

Bible Translation and Anthropology: The Superiority of a Dynamic  
Equivalence Method of Translation

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### Abstract

Bible translation has taken many forms and employed many methods in the past centuries since it was compiled and formalized. Methods of translation range from highly literal to unduly free, with several intervals between the two. In order to come to an accurate translation that can be properly understood by people far removed from the time and culture of the Bible, translators must employ cultural anthropology to understand the culture they are trying to reach. This use of anthropology, combined with a dynamic-equivalence method of translation, produces the most effective and universally understandable translation of the Christian Bible.

Bible Translation and Anthropology: The Superiority of a  
Dynamic Equivalence Method of Translation

In the island nation of Jamaica, Standard English is the official language. However, a local language referred to as *patois* is commonly spoken even more than English. Wycliffe Bible Translators have recently begun to translate the Bible into *patois*, or a colloquial form of Jamaican Creole, and have encountered significant resistance. The government believes a colloquial translation of the Bible will hinder their efforts to standardize reading and writing across the nation by encouraging the use of *patois*. Others consider *patois* as a dialect rather than a language and view it as too common or obscure to accurately communicate such sacred truths as those found in the Bible. A. Scott Moreau, professor of Inter-Cultural Studies at Wheaton College, points out that New Testament Greek was not the standard, official dialect, but Koine, a very common form of the language. The Bible was written in the common language of the people, very much like *patois* in Jamaica.<sup>1</sup> For this reason, it is appropriate to use a common dialect and vernacular in translation to make the Bible understandable to a sometimes-marginalized people group.

Especially as unreached people groups have grown in focus among evangelical Christians, Bible translation has become increasingly newsworthy. When translating a document as important as the Christian Bible, great care must be taken to preserve the original meanings of the words but also to ensure understanding by the target audience. In order to certify proper understanding, a translator must take the target culture into

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<sup>1</sup> Jocelyn Green, "Translation Tiff: Some Aren't Eager to See a Bible in the Country's Majority Language," *Christianity Today* 15 (Sept. 2008), not paginated.  
[http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC- Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T007&prodId=AONE&docId=A184698999&source=gale&srcprod=AONE&userGroupName=vic\\_liberty&version=1.0](http://find.galegroup.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/gtx/infomark.do?&contentSet=IAC- Documents&type=retrieve&tabID=T007&prodId=AONE&docId=A184698999&source=gale&srcprod=AONE&userGroupName=vic_liberty&version=1.0) (accessed February 5, 2011).

account and make his translation relatable in that culture. This requires thorough knowledge and implementation of cultural norms by the translator.

### **Overview and Definition of Anthropology**

The science of anthropology can be literally defined as the study of man. In a broad sense, this can refer to any realm of study ranging from the biological makeup of humans to the lifestyles of the ancient Egyptians to the habits and patterns of modern American college students. In the context of Bible translation, however, the more specific science of studying a particular culture will be emphasized.

Although linguistics and anthropology may not seem related, in this particular context they are inseparable. Language ultimately consists of culturally established and agreed upon sounds that represent concrete objects or abstract ideas. Misunderstandings arise not only from ignorance of grammar or lexicon in a language but idioms, colloquialisms, and slang that derive from a particular population and language group. Accurate understanding and culturally appropriate definitions can only be drawn from a study of the culture, its patterns, and its standardized use of sound. In this way, cultural anthropology and linguistics must be combined to arrive at culturally appropriate translations of the Bible.

### **Theology and Anthropology**

One of the chief sources of conflict between secular and Christian anthropologists is the complaint that missionaries attempt to destroy cultures by forcing conformity to biblical mandates. Contrary to this notion, Walter Goldschmidt argued in an address to the American Anthropology Association that the chief difference between secular

anthropologists and Christian missionaries was the latter's belief in original sin and the negative effects sin had on all humanity.<sup>2</sup>

The practice of ethnotheology is relatively new but has been invaluable in the debate of how to translate the Bible into a culturally appropriate form. This discipline was developed by Charles Kraft, who maintains that the Bible will always remain the starting point of finding God's message for today, but the study of a culture enables the people to come to a more accurate understanding in their daily lives.<sup>3</sup> "The Bible 'has a timeless claim on every generation and ...its message can speak directly to the men of all times provided it is set free from the historically conditioned forms in which it is clothed.'"<sup>4</sup>

Larkin cites Robertson McQuilkin who argues that the science of anthropology overlaps with the theological study of the Bible in that the former is the study of humanity and human behavior while the latter is an attempt to improve and sanctify human behavior.<sup>5</sup> Lloyd Kwast is also quoted to validate this belief. He claims that biblical truth transcends time and cultures, spanning boundaries of geography and barriers of culture. Because the Lord Almighty is likewise transcultural, the Bible is inextricably linked with the science of anthropology.<sup>6</sup>

### Cultural Anthropology

Anthropology is technically viewed by some as a secular science, so most definitions of it exclude Christian principles as well as any effort toward Bible translation

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<sup>2</sup> Robert J. Priest, "Cultural Anthropology, Sin, and the Missionary," in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F.H. Henry*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 1993), 86.

<sup>3</sup> William J. Larkin, Jr. *Culture and Biblical Hermeneutics: Interpreting and Applying the Authoritative Word in a Relativistic Age* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Books, 1988), 141.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 142.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 131.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 134.

or evangelism. Nonetheless, many of the methods employed are useful for Christian missionaries and deserve study. A typical anthropologist will live among the people he intends to study for a period of time ranging from weeks to years, conducting intensive and personal interviews and observations. Unlike practitioners in other sciences, the anthropologist avoids random samplings and surface-level interaction or experimentation.

The goal of the cultural anthropologist is to gather as much information about a people and their culture as possible so as to draw conclusions about the society as a whole. He learns about food traditions, family interactions, feasts, funerals, behaviors, and more. He strives to eliminate or at least stifle his own bias and write objectively about his observations.<sup>7</sup> A missionary, in particular a Bible translator, should study a culture with the same depth and thoroughness in order to come to a complete knowledge of patterns, expressions, and beliefs. It is only with such a comprehensive understanding of the culture that the translator may accurately communicate the Word of God.

Vanhoozer writes, “Culture is a ‘performance’ of one’s ultimate beliefs and values, a concrete way of ‘staging’ one’s religion.”<sup>8</sup> Culture, then, is an expression of the core beliefs and values of a people. It can and should be interpreted by outsiders as well as members of the group. A study of the actions of a group and their meanings is like reading the text of humanity.<sup>9</sup> Understanding this “text” of each individual culture is invaluable in providing an accurate and readable Bible translation for that particular group of people.

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<sup>7</sup> Felix M. Keesing, *Cultural Anthropology: The Science of Custom* (New York: Holt, Rinehart, and Winston, 1958), 7.

<sup>8</sup> Kevin J. Vanhoozer, “The World Well Staged? Theology, Culture, and Hermeneutics,” in *God and Culture: Essays in Honor of Carl F.H. Henry*, ed. D.A. Carson and John D. Woodbridge (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans Publishing, 1993), 2.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 7.

### Analysis of Bible Translation

As far back in history as the Greek Septuagint and Jerome's Latin *Vulgate*, debates have raged regarding the most effective method of translating the Bible. The Septuagint served as an authoritative Old Testament for those during the time of Christ, and the *Vulgate* has remained the official translation of the Catholic Church. Later, the Bible was translated into the English King James Version, which is still revered by most Protestants. All three of these translations are linguistically awkward, archaic to the contemporary reader, and contain multiple hermeneutical errors. Most Christians do not regard the biblical languages of Hebrew, Greek, or Aramaic as holy or that any translation of the Bible is unreliable. Nonetheless, there are many criteria for an accurate and understandable Bible translation, whether in English or in a yet undocumented tongue.

“Bible translation is a sublime form of Bible study. It is impossible to translate without chewing on the meaning behind the words and then struggling awkwardly to re-express those concepts in a different language.”<sup>10</sup> The Holy Spirit inspired the words of the Bible to address a specific time and culture, but its concepts and principles are universal and speak across geographical and chronological contexts. It falls to Bible translators to understand these concepts as the original authors intended them, as well as their culture and worldviews. They must spend time in the culture, learning the language, praying about the project, and trusting the guidance of the Holy Spirit. A deep understanding of the receptor culture and language is necessary to translate accurately the literal words and thoughts in Scripture, but also to understand which phrases and dialogues are idiomatic or cultural and must be reinterpreted. No language can

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<sup>10</sup> David Ker, “What I lost in the Translation,” *The Ecumenical Review* 60 (2008): 428.



adequately be understood without some knowledge of the culture in which it is at home.<sup>11</sup>

Thus a translator must have an understanding of both the biblical culture and language use, as well as those in a receptor culture.

### Cultural Context in the Bible

“Meaning derives from a social system, not lexica; and reading, to be accurate, must employ culturally appropriate scenarios from that system.”<sup>12</sup> In order to communicate this cultural meaning, some degree of interpretation is vital. Current methods are used from extremely literal to improperly free translations, with many variations between these two extremes. Literal translations, like the King James Version or the *Reina Valera* in Spanish, use the grammatical structure of the original language, which reads awkwardly in the contemporary mind. Free translations take too many liberties in interpretation and fail to communicate the original message. Equivalence or idiomatic methods of translation communicate the timeless truths of Scripture in a way that speaks to a specific language and culture.

### Classifications of Cultural Events

Typically, cultural issues encountered in Bible translation are not caused by the literal meanings of terms but by the mindsets and attitudes behind the behaviors of the receptor culture.<sup>13</sup> Eugene Nida, one of the foremost Christian anthropologists of the recent past, creates several categories of cultural scenarios in the Bible. The first category consists of “specific historical events with religious significance.” These are

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<sup>11</sup> Stephen A. Grunlan and Marvin K. Mayers, *Cultural Anthropology: A Christian Perspective* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1979), 96.

<sup>12</sup> Jerome H. Neyrey, S.J., “Lost in Translation: Did It Matter if Christians ‘Thanked’ God or ‘Gave God Glory’?” *The Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 71 (2009): 5.

<sup>13</sup> Eugene A. Nida and William D. Reyrburn, *Meaning Across Cultures* (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books, 1981), 48.

events that may be misinterpreted in other cultures but cannot be altered or contextualized because of their importance to Jewish culture and life in the Bible. For instance, Jesus' circumcision on the eighth day after his birth might seem obscene or sexual in certain cultures, but was a vital part of his Jewish background, and must be translated as such. Figurative uses of the term "circumcision," as referring to the nation of Israel, for instance, can be changed or described in the text.<sup>14</sup>

As a second category, Nida discusses "historical events and general patterns of behavior without special religious significance." For instance, the biblical Jewish culture was unique in its exclusion of lepers or menstruating women. Although this has cultural rather than religious importance, it should be maintained in a translated text. A commentary or explanation in the margin would be appropriate in these cases. Events and practices such as these are "part of the total cultural framework of the Bible."<sup>15</sup>

Nida next elaborates on "figurative or illustrative events and objects." In order to make these more easily understandable in other cultures, translators should attempt to shift from specific to generic descriptors. Instead of saying an object is "white as snow," he could simply describe it as "very, very white." Substituting similes for metaphors will also prove helpful. "Judah is a lion" could be confusing, but the statement that "Judah is *like* a lion" is much simpler to understand. When a translator makes a decision to substitute one word for another, he must use great caution to make sure the substitution will make sense in all uses and contexts throughout Scripture.<sup>16</sup>

In regard to proper names, transliterations into the receptor language are generally acceptable. Translators must be careful to avoid transliterations that sound the same or

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<sup>14</sup> Nida and Reyburn, 49-50.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, 50.

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 52-55.

very similar to actual words in the language, unless readers can be taught the differences between the transliteration and the existing word in the receptor language. Also, many Hebrew names in the Bible were chosen because they had particular meanings and significance. These should be maintained in translations as much as possible. Classifiers can also be very helpful in this process.<sup>17</sup> Willis Barnstone, in his extremely pro-Jewish translation of the New Testament, even maintained the originally Greek, Hebrew, and Aramaic names of the Bible. He consistently uses Yeshua, Shimon Kefa, Shaul, and Miryam instead of Jesus, Peter, Paul, and Mary, respectively.<sup>18</sup> Though translating the Bible as secular literature, Barnstone took great care to include as many cultural elements as possible. These details are very important in an accurate understanding of the Bible and should be included, although explained for readers with no background knowledge of the text. Barnstone writes, “This restoration does wonders to afford a truthful perception of the identity of New Testament peoples.”<sup>19</sup>

#### Universality of the Bible

“Neither the core constants nor the historical outworkings are debatable. They are the basic material of biblical revelatory activity.”<sup>20</sup> The content and message of the Bible are inerrant and should not be changed in any translation. God’s written revelation through the Bible is indeed complete, but this does not mean that the Holy Spirit no longer reveals Himself to people. He still speaks through His Word, often through a

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<sup>17</sup> Nida and Reyburn, 56-57.

<sup>18</sup> Willis Barnstone, “Why a New Translation of the New Testament?” *Tikkun* 25 (September 2010): 31-92.  
[http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/hww/jumpstart.jhtml?query=201024405007008+%3Cin%3E+an&prod=OMNIFT&fulltext=notchecked&eid=2253f7477637b906f4358cffc87d4400f022ca3a72df678c\\_201024405007008](http://vnweb.hwwilsonweb.com.ezproxy.liberty.edu:2048/hww/jumpstart.jhtml?query=201024405007008+%3Cin%3E+an&prod=OMNIFT&fulltext=notchecked&eid=2253f7477637b906f4358cffc87d4400f022ca3a72df678c_201024405007008) an (accessed February 5, 2011).

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>20</sup> Larkin, 148.

human agent to ensure that the Word has its intended impact.<sup>21</sup> The Bible can be compared to a compilation of theoretical case studies rather than a strict textbook. The behaviors or situations in the Bible should be seen as a yardstick or plumb line for the rightness of one's life, rather than a prescriptive law on how one must live.<sup>22</sup>

The Bible is fully able to communicate across cultures because all humans have the same basic physical, spiritual, and psychological needs. Though steeped in ancient Jewish culture, the Bible speaks to these needs that are shared by all humans in all times and across all cultures.<sup>23</sup> The worldview of a culture usually speaks to these needs; consequently, the meanings and values behind worldviews are surprisingly universal. Commands in the Bible known as general principles and human universals fall into this category. The commands and instructions in these passages do not require explanations or understanding of the original culture; commands such as “do not kill” or “love your neighbor” can be understood and applied by all people. Culturally specific commands, on the other hand, require a new culturally appropriate form of obedience but must still fulfill the function intended by the author. Greeting fellow believers with a holy kiss was appropriate in the New Testament church, but a hug or a handshake is much more culturally acceptable in contemporary American society.<sup>24</sup>

### **Means and Methods of Bible Translation**

The study of applied linguistics is a secular enterprise that is very objective and scientific in its methodology. Like anthropology, this secular study has many useful implications in Christian ministry. A study of some basic principles of translation and

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<sup>21</sup> Larkin, 144.

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.

<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 146.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid., 149.

linguistic concepts is invaluable in developing a relevant, accurate translation of the Holy Bible. J.I. Packer, in his analysis of various English translations of the Bible, postulates that all versions are “good in different ways, according to how each seeks to impact its targeted readership. The goal is still Luther’s and Tyndale’s goal, that ordinary people might clearly understand the Word of God.”<sup>25</sup> Although different methods target different readerships, if the textual integrity is maintained, various principles and methods can be employed successfully.

### Principles of Translation

The three basic requirements for a viable translation are normal usage of the target language so that it does not read like a translation, language that makes sense to the readers, and maintenance of the original meaning of the text without the bias of the translator. It is important to note that portions of the Bible will cause difficulties in any language and with any translation. Some confusion or lack of understanding is no reason for translators to change the meaning or attempt to insert explanations into the text.<sup>26</sup>

There are basically four classes of words in linguistics. The first class is objects, which consists of nouns and articles. Events and actions comprise the second class, and the third class is made of abstracts, or qualities and quantities of objects or events. The fourth class, relationals, are words showing the connections among the other three word classes. Events and actions can be compared to English verbs and abstracts are more similar to adjectives and adverbs.<sup>27</sup> These four classes are the simplest ideas in a text and are the most similar parts of all languages. Translators must reduce the text to these four

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<sup>25</sup> J.I. Packer, “Thank God for Our Bibles,” *Christianity Today* (1997): 30-31.

<sup>26</sup> Eugene A. Nida, *Bible Translating: An Analysis of Principles and Procedures, with Special Reference to Aboriginal Languages*, (London: United Bible Societies, 1961), 20.

<sup>27</sup> Eugene H. Glassman, *The Translation Debate: What Makes a Bible Translation Good?* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1981), 85.

classes for ease of translation and understanding with a minimum of distortion from the original message.

### **Form-Based Translation**

Form-orientation, which attempts to maintain the form of the original language, operates under the false assumption that all languages are basically alike. This method is also known as formal correspondence, a type of highly literal translation. When a document is translated into a new language, this language is called the receptor language, rather than a “target,” because there must be some kind of response from the readers, to assure understanding. Much Christian evangelism, in domestic and cross-cultural settings, fails because of a lack of true communication and understanding of the message. The Bible and its message belong to God, but language is a human construct and must be adapted along with cultural advances and shifts.<sup>28</sup>

A formal correspondence translation is exceedingly difficult for readers to decode and understand because they lack the background knowledge of the original language. “God’s Word was given to be read, understood and acted on, not just to be revered and dusted off!”<sup>29</sup> While the original message and meaning must be maintained, there is nothing sacred about a particular Bible translation, and understanding and repentance should be the emphasis of translators’ work. It is counter-productive to merely try to steep readers in Christian language. Memorizing terms with little or no understanding of their meaning or relevance accomplishes nothing. Children are frequently able to memorize poems or stanzas of a song, with no understanding of the meanings of the words they recite. This can easily happen with Christian language, as well; converts in

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<sup>28</sup> Glassman, 47.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 82.

another culture can string together memorized phrases with words like “propitiation,” “justification,” or “redemption” without having any idea of the significance of these terms or their place in the Bible.

Translators must change the shape of the message to match the receptor language structure. This is not to imply that certain languages or people groups have less mental capacity, but that they understand and store information differently. In fact, there is not now nor has there ever been evidence of “primitive” languages.<sup>30</sup> All known languages have rules and structures, so translators can always follow the understood grammatical structure of the receptor language. This reshaping of the message can be accomplished by eliminating cultural terms, like *denarius* and *centurion*, for example. These should be substituted for equivalent words in the receptor language. The translator should consider the language capacity of the receptor language in all his work.<sup>31</sup>

#### Arguments for a literal translation

Leland Ryken makes multiple arguments for an essentially literal Bible translation. One such argument is that dynamic-equivalence methods remove the Bible from its historical context. In doing this, Ryken argues, the Bible loses its accuracy and its authority.<sup>32</sup> There is certainly a risk of this any time words are translated from one time and language into another. However, the goal of dynamic-equivalence translation is to communicate the context and meaning of the Bible in an understandable way. This includes making the historical background clear as well as cultural circumstances.

Implicit information must be understood in the receptor language without altering the

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<sup>30</sup> Grunlan and Mayers, 95.

<sup>31</sup> Glassman, 82.

<sup>32</sup> Leland Ryken, *Understanding English Bible Translation: The Case for an Essentially Literal Approach* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 2009), 82.

circumstances under which the Bible was originally penned. Such implicit information would include cultural practices understood to original readers or idiomatic expressions lost on modern speakers. For instance, Jesus washed His disciples' feet in John 13. Unless it was explained, many readers would miss the significance of a rabbi performing the menial service task of removing dirt and grime from the feet of his students.

Willis Barnstone, a literature professor at Indiana University, recently translated the New Testament into English as a piece of literature. While his methods and motives were far from early Christian translators, many of his observations warrant attention. He contends that many cultural aspects of the New Testament are masked, even in very literal translations like the King James Version.<sup>33</sup> For instance, the Greek word for *rabbi* is frequently translated as "Master" or "Lord." This seems to disguise Jesus' true identity as a Jewish teacher, though He was certainly much more than that. It is important, however, that readers understand Jesus' lineage and religion to grasp fully the importance of His work.

Eugene Nida, one of the pioneers of Bible translation methods and a respected anthropologist, describes various principles and methods for translating the Holy Bible. The three basic ways of looking at a text result in literal translations, translating the general ideas of the text, or deriving the general equivalents of an author's meaning. Nida calls literal translation "discouraging and practically useless."<sup>34</sup> Substituting each word for its direct equivalent in another language results in awkward sentence structures, lack of grammatical stability, and clouded meanings. This method is also called concordant translating.

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<sup>33</sup> Barnstone.

<sup>34</sup> Nida, 11.



Aviya Kushner is a Jewish-American journalist who spoke Hebrew in her home as a child. She has always studied the Torah in the original Hebrew, but decided to read the English Old Testament as research for a new project. She chose to read from the highly literal King James Version. She remarks that she was frequently confused and frustrated by this version, as it omitted vital lexical markers and grammatical structures that enhance the meaning in the Hebrew language. She gives the example of the name “Adam,” taken from *adama* in Hebrew. This word means “earth,” and Kushner argues that substituting an English transliteration for Adam’s name somehow compromises the understanding of mankind’s roots in the earth.<sup>35</sup> English names are often chosen for their sounds rather than the meanings behind the word, so this causes some loss of understanding, especially from a language as symbolic as Hebrew.

Using obligatory grammar

Another method of literal translation uses the obligatory grammar of the receptor language while maintaining as many linguistic features of the original language as possible. This communicates very unnaturally in the receptor language. A literal word-for-word translation generally has incorrect word usage and ambiguities. Idioms, for instance, are translated literally which leads to great confusion and an incorrect understanding of the text. The modified literal translation can be effective in historically literate cultures. This is often produced as a result of a highly literal translation that has just been modified and edited in a few cases.

One of the identifying marks of a literal or modified literal method of translation is the use of only obligatory features of the receptor language. These are grammatical structures or forms that must be used in a language for it to make sense. These include

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<sup>35</sup> Aviya Kushner, “McCulture,” *The Wilson Quarterly* (2009): 25.

the order of words, agreement in gender and number of nouns, acceptability of active and passive verbs, the use of double negatives, the necessity of possessive identifiers, connector words, transitions, and anthropomorphisms (like loving with the heart instead of with the liver or the throat).<sup>36</sup> In Spanish, most nouns require an indefinite article that signifies the gender and number of the noun. A literal translation would include this, but would otherwise follow as closely as possible the Greek or Hebrew manuscript, making minimal adjustments for cultural usage of terms.

### **Paraphrastic Translation**

Nida also discusses translating the author's basic idea, or the essence of his words. This method allows far too much room for a translator's personal interpretation of the text. The translator has the liberty to decide what words or phrases he thinks best fit the author's intended meaning.

It is inaccurate for a translator to extract what he finds to be the "clear meaning" of the text. No matter how straightforward a passage may seem, the so-called "clear meaning" is influenced by the translator's personal cultural context and experience.<sup>37</sup>

The other extreme in translation methods is unduly free. This method puts forth too much effort to achieve clarity and relevance in the receptor language. This is caused by extraneous information, a substitution of facts, proper nouns, and personal commentary by the translator. For instance, *The Message* makes such an effort to paraphrase the Bible in modern English that several words are added in most verses to clarify a meaning, rather than just searching for the closest equivalent from the original

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<sup>36</sup> Glassman, 87-91.

<sup>37</sup> Larkin, 145.

language. Paraphrased versions can be a helpful study tools for many readers, but is not necessarily an accurate method of Bible translation.

### **Content-Based Translation**

The translation of the closest equivalent was “designed to avoid awkward literalness on the one hand and unjustified interpretations on the other.”<sup>38</sup> This method translates the word in the original language with its natural equivalent, which allows for the use of local idiomatic expressions, common vernacular, and contemporary speech in the target language. This type of translation is best accomplished by a bilingual individual—a person who is an accepted and native member of the original and target language and culture groups.

Nida’s principle of closest equivalent, also called the “dynamic equivalency method,” was aptly defined as, “a rendering of a passage so that the same or an equivalent effect is produced in the heart and mind of the reader in the second language as was produced in the heart and mind of the reader in the original language.”<sup>39</sup> He points out that “it is important to realize, however, that a D-E [dynamic equivalence] translation is not merely another message which is more or less similar to that of the source. It is a translation, and as such must clearly reflect the meaning and intent of the source.”<sup>40</sup> When translators seek to preserve the meaning of a text, they must take care to maintain any historical and didactic information contained therein.<sup>41</sup> It is certainly important and commendable to make the text understandable in the receptor language,

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<sup>38</sup> Nida, 12.

<sup>39</sup> Grunlan and Mayers, 109.

<sup>40</sup> Thomas Headland, “Anthropology and Bible Translation,” *Missiology: An International Review* (1974), 413.

<sup>41</sup> Larkin, 168.

but preservation of the original meaning and principle must be a higher priority than ease of understanding to the readers.<sup>42</sup>

In order to accomplish a clear translation based on the content of a text, a translator should reduce the text in the original language to its simplest, most clear form and transfer this message into the receptor language. This method is very similar to the dynamic-equivalence method of translation. This method “assumes that the original message was natural and meaningful and that the grammatical structure and words used were not discouragingly difficult but that people used them in their everyday lives.”<sup>43</sup> Grammatical analysis of both the original and receptor languages will aid translators in necessary use of ambiguous or redundant terms like *his* or *of*, which are used more commonly or more freely in some languages than in others. For instance, in Spanish subject pronouns are optional in most cases. In English, these pronouns must accompany any verb. Grammatical analysis alerts translators to necessary and superfluous uses of these kinds of words.

#### Using functional equivalents

The use of functional equivalents has become much more prominent and academic in recent years. Certainly there are many principles and aspects of Scripture that must be translated exactly as they were written in the original, but there are also certain terms and expressions that will only make sense when contextualized. When translators encounter expressions or idioms used in biblical Jewish culture, like the expression “white as snow,” they may not make sense in all cultures. Many cultures have no concept of snow, and another phrase can be substituted. One translator uses “white as

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 169.

<sup>43</sup> Glassman, 52.

yucca,” a root vegetable that is snow-white on the inside.<sup>44</sup> Idioms like “white as feathers” can be used, but only when they are already commonly in use among the people. Otherwise, a phrase like “very, very white” communicates the same idea.<sup>45</sup> Similar situations arise with expressions like, “under his roof” or “at the third hour.” In many English translations, a footnote is given which explains that the “third hour” is around nine o’clock in the morning. Some cultures, however, really do not use standard time conventions, so “early in the morning” or “at sunrise” would communicate a similar idea.

Building redundancy is another important principle of content-based Bible translation. The readers of the original text understood subtle or implicit cultural information that must be explicitly stated for readers in a different cultural setting. For instance, many people have never heard of Bethlehem or the Jordan, and translators must state that these are cities and rivers, respectively. The “Holy City” could be understood as the seat of the local shaman, so a translator must explain that this is Jerusalem, the holy city of biblical Jews.

Similarly, there are different types of meanings in words that must be understood for effective translation. Referential meaning is the content of a text, which refers to a particular object or event. Organizational meaning consists of the combinations of various referential expressions. This builds the grammatical structure or coherent text. The situational meaning depends on the people involved in the communication, their

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<sup>44</sup> Wendy Murray Zoba, “Your Sins Shall Be White as Yucca,” *Christianity Today* 41(1997), not paginated. <http://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/1997/october27/7tc18a.html> (accesses February 5, 2011).

<sup>45</sup> Glassman, 76.

social status, biases, or common knowledge. This type of meaning may need to be explained or included in a translated text.<sup>46</sup>

Implicit and explicit knowledge are important in understanding a text as well. Implicit knowledge can be described as common knowledge or information shared throughout a culture. It can also be information that is implicit through the structure of the language, like understood pronouns, or it might have been explained in the larger context of the passage. This information must be made explicit and included in the translation, because the original author intended the readers to understand these ideas. Without including them explicitly, the implicit meanings will be lost in the receptor language.<sup>47</sup> Larson gives the following example: “Newscasters in the United States will make statements like, ‘*The Reagan tax bill passed in the Senate today.*’ If the announcer said, ‘*The tax bill proposed by the President of the United States, Ronald Reagan, was passed in the Senate of the United States today,*’”<sup>48</sup> listeners would soon become frustrated. Most modern Americans will understand the first statement. The additional explanations of the second statement are redundant. However, if this particular news broadcast were translated for those in another time or culture, these explanations would be helpful and perhaps necessary. This is what is meant by implicit information.

In many cases, the proverbial pendulum swung too far and a move to strict literalism in translation eliminated the practice of hermeneutical interpretation of the text. Because of this, it is both useful and necessary to allow the Bible to interpret itself. This method eliminates the confines of a language and gives the Bible its due authority over

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<sup>46</sup> Mildred L. Larson, *Meaning-Based Translation: A Guide to Cross-Language Equivalence*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, 1998), 41-43.

<sup>47</sup> Larson, 43.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

all areas of a culture.<sup>49</sup> The Bible provides the content and meaning of the text, and the receptor culture provides the form in which this message is communicated.

#### Idiomatic translations

John Beekman and John Callow have written a monumental work on different methods of translation, emphasizing a method known as “idiomatic.” Before beginning this study, they discuss various less effective methods of translation. A literal translation follows the form of the original language, while an idiomatic translation uses the grammatical form of the receptor language. A highly literal translation follows as precisely as possible the grammatical structure of the original language. This is very difficult to read and does not communicate the message well. An interlinear translation is a literal form, which is the closest possible to the original text while still being classified as a translation. This method does not incorporate any of the grammatical structure of the receptor language but is translated word-for-word from the original language.

According to Beekman and Callow, and many other linguists, the most effective and easily understandable method of translation is the idiomatic method. This method communicates the same meaning as the original language by using the grammar and lexicon of the receptor language. “To translate a sentence from one language to another is somehow to discover its meaning and then to construct a sentence in the new or target language that possesses the same meaning.”<sup>50</sup>

#### Misconceptions about Translation Methods

Language and expressions indeed change, but the holy principles of the Bible remain constant. These should be expressed in ways that make sense and are

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<sup>49</sup> Larkin, 172 -73.

<sup>50</sup> John Beekman and John Callow, *Translating the Word of God* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1974), 24.

comprehensible to every generation. Some believe, however, that an authorized or long-standing translation has more merit and integrity simply because of its longevity. One author claims, “The knowledge that our fathers and forefathers have said the same words as our own, memories of having learned these words in early childhood, these and more sentimental feelings are reasons for esteeming the official version of the Bible and the prayers, even if the archaic language causes single words or complete passages to be no longer fully understood.”<sup>51</sup> It seems to make sense that Jesus’ humanity was in vain if He did not want to be understood by mankind. A Bible that is “no longer fully understandable” seems to contradict the incarnation of Christ.

Many theologians and pastors are rather adamant about using only literal translations of the Bible. Some authors even claim that an idiomatic or dynamic equivalence translation shows that these translators view the Bible as a modern book, rather than an ancient one.<sup>52</sup> Introductions and notes in translations such as the Message, New Living Translation, and New Century Version show that the language used is primarily modernized and colloquial. This does not show a mistrust of the ancient words of the Bible or a belief in religious relevance. The Bible was inspired by God to draw people to salvation. The words written were for a specific target audience in a particular time and culture. The principles and commands in Scripture are universal, but the Holy Spirit spoke in a meaningful way to those particular people. In a new time and culture, He wants to communicate the same thoughts but in ways that are equally relevant to a modern time and culture.

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<sup>51</sup> W. Schwarz, *Principles and Problems of Biblical Translation: Some Reformation Controversies and their Background* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1955), 4.

<sup>52</sup> Ryken, 81.



John D. Wilson was instrumental in translating the Bible into the Yali language of Irian Jaya. His involvement in the project began in 1974, after some amount of work had already been completed. Upon reading the translation in progress, Wilson noticed that the remote past tense was consistently used, indicating that the authors belonged to a different generation than the events they described. Since most of the New Testament authors were eyewitnesses to the works of Christ, Wilson made sure these verbs were changed into a normal past tense, showing the close relationship between the original authors and the events. Wilson and his colleagues certainly saw the Bible as an ancient book written in a different time, yet he still took great effort to make the words understandable to the Yali. He says, “This important feature of the language...was crucial to a translation method which aimed to use the Yali idiom and to be dynamically meaningful to the readers and listeners.”<sup>53</sup>

Unlike the dynamic-equivalence translation employed by Wilson, a poor translation of the text can make the reader feel as though the book is foreign or irrelevant to him. Especially when translating a life-changing book like the Bible, this should be avoided as much as possible. Reading *The Canterbury Tales* in its original middle English provides a good example. Few literature students will truly relate to the text or take life lessons from it. It is written in a language in which they are fluent, but in archaic terms and vocabulary foreign to them. Most students will soon abandon this pursuit in favor of a text they enjoy and understand reading. The goal of translators should be to make the Bible understandable, rather than antiquated and removed from the culture of the readers.

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<sup>53</sup> John D. Wilson, “Scripture in an Oral Culture: The Yali of Irian Jaya” (PhD diss., University of Edinburgh, 1988), 76-77.

One common mistake made by translators is assuming the lexical structures of two languages are compatible. The lexica of two languages can be just as different as the grammatical or syntactical structures. For instance, many landlocked cultures have no concept or words for fishing and boating. It is incorrect to assume that an accurate and understandable translation can be achieved by merely matching words in the original and receptor languages. Translators must be aware of “different semantic perspectives,” as Beekman and Callow call them. Semantic perspectives can be defined as the various meanings hidden within a single word and the interrelationships between words. Furthermore, ideas can be expressed literally or figuratively, positively or negatively, synonymously, and reciprocally. The translator must have an understanding of these different perspectives as well as the meaning intended in the original language in order to arrive at a proper idiomatic translation of the Bible.<sup>54</sup>

David Ker, a Bible translator in Mozambique, writes of his experiences, “After losing my confidence in the meaning of any particular phrase of scripture it began to dawn on me that the function of these individual phrases was to be understood in a wider context or genre...If I lost a fundamental rigidity in my interpretation of Holy Scripture through the process of becoming a Bible translator, I gained an unexpected respect for the power of the gospel.”<sup>55</sup>

Dr. Thomas Headland, a linguistic and anthropological consultant with the Wycliffe Bible Translators, emphasizes a focus on the response from the receptor language rather than the exact message from the source language. A proper translation of the Bible should not sound foreign or awkward, but neither should it stray from the

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<sup>54</sup> Beekman and Callow, 175-91.

<sup>55</sup> Ker, 429-30.

historical and theological foundations of the Bible in its original languages. This is best accomplished by using the receptor language ethnolinguistic structure, not that of the Greek-Jewish context in the Bible.<sup>56</sup> Dr. Headland gives the following example: “The sentence, ‘The *feet* of them which have buried thy husband are at the door’ (a type of synecdoche), must be translated, usually, as ‘The *men* that buried your husband...’”<sup>57</sup>

### **Comparison of English Translations**

Beginning with John Wycliffe’s translation in the late fourteenth century and William Tyndale’s in 1526<sup>58</sup>, the Bible has been available in English. Over such a length of time and with various nations and cultures using English, numerous translations have been made. Beginning with the King James Version in 1611, translations have ranged from highly literal to paraphrased and even unduly free. A superficial overview of these various translations will aid in an understanding of various methods of Bible translation.

Though they do not directly affect translations into new languages, a study of previous Bible translations gives valuable perspectives into the most operative translation methods. For instance, the Septuagint is the Greek translation of the Old Testament, completed around 200 BC. Jews around the world began to realize the importance of understanding their Scriptures, especially when fluency in biblical Hebrew was becoming less common in the Greek world. Around the tenth century AD, the Jewish populations in the Middle East spoke Arabic better than they spoke Aramaic or Hebrew. A Jew by the name of Saadia Gaon translated the Old Testament into Arabic. His goal was intelligibility, so the translation produced was neither a paraphrase nor highly literal. He took the liberty to add descriptors or explain a text so as to make it completely

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<sup>56</sup> Headland, 418.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

<sup>58</sup> Barnstone.

understandable to Arabic-speaking Jews.<sup>59</sup> Even preceding the practice of anthropology or the debate about translation methods, translators sought to make the Bible understandable to readers removed from the Old or New Testament cultures.

Philip W. Comfort has compiled a commentary on the New Testament including its various translations and how these compare to English translations of the Bible. In this work, he analyzes most of the significant English translations based on their adherence to the original meaning, their coherence to English-speaking readers, and the manuscript on which they were based. He credits the translators of the 1611 King James Version (KJV) with accomplishing an admirable work considering the limited resources available to them. Nonetheless, better translations have been accomplished more recently that are more accurate and make use of more numerable resources. The New King James Version, published in 1982, uses revised and more modern English, but it maintains the “textual decisions” of the KJV, which means any errors or misunderstandings remain in the revised version.<sup>60</sup> Comfort argues that the 1901 American Standard Version “is the best English translation reflecting the Greek text produced by the end of the nineteenth century.”<sup>61</sup> The 1952 Revised Standard Version, as evidenced by its name, is a revised version of the ASV. Parts of the text were reworked for a more idiomatic reading and edited in light of the discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls and the Chester Beatty Papyri.

The New American Standard Bible (NASB) is generally revered as a helpful and faithful study Bible. Comfort argues, however, that the NASB is quite lacking in terms

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<sup>59</sup> Harry M. Orlinsky, *Essays in Biblical Culture and Bible Translation* (New York: Ktav Publishing House, 1974), 351.

<sup>60</sup> Philip W. Comfort, *New Testament Text and Translation Commentary: Commentary on the variant readings of the ancient New Testament manuscripts and how they relate to the major English translations* (Carol Stream, IL: Tyndale House Publishers, 2008), xxvii.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*

of textual fidelity. The New International Version (NIV), one of the most popular among modern English readers, is easily understood and follows the meaning and text of early Greek versions of the text. The New Living Translation (NLT) uses more colloquially English and is in fact a revision of the Living Bible, a paraphrase. Nonetheless, the NLT uses Greek manuscripts as its base and closely follows the original text.<sup>62</sup>

These English translations of the Bible can be classified from highly literal to nearly paraphrastic. Those translations that use the idiomatic or dynamic-equivalence method are more popular among most English readers because they make sense and apply to contemporary culture. The English used in these translations is also that utilized in common speech and is therefore more relevant.

### **Conclusion**

Bible translation is a work that is equal parts science and art. The sciences of anthropology and applied linguistics dictate the observation and study of a culture and a language in order to understand grammar, syntax, lexicon, and behavior. The art of translation must be utilized in communicating principles from one language and culture into another setting entirely.

The scientific, objective aspect of translation is widely accepted by scholars and translators alike. This is a very specific method of determining the meanings of words, the grammar of a language, and the process of substituting the two from the original language into a receptor language. The art of translation, however, remains a topic very much subject to debate. The debate mostly centers on the superiority of literal or dynamic translations.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., xxvii-xxix.

When the science of anthropology is combined with the empirical study of language, it becomes obvious that an idiomatic or dynamic-equivalence method of translation is the most effective. The Word of God communicates to individual people, and this should be in a way that is understandable in their time and culture. A literal translation maintains the grammatical structure and language use of the original language, which is decidedly incompatible with a new culture. An idiomatic translation strictly adheres to the principles and commands of Scripture as well as those cultural and historical events that affect spiritual things. Expressions and comparisons that cannot be understood or explained, however, are expressed in local vernacular.

The work of Bible translation is vital to Christians invested in obeying the Great Commission. This work should not be taken lightly, however. The various methods, principles, and misunderstandings about translation should be studied and analyzed in order to produce translations of the Bible that are understandable and faithful to the original texts.

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