

BIBLE TRANSLATION AS A NON-NEUTRAL ACTIVITY

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MOST CHILDREN EXPERIMENT WITH SECRET CODES WHICH REPLACE EACH LETTER OF THE ALPHABET WITH ANOTHER. If you know the code then you know exactly what each letter stands for and can easily translate the secret message. Sometimes those whose knowledge of other languages is limited to the use of phrase books (or perhaps even interlinear versions of the Bible) assume that translation from one language to another works the same way. One word is mapped onto another so that as long as you have the code book which explains the mapping then you can provide an exact translation. Anyone who has battled with learning any language knows that that is not how it works! There are different grammatical structures, words which have several meanings, metaphors, idioms and other linguistic imagery that just do not make sense in another culture. These all add to the difficulties involved in dealing with material written in another language. Virtually everything that can be said in one language can also be said in another, but it cannot necessarily be said in the same way. The translator is thus faced with two separate tasks. First, it is necessary to understand fully the meaning of what the original writer actually said and, secondly, to work out how this meaning can best be expressed in a different language. That is, the passage has to be interpreted before it can be reproduced. In both of these tasks any translator is inevitably influenced by their own background, culture and understanding. Both their interpretation of the passage and the choices they make concerning the words and structures used in the translation will depend on their own pre-understanding.

In biblical translation, the translators are not only influenced by their cultural presuppositions. Sometimes, a prior theological understanding will also affect the choices made. An example of this is can be found in Romans 3.25 where the word *hilasterion* is used. Like the Hebrew *kippur*, *hilasterion* can involve elements of expiation and propitiation. Which word should the translator use? The KJV and JB Philips's translation both use propitiation, whereas the RSV prefers expiation. At one stage, the choice of word used was seen as a measure of how the translator understood the work of Christ. Modern translations like the NIV and the NRSV get round that particular dilemma by using the phrase, "sacrifice of atonement", which includes both elements.

Another example of theology affecting translation is seen in Genesis 2.2, where most translations tell us that God finished his work, "on the seventh day" (e.g. KJV,

RSV, JB, NEB, NRSV), whereas the NIV, presumably in an attempt to assure readers that the Sabbath really was to be a day of rest, reads, "By the seventh day God had finished the work he had been doing".

However, some of the clearest examples of how translation is non-neutral can be found where issues relating to gender come into play. The illustrations I will use come from the New Testament but many similar instances can be found in the Old Testament.

On a number of occasions Paul uses the word *kephalē*, which literally means "head", in a metaphorical way. Sometimes he uses it to imply priority or supremacy (e.g. Col 1.18; 2.10 and, possibly, Eph 1.10,22), sometimes as the origin of life – the one from whom life flows out and who supports the whole body (Col 2.19) – and sometimes as the one into whom all life flows as the head of a flower is energised by the rest of the plant (Eph 4.15). On other occasions, it is more closely related to the human head, as in Romans 12.20, where it represents the whole person, or 1 Corinthians 12.21, where it is one of many different but equally valuable or useful body parts. On two occasions (1 Cor 11.3ff.; Eph 5.23), Paul speaks of the husband as the head of the wife. In the ancient world, the term "head" was often used metaphorically in a variety of ways, but there is no known instance before Paul of it being used in this particular context, i.e. to describe the relationship between men and women. Therefore, the translator has to make decisions about how it is to be interpreted, unless it is decided to simply repeat the metaphor as it stands.

There is a further complication. In Greek *gynē* can mean either woman or wife, and *anēr* can mean either man or husband. In Ephesians, it is explicit that Paul is talking about the marriage relationship and the translations all use the terms "husband" and "wife". In 1 Corinthians 11 it is not so explicit. This is reflected within the various translations. The AV has, "the head of the woman is the man"; the NIV, "the head of the woman is man"; and the JB, "man is the head of woman". None of these translations have footnotes for these references. The NEB, on the other hand, reads, "woman's head is man", but footnotes the alternative. The GNB, RSV and the NRSV all translate *anēr* and *gynē* as "husband" and "wife", with the latter, but not the former, footnoting the alternative rendering.

One of the reasons for these choices seems to be whether or not the translator can accept that Paul can be saying that every woman is somehow in a subsidiary

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NOTES

1 All of the references are from the RSV, but are representative of all earlier translations.

► relationship of some kind to every man. But, of course, this involves the further assumption that Paul is using the headship metaphor in that way. Most of the translators here simply retain the metaphor and partially sidestep the particular problem of what headship might mean.

The GNB translators, on the other hand, have no doubts. 1 Corinthians 11.3 is translated, “the husband is supreme over his wife”, and Ephesians 5.23 as, “a husband has authority over his wife”. The possibility of any other understanding of headship is removed. Further presuppositions relating to the relationship between men and women are apparent in the translations of both 1 Corinthians 11 and Ephesians 5.

In 1 Corinthians 11.10 we read that a woman ought to have authority, *exousia*, on her head. The grammatical construction means that this authority must be that of the woman herself. However, some translators clearly find this concept difficult to accept. The RSV assumes that what must be meant is a veil and omits the word authority from the text, although it is footnoted. The GNB apparently ignores the grammar and tells us that the woman, “should have a covering ... to show that she is under her husband’s authority”. The translators again seem to have begun from a particular understanding of the relationship between a husband and wife and produced the translation in the light of that.

Ephesians 5.21 calls all Christians to be subject or to submit to each other. Verse 22 has no verb of its own but introduces a particular instance of the submission called for in verse 21. However, the NIV, perhaps wanting to avoid the implication that a husband is to submit to his wife, makes it appear that verse 22 starts a separate section. Verse 23 goes on to say that the wife is to be subject to her husband because he is her head. In this particular passage, Christ’s headship of the Church, which stands as a parallel to the husband’s headship of the wife, is elucidated in terms of his self-giving. It is possible to assume that the husband’s headship of the wife also in this instance relates to his giving up his rights on her behalf, i.e. his headship is part of their mutual submission. This makes sense of the *alla* (“but”) at the beginning of verse 24. As her head, he is to give himself up for her *but* she is to submit to him, i.e. she is not to take advantage of this privilege. However, if translators are taking it for granted, as the GNB does explicitly, that a husband’s headship means his having authority over his wife, then the “but” introducing verse 24 does not make sense. Thus, the GNB begins verse 24

with “and so”, the KJV with “therefore”, the JB with “and”, and the NIV with “now”. The RSV and NRSV omit the word altogether. Only the NEB records the “but”.

1 Timothy 3.8–12 lists the qualifications for deacons. In this context, verse 11 speaks of *gynaikeios hōsautōs* (“women likewise”). One of the arguments used for translating *gymē* as woman rather than wife in 1 Corinthians 11.3 is that there is no possessive pronoun. It is interesting therefore that here, where there is also no possessive pronoun, the NIV, NEB and GNB all take it for granted that it is deacons’ wives, rather than women deacons, that are being referred to. It is impossible to avoid the implication that the translation is influenced by whether or not the translators accept the possibility of women deacons.

Similar situations arise in Romans 16. In verse 1, Phoebe is described as a *diakonos* of the church at Cenchrea. *Diakonos* can mean servant but it is, in fact, a masculine word not normally applied to women servants. Nevertheless, the NIV, KJV and GNB all refer to her as a “servant”, whereas the JB and RSV both use “deaconess”, the NRSV uses “deacon” and the NEB speaks of her as “one who holds office”.

In verse 7, two of the Christians are described as notable apostles, or of note amongst the apostles. These are referred to in the accusative case as *Andronikon* and *Iounian*. The first, Andronicus, is clearly a man. The second name could theoretically be either male or female. Junia was a common female name. Junias was a possible short form of a longer male name, but there is not one record of this particular short form ever existing. The evidence seems clear and Chrysostom, writing in the fourth century, had no doubts that Junia was a female apostle. Therefore, the only reason to translate the name as male is a presupposition that a female could not be described as an apostle. However, although the KJV, NRSV and GNB do use Junia, the NIV, RSV, JB and NEB all prefer Junias.

Issues of inclusive language provide a slightly different illustration of the non-neutrality of translation. Spoken languages are fluid rather than static. Meaning changes over time. There is no doubt that for earlier generations the word “man” was in English capable of being used in a generic way to refer to the human race in general. The word male, like the Greek *anēr*, can refer only to the male gender. However, the word man, like the Greek *anthropōs*, could refer to humanity in general, or to a group of both males and females, as well as to a group

of males. It would always have been possible to use an alternative, non-ambiguous word when it was clear that all people, not only males, were meant. But, also, it would not and did not enter the heads of earlier translators that they might do so. Hence, James 5.16: “The power of a righteous man has great power in its effects”; 2 Timothy 2.2: “What you have heard from me before many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also”; and, 2 Timothy 3.16–17: “All Scripture is inspired . . . and profitable . . . that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.”¹ In each of these cases, Paul chose to use *anthropōs*. The English translation did theoretically allow for generic interpretation and it is likely that the translators intended it to do so. However, readers also come with a particular worldview. Even before changes in common usage made the generic understanding of “man” virtually impossible, at least for those born after 1960, it is clear that these verses, and others like them, were often understood as if they represented *anēr* and not *anthropōs*. The use of “man” in a generic sense is deliberately avoided in modern versions in an attempt to preclude such misunderstandings. In this instance, the non-neutrality of the translations has been recognised and corrected. The ongoing task is to recognise and correct other such cases. ■