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**ANALYZING AND USING RECEPTOR LANGUAGE
PROVERB FORMS IN TRANSLATION**

Part 2: Application

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The first part of this article appeared in the April 2006 issue of The Bible Translator, vol. 57, no. 2. In the first part, the author explained how to analyze proverbs in the receptor language (RL).

Application

Collecting proverbs is often pleasant; analyzing them presents some challenges; but applying the results of RL techniques in translation is more difficult.

Conscious use of RL proverbial patterns is greatly assisted by access to an analyzed collection of proverbs, even for native speakers of the RL. The list of RL proverb techniques would then serve as a source of ideas and suggestions on matters of form as the translators translate proverbs into that language.

Translating a few proverbs will quickly show translators that this is a different genre from narrative! Before translating biblical proverbs, it is good to practice translating non-biblical proverbs, which may allow translators to feel less constrained by the tendency to mechanically transfer the SL form into the RL.

There are brilliant examples of translators structuring a proverb in the RL using a different technique, changing some details of the SL form, all for the sake of the RL art. For example, compare the German and Finnish forms of a proverb below, the Finnish having been borrowed from the German:

<i>Führe ein Schwein bis an der Rhein, es bleibt ein Schwein.</i>	Take a pig to the Rhine, he comes back a pig.
<i>Vie sika Saksaan, tuo sika Saksasta, sika sika sittenkin on.</i>	Take a pig to Germany, bring a pig back from Germany, a pig is still a pig.

The German form refers to the Rhine River, achieving a rhyme. The Finnish form refers to Germany (*Saksa*) instead, setting up repetition of *s*, *a*, and *k*. Though the translated proverb does not match the form of the original, it is a good proverb in Finnish, better than if the translator had tried to translate the form of the German original.

In translating proverbs, there is no general requirement for the translator to preserve the particular technique or rhetorical device used in the SL. Rather, it is more important to seek an appropriate aesthetic technique in the RL by which to communicate the meaning. A proverb that is highly alliterative in the SL may very well be translated into a form that uses rhyme in the RL. In such a case, the translator is preserving the meaning and artistic form, but not using the same artistic form as in the SL. Not surprisingly it is easier to approximate the SL grammatical form of a proverb in the RL than it is to preserve any particular sound-based artistic form in the RL.

Sound-based aesthetics are the hardest to convey into another language, grammar-based techniques less so, and image-based ones are the easiest (though one still has to cope with the usual types of translation problems, such as the fact that snow or goats may be quite unknown in some areas.)

Proverbs based on images (such as the ones about the rocks under the pot or the bald-bottomed baboon [see page 84, Part 1, in the April 2006 *BT*]), may be less daunting to translate than proverbs based on parallelism, but a translator should still look for opportunities to render even these into artistic forms appropriate for proverbs in the RL. In a language that likes alliteration in proverbs, even non-alliterative proverbs from the SL could be translated into the RL in an alliterative form. As an example, the proverb about the baboon cited above might be alliteratively translated into English as “The bald-bottomed baboon blindly belittles her buddy.”

Sound-based techniques

A study of English proverbs shows a set of sound-based aesthetic techniques for forming proverbs, including rhyme, alliteration, assonance, and meter. The deliberate application of these in translating biblical proverbs into English is shown below.

Alliteration

A deliberate effort to use alliteration produces a more aesthetic form of Prov 19.7. Compare the RSV rendering that mirrors the SL structure with my

alliterative form (PEU) below: (For other version abbreviations, see the list at the end of the article.)

Prov 19.7	A poor person's family forsake him, his friends flee farther.	PEU
	All a poor man's brothers hate him,; how much more do his friends go far from him!	RSV

Alliteration may be strictly word initial, or word internal and final. Note the sibilants (*s* and *sh*) in Williams' translation of the following proverb:

Prov 10.5	A sensible son makes hay while the sun shines, a shameful son sleeps in the hay through harvest.	Williams
	A son who gathers in summer is prudent, but a son who sleeps in harvest brings shame.	RSV

In these alternatives for Prov 15.17, note how more than one set of consonants is repeated.

Prov 15.17 alternatives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Greens with gladness beats beef with bitterness. • Peas with peace beats battles with beef. • Better beans with loving than beef with loathing. 	PEU
	Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.	RSV

Alliteration may run through the whole proverb (as in Prov 19.7 and 10.5) above, or there may be separate spans of alliteration in each half of a parallelism, as in 28.6, below. Note also that the first line has two consonants being repeated, both *p* and (less prominently) *r*.

Prov 28.6	<u>P</u> referable a <u>p</u> oor person on <u>p</u> ure path, than a <u>w</u> ealthy <u>o</u> ne <u>w</u> ith <u>w</u> icked <u>w</u> ays.	PEU
	Better is a poor man who walks in integrity than a rich man who is perverse in his ways.	RSV

Though some alliteration may be pleasing, too much can form tongue twisters.

Rhyme

The use of rhyme is common in English proverbs, such as "Birds of a feather flock together" and "Haste makes waste." Even if the rhyme is not exact, it can still be effective, as in "A stitch in time saves nine." Notice how this is much more aesthetically pleasing than the equally logical "A stitch in time saves ten." Note the rhymes in the following examples.

Prov 11.22	A pig with a pearl necklace is like a woman pretty but reckless.	Williams
	A pretty woman with an imprudent mind is like a gold ring in the snout of a swine.	Vail

	Like a gold ring in a swine's snout is a beautiful woman without discretion.	RSV
Prov 15.17	Better to eat a few peas with those who adore you than to feast on fine meat with those who abhor you.	Vail
	Better is a dinner of herbs where love is, than a fatted ox and hatred with it.	RSV

Sometimes we can do more than merely rhyme the end of a word, but rhyme multiple syllables or whole words that sound similar.

Prov 12.2	The Lord gives the good—commendation, but to the evil—condemnation.	PEU
	A good man obtains favor from the LORD, but a man of evil devices he condemns.	RSV

Assonance

In the examples of Prov 15.17 in the section on Alliteration, listen to the repetition of the vowel [i] (spelled *ee* and *ea*).

Homophones (homonyms)

In some cases, we can use homophones (as in Prov 14.1, below) or two different senses of the same-sounding word (as in Prov 14.12, below), resulting in sound-based art which prompts the audience to think.

Prov 14.1	Wisdom raises her house, folly razes hers.	PEU
	Wisdom builds her house, but folly with her own hands tears it down.	RSV
Prov 14.12	There is a way which seems right to a man, but it leads (a man) right to death.	PEU
	There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.	RSV

Meter

In the following example translated from Amharic to English, a deliberate effort was made to match the meter of the two parallel lines:

A word from the mouth spoken,
an egg from the hand broken.

A more literal translation would have omitted an overt mention of the verb “spoken” in the first line of the proverb, but that would destroy the meter. In the Amharic original, each line is only three words, with the last syllable of each line rhyming. The rhyme of the English form is more pleasing than if the second line had used the original verb “fallen.”

Grammatical restructuring

Though translators may feel free to use a different form of sound-based verbal art, when tackling proverbs based on a grammatical structure they are reluctant

to consider RL grammatical alternatives and are more likely to transfer the SL grammatical structure into the RL.

However, transferring grammatical structures can be a trap. For example, the SL may use negative imperatives freely in proverbs, but RL proverbs may typically mitigate the force of such messages by using other, less direct grammatical forms. In the table below, compare the different grammatical forms that all convey the same basic message, variations of a Persian proverb, “You cannot carry two melons in one hand.” In some of them, the imperative force is greatly mitigated, in others it is strengthened.

- | | |
|---|---|
| 1. <i>Don't carry two melons in one hand.</i> | 8. <i>Wisdom is shown by not carrying</i> |
| 2. <i>Don't ever carry</i> | 9. <i>Only a fool tries to carry</i> |
| 3. <i>Let nobody carry</i> | 10. <i>Never carry</i> |
| 4. <i>You should not carry</i> | 11. <i>Can you carry?</i> |
| 5. <i>Wise people do not carry</i> | 12. <i>Do we carry?</i> |
| 6. <i>Nobody can carry</i> | 13. <i>How can you carry?</i> |
| 7. <i>It is not wise to carry</i> | 14. <i>Do you see anybody carry?</i> |

The following show more radical grammatical restructuring of this same proverb:

2 noun phrases	“Two melons, one hand.” Or “One hand, two melons.”
noun phrase with prepositional phrase	“Two melons in one hand.” Or “For two melons, a single hand?”
Negative, no verb	“Never two melons in one hand.”
Rhyming couplet	“One hand, one thumb, two melons: it's dumb.” Or “Four fingers, one thumb, two melons: not done.”
Different form of grammar	“One hand cannot carry two melons.” Or “You're trying to carry two melons in one hand.” Or “It's (as impossible as) carrying two melons in one hand.”
Different noun and number	“You can't carry two/three pumpkins/cantaloupes/ papayas/grindstones/chickens in one hand.” “You can't carry ten eggs in one hand.”
Different verbs, not “carry”	“Two melons require two hands.” “One never sees two melons in one hand.” “You can't catch two chickens with one hand.”

As an example of grammatical restructuring, I rephrase a biblical proverb into the Amharic pattern mentioned above, consisting of two noun phrases placed side by side with the listener expected to understand the logical connection between the two.

A constant dripping rain, a contentious woman. (Prov 27.15)

We even have an example of grammatical restructuring done by a NT author! 1 Pet 4.18 uses a rhetorical question to translate Prov 11.31, where the Hebrew has a non-interrogative exclamatory form.

In some languages, some synonymous parallelisms are better translated without the parallel structure. This has been done in the following:

Prov 14.10	Joy and sorrow can only be measured by the person concerned.	WMF
	The heart knows its own bitterness, and no stranger shares its joy.	RSV

With a good knowledge of RL proverb techniques, translators can use RL artistic forms to express many biblical proverbs appropriately.

The examples below show how the translation of some biblical proverbs has become more striking with attention to the principles presented here.

The following proverb has a built-in two-part structure, and many translators have found ways to make its structure sound like a typical English proverb.

1 Sam 24.13	Out of the wicked comes forth wickedness.	RSV
	Wickedness comes from wicked people.	GW
	From evildoers come evil deeds.	NIV
	From evildoers, evil deeds.	PEU

Note that the last one is the shortest, resulting from a deliberate effort to be terse. To see the importance of being terse in English proverbs, compare the Living Bible rendition of Prov 14.12, below, with the RSV:

Prov 14.12	Before every man there lies a wide and pleasant road that seems right but ends in death.	LB
	There is a way which seems right to a man, but its end is the way to death.	RSV

The Living Bible's rendering of the above proverb is so long and deliberately clear that it does not strike one as a proverb in English. It may contain the same information as the original, but because of its length it lacks proverbial artistry in English. Remember, for proverbs the form is part of the meaning, so such examples fail to convey the appropriate genre, thereby missing some of the meaning.

Reordering parallelisms

Many languages use parallelisms in forming proverbs, but we must be alert to notice the order of the parallel elements and strive to match the natural order of the RL. This is not distorting the meaning of the source text, but matching the grammar of the RL.

One exegete gives this example of reordering parallelisms in a language in which the negative comes before the positive (always "not A, B", never "B, not A"). When this RL pattern was pointed out, the mother-tongue translator happily changed the order of translated proverbs to match it. This would reorder the two lines in Prov 14.33 as given below.

Prov 14.33	Wisdom abides in the mind of a man of understanding, but it is not known in the heart of fools.	RSV
	Wisdom it is not known in the heart of a fool but it abides in the mind of a man of understanding.	reordered

Note that the mother-tongue speaker of the RL did not automatically make the adjustment. She profited from a timely reminder of what had been found by analyzing the proverbs of her language.

Conjunctions

In Hebrew there is sometimes no overt conjunction (except the usual *vav*) between parallel elements in proverbs, but translators into English have often found it helpful to make the logical relation between the two lines explicit by adding a conjunction. For example Prov 14.5: “A faithful witness does not lie, **but** a false witness breathes out lies” (RSV). Translators should be alert to the possibility of translating such parallelisms without overt conjunctions if this is a standard RL technique and if the meaning is clear to the listener/reader. Or, they may need to add conjunctions in the RL where there are none in the SL.

In the following example, there is no conjunction and readers/hearers must think about the proverb to understand the relationship between the two phrases:

A constant dripping rain, a contentious woman. (Prov 27.15)

Note the following verses, where Moffatt has no overt conjunction, forcing the hearer/reader to think and discover the logical relation between the parallel parts:

Prov 14.4	No oxen, no corn, good crops come from work done by the ox.	Mft
	Where there are no oxen, there is no grain; but abundant crops come by the strength of the ox.	RSV
Prov 12.25	Worry weighs a man down, a kind word cheers him up.	Mft
	Anxiety in a man’s heart weighs him down, but a good word makes him glad.	RSV

By contrast, Texmelucan Zapotec seems to prefer a conjunction where a more natural English translation would use none, as seen in their traditional proverb: “Don’t yearn for old age, **because** you get it for free.”

Quotations

In Amharic, many proverbs are expressed as a direct quotation, e.g., “ ‘Before you give birth, eat!’ said the person from Gonder.” In such proverbs, the quotation comes first, and the speaker is identified afterwards. In translating quotation proverbs into Amharic, it would be important to consider matching this pattern. For example, for Prov 22.13, the speaker can be identified after the quotation: “ ‘There is a lion outside! I shall be slain in the streets!’ the sluggard says.” Similarly, Ps 14.1 (which is proverbial in that it expresses a truth in a compact manner that is often and easily quoted), would become: “ ‘There is no God,’ says the fool in his heart.”

How clear should a proverb be?

The beginning of the book of Proverbs specifically points to the fact that proverbs are not always easily or quickly understood, 1.5, 6, explaining that this is written that “the man of understanding acquire skill to understand a proverb” (RSV). Notice that some biblical proverbs are very clearly intended

to make the listener/reader stop and ponder, such as Prov 26.4, 5: “Answer not a fool according to his folly Answer a fool according to his folly” (RSV).

In most languages, one of the hallmarks of a proverb is that it makes the listener (or reader) stop and ponder the meaning, so translators would be wise to restrain themselves in their desire to translate every proverb in a way that is instantly clear. In languages where many proverbs have a degree of non-transparency, translators should consider allowing a certain amount of symbolism, metaphor, and obscurity. Efforts to explain too many metaphors in the Toura Bible translation project of Côte d’Ivoire caused some to complain, “You are telling the solution with the riddle.” It should still be possible for listeners/readers to arrive at the meaning after some thought, as in the example with “raises” and “razes” from Prov 14.1 (see section on Homophones), but a proverb does not have to be as clear as a narrative passage. If the translated form of a proverb does retain some non-transparency, it is important that the form is clearly understood to be proverbial so that readers/hearers are alert to the need to look for multiple levels of meaning.

An example of a proverb that has been translated in a way that clarifies a figure by removing the figurative form, is the Living Bible’s rendition of Prov 17.14.

Prov 17.14	It is hard to stop a quarrel once it starts, so don’t let it begin.	LB
	The beginning of strife is like letting out water; so quit before the quarrel breaks out.	RSV

In many languages (including English), such a translation does not strike the hearer/reader as a proverb, or at best seems an artless one.

Many proverbs may seem to be a simple statement of fact or opinion, but actually aim at influencing the behavior of the hearer/reader. Consider Prov 21.23, where the real point of the proverb is to urge the hearer/reader to be careful what they say. “He who guards his mouth and his tongue keeps himself from calamity” (NIV). In translating such proverbs, it is important that the hearer/reader should realize that there is a hortatory function underneath the simple declarative form.

Using local proverbs

Translators have sometimes been able to use existing RL proverbs in Bible translation. This must be done with caution, but there is an example that many will accept from Bamiléké of Cameroon. The Bamiléké have a proverb: “They, the others, have eaten caterpillars and we have got stomach-ache.” In translating Ezek 18.2, “The fathers have eaten sour grapes, the children’s teeth are set on edge,” the RL proverb was slightly modified as: “They, our fathers, have eaten caterpillars and we have got stomach-ache.” The Bamiléké have no grapes, and the point of the proverb is not about a particular item that was eaten, so this was seen as a reasonable substitution.

The use of an existing RL proverb is also seen in the Living Bible’s rendering of Prov 16.27:

Prov 16.27	Idle hands are the devil’s workshop, idle lips are his mouthpiece.	LB
	A worthless man plots evil, and his speech is like a scorching fire.	RSV

However, the LB also had a footnote giving the more literal form of this verse.

Williams incorporated a known English proverb in his version of Prov 10.5 (as did also LB and *The Message*):

Prov 10.5	A sensible son makes hay while the sun shines, a shameful son sleeps in the hay through harvest.	Williams
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Biblical proverbs have passed into common speech in many societies. Also, many biblical proverbs teach truths that are universally applicable, regardless of religious systems. Therefore, it is not surprising to find proverbs in other cultures that match the message of biblical proverbs.

Local church leaders should be consulted before incorporating the exact form of existing RL proverbs in the translation of biblical proverbs.

Examples where RL techniques have been deliberately used on a wide scale

The deliberate use of RL proverbial forms when translating biblical proverbs can be occasionally seen in various Bible translations, such as the NIV’s rendering of Prov 11.4:

Wealth is worthless in the day of wrath,
but righteousness delivers from death.

However, an extreme and consistent use of RL forms is the recent translation of Proverbs into Kyrgyz, following Kyrgyz proverbial structures in such a way that they can be chanted in a traditional manner. Not surprisingly, the translator was freer than some would choose, such as adding a vocative term of endearment “my foal” to go with “my son” in Prov 23.19 (adding it to improve the meter). This translation of Proverbs was so well received in Kyrgyzstan that it was adopted for use in schools across the country! In English there is a recent volume of Proverbs paraphrased poetically by Daniel Vail.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the translation of proverbs requires an appreciation of the fact that proverbs have an aesthetic quality in their form in the source text and a *conscious* awareness of the aesthetic techniques used in forming proverbs in the RL. Then the translator is in a much better position to remold foreign proverbs into meaningful and aesthetic forms in the RL. This is important because for proverbial speech, part of the meaning is the form. Put another way: if a passage does not have a proverbial form, it will not have (as much) proverbial meaning.

All of this is not to take the place of careful exegesis of proverbs, but to provide the most attractive container for serving the fruits of exegesis. As translators consciously study RL proverb patterns, they will be better able to

translate proverbs in a way that more closely matches RL proverb patterns, eliciting more appreciation from readers.

Abbreviations used for translations

GW	<i>God's Word</i> . (Grand Rapids: World Publishing, 1995).
LB	<i>The Living Bible</i> , by Kenneth Taylor (Tyndale).
Mft	<i>The Bible: A New Translation</i> , by James Moffatt (N.Y. and London: Harper, 1934).
NIV	New International Version
RSV	Revised Standard Version
Vail	<i>Solomon's Proverbs Poetically Paraphrased</i> by Daniel Vail (Pittsburgh: Dorrance, 2005).
Williams	James Williams, "The Power of Form: A Study of Biblical Proverbs," <i>Semeia</i> 17 (1980): 35-58.
WMF	<i>The Word Made Fresh</i> by Andy Edington (Austin, Tex: Eakin, 1988).

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TRANSLATING PROVERBS BY TOPICS

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Editor's Note: At the June 2006 UBS Triennial Translation Workshop in Mombasa, Kenya, Prof Miller presented a plenary series of lectures on the Proverbs. She also referred to a topical classification she had made of Prov 10.1–31.9. We are grateful that Prof Miller has allowed us to publish this in The Bible Translator, in the hope that it will help translators to ensure consistency in their translation of key concepts.

Introduction

Proverbial sayings are inextricably related to culture. In translating biblical proverbs, many of the difficulties stem from mismatches between the cultural values expressed in the proverbs and the culture of the target language. The most efficient way to translate the proverbial sayings of Prov 10.1–31.9, then, is to consider them topically, an approach that has proved to be successful in Proverbs workshops that I conducted in Africa. This topic arrangement also makes it easier to discuss key terms in the proverbs.

In the remainder of this article, biblical proverbs are arranged by topics. Several points need to be noted however. First, since the Translator's Handbook on Proverbs uses the RSV as the base text, the interpretation and translation of the RSV is used in assigning a topic. In some (but not all) cases, I have added an asterisk to alert the reader to the fact that the RSV has emended the Hebrew, or has followed another ancient version, or that another interpretation would result in the verse being assigned to another topic (see, e.g., 14.1). Second, because of the parallelism used in biblical proverbs, a proverb often could be assigned to more than one topic. For example, 20.19 speaks about gossiping in the first line, but about appropriate companions in