

CURRENT TRENDS IN SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION

Definitions and Identity

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CURRENT TRENDS IN SCRIPTURE TRANSLATION

by Philip A. Noss

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Introduction

As one UBS Triennial Translation Workshop succeeds another at the appointed time,¹ and as *Current Trends* appears in its eighth edition with this volume, it might seem that repetition signals no more than the continuation of trends.

While continuity is good for the sake of stability and predictability, and for the avoidance of chaos, it is necessary from time to time to stop and reflect on where the road leads and perhaps, why one is on this particular road at all. TTW 2003 was such a moment – when the UBS translation community paused to ask itself questions of definition and identity.

Two guest speakers were invited to guide TTW participants in their quest for answers to these questions. The first was Anthony Pym, Professor of Humanities at Universitat Rovira i Virgili in Spain, whose series of four lectures was entitled “Ethics and Translation.” Professor Pym offered a philosophical view of translation ethics that obliged his audience to question the very basis of their ethics as Bible translators. As he described the changing landscape of contemporary translation, he spoke of the virtues of trust and efficiency. He observed that for the new media, “Text is becoming less and less important,” and he warned that traditional equivalence is no longer enough.

The second guest speaker was Elsa Tamez, Professor of Theology at the Latin American Biblical University in Costa Rica who gave a series of lectures with the title “The Bible, Theology and Latin America.” Basing her presentations on the Epistle to the Romans, she exhorted the TTW participants to engage in a re-reading of the Biblical text that they translate. Biblical concepts such as law, election, and justification by faith need to be understood as they are interpreted by those who are excluded from modern society. Asking the question “Who are we?” she challenged her audience to live “as resurrected.”

A total of 97 papers were presented during TTW 2003 from which a selection of 21 are presented in this volume as representative of the broad range of research topics in which the translation officers are engaged. Special attention was paid to the TTW theme of ethics and translation, as well as other on-going work in Scripture Engagement,² principles for revision of Scripture translations, translation for special audiences, translation for children and youth, translation and literacy and many others. An entire morning was given over to issues relating to translation and the new media.³

Definition and Identity

Following the official opening of TTW 2003, the deliberations were launched by an introductory paper by Philip Noss, the UBS Translation Services Coordinator. In this paper, which is presented

¹ According to the archival information of UBS TC Norman Mundhenk, TTW 2003 at Foz do Iguaçu was the 15th formal TTW. Earlier TTWs were the following: 1) 1957 Greenwich, Connecticut; 2) 1960 Echo Lake, Pennsylvania; 3) 1966 Echo Lake, Pennsylvania; 4) 1969 El Escorial, Spain; 5) 1972 Rueschlikon, Switzerland; 6) 1975 Rueschlikon, Switzerland; 7) 1978 Bangkok, Thailand; 8) 1981 Khania, Crete, Greece; 9) 1984 Bernhauerser Forst near Stuttgart, Germany; 10) 1987 Harper’s Ferry, West Virginia; 11) 1991 Victoria Falls, Zimbabwe; 12) 1994 Chiang Mai, Thailand; 13) 1997 Merida, Mexico; and 14) 2000 Málaga, Spain.

² A UBS Background Paper entitled “Scripture Engagement” was published in October 2003. This included two papers by Joseph Crockett together with comments by Steven Voth and Gosnell Yorke plus the author’s response to their comments.

³ A special volume is being prepared for publication that incorporates papers presented at the UBS Translation and Media Workshop that was held in Chiang Mai in November, 2002, plus papers from the TTW New Media plenary sessions.

first in this volume, the issue of past, present and future definition of the Bible Society translation task and the identity of translation officers serving in the translation program of the United Bible Societies was brought into focus.

Ethics and Translation

Ethics and translation was discussed by Krijn van der Jagt in an anthropological study of comparative ethics in the Bible, in which he drew attention to the importance for the translator to understand the various ethical systems reflected in the Bible in order to translate effectively in the receptor cultural context.

Two papers in this volume focus on the issue of ethics for the translation agency and for the translator. Carl Gross questions the frequent predominance of the acceptability principle in translation, asking whether it is ethical to knowingly mistranslate with the goal of making the translated Scriptures acceptable to the readership, or to the market. Christer Åsberg offers the question of *Horror vacui*? as the logical reason why translators seem to prefer to create sense out of a text which is without meaning, or at least which cannot be understood. Can this dishonesty be justified, he asks.

Sergei Ovsiannikov's paper addresses the problem of base text for the translator, but the question may also be posed as an ethical dilemma. The UBS has made a policy decision that Scripture translations shall not be based on a "hybrid text", but the author notes the frequent inclusion of Septuagint material in Bible translations that are assumed to be based on the Hebrew text. Although theological and linguistic grounds may be posited in support of this procedure, does it not also raise the ethical question of the integrity of the translator's source text?

Studies of the Text

For the translator the source text is primordial. Without a text to translate, there can be no translation, without a good text, there can be no good translation, as long as it retains a translation relationship of similarity to the source text! Recently, studies of the "original text" have begun to include what might be called editorial aspects of the manuscripts. Earlier editions of the UBS Greek New Testament included a section called "The Punctuation Apparatus." The 4th edition includes a new section entitled "The Discourse Segmentation Apparatus" prepared by Roger Omanson that draws attention to various levels of discourse segmentation in several editions of the Greek NT and in modern language translations.

Two papers in this section represent current research into the segmentation of NT text in early manuscripts. Simon Wong looks at early segmentation in the Gospels as ancient windows to the text. Having discussed the numbered division systems used for the Gospel texts before 500 AD, he illustrates the significance of varying segmentation for the interpretation of the well-known pericope of Jesus blessing the little children (Mark 10.13-16). Simon Crisp offers a short analytical discussion of the early Euthalian arrangement of the text in terms of modern discourse studies. On the basis of his comparative study of the segmentation of a 5th century manuscript of Galatians 1.1-9 with two other groups of manuscripts, he concludes that translators, contrary to often proffered advice, should not ignore the way the text was read in antiquity.

Lénart de Regt restates the argument in terms of the redactional development of the biblical texts. He gives OT examples of why this is important to translators and how they may treat apparent textual inconsistencies that are a result of diachronic changes. In his discussion of the language of 1 Maccabees, Seppo Sipilä reminds us that this book offers the intriguing situation of a translation whose original source is not known. Therefore, while the reader might wish to look for Hebraisms in the Greek text, the reader and the translator should be advised to read it as the Greek text that it is.

Exegesis and Translation

If the translator proclaims that "translating means translating meaning,"⁴ the biblical scholar may offer exegesis as the means to reach an understanding of the message of the text. Though a definition

⁴ Jan de Waard and Eugene A. Nida, *From One Language to Another* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1986), p. 60.

of meaning may be difficult to agree upon in contemporary linguistics, making sense out of a text is a prerequisite for translating it. Thus, in TTW 2003 various approaches to the text were discussed from which four representative papers were selected for this collection. Anthony Abela demonstrates the application of narratology and discourse analysis to the OT text Ruth 2.18—3.5. Ernst Wendland takes another OT text, Job 28.23-28, for his demonstration of the application of a literary functional equivalent approach featuring poetics and rhetoric in the exegesis of the text.

Gerrit van Steenbergen adapts a worldview model developed by Michael Kearney and applies it systematically to the text and lexicon of Isaiah 56-66 to discover the underlying worldview of its producer/s. Referring to frames of reference,⁵ he raises the question of how the worldview of Isaiah should be represented in translation. Thomas Kaut applies classic exegetical technique in seeking to understand the letter to the church at Pergamum in the NT book of Revelation. What does “the throne of Satan” refer to, and what is the meaning of “a white pebble”, he asks, and then he attempts to solve the enigmas.

Translation Principles and Procedures

Sacred text poses particular problems and offers special opportunities to the translator. Andreas Hauw, a young scholar from Indonesia, discusses the cross-cultural problem of humor. What is funny in one culture may not be at all humorous in another, and what is humorous may not be perceived to be appropriate for bringing laughter in the receptor culture. Premraj Nag, writing out of the context of India, describes the challenges of understanding honor and respect in biblical contexts and interpreting appropriately through the use of linguistic honorifics.

The acrostic form of poetry has long been assumed to be without acceptable equivalence across cultural literary boundaries, but Alfredo Tepox demonstrates how he has applied the principle of equivalence in the rendering of the Hebrew acrostics in Spanish poetic form. Timothy Wilt offers a further demonstration of the application of literary equivalence in the translation of selected Psalms and Lamentations, as well as in the story of Jonah.

Languages and Translation

Scripture translation has always involved the basic choice of which language to translate into. If the wrong language is selected, there may be no readership; if the wrong dialect is chosen, the translation may be rejected. Numerous articles and books have appeared in recent years on dying languages, and no one is more aware of this phenomenon than Bible translators.⁶ But new languages are also being born under the guise of pidgins and Creoles. These are frequently the target of popular acclaim and of official disdain. Ronald Ross offers the Jamaican Creole translation project as a case study in the challenges of Creole language translations.

Margaret Muthwii writing from the African context speaks of “discouraged” languages, not those that are dying, but those that need attention. She points to official government and international policy that favors the teaching of reading the major languages at the expense of the vast majority of Africa’s mother tongue languages. The limited capacity of the Bible Societies to resolve the problem of literacy is a long-standing one. Therefore, efforts are frequently made to find alternate methods of translating and in the previous volume of *Current Trends*, Julian Sundersingh issued a “Call for a New Translation: A Media-based Translation for Audio Scriptures.”⁷ In this volume Larry Johnson offers a different option in the case study of a project in Liberia in which songs were composed on the basis of selected Scripture texts. An abridged version of the Gospel of Luke was recorded on audio-cassettes together with the accompanying songs. The success of the Scripture-song cassettes was so high that Johnson pleads for this as an approach to Scripture Use, using the primary oral communicators in a society as a method not only to overcome the limitations of illiteracy, but as a means of fostering the integration of every element of God’s Word as a vital part of people’s lives.

⁵ Timothy Wilt, ed. *Bible Translation: Frames of Reference*. (Manchester: St. Jerome, 2003).

⁶ See Anicia del Corro. “Language Endangerment and Bible Translation: The Philippines” In *Current Trends in Scripture Translation*. Philip A. Noss, ed. UBS Bulletin No. 194/195 (2002). Pp. 107-118.

⁷ Noss 2002:191-214.

Song and Theology

Translation and theology was one of the major themes of TTW 2000, and a series of papers on this topic was edited by Philip Towner and published in a special issue of *The Bible Translator-Technical Papers* (Vol. 53, No. 3, July 2002). The relationship of translations and translators' choices to the development of local theology continues to be an important area of research. William Mitchell's study of Quechua hymns from southern Peru provides insights into the early understanding and expression of the Christian faith by the Quechua. The rewards of this study should offer encouragement to others to carry out similar research into local theology through the language and symbols of translated Scripture as expressed in local hymns, both translated and composed locally.

Conclusion

While the task of the Scripture translator remains unchanged from the time of the first translation up to the present day, the times, the tools, and the audiences do change. The presentations at TTW 2003 as represented in this volume are indicative of the changes that are underway in the UBS understanding of its translation definition and identity. In particular, TTW 2003 called for more consciousness on the part of translators for the ethics that must guide efforts in Scripture translation. It also renewed the call for increased attention to the results that arise from the reading and the re-reading of the translated Scripture texts.