

# The Art Form of Translation

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*The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter.*

*'Tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning. ~ Mark Twain*

Growing up, I was always intrigued by words. It was very important to me that I say only – and precisely – what I mean. I had the chance to study Spanish, Afrikaans, isiZulu, Latin, French, and Japanese in school. When I made it to university, Linguistics seemed the natural next step for me, and I continued with French. This summer, I had the opportunity to complete an internship abroad focused on translation for an NGO, and I jumped at the chance. During my two months there, I got to do research and make translation choices that potentially hundreds of people would read, finishing nearly 200 pages of translated content. The whole time, however, I was hyperaware of how small mistakes could turn donors away from the NGO and the work they did.

The experience I gained in translation brought me to some conclusions that I have been thinking about for a while. It's those conclusions I'd like to share with you today.

How is translation at all relevant to the Bible, our faith, or our walk? Let's talk about it.

## Translation

The Bible was written well before the emergence of what we know as English. It's no secret that the Bible was written in Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic, or that the Bible versions we are familiar with are based on different versions of these original texts and languages. For example, the KJV uses a different Masoretic text than the NLT, which uses a different edition of the text than the NASB. This is not to say that they're translating from *entirely* different texts, but these texts do have variations, and we should not ignore the large impacts small differences can make. As such, translation underpins our entire faith.

In Christadelphia, when translation is mentioned, it is often in context of Strong's Concordance or a Greek dictionary that is kept just in reach. I would argue that this is not translation at all, but is a shortcut – fulfilling arbitrary requirements that Christadelphia seems to hold for “academicism”.

I'd love to introduce you to the *art form* that translation should and can be, with some linguistics along the way for context.

## The Art Form

So, to get us started, what *is* translation?

Translation at its core is all about balancing *intended meaning* and *faithfulness to the text*. When given written or spoken language to translate, it is uncommon to be able to translate an entire text in a linear, A→B way. If translation were a matter of finding each word's equivalent one at a time, word by word until the text was finished, there would be no room for translation to be an art form. But it is. And by necessity.

One of the most important concepts to consider when translating written material is the type of text you're dealing with. Is it transcribed from speech? Is it poetry or prose? Fiction or nonfiction? Novel or short story? All of these can drastically change the approach and outcome of translation. And the core concern of translation is accounted for differently based upon the type of text.

Non-fiction, for example, tends to be very straightforward and literal, often with little room provided for the author's voice to shine. As such, if I were to translate it, I would focus more on providing literal translations with little need for me to worry about the intended meaning, because non-fiction does not use much creative language nor stray far from a serious tone.

Poetry, on the other hand, makes a game out of pushing the bounds of language. Metaphor, novel language use, and literary techniques all abound, not to mention the more physical aspects of poetry (think line length, rhyme scheme, specific sound qualities, etc).

Translating poetry, as you might suspect, is tricky.

Poetry is all about the response it can generate from person to person. It is the art of meaning-making. And as such, in the conflict between intended meaning and literality, translating poetry is about being faithful to the text to try to convey the intended meaning *and* elicit a similar response from the audiences reading your translation. This can often mean taking

what was in the original and working with approximations and creative language of your own to emulate the same effect – without losing any of the beauty imprinted into the poem, all while remaining on the same topic and not straying too far.

Poetry is particularly relevant to the Bible. A third of the Bible is poetry: Job, Psalms, Song of Solomon, Ecclesiastes....

Let's look at one of my favorite examples illustrating the art form of translation. *La Vie en Rose*, by Édith Piaf, is a French song that was written after WWII. For the French – and then the rest of the Western world – it became a symbol of hope. Poetry and song have many similarities, and we're going to compare the English version and the French version of this song to illustrate the difference between focusing on function over form.

First, a verse of the English Version sung by Louis Armstrong:

*Hold me close and hold me fast  
The magic spell you cast  
This is "La vie en rose"  
When you kiss me, heaven sighs  
And though I close my eyes  
I see "La vie en rose"*

Now, let's look at a verse of the French version, accompanied by a literal English translation:

*Quand il me prend dans ses bras,  
Il me parle tout bas,  
Je vois la vie en rose.  
Il me dit des mots d'amour,  
Des mots de tous les jours,  
Et ça me fait quelque chose.*

"*And that does something to me*" doesn't immediately strike me as the words of one of the most beautiful songs of all time. In Louis Armstrong's version, the intended effect of the song has been artfully replicated into English. This sort of translation is much more open for the translator – i.e. "translator's license" is applied much more frequently – but at the same time it requires a lot of creativity and effort. Louis' verse is only vaguely similar to the literal version, which means the rest had to be supplied by the translator's own genius.

Notice that in Louis' version, they left "*la vie en rose*" in French. This is for two main reasons, as I reckon it. One, it illustrates the concept of *meaning-holes*. Some languages do not

have exact equivalents for concepts or words, and any attempted translation here will either be awkward or unwieldy. Second, Louis' listeners were in the States, where French is seen as something mystical and romantic. Keeping it in French invited some of that mysticism and romanticism into the song, while also avoiding an awkward, unpoetic translation.

The closest literal translation we have to “la vie en rose” in English is “life in pink,” which has neither the sound quality nor the vowel length to work in place of the original lyric. Can you imagine a song about hope and love whose principal line and title goes “liiiiife innnnn pppiiiiinnkkk”? I certainly can't. Try putting it to the tune, too, it gets even better...

A better translation that I've heard, though one that still doesn't fit the rhythm of the song, is, “life in rosy hues.”

The translation seems like it should be simple, but the construction “en” in French also has the context of referring to materials that objects are made from, and so, when used abstractly, it's able to hold much more meaning than its literal English translation.

Even once we have sorted what type of text we're translating, translation is still more complicated than simply going word by word – there has to be at least some rearranging. In English, we have a strict SVO word order (SVO indicates Subject-Verb-Object). So, a sentence like, “The dog eats some meat,” makes sense to us, but a sentence, “Dog the meat some eats,” is nonsensical. Even if we kept the noun phrases together and rearranged them, it still feels archaic and strange: “Some meat the dog eats.”

Now, take a language with a different word order, like Japanese. The Japanese word order is SOV (Subject-Object-Verb). It's also not as strict as English word order, so long as the verb is always the last component of the sentence. Say I were to translate the sentence “The dog eats some meat” from Japanese (いぬは肉を食べます) back into English. If I went word by word, I would get “Dog meat eat.” That's neither the intended meaning, nor faithful to the text.

Even once we account for syntactic differences (i.e. how grammatical sentences are arranged) and any other differences in how the language is put together, we still can't go word for word without losing intended meaning. Languages almost always have meaning gaps between them. Some words and phrases just cannot translate directly from one language to another, as we saw with “la vie en rose.” This is usually a result of variance between cultures or cultural practices.

A good rule of thumb is that languages will always adapt to suit their speakers' needs. If you are constantly in snowy regions, you will likely develop all sorts of vocabulary related to the snow and the cold, and how it affects you; on the other hand, if you live on the Equator, you are unlikely to have this developed vocabulary about wintery days. Translating a fairy tale about an animal in the snow from the one language to the other could prove a particularly challenging task. How do you describe snow to someone who has never experienced it?

All this to say, translation is complicated. Especially when it's for texts that have as much cultural significance as the Bible.

## Biblical Translation

Bible translation has two (sometimes three, depending on how you look at it) main theories behind it. Eugene Nida proposed the concepts of Formal Equivalence and Dynamic Equivalence, which are an elaborated version of *form versus function*. Formal Equivalence deals primarily with translating as true to a text as possible, with very little adjustment for intended meaning if it varies dramatically as a result of idioms or metaphoric language.

Dynamic Equivalence, however, deals with translating so that the reader's response now resembles what it would have been when reading the original. Notably, Dynamic Equivalence is not about identifying "intended meaning" because that has obvious pitfalls when translating religious texts. Who decides the intended meaning when translating a text that has had thousands of years to accumulate debated meanings and intent?

Formal Equivalence is particularly valued by people attempting to follow the threads of biblical cross-reference, where *word-by-word* translations are much more likely to assist with independent cross-referencing, as opposed to *thought by thought* (which resembles Dynamic Equivalence more closely). Dynamic Equivalence, however, is preferred for a more readable, natural translation that feels responsive and alive. The difference between the two can make for incredibly distinct translations of the same verse, as I'm sure we have noticed before.

In terms of Bible translations, different versions employ different philosophies. As a side note, take a look at the preface in the front of your Bible sometime! Get to know your translators a bit. They'll let you in on their preferred style of translation and their biases ahead of time, which can be enlightening. And, aside from that, it'll give you a chance to identify whether they

use Formal (word for word) or Dynamic (thought by thought) Equivalence, so it's a cool application of potentially new subject matter.

The NASB, KJV, ESV, and RSV are all a part of the Formal Equivalence club (I made that club up just now!), happily chugging along with their word-for-word translations – “*Gird the loins of your mind,*” anyone? The NIV, NLT, CEB, and NAB are in the Dynamic Equivalence club, enjoying thought by thought translations that can sometimes differ from the original text so intensely that it's impossible for someone to follow along in their NIV when you're reading from an ESV.

The CSB, NRSV, and NKJV are all floating somewhere between the two – but it would be a fallacy to assume that just because they're a compromise, they're automatically a good version. In fact, my biggest takeaway here is that there is no such thing as a “better version”. All this does for us is open our mind to the possibilities that lay within the different versions and teach us how to adapt the version we use to our needs. In our personal lives, we can apply this by just using a bunch of different versions and comparing between them.

## Implications

Knowing all this about translation, it becomes easier for us to be honest about what things we're choosing to view through the lens of our own culture – since, if we're not viewing it through the cultural lens of the time, we generally only have one other cultural perspective to use for interpretation.

One example that comes to mind is the discussion on gender that has been ongoing in Christadelphian and Christian circles for as long as I can recall.

There are a variety of nouns used to address believers and groups of people in the Bible, and until relatively recently, these were translated “Brothers” or “men” without exception. While the word *mann* in Old English used to be acceptable as gender neutral, Modern English has seen that usage slowly disappear. It's important that translators be able to identify shifting semantic currents such as this one. Here, for example, the consequence of this gradual meaning change is the exclusion of women from the Bible and the circle of believers. This extends beyond women not being included explicitly in group address, however – which could be initially addressed by changing “Brothers” to “brothers and sisters” or “believers”.

Scott Munger, who among other things has worked as a Bible translator and taught in seminary, suggested a few examples that I find interesting. One in particular from Timothy caught my eye. These verses discuss the behaviors deacons should model, and provide an interesting example of translational interpretation having significant consequences. Here's a selection of the NASB's take on the verses:

*It is a trustworthy statement: If any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife.... These men must also first be tested; then let them serve as deacons if they are beyond reproach. Women must likewise be dignified, not malicious gossips.... Deacons must be husbands of only one wife, and good managers of their children and their own households. For those who have served well as deacons obtain for themselves a high standing and great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1Tim 3:1-2, 10-13)*

Munger begins by pointing out that the phrase “any man” in the first sentence is actually the gender-neutral “anyone”. The “he” following it in “it is a fine work *he* desires to do” isn't in the Greek. Then, clearly, the verse moves on to talk about male deacons. However, in verse 11, the word here translated as “women” is translated in many other versions as “their wives”, when the word “their” isn't present. Interestingly enough, though, Munger suggests that the parallel structure set up here may be implying a contrast between behaviors specific for male deacons and those for female deacons. Also interesting, the more literal translation here would actually just be “women”, as the NASB has rendered it. To wrap it up, he points out the “those” in verse 13 as being gender neutral.

This does not necessarily mean that this verse has to be interpreted as outlining behaviors for both men and women being in leadership. That's up to the individual reader. It is to say that we should at least be able to *consider* these possibilities, since the language begins with no reference to gender, then male gender, then female gender, then neutral again.

For another example of translation discrepancies (one that I discovered only recently), consider the Greek word *arsenokoitai* (think Leviticus 18:22 and 1 Corinthians 6:9). *Arsenokoitai* was only translated to mean *homosexual* (rather than *boy molester*) for the first time in 1946 in the RSV, as can be discovered by comparing Bibles of many languages and ages. This is notable because the word *homosexual* was very available to be used before 1946, and yet it wasn't chosen.

The consequences of translation discrepancies can be minuscule or enormous. It really just depends on the seriousness of the issue and what the cultures we live in make of it. If our culture is already inclined to overlook women in religious spaces, then it's not difficult for us to accept a potentially inconsistent translation of verses that reinforces this inclination.

And then again, perhaps these verses were translated correctly the first time. What is important is that we're able to acknowledge the uncertainty, question it, and recognize how it impacts our faith journeys and our communities.

## Open-Hearted Faith

There's an underlying current running through Christadelphia that I've been conscious of since I was little. It whispers in our ears, telling us that unless we have it memorized and charted out in Strong's concordance, with cross-references to every mentioned usage of a single word in both Hebrew and the Septuagint, then we don't "know our stuff". In fact, I once had a teen Sunday school teacher tell the class just that.

When I was little, church felt very much like school to me. And don't get me wrong, I adored school; that was the best possible reality for small me. I thought that all I had to do to understand the Bible was draw up the most elegantly crafted checklist you've ever seen. And believe me, I tried! As it turns out, the Bible can be no more summed up in a single checklist than read in a single night And I tried that one too!

But as I got older, and the pressure of academicism within Christadelphia became more prevalent, it wore on me. I stopped taking notes during exhortations; the hymns embedded with doctrine began to lose meaning; and I stopped enjoying my faith. My faith became something I knew, rather than something I lived with.

All of this discussion about translation is a joy to be able to share with you, because it's something I'm passionate about, but it's also a demonstration of how we don't know as much as we think we do. The main lesson in all of this is that we have to approach new ideas with open hearts, since reading a translated text includes inbuilt uncertainty. Otherwise, we will fall back onto what we already know and stagnate.

It's worth taking a moment to step back from academicism to just live with our faith. We need to be okay stepping into the uncertainty, fear, and doubt that come with being constantly open to new ideas. And perhaps, once we move past those initial emotions, there will be joy. Joy



that this is not all there is to the text we base our whole lives on; joy that there will always be something more, something new, something interesting; joy that we have been enabled to lead interesting lives because the text will continue to change to mirror our changing contexts and understanding.

I recognize the irony in writing an article that is in itself an academic venture, and then speaking against academicism. But I want to invite you regardless to move outside of what we're used to and step into the unknown of living our faith, not just intellectualizing it. Let's step off the foundation of Strong's concordances and Greek dictionaries, 'cause the higher you stack them, the wobblier it gets.

We've been called to *hear his words and put them into practice*. We can't do that until we get down off our stack of books and start digging a stronger foundation.

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