to AV’s conscious archaisms, or to its proponents having heard the AV read aloud in church for decades, than to any innate literary qualities that it may possess.¹⁰

Nida recommended departing from the structure of SL as freely as necessary in order to preserve ST’s meaning, an approach he termed “dynamic equivalence” (later “functional equivalence”)¹¹ where “equivalence” is essentially a more nuanced and limited concept of “faithfulness.” The ultimate goal of “functional equivalence” was a “translation that doesn’t sound like a translation”¹²—in other words, a TT that could pass for an original artifact of the target culture and that achieves the same “impact” or “function” for TR as ST had for SR. Functional equivalence dominated Bible translating in the 20th century, and more or less explicit homage is paid to it in the introductions to many popular Bible versions.

The problem with functional equivalence was not only that ST’s “function” is often not easy to determine, thanks to the many barriers between the source and target cultures. The greater problem was that “equivalence” (or “faithfulness”) is not one thing but many. There are always more features in ST than it is possible to retain in TT, and some can be retained only by sacrificing others. Take, for instance, a ST in which the sound of the text is part of its meaning (like Genesis 49:8, Ezekiel 20:29, or Galatians 5:12). In cases like these the translator’s options include 1) simply transliterating (thus preserving the sound but losing everything else); 2) trying somehow to preserve the sound in the target language (which, even if it is possible, is usually extremely awkward);¹³ 3) transliterating, then explaining the effect of the original in a footnote (which will go unnoticed when the text is read aloud); and 4) ignoring the sound altogether. Which of these four approaches results in “equivalence”? Which must a translator adopt who wants to be “faithful”?

In translation theory there has been a growing recognition that “faithfulness” is more complex than was once supposed, and that putting “faithfulness” at the top of the list of criteria when choosing a Bible translation, while appropriate, is helpful only to a point. Replacing “faithfulness” with “equivalence” helps only a little, because any translation will be “equivalent” to its ST in some respects but not in others. Decisions about which respects are most important—in other words, about which features of the source text absolutely must be preserved, and which are less crucial—are the essence of the translator’s task. The norms according to which these decisions are made are the interest of what is known as “descriptive translation studies.”

3. Descriptive translation studies

¹⁰ See August Pieper, “Our Transition to English,” John Jeske, translator, <http://www.wlssays.net/files/PieperEnglish.pdf>, accessed December 20, 2010.

¹¹ Sometimes also called (somewhat tendentiously) “meaning-based translating.” Stephen Pattemore believes that the shift from “dynamic” to “functional” actually represents a slight philosophical shift. See his “Framing Nida” in Philip A. Noss, ed., *A History of Bible Translation* (Rome: Edizioni di Storia e Letteratura, 2007), p. 224f.

¹² Eugene Nida and Charles Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: Brill, 1974), p. 12f.

¹³ Cf. Moshe Greenberg’s rendering of Ezekiel 20:29: “What is this *high place* that you *hie* to?” (attributed to Moffett). *Ezekiel 1-20, Anchor Bible* vol. 20 (New York: Doubleday, 1983), p. 362.

Descriptive approaches—such as those of Christiane Nord, Gideon Toury, and Theo Hermans—reject the idea that the business of translation theory is to create rules for grading translations or training translators. Instead, they study the way translating is actually done, *i.e.*, the relationships between translation techniques and the results that are obtained. They seek to account for those norms by which translators operate and, especially, how these correlate with the expectations of TR's.

Descriptive approaches warn us to be especially aware of the latter. Lourens de Vries notes that:

...translators never work in a pure and clean, ahistorical, translational-theoretical world in which they follow translation-theoretical agendas. Rather, they serve commissioners and audiences in specific times and places who want texts with which they can do the things they want to do....Ultimately, all translations serve specific cultural and historical goals and it is these goals that determine which translation techniques are applied and how they are applied in translations.¹⁴

This is not (necessarily) an argument for a reader-oriented theory of meaning. Nor does it recommend pandering to TR, delivering a translation that says what his or her “itching ears” want to hear. It simply recognizes that translators—all of them—do not simply render “what’s there.” They render those features of “what’s there” that are called for by the readers and the situation that necessitate the translation in the first place. In descriptive approaches, “faithfulness” or “equivalence” is replaced with “loyalty,” which is defined as an ethical commitment in two directions: to the meaning of the source text, and to the expectations of the target reader.¹⁵

In the case of Scripture, the TR expects a translation that says what the original says. Translators must, however, seek to deepen their understanding of exactly which features of ST their TR expects to encounter when reading the translation. For instance, would TR really expect every occurrence of ויהי to be translated “And it came to pass...” (And will the reader equate this with “accuracy” or “faithfulness”)? Does TR really want “a translation that doesn’t sound like a translation”? Will he or she expect to find literary beauty in a translation of a highly literary original? Does TR expect a TT that is “pitched” where ST was pitched within its source culture? Or does he or she want a translation of the whole Bible—from Job to 3 John—that any 10-year-old can understand? Do readers want the translator to solve theological “problems” for them (as the NIV does in, *e.g.*, 1 John 3:6), or would they rather have been left to grapple with these issues on their own? Etc.

Within descriptive studies, Vermeer’s *Skopostheorie* considers whether and how a translation declares the norms governing the project in its *skopos* (found, *e.g.* in the introduction to the book), and then how consistently the translation applies these norms in the finished product. While it purports not to be prescriptive, *Skopostheorie* judges rather harshly those *skopoi* that create reader expectations that cannot possibly be met. A practitioner of *Skopostheorie* would

¹⁴ Lourens de Vries, “Introduction: Methodology of Bible Translation,” in Philip A. Noss, ed., *op. cit.*, p. 275f.

¹⁵ Christiane Nord, “Function and Loyalty in Bible Translation,” in Maria Calzada Pérez, ed. *Apropos of Ideology: Translation Studies on Ideology—Ideologies in Translation Studies* (Manchester, UK and Northampton, MA: St. Jerome Publishing, 2003), p. 48.

take a dim view of this promise from the introduction to the ESV, which was more likely written by a publicist than an informed translator:

As an essentially literal translation, then, the ESV seeks to carry over every possible nuance of meaning in the original words of Scripture into our own language. As such, it is ideally suited for in-depth study of the Bible. Indeed, with its emphasis on literary excellence, the ESV is equally suited for public reading and preaching, for private reading and reflection, for both academic and devotional study, and for Scripture memorization.¹⁶

That a translation can carry over “every possible nuance of meaning” is simply not a realistic claim. Neither is the statement’s implication that it is ordinarily possible to achieve both formal correspondence (“essentially literal translation”) and literary excellence in the TL at the same time (The assertion that the ESV has achieved “literary excellence” is also contestable). Finally there is the claim that a single translation can excel equally whether it is used for “academic study,” devotional study,” or “public reading.” But not only do promoters of certain translations often harbor expectations that are this unrealistic. Critics of translations often have the same problem. As John McFarlane put it, “We demand that it [a translation] reconcile the irreconcilable and then gloat over its necessary failure.”¹⁷

One of the most useful insights from descriptive translation studies is that when choosing a Bible, it is important to identify as specifically as possible the type of reader for whom the translation is being chosen and what this reader expects from the Bible that he or she is being given—even when (especially when!) these expectations are unrealistic or contradictory. A second insight is that not only is there no such thing as a perfect translation; there also is no such thing as a single translation that is perfectly suited to every conceivable purpose to which it might be put. Some kind of hierarchy of intended purposes might be useful: “It is critical that this Bible be good for_____. Next in importance is that it be reasonably good for_____,” etc.

4. Relevance theory

Recently, translation theory has been greatly illuminated by a relevance theory of communication,¹⁸ especially through the work of Ernst-August Gutt. Briefly, Gutt’s claim is that any theory of translating actually rests on a more basic theory of how communication works. Past approaches to translation theory have been hampered by a “code model” of communication, in which “meaning” is thought of as more or less independent of its linguistic form until it is encoded by senders (and after it is decoded by receivers). Translation, then, becomes essentially a code-switching enterprise.

Among the weaknesses of a code model is that it can’t really account for implicit information, which relevance theory has shown is not incidental but essential to almost all communication. In

¹⁶ Preface, *English Standard Version* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2001), electronic (unpaginated) version.

¹⁷ Quoted in Theo Hermans, *Translation in Systems: Descriptive and Systemic Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St. Jerome Publishing, 1999), p. 17.

¹⁸ The theoretical foundation is found in Dan Sperber and Diederik Wilson, *Relevance: Communication and Cognition*, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 1995.

a code model, how does a sender manage to “encode” the fact that his or her real meaning lies beyond (or—*e.g.*, in the case of sarcasm—is entirely different from) what the sender has literally said? And why would people ever say anything other than literally what they meant—though it is easy to show that we all do this a great deal of the time?¹⁹

Relevance theory proposes that each sender and each receiver possesses a “context”—a body of information that is active in his/her mind at the moment of communication. When they interpret utterances, receivers naturally seek the interpretation of the utterance that alters their context the most—adding to, confirming, or calling into question things that they already know—and that entails the least cost to themselves in mental effort.

Take this exchange, for example:

Bill: How do you like the new neighbors?

Mary: I hate yuppies!

In relevance-theoretic terms, Mary’s answer carries the assumption of its own relevance. In other words, Mary has implicitly invited Bill to understand her remark as an answer to the question he asked. Bill will therefore interpret what Mary said according to the principle of relevance; that is, he intuitively seizes on the first interpretation that he runs across that has some effect on the body of information that is currently active in his mind. This is how Bill immediately grasps the implicatures of Mary’s statement, which include that the new neighbors are yuppies and that Mary doesn’t care for them—although in a strictly literal sense Mary did not say this at all.²⁰

Most important of all: in order for the communication to succeed, Bill needs to do more than to decode each individual word that Mary says in the order in which Mary has strung them together. He needs to bring an adequate “context” to the communication event. While his “context” needn’t be identical to Mary’s, it must overlap with hers significantly if he is going to understand her.

The implications of this understanding of communication for translating are profound. For one, if “context” in the relevance-theoretic sense is the critical factor in whether communication is successful, then the more different the source author’s and TR’s contexts, the less likely it is that the message of ST will be understood. Relevance theory questions the assumption that any message can be made fully understandable to anybody—not, at least, before some groundwork has been laid with him or her. Gutt has written on the connection between “context” in the relevance-theoretic sense and the call for a baseline level of “cultural literacy” if participants in a culture are going to be able to understand one another.²¹ Besides helping to insure that our demands of a Bible translation are realistic, an understanding of this aspect of communication demonstrates why the teaching ministry of the church must do all it can to lay a solid foundation of “biblical literacy” among its members.

Second, in relevance theory, translating is a form of secondary communication—exactly like quoting (“ST said, ‘...’”). Just as in descriptive translation studies, relevance theory posits a wide range of possibilities for exactly how TT can resemble ST. When we quote someone directly, we normally convey the assumption that the quotation will give the receiver access to

¹⁹ Ernst-August Gutt, “Aspects of ‘Cultural Literacy’ Relevant to Bible Translation.” *Journal of Translation* 2, no. 1(2006), p. 3f.

²⁰ This also illustrates one of the purposes of “weak communication”: it enables a sender to commit him or herself to a statement less than fully.

²¹ *Op. cit.*

what the original sender said—but that in order to discern what the sender meant, and what it has to do with the receiver, some work may be necessary on the receiver’s part. Furthermore, quoting someone directly assigns ultimate responsibility for the message with the original sender, not with the person quoting (“Maybe you don’t understand; maybe I don’t, either--but that’s *what he said*”).

Indirect quotation works differently. It commits itself to having accurately represented what was said, but only in those respects in which the person doing the quoting decides that the original message will be relevant for the hearer. Example:

Primary communication:

A: Can you come to lunch with us, professor?

B: I’m leaving for Chicago right after class.

Secondary communication:

C: What did he say?

A¹: He said, “I’m leaving for Chicago right after class.”

A²: He said he has to leave for Chicago.

A³: He said he’s leaving right away.

A⁴: He said he can’t.

In many secondary communication situations, any one of these could be judged a “faithful” representation of the original statement. In some situations, however (*e.g.* a court of law), nothing less than A¹ might do. And if for whatever reason the communication failed, more blame would probably be assigned to the person doing the quoting in A²-A⁴ than in A¹, where greater blame would probably be assigned to the original speaker.

Gutt’s point is that consumers of Bible translations normally expect something more like A¹ than like A²-A⁴, and they are understandably disappointed when they find that this is not what they have been given. A historically-conscious Bible reader’s understanding of what he or she is doing has been described as “reading somebody else’s mail”²²—and Bible readers become suspicious when the “mail” doesn’t fit what they know about the original addressees. For instance, a translation like the famously “functional equivalent” rendering of Psalm 23:1 as “The LORD is my swineherd” will probably serve only as long as the Papua-New Guineans know very little about the outside world, and only until their canon comes to include Leviticus 11. After that, they may be quite upset with their Bible and those who gave it to them.

This does not necessarily call for a return to “formal correspondence” since, as mentioned above, often this approach actually alters the message of ST in significant ways. It does, however, show what was wrong with the goal of “a translation that doesn’t sound like a translation.” It also shows what is wrong with those attempts of many Bible versions to achieve greater “clarity” by making explicit much of the information that is implicit in ST--removing all ambiguities, even those that were clearly intentional; bracketing words that “aren’t really there” in ST (Exactly which English words *are* “really there” in ST?); capitalizing pronouns that refer to God, etc. Even where the translators’ decisions are exegetically justifiable (which at times they are not), these techniques not only disappoint biblically-competent readers by taking such decisions out of their hands. At times they appear to betray a faulty understanding of the role of implicit information in all communication, including the Word of God.

²² L. Dorn, quoted in Pattemore, *op. cit.*, p. 239. On another level, the “mail” is of course intended for him or her, too!

5. Our target reader

If it is true that, as descriptive studies suggest, “A good Bible *for whom?*” is a critical question in choosing a translation, how might we answer it in the case of our church body? We could propose something like this:

The primary TR for which we would choose a translation is, above all, a believer. This reader approaches Scripture with the presuppositions of faith, which include the confidence that it is God’s inspired, inerrant Word. He or she does not believe that the different human authors – blessed though they are with a rich variety of gifts and styles of writing—speak to us with competing and contradictory voices. Rather, through each and all, the same divine Author addresses us. Regarding Scripture’s purpose, this reader believes that the prophetic and apostolic writings find their center in Jesus Christ, our Savior. They testify of him and in his name proclaim repentance and remission of sins. The reader will consider translations to be acceptable to the extent that they conform to these presuppositions, since they are simply the basic beliefs that the Scriptures themselves require of any reader or translator.²³ Our TR will find a Bible translation unacceptable that betrays different presuppositions or that renders these opaque—as will we.

Furthermore, our TR has no access to the source languages (or else a translation is unnecessary). Neither illiterate nor a PhD in English, this reader is likely to be a native English speaker; at any rate, one who can handle Standard American English on a late-primary-school level or beginning high-school level. While not an expert in poetics, this reader can tell the difference between texts that don’t aim at literary beauty and those that do and has some appreciation for the latter. Similarly, TR is not a professional theologian, but is also not a complete biblical illiterate. We probably should have in mind someone with enough biblical and linguistic competence so as not to need (perhaps even to resent) the constant explicating of implicit information.

Our TR does not want a Bible whose notion of “faithfulness” results in a text that is unintelligible or unnecessarily confusing. The reader expects, however, a translation that understands itself as a “direct quotation” of an ancient document. Therefore, this reader is prepared to expend some mental effort in order to understand it; he or she does not expect the necessary “context” to be as readily available as the context needed to understand an article in the local newspaper.

Note some implications of this profile in practical terms. On one hand, our TR may not mind if the translation renders certain Biblical idioms with target-language idioms. In other words, this reader’s needs will be better served by “I gave you empty stomachs in all your cities”(Amos 4:6 NIV) than by “I gave you cleanness of teeth in all your cities” (ESV); “No one uttered a word against the Israelites (Joshua 10:21 NIV)” rather than “Not a man moved his tongue against any of the people of Israel (ESV); and probably “With him I speak face to face” (Numbers 12:8 NIV) rather than “With him I speak mouth to mouth” (ESV).

Because TR expects a Bible that is a direct quotation of an ancient document, he or she also knows, for example, that there were no “launching pads” in Bible times and that therefore Paul did not write “launching pad” at Galatians 5:13 (GWN). Though the target culture might be more familiar with “juicy steaks” (*God’s Word*) than with “a fattened calf,” our TR does not

²³ I owe the wording of this paragraph to English Version Evaluation Steering Committee Chairman Paul O. Wendland.

expect to find the former rather than the latter at Proverbs 15:17. If “fatted calf” requires more effort to understand (which is debatable), the reader is prepared to make it. Translations like “launching pad” or “juicy steaks” are readily identifiable as something less than “direct quotations.” Put differently, they read suspiciously more like our own “mail” than like SR’s.

6. Our target situation

Ideal or not, the primary way in which *most* WELS people experience *most* of the Bible *most* of the time is aurally (Surely it is also relevant that this is also the way that most of ST was originally experienced in its source culture). More of our people still attend worship services than attend Bible classes, or than read their Bibles at home, or than read WELS-produced materials that incorporate biblical texts. Additionally, other settings in which the Bible is used afford opportunities for explanation (oral commentary, study notes, etc.) that oral reading during the worship service does not.

Therefore, in choosing a translation, prime consideration should be given to whether a translation is suitable for oral reading--whether its sound, cadences, sentence length, etc., are such that it is understandable when read aloud, whether its level of language is suitable for the worship service, etc. Here August Pieper’s remarks on the horrors of AV English come to mind (*e.g.*, the phrase “nourisheth it and cherisheth it” at Ephesians 5:29, which Pieper called a “jawbreaker”).²⁴ For a subtler and more recent example, try reading Luke 22:29 aloud in these two versions to someone with no written text in front of him or her. Ask your hearer which is clearer:

ESV: ...and I assign to you, as my Father assigned to me, a kingdom.²⁵

NIV: And I confer on you a kingdom, just as my Father conferred one on me.

Fortunately, suitability for oral use generally entails suitability for other uses as well. For example, a translation that reads well orally will also tend to be easy to memorize.

7. Translation technique

Although as noted above “faithfulness,” “equivalence,” and even “loyalty” are more complex notions than is sometimes thought, this certainly does not mean that accuracy in translation is entirely in the eye of the beholder. There are translations that are simply wrong, and inaccuracies—whether these result from doctrinal bias or simple translator error—must be at a minimum. On one hand, reader expectations from a translation need to be realistic. There has never been an error-free translation. On the other hand, not all errors are created equal; where they exist, translator errors have to be weighed as well as counted. For instance, a consistently incorrect rendering, even of a single Hebrew or Greek word--*e.g.* “make righteous” for *קִדְּשׁוּ* or *δικαιώω*--might be enough to disqualify a translation altogether.

But choosing a Bible is not as simple as picking the translation that “gets it right” most of the time. In discussions of how to choose a Bible the choice is sometimes framed as a choice among translation techniques, and this is then elaborated as a choice between “formal correspondence”

²⁴ Pieper, *op. cit.*

²⁵ ESV preserves the Greek word order.

and “functional equivalence.” Proponents of “formal correspondence” argue that their approach is most consistent with the value of “faithfulness” and even with the doctrine of verbal inspiration. Proponents of “functional equivalence” argue that “faithfulness,” if it means anything at all, calls for a TT that means what ST means. Opponents of “formal correspondence” are quick to point out examples where overly-literal translating has produced a TT that communicates nothing or erroneously, and in versions such as the AV, NASB, and ESV examples of this are not at all difficult to find. Opponents of “functional equivalence” seize on examples of translations that reveal more about the translator than they do about ST, and examples of this abound in TEV or the *Living Bible*.

The problem is that the choice as it is framed above presents a false antithesis. Better said, it tries to view in two dimensions a problem that is actually multi-dimensional. If Gutt is correct, then a better way to pose the problem is, “We need the translation that does the best job of communicating what God said through the prophets, evangelists, and apostles to our TR in our target situation. This will be that translation that meets a believing reader’s expectations for a direct rather than an indirect quotation of a divinely-inspired ST. This will also be that translation that maximally enriches the reader’s understanding of what God said without making greater demands, in terms of processing effort, than our reader can meet. Which translation is this?”

This way of framing the question perhaps lacks the *elán* of “Functional equivalence!” “Formal correspondence!” But I believe that it is more likely to result in a good decision.

8. Gender-neutral language

Since so-called “gender-neutral language” is a hot-button issue in current Bible translating, one that has been at the forefront of criticisms of TNIV, some remarks about it might be appropriate. Naturally, the issue impinges on the matter of what Scripture teaches about the roles of man and woman. For this reason, discussions of the issue have sometimes been primarily but unhelpfully preoccupied with proving or disproving that a feminist agenda underlies certain Bible versions. Our present focus is gender-neutral language as a Bible-translation issue—in other words, the position on gender-neutral language that would seem to follow from the approach to translation theory that this article is advocating.

Factors complicating the gender-neutral language discussion can perhaps be divided into ST/SL issues and TL issues. Among the ST issues would be the fact that Scripture originated in specific historical and cultural contexts that were undeniably andro-centric, and at times the text of Scripture reflects this. To acknowledge this openly is not to surrender Scripture’s teaching on the roles of man and woman; in fact, our credibility probably suffers if we do not. There is a reason, for instance, why only Adam is mentioned as being driven from the garden in Genesis 3:23 (when obviously Eve left too), why only males are counted in Numbers 1:2-3, why much of Proverbs is cast as a father’s instructions to his son (which are not then followed by instructions from mothers for daughters), or why, when those who were fed by Jesus are counted (Matthew 14:21), the number given includes the men only.

As an example of a source-language (SL) issue, Hebrew and Greek, like some modern languages (*e.g.* Spanish), normally designate a mixed-gender group with masculine terms. A native speaker of Greek would not necessarily have felt excluded if the group to which she

belonged were addressed as ἀδελφοί,²⁶ just as a native Spanish speaker does not conclude that someone who addresses the group as *Hermanos!* must not be talking to her.

The only parallel instance in English that I can think of, however, is the colloquial “You guys!” (which can include women, too). “Brothers!” in modern English inevitably leaves the women out in a way that ἀδελφοί did not. A translation that insists on “Brothers!” for every instance of ἀδελφοί, therefore, will at times be androcentric where the original wasn’t—something like what happens when ἄνθρωπος is translated “man” (as in NIV Matthew 5:13 or 1 Timothy 2:4).

On the other hand, in its attempt to avoid unnecessary androcentrism, TNIV routinely replaces “Brothers!” with “Brothers and sisters!” conveying the assumption that the group is mixed even in places where the context suggests otherwise. For example, in 1 Corinthians 14:39, TNIV has Paul encouraging the “brothers and sisters” to be eager to prophesy almost immediately after the women have been told to be quiet in church (v 34). In a similar way, TNIV Philippians 1:14-15 leads the reader to the conclusion that the women were preaching, though this was certainly not Paul’s intention. The latter might be described as a TL issue—a case of tone-deafness to the connotations of “preach” in English, something like designating a children’s play area “the naughty palace.”

Perhaps an even more vexing TL issue involves ascertaining exactly where English currently stands. Most recent English style guides assert that the generic “man” in the sense of humanity (*i.e.* “mankind”) has been lost (or that if it hasn’t, it should be),²⁷ that it is to be avoided in serious writing, and that the same goes for the generic pronoun “he.” There are sound reasons for this. There is research, for instance, that shows that modern-day hearers of “man” do not think of a genderless “person,” but have a strong tendency to attribute maleness to the referent whether this is appropriate or not.²⁸ There are also unsound reasons; namely, radical feminism’s insistence that a translator ought to be free to change any feature of ST that offends against feminist orthodoxy.²⁹

The problem with attempting to avoid the generic masculine pronoun is that it results in considerable awkwardness in situations like this one:

Everybody should bring his book.

“Everybody should bring their book” breaks the rule of agreement in number and still jars the ears of many careful speakers and writers (cf. NIV 2010 “Whoever spares the rod hates *their* children,” Proverbs 13:24). “Everybody should bring his or her book” doesn’t flow, and in a string of similar sentences it becomes annoying very quickly. Probably no one since Sir John Gielgud has managed to say “Everyone should bring one’s book” with no hint of affectation. Some authors alternate between a generic “he” and a generic “she,” a device that draws undue attention to itself even when it does not lead to wholesale confusion. Substituting an article for the pronoun (“Everybody should bring the book”) works only when “everyone” already knows which book is meant. A change to first or second person (“Let’s all bring our books”; “You should bring your books”) is a work-around, not a solution. There is in fact no

²⁶ See BDAG, 3rd edition, p. 18.

²⁷ In Canada, the National Museum of Man became the National Museum of Civilization in 1989.

²⁸ Joan C. Chrisler and Donald R. McCreary, eds., *Handbook of Gender Research in Psychology* (New York; Springer, 2010), p. 363.

²⁹ “God/dess is beyond gender and at the same time inclusive of both genders. Using exclusively masculine terms and systems of domination is contrary to the Gospel and the heart of the risen Christ and the mission of the church.” www.herchurch.org/ (ELCA), accessed October 16, 2010.

solution that can be applied across the board--as TNIV's problem with "brothers and sisters" illustrates.

Bringing the traditional "formal correspondence-functional equivalence" dichotomy to bear on the issue is not very helpful. A "formal correspondence" advocate might insist that "brother" is the "dictionary meaning" of ἀδελφός, that letting the target reader see that the term used in, e.g., Matthew 12:46 is the same as the one in Matthew 1:2 is crucial, and that therefore "brother" must be used each time that ἀδελφός occurs. He must then find a way to quiet his conscience over the fact that the translation "brothers" at Luke 21:16 says less than Jesus meant. The "formal correspondence" advocate might further insist that masculine pronouns in the original must be translated "he," "him," or "his," not realizing that gender does not function the same way in English that it does in Hebrew or Greek—or that the rule that he is proposing is the one that gave us "Let the children of Israel also keep the passover at *his* [emphasis mine] appointed season" (Numbers 9:3 AV) and "Put up again thy sword into *his* place" (Matthew 26:52).

"Functional equivalence" advocates fare a bit better, in that they will seriously consider the range of choices that the TL has available and their effects. But there is really no theoretical basis to prevent them from deciding that the goal of "a translation that doesn't sound like a translation" is best met by changing "brothers" to "friends" or "fellow Christians"—which, if our assessment of our TR's is correct, would give them something other than what they think they are getting.

A better way to proceed would be to think first about TR's expectations and "context" (in the relevance-theoretic sense), then about the question: "What kind of rendering maximally rewards the effort that TR will have to make to understand it?" On the one hand, TR may well find his or her context enriched when he or she perceives that the same word is used in Matthew 1:2 and 12:46. Our reader may even equate being granted access to this text feature with "faithfulness" on the translator's part. On the other hand, TR may end up wasting time and effort trying to understand why Jesus wants his followers to beware of traitorous fathers, mothers, and brothers, but they are at least safe from their sisters (NIV Luke 21:16). And to require of a woman reader even the modicum of effort needed to see herself in NIV 1 Timothy 2:4 is wholly unjustifiable.

As for the pronouns, if asked, TR might voice the opinion that the gender and number of the pronouns in ST should simply be left alone. On the other hand, in the case of women readers, applying verses with "he," "his," and "him" to themselves may require an expenditure of processing effort (a mental "switch") that is completely unnecessary. Furthermore, it takes effort on any reader's part to understand why the Passover or Peter's scabbard is called a "he" (AV)--effort that is not at all rewarded with a better understanding of the biblical text.

There are still no universally-applicable solutions to problems like these, and decisions need to be made—and evaluated--case-by-case. In addition, any evaluation of translations needs to begin with a realistic and charitable understanding of the complexity of the translators' task. It may be cliché to call translating an art rather than a science, but it remains true. Most of all, both translating and choosing a translation ought to be an act of love—love for both the sacred text and for those to whom, through that text, the God of love seeks to make himself known. Martin Luther's grasp of these issues was exemplary. Let us follow.

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