Bible translation in a changing world

After a brief survey of the history of translation, Jon Riding considers three key developments in recent decades that have radically transformed the task of translating the Bible. He also reflects on what the future holds for Bible translation.

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The first great impetus to translate Scripture in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries went hand in hand with the (largely) Protestant outpouring of missionaries into the rapidly expanding colonial and commercial empires of first the Western European nations and, latterly, America. Men and women answered the call to mission to bring the gospel to these new territories and peoples. Hand in hand with the work of mission went the work of translation. A model for translation work was soon established which closely mirrored that of primary mission. Individuals who felt called by God to the work of translation committed their lives, often sacrificially, to the task of making God known through the Scriptures in the languages of this expanding mission field. The impetus for the work was, therefore, often external to the intended audience. Whilst there is no question that much good work was done and the translations were warmly welcomed by the early mission churches, it is also true to say that many of the expectations of the parent churches in Europe and America were translated into these new Christian communities together with the Scriptures.

After the Second World War the world was left reeling from the effects of near global conflict. This was a moment when the dependency of nations upon one another and the need for peoples to cooperate with one another were keenly felt. Just as the geopolitical reality of the time led to the formation of the United Nations, similar imperatives brought together the major players in Bible translation, the British & Foreign Bible Society, Scottish Bible Society, the American Bible Society and other Western European societies, such as the

Dutch, German and Scandinavian societies. What had previously been nationally driven programmes for the translation, publication and distribution of Scripture[1] now became a global programme within which all these societies sought to cooperate in a shared task as members of the fellowship of Bible Societies which is the United Bible Societies (UBS). The history of the following 60 years would take too much space to cover in detail but during this period there have been a number of developments in Bible translation which have already radically transformed the task and will continue to do so into the future.

The local approach

In more recent times, and encouraged by the UBS, there has been a significant change in the model for translation work. Whilst there is still a place for the expatriate missionary translator, in many cases the impetus for a translation now comes from within the target audience. The Church is now well established in many places which 100 years ago were primary mission fields and as these local Christian communities now begin to seek a Bible in their mother tongue it is no longer the case that this dream must await the arrival of European or North American translator. Representatives of the local community, typically ministers and scholars, are now able to take on the translation task, drawing on the support offered by the UBS. This is a very significant development. Sadly, despite all the hard work and commitment of the early missionary translators, it is sometimes the case that earlier translations are regarded as obscure and clumsy, even occasionally unintelligible,

Notes

1. For an analysis of the motives of translation in a colonial context see H Sharkey, 'Sudanese Arabic Bibles and the Politics of Translation', *The Bible Translator* 62.1 (2011), pp. 37–45.

2. Good News Bible British & Foreign Bible Society, 1976. The Good News Bible remains an outstanding example of functional equivalence translation in action. Avoiding the use of inaccessible theological language, it has remained a best-seller in the UK since its introduction.

3. An excellent review of the strengths and weaknesses of both 'literal' and functionally equivalent translation can be found in M Strauss, '"Literal Meaning" Fallacy in English Bible Translation', *The Bible Translator*, 56.3 (2005), pp. 153–68.

4. If this still feels a little *avant garde* see WE Vine's *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (London, 1940), pp. 298ff., which offers the following gloss for *dikaiosynē*, 'whatever conforms to the revealed will of God'.

5. All of the examples above are drawn from JD de Waard and EA Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986) in which Nida and de Waard explain the theory of functional (dynamic) equivalence and relate it particularly to Bible translation. For an alternative perspective see I Robinson, *Who Killed the Bible?* (Bishopstone: Edgeways, 2006).

6. The Institute for Computer Assisted Publishing is a collaboration between UBS, some national

by their intended audience. This is in part due to the reality that language is always a moving target. Just as English usage has developed since the 1950s so other languages have developed and adapted in a world in which the pace of change is accelerating. Nevertheless, it is now generally accepted that a translation for a group prepared by mother-tongue speakers of their language is likely to speak more clearly to its readers and hearers than one prepared by translators whose cultural and linguistic roots are outside the community.

Linguistic and cultural differences are not the only potential limitations on the expectations for Bible translations. Hand in hand with the growth of indigenous translation teams has come an increasing recognition that Scripture can and should transcend denominational boundaries. No one denomination owns the Bible. Much of the earlier work of translation was driven by the protestant churches but the growth of community driven translation has ensured that the vast majority of translation projects today are inter-confessional with each of the principle denominations in the community represented on the translation team. This is a most welcome development despite the inevitable tensions that it can bring. Not least among these tensions is the question of canon. To the Western Protestant the question of the canon of Scripture rarely arises despite the fact that some communions, such as the Anglican and Lutheran, recognise a set of apocryphal books in addition to the principal canon of Scripture. For the majority of their church members this canon is limited to the 66 books found in traditional Protestant Bibles. The moment a member of one of the other major Christian confessions joins a translation team the question of canon must be addressed. For example, a project in some parts of East Africa may well need to include the books of Jubilees, Enoch and 1–3 Maqabyan which are considered canonical by the Ethiopian Orthodox Church. Translation projects in some parts of Eastern Europe, the Balkans or parts of the sphere of Russian influence may well require that the base text for their Old Testament be the Greek Septuagint rather than the Masoretic Hebrew text, others still where there is a strong Syriac Christian tradition may prefer the text base to be the Syriac Peshitta. Whatever the needs of a particular project, the position of the Bible Societies is simply to serve the Church as a whole.

Functional (dynamic) equivalence

Probably the most significant development during the last 60 years has been the development of new models for translation. Not only has the model for a translation project changed, many of what seemed fundamental principles for translators have been questioned and new ways of approaching the translation task have been developed. The work of Eugene Nida during this period has hugely enriched the work of translators. Nida's development of 'functional equivalence' in translation has been challenging for both Bible translators in

particular and the Church in general. Often dismissed (erroneously) as 'paraphrase', functional equivalence translation is now the norm for most Bible translation work. When the first UK English Bible[2] based upon functional equivalence principles appeared in the 1970s there was much discussion about 'dumbing down', 'paraphrasing Scripture' and the fact that some vocabulary present in more traditional English Bibles had been replaced by words and phrases which were more generally accessible to modern-day English speakers. This is a fundamental principle of functional equivalence which seeks not to translate literally or word for word but to find ways of expressing the meaning of the original text which are equivalent to that meaning within the culture and language of the target audience.[3]

Functional equivalence in translation is inevitably highly contextual. The experiences and expectations of the target culture and language often offer the possibility of translations which can seem strange to a reader or hearer from a different culture. For example, the attempt to translate using functional equivalence the English phrase 'do not lead a bad person into temptation' into the South African Tsonga language may well result in something like 'don't throw a mouse into a granary of monkey-nuts'. The complaint of the writer of Judges that 'everyone did what was right in his own eyes' can be expressed in Ndoga by the proverb 'everyone was a lone-grazing goat'. Idioms familiar to English readers such as 'beating the breast' if translated literally can in some languages, such as Batswana, express self-assurance and aggressiveness — the equivalent expression in Batswana is 'to take hold of the beard'. In the oriental world the general Western perception of a dragon as violent and evil is reversed. This must be taken into account when translating Revelation. The Good News Bible (GNB) translation of Matthew 5.6 generated much discussion when it first appeared. The King James Bible had rendered this as 'Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness.' The GNB turned this into 'Happy are those whose greatest desire is to do what God requires.' What had happened to 'righteousness' let alone 'hunger and thirst'? In modern English 'hunger and thirst' is a phrase rarely encountered in day-to-day speech. The original intention of the writer seems to have been 'to want something more than anything else', hence the GNB's 'those whose greatest desire'. 'Righteousness' became 'to do what God requires'.[4] Most church members in the UK would struggle to better that as an explanation of a term that is to many outside the Church largely meaningless, technical Christian vocabulary. Nevertheless, the debate about functional equivalence rages on. Churches for whom functional equivalence translations are particularly challenging are raising an important question. Is the Bible there to confirm the expectation of the Church or to shape it? The answer is both, at least to some degree, but this can be uncomfortable territory for many Christians on both sides of the discussion. The translator's task is to express

the meaning of the text as clearly as possible for his or her audience.[5]

New technologies, new media

The single most dramatic technological development of the late twentieth century has been the growth of personal computing. The world as we know it today would simply stop without it. Towards the end of the 1980s early personal computers were becoming available to Bible translators in the field. These machines were no more than text capture devices, very early word processors, but the ability to store text in an easily editable form and to recover that text for further work as the translation progressed was the beginning of a transformation in Bible translation. Initially the benefits were largely administrative. Text captured to computer could easily be checked to ensure that all the chapter and verse markers were indeed present in a book. Similar checks removed double spaces, ensured quotation marks were properly paired and so forth. The early systems were not at all intelligent but they were very patient and rather more methodical than most human beings. By the end of the decade desktop publishing was a reality and computers were typesetting finished translations and by the mid-1990s standard personal computers were available to translators in the field.

Under the leadership of UBS, through the Institute for Computer Assisted Publishing,[6] a comprehensive translation editing suite known as Paratext has been developed which is now used by almost all Bible translation projects. The Paratext program displays the original text to the translator as he works and monitors the text of the new translation as it is created, checking automatically for the presence of markers (chapter, verse, section headings, cross references, etc.). As the project progresses Paratext runs consistency checks on the text to ensure consistent spelling and even consistent usage in the translation of key biblical terms. The program generates automatically an interlinear back-translation for checking and review, and can even in some circumstances produce a first draught translation of portions of books as a starting point for the translators.[7] When the translation is finished Paratext can export the text directly into the typesetting system. Probably the most important feature of Paratext is that it can work with any natural language without the need for the user to provide any detailed linguistic information for that language.

In the developed world we are used to not only having many different translations to choose from but also helps for readers to make Scripture more accessible. Such helps take many forms but a common aid used by almost everyone involved in any kind of Bible study is a concordance. The Bible is a large corpus of text; those receiving a Bible in their mother tongue for the first time only rarely have access to study aids based upon their text. Happily, this situation is now changing. The same technology which powers consistency checking can also

be used to create a concordance for a new translation largely automatically. The outcome is more consistent, accessible translations which are now completed in 10–15 years as opposed to 20–25 years in the past.

The continuing work

Where next for the work of Bible translation? Scripture on mobile phones and websites is already endemic in the developed world and as new technologies are developed and adopted, not just in the developed world but also in developing nations, ways must be found to present the gospel in these new contexts. Nevertheless, whatever the medium, the work must begin with translation. The list of living natural languages now stands at approximately 7,000. About 450 have a complete Bible translation.[8] For the Scriptures to carry the message of the living Lord they must speak to communities in ways that relate to their daily life and work. Whatever the medium, locally recruited translators, representing all the major denominations and using systems benefiting from technologies at the forefront of current research in computational linguistics, are well placed to create mother-tongue translations for their own communities. The increasing availability of study material such as concordances helps to ensure that these translations are accessible to their intended audience.

The Archbishop of Canterbury, speaking in St Paul's in 2004 at the service celebrating the 200th anniversary of the foundation of the Bible Society movement, articulated very clearly the nature of the Bible translator's task: 'Christians have been convinced that every human language can become the bearer of scriptural revelation. The words in which revelation is first expressed are not solid, impenetrable containers of the mystery; they are living realities which spark recognition across even the deepest of gulfs between cultures, and generate new words native to diverse cultures which will in turn become alive and prompt fresh surprise and recognition.'[9] It is the privilege of UBS translators and translation officers, together with their colleagues from other Bible translation organisations, to be part of this work.