

# Challenges for Bible Translation Today

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## 1. Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to give you what must inevitably be a brief outline of some of the many different factors which Bible translators have to take into account as they practise their craft – and reflect on their activity – in the first decade of a new millennium. The main theme of my paper will be the following: it used to be thought that the choice facing Bible translators was a relatively simple one, between a translation which was more literal and one which was more free. And in the case of the Bible, the Holy Scriptures, it was generally felt that faithfulness to the text required a rather literal rendering of the words and phrases of the original. Then, in the 1960s, came something of a revolution. From Eugene Nida<sup>1)</sup> we learned that the meaning of the biblical text could be expressed as a series of “kernel propositions” independent of the form of the source language; that these propositions could be transferred from one language to another at the level of deep structure; and that they could be re-arranged and re-expressed according to the grammatical rules of the target language, with the original meaning remaining intact in its new guise. The reader of the translated text, therefore, would have access to the same meaning as the reader of the original text, and the translated text would have the same impact on its readers as the original text had on its first readers (or hearers). In this way was born a simple yet powerful explanatory model which has had enormous influence on the practice of Bible translation, giving rise to a whole series of common language translations. The approach known as dynamic equivalence (later restated as functional equivalence) came to dominate the

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1) The essential texts are: Eugene A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1964); Eugene A. Nida and Charles R. Taber, *The Theory and Practice of Translation* (Leiden: E. J. Brill for the United Bible Societies, 1969); Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another: Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating* (Nashville: Nelson, 1986).

practice of the major Bible Translation agencies and to be worked out in practice in a huge number of Bible translations, both in major languages with many millions of speakers and in the majority of missionary translations into smaller languages around the world.

The great German philosopher Friedrich Schleiermacher, who also wrote important works on issues of language and translation,<sup>2)</sup> makes a useful distinction between two fundamentally different approaches to translation: “The translator can either leave the writer in peace as much as possible and bring the reader to him, or he can leave the reader in peace as much as possible and bring the writer to him”.<sup>3)</sup> This statement eloquently captures the basic dilemma of Bible translators: to preserve the wording of the original text in as literal a way as possible and find other ways of explaining it to the reader, or to make the meaning as clear as possible even at the expense of the original form and structure of the text. If we apply this distinction to Nida’s theory of translation, then, we can see that the trend in Bible translation in the second half of the twentieth century was overwhelmingly in the direction of bringing the text to the reader.

At this point it may already be useful to turn from the discussion of theory and look at a concrete example. The issues touched on so far emerge clearly in Mark 1:4, which has been discussed both by Nida himself and in the subsequent literature, and which is also frequently presented at practical training seminars for Bible translators.

ἐγένετο Ἰωάννης [ὁ] βαπτίζων ἐν τῇ ἐρήμῳ καὶ κηρύσσων βάπτισμα μετανοίας εἰς ἄφεσιν ἁμαρτιῶν

John the baptizer appeared in the wilderness, preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins (RSV)

2) The key text is the article “Über die verschiedenen Methoden des Übersetzens”, Friedrich Schleiermacher, *Kritische Gesamtausgabe. Erste Abteilung, Schriften und Entwürfe, Band 11* (Berlin & New York: Walter de Gruyter, 2002), 67-93. A partial English translation may be found in Rainer Schulte and John Biguenet, eds., *Theories of Translation: An Anthology of Essays from Dryden to Derrida* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), Chapter 4.

3) It should be pointed out that Schleiermacher himself did not see these two approaches as having equal merit: from his perspective of German Romantic philosophy he clearly prefers the option of leaving the writer in peace and bringing the reader to the text, relying on the Spirit of the Language (*Geist der Sprache*) to make up for any gaps in understanding.

So John appeared in the desert, baptizing and preaching. “Turn away from your sins and be baptized,” he told the people, “and God will forgive your sins.” (GNT)

So John the Baptist appeared in the desert and told everyone, “Turn back to God and be baptized! Then your sins will be forgiven.” (CEV)

Leaving aside the text-critical question of the presence or absence of the Greek article and therefore the translation of βαπτίζων, the issues raised by this example are essentially two: firstly, the syntax has been rephrased (in particular, direct speech has been used instead of indirect speech; and secondly, abstract nouns have been changed into verbs. Nida argues that the “basic kernels” which make up the phrase “preaching a baptism of repentance for the forgiveness of sins” are as follows:

- (1) John preached X (in which X stands for the entire indirect discourse)
- (2) John baptises the people
- (3) The people repent
- (4) God forgives X
- (5) The people sin

The modern English renderings just cited find direct speech to be a more appropriate (more functionally equivalent) way of expressing the notion of preaching (and CEV indeed dispenses with the technical term *preach*), and also restate the abstract nouns *baptism*, *repentance* and *forgiveness* as verbs. The wording of Mark’s text, then, has been sacrificed in the interests of clarity, and the result is claimed to be functionally equivalent in the sense that the reader of the modern English translation has the same possibilities of understanding the content of the message as the reader or hearer of the original text.

A quick consideration of this example already throws up several questions. Do the modern English renderings we have quoted say the same thing as the original Greek? Nida’s theory of functional equivalence translation claims strongly that the English and Greek do indeed say the same thing, and he does so by claiming that there is an invariant core of meaning which remains unchanged when expressed in different grammatical forms (for instance abstract nouns or verbs, direct or indirect speech) or in different languages (in this case English

and Greek). This argument depends of course on linguistic considerations, specifically on an early form of the theory of syntax developed by the famous American linguist Noam Chomsky, which allowed surface structure elements to be re-expressed as kernel propositions having some kind of universal status, and which entailed a more or less complete separation of content from form. Now all of this looks more than a little naïve in the light of modern linguistic and literary theory.

The criticism most frequently levelled at functional equivalence in Bible translation is that it sacrifices the richness and multi-dimensionality of the text in favour of clarity of expression, and thereby impoverishes the reader. In the case of our example, this would imply claiming that μετανοία means much more than either of the two modern renderings just cited, and so these translations deprive the reader of access to the full richness of the text or (worse) deceive by over-simplification. The only way to retain faithfulness in translation, according to this argument, is to adopt a more conservative rendering and – to go back to Schleiermacher's distinction – to find other ways of bringing the reader to the text.

In what follows I shall try to show how more recent developments in Bible translation theory have led to a situation which is much more nuanced than the model proposed by Nida and his followers. On the one hand we see a tendency to take functional equivalence to its extreme logical conclusion, with highly explicit translations which are clearly intended to stand alone, in the sense of giving their readers access to the full range of background and implicit information which is assumed to have been available to the original readers or hearers. On the other hand, though, there is growing recognition of a wide range of relevant factors which complicate the translation task and require the production of different kinds of translation: developments in communication theory, audience response, linguistics and hermeneutics, advances in biblical studies, lively debate about the role of implicit information, and increasing concern with the status of the text as a literary artefact on the one hand and as an oral production on the other, have all had a role to play.

## 2. Communication

The functional equivalence approach to Bible translation presupposes a model of communication which has become known as the conduit metaphor: a sender encodes a message which is successfully decoded by a recipient. This simple linear model is extended in the case of translation by a sender/recipient (the translator) who passes the same message on to a second recipient, still essentially in linear fashion and with the content of the message unchanged. In Nida's definition, "translating consists in reproducing in the receptor language the closest natural equivalent of the source language message, firstly in terms of meaning and secondly in terms of style".<sup>4)</sup> This is a classical example of the conduit metaphor, which has been criticised as creating the illusion of objectivity: "It reifies meaning and gives it some kind of privileged, free-floating status, thereby allowing all linguistic exchanges to have equal participants. It equalizes exchange because the crux of the exchange is taken out of the participants and cast in terms of universal accessibility ... The conduit metaphor reduces language to some sort of effortless gathering of objectified meaning by people who are ultimately all the same".<sup>5)</sup> Recent application of communication theory to Bible translation has resulted in a much more complicated picture, in which the mismatch of sociocultural, organisational and speech-situation frames between sender and recipient surrounds the process of encoding and decoding in such a way as to cast doubt on the possibility of fully successful communication. Each participant has his/her own presuppositions, the set of cultural understandings which they share with their own language community, and these interact with the message itself to such an extent that the ability of the message recipient to understand what is being communicated depends to a significant extent on the extent to which these presuppositions can also be successfully conveyed and decoded. As has been justly observed, the reading of texts, the translation of texts and the construction and interpretation of meaning from texts is not an innocent process. It involves presuppositions and assumptions, prejudices and biases, value systems and belief systems, textual traditions and practices, world views, ideology and interests, all of which are brought to bear on new texts in attempts to construct or reconstruct meaning from them.<sup>6)</sup> The

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4) Nida and Taber, *Theory and Practice* (see note 1 above), 12.

5) William J. Frawley, *Text and Epistemology* (Norwood: Ablex, 1987), 136.

6) See Aloo Osotsi Mojola and Ernst Wendland, "Scripture Translation in the Era of Translation Studies", T. Wilt, ed., *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference* (Manchester: St Jerome), 8.

result of all of this has been for Bible translators to be much less confident and more cautious about their own understanding of the source text and their ability to communicate it to a new audience.

### 3. Audience response

The question of audience response was of course at the heart of Nida's theory of functional equivalence, in the sense that equivalence of function was understood to mean that the reader of a Bible translation should have the same (or an equivalent) response to the translated text as the first readers had to the original. In the functionalist school of translation associated with German scholars like Hans Vermeer and Christiane Nord this principle has been elevated to the status of the central plank in what has been termed *skopos* theory (from *skopos* in the sense of "purpose, aim, intention, function"), but with the emphasis now explicitly on appropriateness for the intended audience. Nord thus formulates the *skopos* rule as follows: "translate/ interpret/speak/write in a way that enables your text/translation to function in the situation in which it is used and with the people who want to use it and in precisely the way in which they want it to function".<sup>7)</sup> The full implications of this approach for Bible translation are only now being worked out, notably in the work of Lourens de Vries:<sup>8)</sup> at the very least they provide one more challenge to the 'one size fits all' mentality of functional equivalence, and incidentally may also be seen as providing a theoretical justification for the ever increasing multiplicity of modern Bible translations.

### 4. Linguistics and Hermeneutics

Readers of the Bible have long been used to seeing the text divided into

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7) Christiane Nord, *Translating as a Purposeful Activity: Functionalist Approaches Explained* (Manchester: St Jerome, 1997), 29 (citing Hans Vermeer).

8) For example Lourens de Vries, "Bible Translations: Forms and Functions", *The Bible Translator* 52:3 (2001), 306-319.

chapters and verses — a system of division invented for ease of reference in the 12th century (by Archbishop Stephen Langton).<sup>9)</sup> Bible translators have also tended to treat the text sentence by sentence, without paying all that much attention to larger structural units. One of the most active areas of study in modern linguistics however is exactly the way in which larger units of discourse (larger than the sentence) are organised. In this area, known as discourse analysis or text linguistics, scholars have shown that the larger structures of discourse vary considerably from language to language, and that this fact should be taken account of in translation.

A good example of this from Bible translation concerns the chronological ordering of events in narrative text. The story of the death of John the Baptist in Mark chapter 6 is arranged in quite a complicated way, particularly in verses 16-20:

But when Herod heard of it he said, “John, whom I beheaded, has been raised.” For Herod had sent and seized John, and bound him in prison for the sake of Herodias, his brother Philip's wife; because he had married her. For John said to Herod, “It is not lawful for you to have your brother's wife.” And Herodias had a grudge against him, and wanted to kill him. But she could not, for Herod feared John, knowing that he was a righteous and holy man, and kept him safe. When he heard him, he was much perplexed; and yet he heard him gladly.

The chronological order of events is actually rather different to the way in which they are presented in the text, and looks essentially as follows:

1. Herodias was the wife of Philip, Herod's brother (verse 17)
2. Herod married Herodias (verse 17b)
3. John the Baptist rebuked Herod for this (verse 18)
4. Herodias had a grudge against John (verse 19)
5. Herod ordered John's arrest (verse 17a)

Translators need to take account of such differences in structure (and also of

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9) There were of course well developed systems of text segmentation in the manuscript tradition (notably the massoretic text divisions in the Hebrew Bible, and the tradition of marking logical sense units in the New Testament); the reference here is to the particular system of chapter and verse numbering familiar to us from our printed Bibles.

matters like different patterns of argumentation in the Letters of Paul), even though in many cases they will be obliged to preserve the order of the original text. In some languages, though, it might be necessary to re-order even the verses from Mark just quoted, in order to make the sequence of events clearer to the reader.

The area of linguistics which has had most impact on modern Bible translation theory is pragmatics – the study of the complex way language functions when used in real life (as opposed to on the pages of grammar books!). A notion of particular importance here is the idea of conversational implicatures – these are essentially devices which make it possible for a speaker to communicate to a hearer more than is actually said. The conversational exchange A: I am out of petrol / B: There's a garage round the corner,<sup>10)</sup> for example, contains the implicature that A, by walking a short distance, could solve his problem by buying petrol from the garage round the corner (and that the garage is open, that it has supplies of petrol, and so on). This kind of device is probably a universal feature of language, but the specific implicatures are closely tied to individual languages and cultures, since they depend on the shared assumptions of a speech community. Such phenomena are of direct relevance to translation, since by definition there are two speech communities involved, each with its own set of assumptions. A nice biblical example is in Matthew 26:64, where Jesus' response to the question of whether he is the Messiah is  $\Sigma\upsilon\ \epsilon\iota\pi\alpha\varsigma$ . It is not quite clear what the implicature is here, and modern English translations take it in different ways: NIV 'yes, it is as you say'(agreeing), but GNB 'so you say' (neutral) and CEV 'that is what *you* say!' (disagreeing?). Increasing awareness of such nuances enables Bible translators to gain a better understanding of what is going on in the biblical text and so to make more informed choices in their work.

The practical application of implicature and speech act theory to Bible translation essentially brings functional equivalence to a more sophisticated level, by refining what it means for a translation to be linguistically equivalent to

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10) Examples like this are well known through the work of H. P. Grice on the one hand, and J. L. Austin and John Searle on the other (see in general Yan Huang, *Pragmatics* [Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007], especially Chapters 2 and 4; and for an application to biblical studies Richard S. Briggs, *Words in Action: Speech Act Theory and Biblical Interpretation* [Edinburgh & New York: T&T Clark, 2001]).

its source text. Discussion of the nature of human language itself however has the potential to subvert functional equivalence in a more radical way. The argument goes roughly like this: If language is first and foremost composed of logical propositions with a single meaning, then there are general rules for interpretation which apply to all texts, and therefore unimpeded access to the meaning intended by the author, which is identical with the single meaning of the logical propositions. Such, in essence, is the Western linguistic tradition (at least before the rise of pragmatics), and it is this kind of philosophy of language which provides the hermeneutical foundation for historical-critical interpretation of the Bible and consequently for functional equivalence in Bible translation. It is an optimistic, positive, modernist view of language, confident about our ability to discover and (re-)express the meaning of texts. Other traditions of linguistic philosophy however are much less sanguine about the logical, propositional nature of human language; they are less optimistic about access to authorial intention and to (complete) understanding of texts, and their implication for translation theory is to relativise the whole notion of equivalence.<sup>11)</sup>

## 5. Implicit information

The question of how much implicit information to make explicit in a Bible translation is of a somewhat different order to the other matters considered here, but it deserves attention because of its clear practical impact on the publication of modern Bible translations. At one level it relates to the perhaps trivial issue of whether it is permissible in a translation of the Gospels to say River Jordan instead of Jordan (the justification being that most readers will associate ‘Jordan’ only with the modern state), or whether ‘your honoured ancestor Abraham was overjoyed that he was going to experience my glorious coming’<sup>12)</sup> is a faithful rendering of ‘your father Abraham rejoiced to see my day’ in John

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11) These arguments are presented in more detail by Simon Crisp, “Icon of the Ineffable: An Orthodox View of Language and its Implications for Bible Translation”, A. Brenner and J.W. van Henten, eds., *Bible Translation on the Threshold of the 21st Century* (Sheffield: Sheffield Academic Press, 2002).

12) Literal rendering of a draft translation in one of the languages of Central Asia.

8.56. At the level of publication however the issue of the inclusion of extraneous materials (footnotes, introductions, glossaries and other readers' helps) has a long and chequered history particularly in the Bible Society movement. At the time of the founding of the BFBS in 1804 the charter of the organisation was to publish the Scriptures "without note or comment". This was more a way of maintaining fragile unity amongst representatives of different Christian denominations than a statement of theological conviction, and over the course of time was gradually transmuted into a policy to publish without *doctrinal* note or comment. Over the past few years however a much more significant shift has been taking place with the addition of a commitment to "help people interact with the Word of God" to the traditional Bible Society activities of Bible translation, publication and distribution. Will this lead to a higher degree of explicitness in the text of the translation itself, or on the contrary to more conservative translations with a more extensive range of readers' helps?

## 6. Literary Theory

One of the most influential developments in Bible translation over recent years is the rise of a 'literary turn', and consequently much more serious attention paid to the literary form of the text. In the functional equivalence approach, as we have seen, content was given absolute priority over form – indeed, it was clearly envisaged that the form of the message *had* to change in order to ensure that it was understood. At one level of course this is a truism (otherwise the only faithful type of translation would be an interlinear gloss), but more significantly this divorce of (language-specific) form from (universal) content lies behind the great majority of Bible translations produced over the last half century. The tide has now begun to turn however, as the impact of studies in biblical poetry, rhetorical criticism and discourse analysis is taken on board by theorists and practitioners of Bible translation. The practical effect to date, though, has often been a smaller or larger step back from more idiomatic to more literal translations. In spite of the considerable amount of work done in the field of general translation studies on techniques for preserving the literary characteristics of texts in translation, there remains much to be done if these

insights are to be integrated into the practice of Bible translation.<sup>13)</sup>

## 7. Non print translation

One area where our contemporary culture does have a clear impact on Bible translation concerns the decline in reading and the effect of this on the reception of the text of Scripture. Of course primary illiteracy (the inability to read or write) remains a significant issue in many parts of the world, but in the majority of developed countries the problem is essentially one of what has been termed functional illiteracy – large numbers of people who have learned in school how to read and write, but for whom written or printed text is no longer the preferred means of accessing information. Among the challenges facing Bible translators today, then, is how to produce a faithful version of the Scriptures for listeners or viewers. In what ways does a translation for audio or video differ from a printed text? In general, a translation made to be heard will need to use simpler forms of language, shorter sentences, in order to match the information load to the way in which spoken language is processed. One specific example is the way in which discourse participants are referred to. In a printed text it is perfectly permissible to write “and he said to him”, because the surrounding context makes it clear who is being referred to, and this information is easily processed by the eye. In an aural translation however it is frequently necessary to specify exactly who the participants are (“and Jesus said to the blind man”), since this information is not easily retrieved from its context by the hearer. In a translation for video, on the other hand, such information may be completely redundant (given that the participants are visible to the viewer), and the same information may need to be presented in more dramatic form, for example as straight dialogue (without any speech frame).

There is also a more general hermeneutical issue raised by non print translation. Although many Bible texts show clear signs of their origin in spoken

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13) A significant step in this direction has been taken in the development, by Ernst Wendland and Timothy Wilt, of a “literary-functional equivalence” approach to Bible translation; see especially Ernst R. Wendland, *Translating the Literature of Scripture: A Literary-Rhetorical Approach to Bible Translation* (Dallas: SIL International, 2004).

language (for instance Gospel parables, liturgical Psalms), and even written texts like Paul's letters must originally have been read aloud, the form in which the text has been transmitted to us is a written one (after all, we do call it "Holy *Scripture*"). We may be justified in asking whether the kind of adjustments needed to make the written text comprehensible to a listener (and even more so, to a viewer) do in fact fundamentally alter the nature of the text itself. This is another aspect of the basic question of faithfulness in Bible translation (what does it mean to be faithful to the original text?), and it is one which Bible translators are increasingly having to consider.

## 8. Conclusion

In this short paper, I have tried to give an outline of the way in which Bible translators' perception of their task has changed in recent years, and to show how changes in our understanding of language and communication have influenced our views about what constitutes faithfulness to the original text and how the translation task might look. It used to be thought that translators had to decide essentially whether to make their translation literal or free: now however they need to take into account the many different factors which we have summarised. This means that it is no longer possible to speak of only one good or faithful translation, but rather of a range of many possible translations for different audiences, functions and needs. All of this makes the task of translation more complex and challenging, but at the same time more exciting.

### <Keywords>

Bible translation, communication, audience response, hermeneutics, literary theory.

<Abstract>

## 오늘날의 성서 번역을 위한 도전들

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이 소논문은 최근 몇 년 사이 성서 번역에 있어 좀 더 문자적인 번역과 좀 더 자유로운 번역 사이의 비교적 단순한 선택과 많은 관련 분야들에서의 진전들을 고려하는 더 복잡하고 정교한 접근이라는 초점의 변화를 다룬다. 마가복음 1:4의 경우는 번역자들을 대면하는 이슈들의 “고전적인” 한 예로 여겨진다. 그리고 이후에 성서 번역자의 작업에 특정한 적용을 할 수 있는 몇몇 연구 분야 즉 커뮤니케이션 이론, 청중 반응, 언어학, 해석학, 함축적 정보와 문학 이론의 검토가 있을 것이다. 이 소논문은 비 인쇄 매체로의 성서 번역에 의해 제기되는 특정한 이슈들을 짧게 검토하면서 끝맺는다.