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Published in: Ph. Noss, ed.
New Trends in Bible Translation,
2003, pp. 61-72.

Bible Translation as Literary Translation

This paper is dedicated to the problems of Bible translation – specifically the type of translations prepared by the Institute for Bible Translation, the United Bible Societies, the Summer Institute of Linguistics and similar agencies. By definition, these translations are destined for a broad range of readers, not limited to those of a high educational or confessional status. The same ideas may not be applicable to other sorts of translations, the main idea of this paper is not to give any universal definitions but to suggest some practical solutions for some widely reported problems. Furthermore, this paper is a reflection of the experience of Bible translation on the territory of the former USSR. However universal the problems may be, the solutions obviously need some adjustment when applied to other projects in different regions of the world.

Approaching the text

Before starting our survey, it is useful to notice an important current trend in biblical studies. Contemporary scholars are now paying more attention to the text “as it is” and are less involved in the debates between fundamentalists who insist on unambiguous literal interpretation of every word in the Bible and liberals who tend to forget the actual text trying to reconstruct the fact “as it actually was”. The achievability of the very idea of establishing absolute and unquestionable links between a word and a fact is being questioned more and more often. Instead, modern scholars aim at analysing the text with some standardised techniques. The disciplines called ‘source criticism’, ‘redactional criticism’, etc. are being replaced by the so called ‘literary criticism’. The main idea of this method has been described by R. Alter in the following way: “By literary analysis I mean the manifold varieties of minutely discriminating attention to the artful use of language, to the shifting play of ideas, conventions, tone, sound, imagery, syntax, narrative viewpoint, compositional units, and much else; the kind of disciplined attention, in other words, which through a whole spectrum of critical approaches has illuminated, for example, the poetry of Dante, the plays of Shakespeare, the novels of Tolstoy”¹.

This approach could have been called new if its essence were not to apply to the Bible the standard techniques that are as old as literary analysis itself. If a scholar uses them to create a theory, a translator may try to apply them practically. The present article attempts to show why this is both possible and desirable. The approach advocated here can be called literary equivalence.

Since for us the Bible is not just a piece of literature but Holy Scripture some theological explanation should be given first. If we apply to the Bible the definitions that the Christian Church once proposed for its main character – Jesus Christ – we can say that this book is fully divine and fully human in nature. The divine and the human are connected without any mixture or separation, to use the formula introduced by the Council of Chalcedon. As usual, this point of view takes the middle position between extremes: the divine is only clothed in human form; the

* This article is based on papers presented by the author at a joint conference of the Institute for Bible Translation and the Russian Academy of Sciences in Moscow, December 1999, and at the UBS Triennial Translation Workshop at Málaga, Spain, June 2000. It develops some ideas once expressed by S. Crisp (UBS) – see С. Крип, *Современные теории перевода и современные переводы Библии*, in *Перевод Библии. Лингвистические, историко-культурные и богословские аспекты. Материалы конференции*, Москва, 1996, pp. 65-72. My sincere gratitude goes to E. Wendland (UBS) for many valuable critical remarks and to V. Voinov (IBT) for editing the English version of the text.

¹ R. Alter, *The Art of Biblical Narrative*, New-York, 1981, p. 12-13.

divine is totally diluted in the human, etc. I consider these theological models to be false, even though they are widespread and can be even traced in the practice of Bible translation.

For some the Bible is too holy to approach with human measures. Their most radical opponents see its present form as an old garment that can be thrown away in order to uncover the precious *ipsissima verba*. A reader who is versed in the Church history can easily draw some parallels to the Monophysites and the Nestorians, two groups rejected as heresies.

However, if we retain the middle position and insist on the fullness of both divine and human natures of the Bible, this will lead us to a certain distinction (not separation!) of two spheres of analysis. The Scholar and Translator care for the human, leaving the divine to the Theologian and Preacher. Though they work together, their spheres of interest, as well as their methodologies, remain different.

This point of departure does not yet determine the translator's approach nor the variety of techniques he uses. It goes without saying that any translation is called not only to overcome a linguistic gap between the writer and the reader, but a cultural one as well. How is this done? The answers vary. Some translators (conventionally called archaists, or foreignisers) try to introduce the reader to the world of the writer; some (who can be identified as modernisers, or domesticators) try to draw the original text closer to the audience. In fact, they all have to compromise by creating a third conventional world. This world represents the realities of the source culture, but tries to express them in a form understandable to the target audience. This process was called by K. Reiß and H.J. Vermeer² "the imitating transfer" (*imitierendes Transfer*).

Once a translated text is accepted, this conventional world may become an integral part of the cultural heritage of the receptor audience. This was the case with national versions of the Bible, which greatly influenced the development of national literatures all over Europe. The same thing can sometimes happen even without there being any actual translation in the background. For instance, one may wonder how well Rudyard Kipling's Indian jungles or his road to Mandalay relate to the geographical realities known under the same names. It is their very dissimilarity with the reader's everyday experience, their complete otherness that makes the whole story so fascinating. A road to Southampton or Boston simply would not do. Kipling's Burmese beauty speaks English (presumably unlike real girls in Burma of those days) but this English has to bear some sweet oriental accent.

This conventional world is in a sense already pre-existent for a reader since he usually has some ideas of what the book he is reading is about. The same is true for the Bible as well: we hardly can imagine a modern or ancient reader who opens its cover without the slightest idea of who created the heavens and the earth. Such an expectation can create problems for a translator (this sort of problem will be discussed below).

Choosing a strategy

Different approaches produce different types of translation. Sometimes these are classified according to the degree of their literalness/freedom but the difference can be qualitative as well as quantitative; it is also conditioned by a number of choices a translator makes. A translator naturally aims at establishing some equivalents between two languages, so the level on which the equivalents are sought can be taken as the ground for a classification. Now we will discuss in brief some of the best known models. It goes without saying that this classification is oversimplified and is very far from including all possible varieties of existing translation practices. However, some general tendencies can be categorized and discussed in more detail.

The traditional **literal** translation insists on correspondence of separate words and expressions. The basic advantage of this venerable method is that it brings the reader as close to the original as possible; its disadvantages are too well known to enumerate here. Probably only one observation is worth making: literal translations that obviously demand further explanation

² in *Grundlegung einer allgemeinen Translationstheorie*, Tübingen, 1984.

existed as a part of an integral exegetical tradition. Beginning with the Septuagint, the audience was not expected to read the Bible on its own, isolated from the practice of a certain religious community like it often happens today.

Besides, the amount of verbal information available to an ordinary reader increases in geometrical progression. In the Middle Ages, people had to appreciate whatever reading material was available and read it through no matter how difficult the reading was; the treasury of a dozen of books was considered a huge personal library. Today, any urban dweller on his standard commute passes by many kiosks full of magazines and paperbacks so that even a brief glance at each of them would be an unaffordable waste of time. Need I mention the new informational horizons recently opened by computer networks?

So the reader has an inevitable choice to make. Leaving him with only a literal version of the Bible will compel him to buy something easy-to-read instead; even if he chooses the Bible, he may get lost without any exegetical guidance. No longer does he find the Bible chained to the church wall; instead, he looks for it on a bookstore's shelves which are full of "spiritual literature" offering all sorts of exegetical guidance, a good deal of which we find at least inaccurate and incredible if not worse.

Still, I am convinced that there is some future for literal translations in the settings where a commentary is expected and necessarily provided alongside. Basically, there are two domains for them: intra-denominational (mainly liturgical) usage and academic circles. For the rest of the audience under present circumstances the literal translation will be a serious stumbling-block.

The realisation of this fact has led many translators to new approaches.

The opposite approach is sometimes called **meaning-based** translation. This is regarded by some as the only viable alternative to literal translation; in fact, though, it often approaches the opposite extreme with its own generic drawbacks. The title 'meaning-based translation' is often applied to any type of non-literal translation, but here we will be using this term in a more narrow sense. The criticism that will follow is addressed to those translators who insist on translating "just the meaning" as they see it, without trying to find a more stable foundation³. Experience has taught me that their number is significant. Methods for regulating this liberty will be discussed later.

If a literal translation pays too much attention to the form of the text, so to say its historic flesh, the meaning-based translation too often disregards it for the sake of 'the spirit'. The form of a text is regarded as a mere capsule for the valuable content. As a writer can change vellum for paper and paper for electronic files without changing the content, so allegedly easy seems the change of the internal form of the text. Not only are words and syntactic constructions replaced but cultural details, poetic features and – what is most regrettable – the variety of possible meanings are abandoned without hesitation. Out of several equally possible interpretations, the translator chooses just one and forces it on the reader, claiming the right to interpret as an expert who knows the meaning better than an inexperienced 'user' of the final product. This is exactly the approach I have heard advocated by one translator who works in Asia. The user has just to push the button, unplug the bottle or, in our case, open the book and consume the content⁴.

The difference between a literal and a meaning-based translation can be shown with two examples. The first passage Job 40:15-19. The text in the left column is the King James Version, while the right column contains the Contemporary English Version:

¹⁵ Behold now behemoth, which I made with thee;
he eateth grass as an ox.

¹⁶ Lo now, his strength is in his loins,
and his force is in the navel of his belly.

¹⁷ He moveth his tail like a cedar:

¹⁵ I created both you
and the hippopotamus.

It eats only grass like an ox,
¹⁶ but look at the mighty muscles

³ The most convenient example can be found in K. Barnwell, *Bible translation. An Introductory Course in Translation Principles*, 1986.

⁴ This approach has been sharply criticized by S. Prickett in *Words and The Word: Language, Poetics and Biblical Interpretation* (Cambridge, 1986).

the sinews of his stones are wrapped together.
¹⁸ His bones are as strong pieces of brass;
his bones are like bars of iron.
¹⁹ He is the chief of the ways of God:
he that made him
can make his sword to approach unto him.

in its body ¹⁷ and legs.
Its tail is like a cedar tree,
and its thighs are thick.
¹⁸ The bones in its legs
are like bronze or iron.
¹⁹ I made it more powerful
than any other creature,
yet I am stronger still.

The text in the left column is rather obscure and obviously demands explanation. The CEV text, to the contrary, is absolutely clear. But the mythology and poetry of the original have disappeared; we see just a zoological description of a hippopotamus (which is by the way impossible – see the mighty tail in verse 17) with some moralisation attached. No other components of meaning that were presumably present in the original text can be found here; all the exegetical questions are already solved in an unambiguous manner. A reader may ask: why is he deprived of the possibility of making up his own mind? Why is he obliged to see here a hippopotamus and not a mythological or symbolic beast?

If this is the cost of making the text clear, one can question whether this is really worth the price. In any case, this approach will become even more debatable if applied to audiences which do not possess many different sorts of translation as does the English speaking audience.

The second example is Ephesians 2:8-10 in the same two versions:

⁸ For by grace are ye saved through faith;
and that not of yourselves: it is the gift of
God:
⁹ Not of works, lest any man should
boast.
¹⁰ For we are his workmanship, created in
Christ Jesus unto good works, which God
hath before ordained that we should walk
in them.

⁸ You were saved by faith in God, who treats us
much better than we deserve. This is God's gift to
you, and not anything you have done on your own.
⁹ It isn't something you have earned, so there is
nothing you can brag about. ¹⁰ God planned for us
to do good things and to live as he has always
wanted us to live. That's why he sent Christ to
make us what we are.

One can easily notice that the meaning-based translation in the right column presents some concepts that are quite different from those found in the original. Right or wrong, they belong to the translator, not to the apostle. The concept of grace, one of the key terms for the whole of Pauline theology, is reduced to a banal remark that “God treats us much better than we deserve”. Another extremely important Pauline idea, namely that the believers were created “in Christ” for a certain purpose (“unto good works”) seems to have disappeared; as far as I can judge, the expression “to make us what we are” is at least ambiguous if not to say misleading. The description of the cosmic drama that lasts from creation to new creation is once again reduced to a moralisation. It comes out that such a meaning-based translation amazingly suppresses important aspects of meaning.

This would not be problematic in a commentary written by Mr. X that by definition presents a *personal view* of Scripture. In a translation that claims to be *the authentic text* of the Scripture, however, this looks differently: this is called the word of God, not the word of Mr X. In our case (translators working in the CIS), we must also consider the audience. An English reader is quite used to the multiplicity of extant versions, even to such a prominent manifestation of it as the eight-column edition of the New Testament. Our CIS reader finds himself in a totally different situation. Usually the translation he uses is the very first one ever produced in his mother tongue or the first after many decades under the Communist regime. The number of other available sources of knowledge about the Bible is very small. At the same time, the reader was usually taught that there was always only one correct answer to any essential question. Under the

circumstances, force-feeding him our own point of view while closing all the other doors is not at all fair.

Another objection to the most radical meaning-based translations is that they eliminate the stylistic diversity of the original text. For instance, it is often stated that the New Testament was written in a simple language (which is only half true as will be discussed later), so it should be translated into the same style of language. By no means, though, was it written in a flat, sterile, oversimplified language like some of our modern versions. Rhetoric devices, poetic features, stylistic diversity and polysemy play a very important role in the New Testament. Sacrificing most of these characteristic features “for the sake of the meaning” looks rather like abandoning the true meaning of the text for the sake of one’s own ideas about it.

This method may indeed be practical for some specific audiences, such as children. However, I would not recommend it as a standard procedure for all our projects.

The principle of **dynamic** equivalence introduced by E. Nida in his earlier days⁵ expects the translation to make more or less the same impact on the modern reader as the original did on its contemporary audience. It should be noted that this aim can be achieved only partially since everything has changed: the world, the reader and even the role of the text if not the text itself. This theory however was the first remarkable attempt to suggest a more stable theoretic foundation for “meaning-based translation”. It was in a sense revolutionary but was soon refined and updated.

The outcome of this development was the theory of **functional** equivalence, proposed by E. Nida and J. de Waard⁶. Every utterance performs a number of functions (informative, expressive, emotive, imperative, aesthetic etc.); thus the translation should render them adequately in the target language. In comparison with other types of translation, this approach has a broader vision of the text. For instance, emotive and aesthetic aspects of the text do not attract much attention of a meaning-based translator (though in practice he usually does not neglect them completely).

This is the type of translation that rightfully dominates the area of Bible agencies’ activities today. On the other hand, since it developed from an earlier theory, fixing its defects, one may ask the following question: does experience show some weak points in this model as well? In what respects can it be elaborated further?

I think that at least one direction can be targeted already. Functional equivalence is oriented toward separate utterances or their combination, but pays little attention to the literary structure of the text as a whole. This is quite natural in fact: the theory of Nida – de Waard appeared in a sense as a generalisation of the experience of translators working in African and Asian languages who could draw exclusively on an extensive oral verbal tradition with hardly any literary works present. This was the main field of activity for Bible translators in the 1950s to 1970s.

We in the CIS are in a different position now. Our translators have at their disposal literary traditions that have existed for many decades (if not centuries); many of them were even specially trained, and worked for decades as writers and translators. Paradoxically, this favourable soil was prepared by the Soviet regime, which endorsed linguistic description and literary development of once nonliterate languages. No matter how awkward the slogan “Soviet culture, multinational by form and Socialist by content” may seem now, it played a positive role in bridging cultural gaps and creating national schools of translators. At the same time, ideological restrictions did not allow any new translations of biblical texts to be published except under the rubrics of “ancient Eastern literature”⁷ or, in a unique case, “scholarly editions”⁸.

⁵ E.A. Nida, *Toward a Science of Translating*, Leiden, 1964.

⁶ J. de Waard, E. Nida, *From One Language to Another. Functional Equivalence in Bible Translating*, Nashville etc., 1986.

⁷ For instance, various translations by I.M. Dyakonov and S.S. Averintsev.

This experience inevitably compels us to conceptualise the relationship between Bible translation and literary translation, to develop some new models that would reflect this relationship. Such models can be based on the notion of literary equivalence.

Literary equivalence

Literary equivalence may be defined as the adequate representation of the literary structure of a source text in a receptor text on different levels, from phonology to genre. In fact this is nothing but an amplification of functional equivalence with more attention paid to the text as a whole or at least to the major portions of the text, which scope has, in my opinion, not received adequate attention so far.

Does this approach exist already? Yes and no, and in fact more “no” than “yes”. The term “literary equivalence” is not yet being used, and I do not know of any written explication of this method. Still, it is reflected to some degree in general works on translation theory, and, what is much more important, it is being introduced by our translators in practice.

A translator is called not simply to render accurately a series of phrases but to create a *text* that adequately represents the original. It is not only separate utterances that are functional but also every text that has some functions in the society in which it is read. These functions are to a large extent determined by factors that can vary for different generations and audiences. Let us take as an example the Joseph narrative from Genesis. Is it primarily an adventure story of a youngster who became famous and rich against all odds? Or is it a genealogical explication of where the ancestors of the Hebrews (or Jews, or Samaritans) came from? Maybe, a theological illustration for the idea of predestination? A prototype image of Christ as just sufferer and saviour? Different settings suppose different answers, and once the choice is made, it consequently affects the interpretation of particular passages.

Can we exactly reproduce the same number of functions in our translation? This is hardly achievable or desirable, I believe. The translation enters a totally different society with different expectations and presuppositions and we as translators also aim at various goals. A translation proposed for liturgical use will necessarily differ from a translation for a non-Christian audience.

So is there any common ground? I think it can easily be found with the traditional technique of the literary translation, which creates a conventional world that imitates the cultural world of the source language by the devices of the target language (as discussed above). A certain alienation helps the reader to understand that the text played a special role (or, better, a number of roles) in the original culture that can not be reduced to one simple explanation. Some hermeneutic work is reserved for the reader, who can approach the text with his own experience and needs without being forced to put somebody else’s mask on.

So the general idea is that Bible translators who work for the general reader’s sake can and should use the standard translation techniques applied in literary translation, certainly recognising a text’s specific features. Mentioning the general reader is not an irrelevant remark: translations destined for a well advanced or specific audience obviously have to be different. This concerns first of all liturgical and academic translations that naturally have a very different setting.

One should be well aware of the fact that this approach is not without blemish either. Quite often a translator tends to take too much liberty in following his inner calling so that his own voice is heard better than the voice of the original author. This is probably fine if the author’s name is Shakespeare and the translator’s Pasternak, but in our case it would be indecent to drown out the Evangelists or the Psalmist.

This defect is characteristic of literary translation, and in fact stems from its positive features. It can be tempered however if a translation is prepared not by a single individual but by a team. In this case, the most debatable solutions and the strangest features of an idiolect can be

⁸ I mean a remarkable example of the translation done by a professional atheist: М.И. Рижский, *Книга Иова. Из истории библейского текста*, Новосибирск, 1991.

revised in the discussions with fellow translators and checkers. After all, the Bible was not written by a single man on his own; separate books often present a tremendous variety of styles, genres, and voices. This is a strong argument in favour of team work: neither colourless literalism nor profligate fantasy, but a balanced symphony of voices, like the one that is found in the original.

This classification can be expanded further; in practice we usually see a combination of different translational approaches. The choice greatly depends on specific circumstances: the audience, its presuppositions and expectations, cultural norms, the functions that a translation is expected to perform, etc. Now we can look at some practical issues and try to see what solutions can be offered by the proposed model of literary equivalence. There are no universal solutions for all cases of course; however, I would like to make some general observations.

Some practical question

1. To follow the tradition or to create it? Bible translators in the former USSR usually find that their audience is already somewhat acquainted with biblical names and concepts (though their notion may be far from adequate). Should we try to use this preliminary knowledge of the reader or, just to the contrary, should we lead him away from his wrong presuppositions?

Even Russian translators, who work for an audience that has possessed the Bible for a millennium, must bear these questions in mind. Words get worn out, old meanings fall into oblivion. Everybody knows today that Pharisees were extremely bad, so the Gospel's denunciations may seem rather banal: once more those awful people are called what they are. Perhaps approaching the text with the dynamic equivalence principle, one may wish to change Pharisees to academicians or bishops, but this would be obviously going to far.

Terminology is another problem. For instance, the word "baptism" exists in all languages that are cognisant of the very existence of Christianity. On the other hand, for many people this word designates only a certain rite. Therefore some translators choose to take another word that has no clear religious connotations ("oblution, lavation"). Perhaps this is a good choice for Muslims, who mostly know baptism as a *conversion* from their own religion, often forced and superficial. For traditionally Christian nations, though, this choice seems wrong since it can be misinterpreted as meaning that the rites performed in the traditional denominations have nothing to do with what John the Baptist did at the Jordan river. It goes without saying that this sort of declaration (even when the translator has no such intention) may not be welcomed kindly, and can dispose the target audience against the very idea of new translations.

One also can ask to what extent it is allowable to borrow terms from Muslim spiritual practice. The word "mosque", for instance, can designate a synagogue since in some languages synagogues are actually called "Jewish mosques". Meanwhile, the Temple as the House of God or the Church as the community of believers should be called by some other names since these institutions are totally alien to the Muslim concept of a mosque.

Literary translation also admits borrowing new words. These loan words in fact play an important role in creating a "conventional world", as described above. For instance, the stories of A. Conan Doyle are very popular in Russia, and Russian readers have no problems with loan words such as "cab", "pub" and "constable". Russian equivalents like "militiaman" for "constable" would seem absolutely out of place on Baker street. When a culture accepts such exotically flavoured loan words, it easily starts to produce original texts where these can play an important role: in Russia, Sherlock Holmes is the popular hero of many jokes that imitate the original style of A. Conan Doyle. Different languages welcome loan words to a different degree even when they are closely related to each other: one can compare in this respect the open Dutch language to self-sufficient German.

Thus we follow the tradition and create it at the same time. Many national translators testify that the Bible translated into their language has had a serious impact on the development

of their own national literature. Of course this can happen only when the translation is of an acceptable quality, so one can ask the following question:

2. Which style to choose? Shall we try to leave the biblical texts in the same stylistic register in which they were created or should we try to make our translation fit the style that is expected for these sorts of texts in the receptor culture? Usually the solution is a compromise between these two vectors.

It is often stated that a translation of the New Testament should be done in the same style in which the original was written. Some call this style simple and even colloquial, some (and their number in Russia is significant) believe the Bible to be written in a specially invented holy language. Actually, both answers are misleading since they try to identify a certain form of language outside of the whole cultural and linguistic context. The only thing we know for sure is that the language of the Gospels differs from the standard literary Greek of the epoch. But how exactly did it sound for fishermen from Galilee, for scribes from Jerusalem, or for the Hellenistic audience overseas? Nobody really knows the answer for sure. All reconstructions of the linguistic situation in 1st century C.E. Palestine are merely hypothetical. Moreover, we would not be able to authentically reproduce any of these reconstructions in any society we are dealing with, because the world has changed, as have the reader and the status of the text being translated.

So we can only imitate some stylistic and linguistic features of the original and this imitation inevitably has some limits. For instance, no translator in his right mind will ever try to translate the Gospel of Mark into a grammatically incorrect language with a distinct foreign accent, even though this is precisely the description of Mark's original style. On the other hand, a translator may choose to make a certain stylistic shift between Mark and Luke to reflect the vivid simplicity of the former and the exquisite variety of rhetorical devices employed by the latter. Meanwhile, both of the texts will remain within the limits of the socially accepted written form of a language. In fact, there are even more limits: the Bible should not contain any features that presumably will be considered stylistically inappropriate for the Scripture, be they too obscure, too colloquial, or anachronistic.

Stylistic diversity performs a very important function in the original. If we even briefly look at the beginning of the Gospel of Luke (who is certainly the best stylist among the Evangelists) we see a remarkable shift between the introduction written in a perfect rhetorical manner indistinguishable from the best samples of Hellenistic epistolary genre, and the narrative, expressed in an archaized language imitating the Septuagint. This is a certain declaration about the author's intentions expressed by artistic means. Unfortunately, this is hardly reflected in most modern translations.

Another important issue is the question of how the poetic parts of the Bible should be translated. Actually the very existence of poetry in the Bible is sometimes questioned and there is no scholarly consensus on its formal distinctions from prose. No strict limits can be actually drawn, though it is usually agreed that biblical poetry was based on alliteration, rhythmic patterning, and parallelism. These features are easily reproduced in many languages – see for instance Psalm 1:1-2 in the French Traduction Œcuménique:

¹ Heureux l'homme
qui ne prend pas le parti des méchants,
ne s'arrête pas sur le chemin des pécheurs
et ne s'assied pas au banc des moqueurs,
² mais qui se plaît à la loi du SEIGNEUR
et récite sa loi jour et nuit!

A theologian might see divine predestination in establishing such a poetic form that can be translated much easier than many others, but a translator should have a practical response. There is no unified view in these matters. Different versions may represent the same biblical passages as either prose or poetry thus reflecting the instability of the very concept of biblical poetry in

our minds. However, if a translator chooses to imitate these features using the means of the target language (such a choice is very personal, of course), he will not only decorate his translation but also make it better understandable and closer to the original.

Beside the form of the text, the translator also has to aim at adequately rendering its meaning. Thus, one of the most frequent questions will be the following one:

3. How much implied information should be rendered explicitly? Our modern audience is in every sense very different from the first readers of the Bible. People's presuppositions and general knowledge of the world are not the same any more. Many details that were familiar to the ancient Israelites can hardly be understood correctly today. How far shall we go in making this information explicit or, on the contrary, omitting it? Let us have a look at just one example: Acts 1:12. The text says that the Mount of Olives was not far from Jerusalem, just "a sabbath's journey away". To interpret the text correctly, one must know that according to their customs Jews could leave their settlement on a Sabbath day only for a rather short walk, presumably about half a mile. Not many ordinary readers are aware of this fact today. So what can we do?

The first option will be just to translate the text "as it is", leaving the question for the reader to ponder (cf. NIV: "a Sabbath day's walk from the city"). This is a perfect solution for an expert but most readers are likely to imagine that the way from Jerusalem to the Mount of Olives took the whole day. One can only wonder why it had to be a Sabbath – maybe Jews for some reasons preferred to travel on weekends?

To avoid this misinterpretation, we can put in a footnote. This will work however, only if the audience is inclined to address the footnotes in case of uncertainty and is already cognisant of the Jewish laws concerning the Sabbath (otherwise the footnote will expand beyond any reasonable size). Is it necessary to explain how rare such an audience is?

So the preferable solution, in my opinion, will be just to leave the notion of Sabbath out and to choose a natural expression designating roughly the same distance, as in TEV: "about half a mile away from the city"; cf. French 'Bible en Français Courant': "près de la ville, à environ une demi-heure de marche" ("near the city, a half an hour walk away").

It will probably be excessive to add here any geographic or ritual exactitude, like the Spanish 'Versión Popular' did: "un trecho corto, precisamente lo que la ley permitía caminar en sábado" ("a short walk, precisely the one that is allowed on Sabbath"). The author's intention was not to teach his readers Jewish laws or to describe the suburbs of Jerusalem. Putting more stress on these details will only distract the reader's attention from what was really stressed in the text. Beside that, the author did not give us any exact measures. Neither do we when we say that some shops are "within walking distance" from our house.

As far as explicitness is concerned, we have another important question:

4. How much ambiguity should remain in a translation? One of the characteristic features of the Bible is its openness to multiple interpretations. Again and again, every translator must rethink previously accepted solutions concerning how much of this ambiguity should be retained in a translation. To what extent should a translator get involved in the process of exegesis? How many problems can he leave unsolved? Once again, there is no universal answer.

The Bible is not pulp fiction the complete comprehension of which can be easily achieved at first glance. There is always a place for rereading this book with some careful meditation. On the other hand, the translator should avoid making the text more ambiguous than it was in the original. If we have good reason to consider the ambiguity to be the author's intentional strategy, the best option will be to preserve it, leaving the choice to the reader. Actually, even the word "choice" is not quite correct here since more than one out of a number of potential interpretations can be true. On the contrary, if this ambiguity is created solely by the translator it has to be corrected if possible.

There is another aspect of this problem. Unlike Babylonian epics or Greek myths, biblical texts have never ceased to be the Holy Scripture for various religious communities up to this very day. This implies that biblical exegesis has never been independent from general theological presuppositions and practical needs of these communities. This process is to some extent justified by the apostles themselves, who often interpreted the Old Testament passages with a meaning that was rather far from the original. Even in our post-modernist culture a completely independent exegesis is hardly achievable: even when rejecting a certain tradition an exegete still takes this tradition as his orienting point.

In this situation a translator has to avoid two extremes. The first temptation is to produce a confessional translation with all the questions solved in the spirit of the translator's religious tradition and personal experience. No matter how justified this method may look in the zealot's eyes, it finds no strong arguments in the Bible itself, which is full of provocative ambiguous expressions. All the ancient heresies were based on a number of biblical quotations. God takes the risk of being misunderstood. He does so in his Scripture as well as his incarnation, and we are not likely to be allowed to stop him. There is of course some ground for such confessional translations which reflect deliberately their own one and only exegetical tradition, but we have to realise that it is simply not our job to produce them.

The opposite danger will be to try to cut out any later interpretation of the Bible, thus confining its meaning to the "original understanding", just another reconstruction that is often treated as a proven reality. It has been said already that some translators insist on abandoning the traditional ecclesiastic terminology in favour of neutral words not overloaded with too technical meanings: "ablution" instead of "baptism", "return" instead of "repentance" etc. For nations with a well established Christian tradition, this approach will look like a manifest rejection of this tradition, like a deliberate schism in search of a "better Christianity". Though this may be the case with some individuals, it certainly does not reflect the typical policy of the Bible agencies and therefore should be carefully avoided. For non-Christians, however, this method may be just a way to coin a new term, to fill in the blank. In any case, we have to consider not only our own ideas but the audience's expectations as well.

The last question to discuss here partially belongs to the area of linguistics:

5. How can rhetorical devices help to structure a text? In recent decades, linguists have been trying to expand their horizons studying not only words and phrases but entire texts at the discourse level. Translators as well are called not only to choose words and phrases, but to make them all fit, to produce a logically structured and coherent text. To achieve this goal, linguists perform what is usually called discourse analysis. Beside merely linguistic means to structure a text, however there is also a number of devices of literary character. One can call them rhetoric (in the broader sense of the word). Two utterances can have no formal links and still be understood as a single whole if this is implied by certain conventions in the given literary tradition. One of the most interesting features of biblical literature – parallelism – is a good example of this: "The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand" (Isaiah 1:3).

Because different languages can organise texts in different ways the translator must work hard to find in the target language rhetorical devices that are both powerful and natural, to adequately represent the original. This area is still very poorly explored, so I will stop here and simply point to another promising, yet uncharted area of general Bible translation theory.

In conclusion, I would like to say that none of the questions listed above can be solved in a simple way; not even a carefully developed approach will fit all the particular situations equally well. Translation is still very much of an art. Even the list of problems touched upon in this short paper is far from exhaustive. One should also be well aware of the fact that the Bible is in many senses different from other samples of ancient literature. So we should be very careful when we apply general principles of literary translation to it. Meanwhile, the proposed approach

will hopefully be helpful in finding one's way in this fascinating and challenging field of Bible translation.

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